

A painting of a large flock of white birds, possibly swans or geese, flying over a landscape. The birds are in various stages of flight, with wings spread, against a blue sky. Below them is a body of water reflecting the sky, and a shoreline with green grass and some trees. The overall style is soft and painterly.

# Returning From Death

*An Autobiography  
by  
Messenger of Peace  
Beggars of the Century*



**PATRIARCH MINH DANG QUANG**



**BHIKKHU BUDDHA DHATU**

**BEGGAR OF THE CENTURY**



**Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu** was a victim of the Vietnam War when he was only nine years old. His whole village was destroyed by bombs and he himself suffered horrific burns over 70% of his body. He underwent 6 operations that saved his life, but they did not completely heal every wound on his body.

Later, **Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu** became a **Messenger of Peace** based in Australia and his message is especially pertinent as we recall the sufferings he had to endure as a child.

In 1998, **Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu** subjected himself to a strenuous 9,000 km Peace Walk around the world barefoot, accompanied by participants from 24 other nations, in a quest to awaken the world. Throughout the Walk, as well as his many visits to other countries, **Bhikkhu** has met with and touched the lives of countless people.

This book is a vital read for everyone as we are living in perilous times. The world is heavy with the burden of hate and violence born of anger, ignorance and desire. The only hope we have for our children would be to follow the Buddha's teachings and strive for peace. We owe it to our children, to the world, to ourselves.

*WAR IS NOT HOLY*  
*-Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu-*

**This Book Is For Free Distribution in Malaysia and Singapore**

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An Autobiography

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*The Heart For Peace Order would like to express our gratitude to our helpers and supporters who have contributed in cash or kind to the printing of this book. May the merit they have thus accrued benefit them and their loved ones, and may they all attain the bliss of Nibbana. May the merit also be dedicated to the well-being and peace of all beings.*

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## RETURNING FROM DEATH

### *A Word from the Author*

I am, I feel, one of the luckiest persons on earth. When I was only nine years old, I became one of the countless child victims of the Vietnam War. I suffered burns on 70% of my back due to a napalm bomb and have had several operations to cure my condition. No child should ever be forced to undergo the pain and sufferings that I had to endure, but fortunately, I survived to tell the tale.

I became a mendicant monk at the age of thirteen and migrated to Australia when I was twenty. I helped to set up the Heart For Peace Mission Headquarters in Vietnam and a branch in Sydney, Australia because the cause for world peace is especially close to my heart. The scars on my back are constant reminders of the horrors of war. If I can help to erase all warfare in the world, my surviving the napalm bomb will be worthwhile.

Due to the necessity of contacting as many people as possible in order to spread the message of peace, I have been to many countries. I undertook a 9,000 km walk through five continents and eighteen countries where I met people of all races and creeds - kings, ministers, presidents, dignitaries, plus the poorest of the poor, the handicapped, the suffering masses - and I have learned a lot from all of them. But the greatest lesson the world's people have taught me is that all of us are brothers and sisters. We should put down our weapons and look at our enemies with the eyes of human kindness. We will then see that the man behind that gun on the battlefield has the same dreams, problems, illusions about life that we have. When we cut each other up, red blood flows out - never blue for some, and red for the others.

Some of these friends whom I have made requested that I translate my book *Returning From Death* from Vietnamese to English. They are curious to read about my near-death experience when I was in a coma for five and a half days. It is to oblige them that I have finally done so, albeit with some revision, and you are holding the result.



I now express my gratitude once again to all the people who helped us accomplish the 9,000 km walk as well as our supporters from around the world. My gratitude also goes to my Malaysian supporters for having helped me to produce this small literary offering at the Buddha's feet. This book is for all of you. May it bring you great peace and happiness.

Messenger of Peace,  
Beggars of the Century.

2005

## CHAPTER 1

### THE SCARS OF WAR

What is death? One day when I was only 4 years old, I saw my grandfather's house full of people bustling in and out as though there was a festival afoot. However, the hustle and bustle lacked the normal gaiety that would speak of joyful festivities. A beautiful ceremony soon ensued around a coffin with my great grandma in it. I followed the funeral procession happily as I did not understand what had happened to her nor did I understand why the adults around me were crying. But when I saw them put the coffin into a big hole in the ground, I ran up to my father and my grandpa. Grabbing at their hands, I said, "No, do not put great grandma there. She will not be able to breathe; do not put her there!" I tried to stop them but my father took me away, saying, "No, do not do that. She will only sleep here for a few days. She will come home soon."

I didn't know what was going on but in my little childish mind, I thought that she would not be able to breathe and I worried that she would have no food either for a few days. Every day for three days, I observed the adults taking food to her in the forest but they would bring the food back later and we shared the food among ourselves so that meant that my great grandma had not eaten any of it. After the three days had elapsed, I asked my grandfather why great grandma had not returned home as my father had promised but he did not answer me. He just placed me on his lap. As I grew older, I realised how much my grandfather had loved his mother and that among all his grandchildren, he

knew I loved his mother more than the others did, hence I held a special place in his heart. Anyway as the days passed, it finally dawned on me that she was 'dead' and that death does not allow anyone to return to their loved ones. Until today I still remember my great grandma's passing as my first encounter with the sorrow that death can bring.

I grew up in a very idyllic village nestling among hills and mountains. The sea was nearby and my house was close to a lake. The river that flowed into the lake was - needless to say - a glorious playground for us children. My grandfather's house was at the foot of a hill. It was very peaceful and the people lived in harmony although there was not much education available to them. My great grandfather was the third son of the previous king of Vietnam but he disliked the life he lived as a royal prince. There was political turmoil in the kingdom then and the Chief Commander of the Army was eager to dethrone the heir and murder any other claimants to the crown. My great great grandmother fled the palace with her children for the peace and calm of a small village that they called Phu Lac. Great grandpa became a primary school teacher there in the small community of farmers and fishermen. The family decided to keep their royal parentage a family secret and soon settled down to a peaceful life. It was thus in this setting that I was born in 1956 and given the name Nguyen Thanh Liem.

My second encounter with death came at the young age of seven. At that time, Vietnam was in the throes of yet another bloody war, but this time, the Americans would also be involved. I recall that day very clearly. My mother had prepared some food

for my grandparents and wanted me to take it to them. Their house was not very far from ours, but mother warned me not to use the main road, as there were many soldiers around. So I had to use the back lanes among the wooden houses and I did not stop until I approached a bamboo grove. Normally bamboo groves are infested with snakes but this time, it was not something reptilian that stopped me in my tracks. It was something worse.

I heard raucous laughter mingled with muffled sounds among the bamboo plants. Instinctively, I hid behind a thick cluster of bamboo and peered out into the clearing. A group of South Vietnamese soldiers were bending over a man on his knees. He was bound and gagged and there was unmistakable terror in his eyes. Then one of his tormentors took out a sharp knife and slowly, deliberately sawed off his head. The man strained and struggled until his body went limp. His blood – lots of it – spurting out all over the ground. I froze only for a split second before I regained my senses and took to my heels. However, one of the soldiers noticed me and yanked me back. I was questioned but released when they saw I was obviously not a threat to them. I ran all the way home without looking back, terrified that they would be in hot pursuit.

That afternoon, there was an announcement for all the villagers to gather in order to see the dead man's mutilated body. They had attached his head to a bamboo pole and it looked grotesque silhouetted against the grey skies. It was to serve as a warning to the people of the fate that would befall all Communist

sympathisers. That was to be the first time I ever witnessed a beheading.

One morning in 1964 when I was in school, an announcement was made over the loudspeakers for everyone to assemble that evening in the middle of the village. Someone said that it was judgement day for the government sympathisers. I did not understand it then, but later on I learned that many Communist soldiers were actually taking refuge in the hills around our farms and at night they would mingle with the villagers and try to win their sympathies.

That evening, unable to resist it, my playmates and I hid among some bushes near the bank of the river to see the 'convicts' being escorted in boats to our village. Several boats came in sight and each carried bound 'government sympathisers' with Vietcong guerrillas standing over them, firearms in their hands. I recognised some of the hostages – one was my brother's teacher, another was a friend's father or grandfather. But I was shocked to recognise the friendly neighbour I used to see on my way to school every morning - until he disappeared six months ago. Nguyen Dinh or Bac Dinh (Uncle Dinh) had been suspected of being a spy for the South Vietnamese government. He wore his hat way down low over his face, ashamed of having brought humiliation to his family. He looked pale and thin and fear was written all over his face.

At nightfall, all of us were forced to gather in one of the classrooms in the school. First of all, the soldiers screened a shadow play on the war in which North Vietnamese soldiers fought with South Vietnamese soldiers and of course, the play

ended in victory for the North Vietnamese. I was young and quite happy with the free entertainment that broke the monotony of an otherwise ordinary evening at home. Just then, we heard a voice over the loudspeakers proclaiming justice for the deserving. We were led out of the classroom into the school compound. A table had been placed there for the three 'judges' to sit at and the bound prisoners were all in box-like docks nearby. All around them were heavily armed soldiers. I was too young to understand the charges against the poor victims, but I did feel a pang when they finally turned their attention to Uncle Dinh. One of the judges hammered the table 3 times with a 'mallet' and an ugly Vietcong called Tong Em approached Uncle Dinh menacingly. Tong Em had a face badly scarred by chicken pox and had only one eye. He looked horrible and very cruel.

Tong Em had a long knife in his hand which he waved slowly as he circled Uncle Dinh. I could hear Uncle Dinh pleading for his life, saying that he had a wife, an old mother and children to look after. Suddenly, Tong Em grabbed Uncle Dinh's head, pushed it back and plunged his knife into his throat over and over again. Three times in all. Uncle Dinh tried to block the blows and held up his bound hands to his head but his fingers got in the way and swish – they were gone too. There were no more pleas from the poor man now, only a hoarse gurgle and lots of blood. One final stab with the knife and he was dead. Chaos reigned immediately as the spectators screamed in horror and stampeded. My mother fainted there and then and had to be helped home. Ever since that episode, she has had a weak heart until today.

Mother was living in fear all the time that a similar fate would befall my father and even us, the children, by virtue of the fact that we are descendants of the royal family. My father, Nguyen Phuc Xe, was not in the village when this horrifying episode occurred as he had been warned that his name was also on the list of the 'liberators' so he was forced to stay away. However, father had always stayed neutral throughout the war. He always said that it was not safe to be perceived as an enemy by either side.

I remember vividly yet another harrowing incident around that time. It was during one of the school lessons when the teacher suddenly dismissed us and sent us home, warning us to be on the lookout for any fighting or bombs being dropped on our heads. Mother was not surprised to see us return at 9.30 in the morning. Instead, she greeted us with a grim look on her face and quickly shepherded us to the mountain across the lake. Mother said that it was safer for all of us to hide in a cave there together with some of our other relatives. We followed her without protest. Something in her manner told us that she would tolerate no nonsense from us.

Time passed slowly in that dark, gloomy cave. It was as quiet and peaceful inside the cave as it was in the surrounding forest. The silence lulled us into a false sense of security and the adults even entertained the thought that perhaps it might be safe to return to their homes soon. Then my little sister started to cry for food. Mother had not packed any food in her hurry to get us to safety. Unable to hush her, mother asked me to return to the house to get some food together with my uncle who was also told

to go to his own house for the same purpose. His house was not far off - only about 50 metres away from ours. This uncle was only one year older than I was, so the two of us brave little boys set off on our mission proud that we had been entrusted with such an important task.

We had to wade into the lake at one point and the water reached up to our necks. Halfway across, we heard an ominous 'tak - ku' and a spray of water near to us shot up into the air. The South Vietnamese soldiers thought that we were Vietcong guerrillas and were shooting at us!! From behind us, we heard our families yelling frantically, "Dive, dive!" and "Don't shoot - they are only children!" We dived into the water but had to surface again and again for air and each time we did so, bullets whizzed past our heads, hitting the water around us. Finally, I resurfaced only to see that the water had turned red. I tried to grab my uncle to help him get away, but then I heard, "Leave him, Liem and go, go - he's dead." I reached the other side of the lake and ran all the way home where I remained curled up in a corner, in deep shock, until the others returned from the cave.

That night, the soldiers stopped their shooting and someone recovered my uncle's body from the river to be given a decent burial. There was quiet weeping throughout the night in my great aunt's house as they mourned the loss of a son who never had a chance to grow up. That was when I recalled the night Uncle Dinh was killed and how his family had to bundle up his body in an old mat to be buried. I learnt later that his death badly affected his nephew who had been a Communist sympathiser and this young man soon turned informer to avenge



his uncle's murder. Because of the information he gave to the South Vietnamese government, many Vietcong hideouts were bombed out. Later, he was captured and burned alive by the Communists. Like the saying goes, an eye for an eye and the world goes blind.

I learnt of the many ways in which atrocities were committed by both the North and the South Vietnamese armies in the name of liberation. One of my uncles used to be a Communist soldier too but he was not involved in the killings. Instead, he was an eyewitness at many trials and executions in the jungle. He told me of one particular informer whom the Communists were eager to capture. This man had posed a great challenge to them, as he was elusive and very difficult to pin down. Finally, their chance came. He was getting married and some Communist soldiers attended his wedding by posing as guests but later hid under the bridal bed. When he entered the bridal chamber, they nabbed him. They did not kill him immediately. Instead, they tied him to a wooden crucifix and shot away at his fingers, ears, and nose – until he looked like a tree of blood. He was very strong and tried to run so they finally pumped him full of bullets to finish the job.

When I was still a small boy, I used to follow my father and uncle to the forest to cut wood. One day I saw a clay cooking pot lying overturned on the ground and ran to pick it up. After all, if it were still serviceable, maybe mother would like to have it. But as soon as I picked it up, I dropped it again in fright – beneath it was a human skull! And that skull was still attached to its body which had been buried upright in the ground. The soldiers

sometimes dug holes in the ground to bury their victims up to their necks and then interrogate and torture the poor souls before leaving them to die as they were.

We were also told of other cruel acts by both armies. Soldiers were known to kill their enemies and then cut out their livers to be chewed in cannibalistic gusto. Even the American soldiers were not innocent of inhuman treatment of the people; in fact one of my friends personally witnessed an American soldier tear a little girl into two by pulling her legs apart. How did this happen? The American soldiers lost a lot of battles against the Vietcong, so they would raid villages suspected of being Vietcong hideouts to root out their enemies. However, very often, the Vietcong soldiers would have deserted the villages by then, leaving behind only the old, the sick, women and children. One day, an American soldier on just such a mission grabbed hold of a little girl, pinned one of her legs down beneath his boots, and pulled hard on the other, so that she was ripped apart. Why did he do that to an innocent child? All because he had lost a comrade in a battle. The fire of hatred had burnt him up and someone – anyone – had to pay the price.

The Vietcong, too, were well known for taking their Korean and American POWs into the jungles at night and shooting them dead there. They had many supporters among the villagers as well. Once there was a farmer who was a Vietcong supporter, and one day, he was working on his land with a hoe when a group of Vietcong soldiers escorting a South Vietnamese POW passed him by. Suddenly, the farmer lifted his hoe and smashed it into

the man's head, killing him instantly, and his brain spewed out all over the earth.

One of my aunties died a horrible death too. The South Vietnamese government had enlisted the help of Korea as well so there were Korean soldiers fighting in our jungles against the Vietcong. On the day she died, a group of Korean soldiers were in her village to weed out Communist sympathisers. Furious at not finding any men around, the soldiers made the women kneel in a row together with the elderly and the children. All of them had to bend forward so that their heads touched the earth. My aunt was carrying her small baby in her arms at that time, and the child was suckling at her breast. The soldiers interrogated them, but in the Korean language which was obviously more than Greek to the poor villagers. Some South Vietnamese soldiers were with them, and one of them played translator. When the Koreans demanded, "Where are your husbands? Are you Vietcong?" the South Vietnamese soldier told them to nod their heads. The troops shot them all. When my aunt was shot dead, she collapsed forward, hence trapping the baby beneath her and he suffocated to death.

This reminds us of how animals are slaughtered for the dinner table – all these animals make desperate attempts to plead with their butchers not to kill them, but to spare them. Please, please, please. But do we understand their language? No, and so they die. Perhaps it would be better for us to learn as many languages as possible rather than to use our intelligence to invent weapons to kill others, or modern gadgets to make our comfortable lives even more comfortable at the expense of the environment. Perhaps then, we would understand each other

better, and with that, learn tolerance and how to live together in harmony.

## CHAPTER 2

### **BLOODSTAINED HISTORY**

Throughout the years, there were frequent hostilities between Vietnam and Cambodia too, and the stories told of torture and abuses were not any less horrifying. Vietnam and Cambodia had been quarrelling over their borders for hundreds of years so the bad Karma generated among the people is very great. The different methods of torture used by the two armies against each other, life after life, were also cruel beyond belief. One of these methods was the 'cooking pot' torture employed by the Vietnamese on the Cambodians a long time ago. The Vietnamese soldiers would bind three Cambodian prisoners-of-war and bury them up to their necks in the ground in a triangular formation. These three men's heads would then serve as a tripod stand for a cooking pot. The families of the three victims would be forced to gather round and watch while the soldiers lit a fire in the centre of the 'triangle' and proceed to cook a meal in the pot. Should any of the three victims struggle or scream in pain and thus cause the soldiers' meal to spill from the pot, the soldiers would kill one of his family members standing by.

By committing such cruel acts on other human beings, one can only hope to receive retribution. As such, many Vietnamese people died as boat people or perished in prisons. And what about the Khmer Rouge, so infamous for creating the Killing Fields of Cambodia? These hardhearted soldiers were the victims of the various battles between these two countries and

were reborn due to the hatred and anger in their souls for the sole purpose of taking revenge on their previous tormentors.

When I sit in meditation, it becomes very clear to me how *Kamma* has caught up with the two countries. 500 years ago, the last king of Champa was called Emperor Che Man. He fell in love with a Vietnamese princess named Huyen Tran and acquired her hand in marriage in return for two provinces. When he died, the princess, (his widowed queen) was to be cremated together with him in much the same way as the Hindus used to practise *suttee*. However, her ex-boyfriend, the Chief Commander from neighbouring Vietnam was also at the funeral with a battalion of soldiers under the pretext of paying his last respects. This man launched an attack and rescued the princess from a fiery death. This Chief Commander later overran the country of Champa.

In 1752, Emperor Che Man was reborn as Ho Due in what is present-day Vietnam, into a family of three brothers who became well-known for their military prowess. The ruling family at that time was the Nguyen imperial family and Ho Due was able to win the trust and affection of the emperor. In fact, the emperor liked Ho Due so much that he even honoured him with the royal name of Nguyen Hue.

However, in 1778, Ho Due plotted against the emperor and usurped the throne with the help of his brothers. They killed the emperor and his entire family of a few hundred people together with 10,000 Chinese settlers in an area near present-day Saigon. It is said that Saigon river was full of dead bodies for months after the massacre. Besides that, the three brothers had the remains of all the previous Nguyen emperors dug up and their

graves destroyed. Ho Due then crowned himself Emperor Quan Trung at the imperial capital, Hue. His older brother Nhap became Emperor Thai Duc at Qui Nhon (former city of Vijaya in Champa) and his younger brother was made the Viceroy of Saigon.

Fortunately for the Nguyen Dynasty, one person managed to escape the carnage – the murdered king’s 17-year-old nephew, Nguyen Phuc Anh. Nguyen Phuc Anh was forced to take refuge in Thailand where he gathered an army of loyal supporters to help him overthrow the traitor.

While Emperor Quan Trung was wearing his crown unlawfully, he lived in great fear of Nguyen Phuc Anh who, he knew, was gathering strength. His fear and hatred was so intense that whenever he heard rumours that Nguyen Phuc Anh had sneaked back into Vietnam and was in a particular village or province, he would order that place to be razed to the ground. Emperor Quan Trung was much stronger physically than Nguyen Phuc Anh but realised that the latter’s intelligence was superb. Emperor Quan Trung used to say to his aides that as long as his enemy was alive, he would not be able to sleep well at night. His fear was further aggravated by the fact that the royal astrologers had long predicted that Nguyen Phuc Anh would be emperor of Vietnam; hence the usurper’s throne was never secure.

One day, Emperor Quan Trung’s brother sent an official document to him via some trusted messengers. En route to the palace, the party was ambushed by Nguyen Phuc Anh’s loyal supporters and the document was altered into a devious plan to overthrow the emperor. King Quan Trung read the damaging document, became very angry and ordered his brother’s

imprisonment and death. However, after the poor man had been killed, the king discovered that the contents of the document had been doctored. King Quan Trung was filled with so much remorse and fury that he vomited blood on the spot, collapsed and died, leaving the country in the hands of his 10-year-old son.

Ten years later, Nguyen Phuc Anh succeeded in rallying his supporters into a formidable army and in 1802 he recaptured his throne and reunified the whole country. Nguyen Phuc Anh then crowned himself Emperor Gia Long in Hue. In his thirst for revenge, King Gia Long had Quan Trung's remains exhumed and mutilated in public. He displayed his enemy's rotting corpse for all to see and encouraged the court ladies to urinate upon it before the remains were shot from a cannon. Quan Trung's son died a horrible death too – he was tied spread-eagled to five horses which were then made to run in different directions, thus tearing him into five parts. The king also tortured and massacred Quan Trung's entire family, seeking 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'.

Later, two of Emperor Gia Long's generals encouraged him to annex the neighbouring countries of Thailand, Kampuchea and Laos, but the emperor recalled how he had received hospitality in those countries when he was seeking refuge from his enemies. Thus, he brushed aside all their suggestions and said, "A good friend does not steal your wife; a good king does not steal your country." In a similar vein, I should add here that a good monk does not crave for temples.

There are people who do not understand why Emperor Gia Long acted so cruelly towards his old enemy and criticise him



for being unforgiving. To understand this, we must step into the shoes of the young prince who lost his entire family in the carnage unleashed by a traitor and had to suffer away from his homeland for twenty years. By punishing Quan Trung and his family, Gia Long was behaving like a judge who had to mete out harsh punishment to hardcore criminals as a warning to other treacherous trouble-makers.

In 1890, Ho Chi Minh was born. His real name was Nguyen Sinh Cung but he changed it to Nguyen Tat Thanh. Then, in order to escape detection by the French government, he took the name of a famous rebel leader who had been murdered – Nguyen Ai Quoc. Later, when it became apparent that the real Nguyen Ai Quoc was already dead, Nguyen Sinh Cung decided to call himself Ho Chi Minh.

Ho Chi Minh studied in Moscow and established the Vietminh as a force to struggle for independence against French rule. He then started a jungle war that led to victory and he became the first chairman of North Vietnam in 1954. Being an ambitious man, Ho Chi Minh then attempted to take over the non-communist south and in 1955, the Vietnam War broke out between his communist troops and the South Vietnamese army. Ho Chi Minh also supported the Vietcong guerrillas in the South while the Americans sent troops to help South Vietnam in 1965. It took twenty years of war and sufferings before the two sides could be united as one country. In the end, two million Vietnamese were killed and the countryside was ruined by chemical warfare and land mines. Thousands of 'boat people' fled by sea in search of freedom. Yet many of these refugees did not

make it to safety. Most of the boats were rounded up by the marine police and ordered to turn back to shore where the unfortunate people were arrested; and many also drowned when the overcrowded boats capsized. I myself had to face a similar scenario when I fled the country with my sister and her family. Out of the forty-seven people who were bent on escape that night with us, only twelve of us made it to safety.

What is the significance of this long story, you may ask. Here, we can see that this is a case of three rebirths for one person – Che Man was reborn as Ho Due and then, as Ho Chi Minh. With anger smouldering in his mind consciousness, one man was reborn time and again to work out his *Kamma*, and in all three rebirths, became the architect of his country's violent history. This, I believe, is the reason behind Vietnam's bloodstained history.

There were many, many children who grew up in Vietnam without ever understanding the meaning of the word Peace. That is why so many young Vietnamese refugees got into trouble with the law in their adopted countries. These are children who were born into days and nights of ruthless killings and atrocities, who never knew a moment of childish play like other kids do. They grew up not with dolls and hoopla hoops in their hands or toy guns to play 'Cowboys and Indians', 'Cops and Robbers' with – they held real guns and they learnt to use them on live targets. It was either that or be shot themselves. Which child would choose to be born into such circumstances? Only *Kamma* can answer that question.

Cause and Effect is the law of nature, so it is imperative for us to do only what is good, right and proper. You do good deeds, you get good results and vice versa. Let us remind each other that our *Kamma* decides where we are reborn as well as the circumstances that we will have to face in life; and *Kamma* is something that we cannot escape from.

## CHAPTER 3

### WHEN DEATH DIDN'T COME

It was the year 1965 and there were only 4 more days to go before we would celebrate the Vietnamese New Year. I was asleep when mother came to my bed and gently but firmly shook me awake. "Liem, my son, get up and go with your elder brother to the river to catch some fish for the New Year celebrations," she said. I was still sleepy – after all it was just 3 or 4 a.m. then – but I was willing to obey. I followed my elder brother to the river, secured the fishing nets then lay down on the river bank and promptly fell asleep once again.

At about 5.30 a.m. my brother woke me up abruptly, saying that soldiers were gathering for a battle in the area. I rubbed my eyes and peered at the river where I saw many water buffaloes crossing in the dark. My brother said no, they were not water buffaloes – they were tanks!

Almost immediately, I heard my mother's voice shouting, "Come home, boys – quickly!" We dragged our fishing nets out of the river at once and dashed home. I could see all our neighbours, in fact the whole village, up and about; rushing around with fear written all over their faces.

There were soldiers everywhere and we knew a big battle would be fought that day. We fled to our hiding place underground.

We were not long in the hole before we heard the shrill whistle of falling bombs followed by the tremendous noise of

explosions in the village. I crept out of the hole with my elder brother to take a look at what was happening and was greeted by the sight of thick smoke enveloping the whole village. We saw then that our home had been hit by a bomb along with so many of the other houses. 15 minutes later, much of the village was on fire and our eyes and lungs were filled with stinging acrid smoke and fumes.

My baby sister had difficulty breathing so we had to take her out into the open. Mother told me to run to the mountains with my elder brother while she took another route there with the other children so that we would not die together.

My brother grabbed my hand and we emerged from the hole. We ran as fast as our legs could carry us behind the burning houses, avoiding the main street. The bombs were falling hard and fast around us and everywhere we turned, we were met by bodies being literally blown into the air and blood splattering on us like rain. People were running helter-skelter, screaming in pain as well as terror. Helicopters hovered above the flames, and soldiers strafed the fleeing villagers with machine-gun fire. We ran blindly in the mêlée, turning right, left, right, trying to gauge where the next bomb would land. We were near a coconut grove when another big explosion blasted some coconut trees into the air. They came crashing down to earth, crushing some unfortunate people to death. It was deafening and in a split second, I lost hold of my brother's hand. I found myself suddenly alone, terrified, in the middle of a fiery hell.

I could not find my brother in all that confusion and was left to grope my way around in the near darkness. I screamed for

him but I could hear nothing except for the explosions and the cries of death all around me.

Suddenly I found myself at the entrance of my teacher's house. I rushed in and saw her in the hall, looking at me in astonishment. "What are you doing here, Liem? Your family is dead. Your house has been destroyed." Hearing her ominous declaration, I turned upon my heels and dashed out of the house to look for my family, my heart breaking from sorrow at their 'demise'. As soon as I shot out of the house, a bomb fell on it and my teacher was blown to bits. In fact, half her torso actually flew out of her front door and landed near me.

I ran from one neighbour's house to another, seeking a familiar face and each time I left a house, a bomb blew it up. Finally I saw ahead of me my uncle's house. I stepped into the house quickly and at that moment a napalm bomb landed behind me in a huge explosion. The force was tremendous and I was literally flung forward into the hall where my aunt was standing rooted to the ground with unspeakable terror on her face. I was glad to see my aunt - I knew my aunt would help and protect me - I was with family again. She rushed to me, grabbed my hand and pulled me out of her burning house. All of a sudden, I felt a burning sensation on my back. The clothes on my back were on fire but I had not realised this earlier. The pain was excruciating and I began to roll on the ground as well as in a muddy pool to try to put out the flames. My aunt screamed for help and some people turned back to pick me up. That was when I lost consciousness.

Much later, I opened my eyes to see mother beside me. Her face lighted up with relief to see me regain consciousness but the lines of anxiety and puffy eyes told me how she had suffered. I noticed that she had draped my scrawny body with my father's blanket and that we were beside our demolished house. I asked for my elder brother and younger sister, and they came to my side. I blacked out once again.

When I woke up again, I was in the hospital. Much later, my mother told me how difficult it had been for them to take me there. Mother had enlisted the help of two of our distant uncles to carry me in a hammock-like stretcher all the way to the hospital 35 km away in Tuy Hoa. They had to face many obstacles to get me out of the village. For one thing, soldiers were everywhere – and corpses were strewn all over the place too. The soldiers kept watch along the roads because they did not want anyone to escape so mother and our uncles had to lie low in the day and travelled with me only at night. As such, they took a few days to complete the journey. By the time we reached the hospital, my wounds had festered so badly that maggots fell off by the dozens when they removed the blanket from around me. Mother said that the fat maggots filled several bedpans and were so disgusting that the doctors and nurses were nauseated at the sight. Fortunately, they did not abandon me and upon examination, the doctors announced their conclusion - I had suffered burns over 70% of my back.

There were many patients seeking treatment for their wounds at that hospital, so I was just another statistic for them. After a few days there, the doctors told mother to take me to yet

another hospital 70 km away; this time in a bigger town called Nha Trang. They told her that I needed surgery and skin grafting which they were unable to perform in their small hospital.

To reach Nha Trang, we had to travel by bus but mother was penniless. At that time, the buses were very few too, and those that still ran took a very long time to appear because the bus drivers had to make many detours around battle zones. Together with my elder sister and another little one, mother carried me in her arms and begged for pennies. Whatever she managed to get from the sympathetic people, she spent on painkillers to make my journey more comfortable. None of the money went into buying food for herself or my sister. They just ate hard corn cobs and tapioca.

By the time we reached the hospital at Nha Trang, my condition was serious. The wounds on my back smelt bad and the maggots returned with a vengeance. Mother had to return to the village to look after the rest of my siblings, so my elder sister stayed in the hospital with me. I was given a small bed and she slept every night curled up at my feet. I was only ten then, and she was twelve. The hospital was crammed with the sick or wounded, and most of them had their families by their side. These people camped on the hospital grounds and cooked their meals on portable stoves. My sister had never had to cook at home before and did not know a thing about the preparation of food. She was forced to help out at the hospital in return for some handouts and when the other families had finished their cooking, she borrowed their stoves and cooking pans and tried to



churn out something edible for herself and me. It was very difficult to enjoy her culinary skills, or rather, lack of them.

My sister and I stayed in that hospital for six months. I had to undergo four operations and the doctors had to use the skin on my legs for the skin grafts. Every time an operation was performed, there were two or three days of anxious waiting to see if my back was healing. Unfortunately, it never did. Pus would form and the wounds would split open again and the nurses had to come and clean them up. I do not know which was worse – the cleaning up of the pus or the changing of the bandages. All I did was to grip the bedstead tightly and bear the agony in silence. The nurses offered me some painkillers but my father had once said that these painkillers would have damaging side effects, so I decided to do without.

The napalm bombs had also injured another of my aunts. She had gaping wounds on her left breast, and maggots aplenty. My uncle visited her in the hospital and helped the caregivers pick the maggots off her body. He would also visit me there at the same time. Father and mother would come to see me as often as they could and I wanted to do them proud but my will was weakening and I often thought of death.

After six months, the doctors advised father to take me to yet another hospital for further treatment. They recommended the general hospital in Camranh town, 150 km away. By that time the doctors had given up hope of curing me and I myself had no hope of ever getting better. Father decided to move the entire family to an island near Camranh called Binh Ba Island in the hope

of securing some peace there. In his own words, he did not want any more of his family members to die or be wounded.

One day, some Americans visited the principal of the primary school on the island and he told them about my condition. They immediately took charge of the situation and sent me to the American hospital in Camranh. I was already twelve years old when I was admitted to that hospital and had two operations performed on my back. I stayed there until I was discharged more than a year later. I have to thank the doctors and nurses there for helping to put me on the road to recovery but I still needed another operation when I finally reached Australia. However, until today, my back is still not one hundred percent fully healed.

When I was in the American hospital, I found my fellow sufferers to be mainly American soldiers brought in from the battlefield. Many of them had lost their limbs and some even had parts of their faces blown up into red bloody masses of flesh. These soldiers were mostly young; some even looked like teenagers, but their pain and suffering made them curse their country and government in a language that would have made a seasoned pirate blush with shame. Every night nobody could sleep as we lay in bed listening to the unashamed sobbing and screaming until the nurses came around with stronger doses of painkillers and sedatives.

The American soldier in the bed next to mine crossed himself before being taken into the operating theatre one day. I knew that he was praying for death to come swiftly and in my heart, I wished the same for him too. I felt that it would have

been better for him not to return. I felt that life was meaningless and a living hell. After such a lot of medical aid, I was still in a lot of pain and I could not even lift my right arm! Looking back now, I marvel at the way I often managed to hold back my tears despite the throbbing pain that was my constant nightmare. I understood deeply what agony each and every soldier suffered in that hospital. So I did what any person would do too in my situation – I decided to kill myself.

My first attempt at suicide was with the sleeping pills that the nurses gave me to help me sleep. I pretended to swallow them but I was actually keeping them aside for a painless death. After I had acquired the equivalent of five days' supply, I swallowed them all and the next thing I knew, I was in the emergency room. The nurses there scolded me soundly for my foolish act but I did not understand enough English to know what they were saying. I just noted the anguish on their faces and knew that they were filled with pity and helplessness watching me suffer. But I did not want their pity. I just wanted to be free of the pain. I just wanted to die.

The second attempt took place after my American friend had recovered from his operation and was scheduled to return to America soon. I was in a wheelchair one day and by waving my left hand about and using my limited English to say, "Go, go" I managed to get him to carry me up the stairs to the roof terrace. He must have thought I wanted to see the blue sky again, so he was more than happy to oblige. There, we stayed for a while near the low wall around the roof terrace in companionable

silence – he drinking beer in a relaxed mood, and I biding my time.

As soon as he left me alone, I lunged forward and in a second, I was falling down the side of the building. It was a single-storey building so I did not die. I landed on my left arm but the impact caused the wounds on my back and on my right arm to split open again. I was a bloody wreck.

When I opened my eyes, it was to see my father gazing anxiously at me. He said, "I have many children, but you are the one who has to bear the *Kamma* of all my children. Do not kill yourself. I can take care of you." I never tried to kill myself again after that. I think it was the look on his face that day that made me strong again. My father was, and still is, a very strong man not often conquered by emotions, but the tortured look in his eyes as he gazed at me told me how deeply he loved this son and if only he could, he would have willingly taken my place in that hospital.

Mother came to see me later with father, and I was soundly chastised for my foolishness. But mother said, "If you need help, think about Kuan Yin Bodhisattva." We were not practising Buddhists and it was strange for mother to give me such advice. It was stranger still when she took out a little booklet about the Bodhisattva complete with Her prayer and mantra. I did not know who She was at that time but it gave me comfort to look at Her picture. I took it and put it under my pillow and it stayed there until I was discharged.

## CHAPTER 4

### **ORDINATION AS A SAMANERA**

I was already nearly thirteen years old when I resumed my education and fortunately the school principal accepted me back. I had been away for several years yet I was quickly able to catch up with the other children in my class. I had still not fully recovered from my injuries and the disfiguring scars on my back were meant to stay but I was comfortable enough to carry on with my life.

One day I went for a stroll along the beach with three of my friends. School was out then and we were on the beach looking for little crabs and seashells and just whiling the time away. Suddenly I noticed a monk emerge from the forest nearby. He walked with slow careful steps across the sand towards a huge rock jutting out into the sea and climbed it deftly. Then, the monk arranged his robe carefully about his slight frame, sat down cross-legged and soon, was as still as a rock.

I did not know what he was doing, but my curiosity was piqued. I climbed up the rock and sat down behind him and waited quietly for him to say something. I waited for almost an hour before he finally stirred. He looked at me with gentle eyes and asked me what I was doing there. I asked him what he was doing himself and he answered, "Meditating." This was a new word to me and he tried to explain what it meant but I did not understand him. Then he spoke about the war and the way the people had suffered and I felt that he was referring to my injuries.

I asked him why I had to suffer so much pain and he spoke about the effects of *Kamma and Retribution*. I did not comprehend what he was talking about. Soon he got up to go. He had to return to the monastery, he said, and that I could go along with him for a visit if I liked. I called out to my other playmates but they did not want to go with us, so I left the beach with the monk. When we reached the monastery, I saw for the first time in my life, a statue of the Buddha.

My own family had no religious beliefs at that time although some of our relatives had embraced Roman Catholicism. In fact, my father disapproved of many monks because he felt that the *Sangha* mixed politics with religion and that it was wrong. Politicians were using many monks to garner public support and in return, these 'political monks' earned very comfortable incomes. Father had long decided that his descendants would not become patrons of such monks. He did not want our family honour to be tarnished by abetting the illegal goings-on in the monasteries; whether knowingly or unknowingly. My uncles were of the same mind too; hence we children had never been to a monastery before.

Anyway, when I gazed at the statue of the Buddha in the monastery that afternoon, I felt a deep peace descend upon me. He looked so serene, this man of stone and his face was so kind. Yet I did not bow before the statue – I did not know that I was supposed to.

Ven. Buu Minh, the monk I had befriended, took me to an inner sanctum and there was a black and white picture of a Vietnamese monk on an altar. I did not know who it was but as

soon as I saw that picture, I bowed down low. Ven. Buu Minh was surprised to see my behaviour and he said that the monk in the picture was Patriarch Minh Dang Quang. He showed me all around the *vihara*, explaining whatever he felt would be interesting to me, but my mind was on that picture so I did not absorb much of the information he was dishing out.

Soon it was time for me to go home and Ven. Buu Minh invited me to visit the monastery as often as I wished. I saw then that it was just 20 m away from my school yet I had not noticed it before. Every afternoon after that, I went to the *vihara*. I also stopped eating meat and fish and mother noticed it a month later. Mother quizzed me about my new dietary preferences and I told her frankly that I wanted to be a monk.

Father had to be told of course, and was he mad! He called me to him and said in no uncertain terms that no son of his can ever be a monk and that I was not to visit Ven. Buu Minh again.

I told father that Ven. Buu Minh was not attached to the *vihara*. In fact, he was a mendicant monk, one who went about barefoot and ate only once a day the *Dana* he was offered by the public. He did not touch money, had only three robes and one alms bowl and taught me good things.

Father said, "No, my boy. If you want to be a monk, you might as well join the ones in the Mahayana temple that your great grandma built in town. At least you will not be a beggar on the road."

I refused, my mind set on being a mendicant monk like Ven. Buu Minh.

Father did not budge from his stand and neither did I. I carried on being a vegetarian and every day ate only rice with salt until I frequently began to feel weak and tired. Then one day three months later, mother put a bowl of soup on the dining table and in front of the whole family, told us it was vegetarian soup. It looked delicious and every one started tucking in happily and I followed suit. I took one mouthful and immediately vomited it out so violently that the whole table of food was spoiled! It was not vegetarian at all, but fish soup. Father had to admit defeat and announced that I was meant to be a monk. Later I found out that it was father's idea to test me.

Father took me together with my uncles and aunts to see a monk at the *vihara* who gave all of us a *Dhamma* talk but I understood little of it. This monk asked me why I wanted to leave home, and I said I wanted to be like Ven. Buu Minh. However, Ven. Buu Minh was a wandering mendicant monk so it was not practical for me to take my *samanera* vows under his tutelage – at least, not yet. I was too young, he said. So it was decided that I would be sent to Saigon where I would stay and study in the *Tinh Xa Trung Tam vihara centre*, a monastery that followed patriarch Minh Dang Quang's teachings. When I reached that big vihara, I took my five precepts and Ven. Buu Minh gave me the *Dhamma* name Minh Thien, meaning Light of Meditation.

From 1968 to 1972, I stayed in the vihara in Saigon. I settled down and everyone trusted me because they knew my family background and that I had not joined the *Sangha* in order to avoid being drafted into the army. I was then under the guidance of Ven. Giac Cuu who has since disrobed and rejoined



society. Giac Cuu was a student of a 'commercial, Mercedes Benz' monk. At that time, the people were still poor but this 'commercial monk' played on their religious fervour to raise a lot of money for the building of temples. Altogether, he managed to build 33 temples but the amount of money collected way exceeded the expenses incurred. Where did the rest of the money go to but into the purchase of one of only two Mercedes Benz's in Vietnam at that time?

Father came to visit me at the *vihara* in Saigon one day and saw the big, shiny car in the driveway. When he learnt whom it belonged to, he was very upset. He said, "I told you to go to your great grandma's temple but you said you wanted to follow Minh Dang Quang's tradition. But see – these monks here are making a mockery of Minh Dang Quang's teachings. Minh Dang Quang was a very good monk. He would not have approved of these fake monks here. It is better for you to go home with me."

I pleaded to be allowed to stay in Saigon for just one more month and father left in a foul mood. Not long after that, I met my master, Ven. Giac Dong.

One evening, I was seated beside Ven. Giac Nhien in his Mercedes, going to a religious function. A few other cars were following the Mercedes – all of which were full of monks.

Along the way, Giac Nhien saw one of his rich patrons on the road, and asked his driver to stop the car. He then told me to get out of the Mercedes in order to make space for the rich lady, and to get into one of the other cars following behind. I could not get a seat in any of the other cars, and so was left stranded on the road. I was told to make my way back to the Tinh Xa Trung

Tam centre by myself. Unfortunately, it was already dusk, so I found my way to the nearest Minh Dang Quang temple in the vicinity. It was a small temple and I stayed there for a few days, reluctant to return to the Saigon centre.

After a few days, Giac Nhien sent some monks to the small temple to look for me – not because he was concerned about my welfare, but because he had learnt about my family background. They asked me to return to Saigon with them, but I refused. It was at this small temple that my new teacher, Ven. Giac Dong saw me.

Ven. Giac Dong, being a mendicant monk, had visited that small temple before. He questioned me about the reason for my presence there and when I told him what had happened, he laughed heartily. Then he asked me to leave the temple and follow him. I was fifteen years old then.

Ven. Giac Dong went around barefoot like Patriarch Minh Dang Quang did. From 1972 to 1975, I followed Ven. Giac Dong everywhere and he taught me whatever he could. We were not attached to any one place, but went into the mountains and visited monasteries for not more than a few days at a time. We ate only one meal a day before midday and avoided contact with money and that made my father very happy to place me in his hands. It was a vast contrast to my stay in Saigon. When I was still in the *vihara* in Saigon, I had to collect monetary donations on behalf of the monks there who claimed that they did not touch money. They even claimed that they did not eat more than one meal a day, but I can bear witness to the fact that they certainly did so.

In 1975, South Vietnam fell to the Communists. I was nineteen years old then. My father visited my master and had a long talk with him about my future. Father wanted me to disrobe and return home to further my studies, as I was still young. I had not been fully ordained yet at that time because a *samanera* or novice monk has to be at least twenty years of age before he can take the vows of a Bhikkhu.

The Communist regime was not well disposed towards monks and monasteries, and forced about 80% of the monks nationwide to disrobe. Monks who refused to do so were often incarcerated and forced to do hard labour. My master was locked up in prison for refusing to disrobe too. His tormentors urged him to eat meat so as to win his release but he did not comply and for that, he suffered at their hands. This episode in his life broke his health and by the time he was finally released – after six years, six months and six days – he had become a shadow of his former self.

The authorities found that it was not as easy to dispose of the 'monk problem' as they had thought, so they resorted to other devious means to destroy the *Sangha*. One way was to relax the requirements for acceptance into monkhood. Previously, educated people would be considered the most suitable material for the *Sangha* as it would be easier to teach them the Buddhist doctrine and scriptures. By allowing all and sundry to become monks, the authorities effectively introduced undesirable characters into the *Sangha*. Such people became poor reflections of the *Sangha* as many of them were coarse and hard to train. Some of them were not even interested in learning the scriptures

– they just wanted to have a roof above their heads, and food in their stomachs.

Yet another method employed by the Communists to destroy the *Sangha* was to send their police personnel 'underground' – these people infiltrated the temples as 'spy monks'. In the mornings they would be seen going around on their alms rounds but later, they would don their own clothes again and hang around with women in pubs. Some of these 'monks' also collected protection money from the other monks who were paid to perform religious ceremonies on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month – they were just gangsters in *Sangha* robes. This gave such a bad impression to the public that many people lost faith in the *Sangha*; and who can blame them? It is sad that we managed to repel the French and the Americans, only to be vanquished by our own people.

Anyway, I returned to my village and stayed there until 1977. Since I was educated and showed some literary talents, the Communists asked me to compose patriotic songs about their heroes. I had to help them as well as attend their party meetings. At the meetings, the Communists told a lot of lies to the villagers. They said that the South Vietnamese people were poor and that only the Communists could bring prosperity to them. I had to keep my mouth shut.

One day in January, my family and I had to gather with our other relatives at the Nguyen Phuc Family Hall in town. It was All Souls' Day and I met one of my father's cousins there. This uncle was one year younger than me; a tall and imposing man and he liked me at once. He pointed to the wall where the names

of the previous royal Nguyen Phuc family were printed and to my surprise, I saw Grandpa's name there as well. I had never known before that we were descendants of the previous king, and direct descendants of King Gia Long. Uncle said that my father had not told me about it, as I was a monk.

Father told us then the truth about our ancestry but I was not interested. It did not strike me as something worth recalling or even to discuss, but my uncle was of a different mind. He was an ambitious man and already involved in politics. He came to see me often to enlist my support but I was averse to helping him further his political career.

One day, my uncle came to say that we had to escape, to run away from Vietnam. The Communists were onto him and he wanted me to go with him. I helped him to arrange for a boat to take him away from Vietnam but I did not wish to follow him. A week later, we heard about his arrest and his subsequent torture in prison. He was only nineteen then and after three years in prison, he emerged a broken young man leaning on a walking stick.

Not long after his arrest, my father told me to consider leaving Vietnam. He was aware that the police were watching me like hawks because they knew my uncle had been very close to me. In fact the whole neighbourhood knew of the affection between us as we often used to ride a motorcycle all over the place. Besides, one of my sisters was ill with a heart ailment and needed treatment overseas and my brother-in-law knew that the only way to save her was to get her into a hospital outside Vietnam.

One month later, I made my escape with my sister, brother-in-law and their three children. My parents did not want to leave Vietnam so they stayed behind. Of course the police combed our home and village, looking for me but after interrogating and threatening my father, they left my family alone.<sup>1</sup>

We arrived at the Philippines where I was later interviewed at the Australian embassy and granted a visa to go to Australia. At that time, the Vietnamese Boat People captured the hearts of many people and nations and my injuries due to the napalm bomb earned me even more sympathy. Many Australians were kind enough to open their arms to my people and I myself was placed in the care of a loving family. That was how I ended up staying with my foster family, the Farwells while my sister and her family went on to Germany. The Farwells looked after me from 1977 to 1980 and I was sent to a vocational school. It was the start of a new chapter in my life; but that is another story.

## CHAPTER 5

### SERVING IN SYDNEY

In 1994, my old master, Ven. Giac Dong ordained me as a *samanera* or novice monk once again. That same year, I took my Bhikkhu vows under the Second Patriarch of the Minh Dang Quang Order, Ven. Thich Giac Chanh before I went to Sri Lanka where I was fortunate to be under the tutelage of Ven. Piyadassi in Sri Lanka. He called me Mahinda after King Asoka's son who was the leader of the first Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka in 250 B.C.

At that time, we also built a *vihara* in Sydney called the Buddha Relics Vihara, modelled after the Heart For Peace Mission in Vietnam. However, my main aim is to spread the *Dhamma* all over the world to win peace back into the hearts of the people and to prevent a third world war from occurring. Hence, I do not stay put for long in one temple or monastery but I have to be always on the move, making new friends, talking to people, spreading the message of Universal Peace. In this way, I will also not get too attached to any place as that would be a burden on my shoulders and I will be unable to live the life of a Universal Beggar.

Yet, I do recall certain experiences that I had while staying at the Buddha Relics Vihara. I remember one particular morning when I received a call from a hospital in Sydney. The nurse at the other end of the line said that they were treating a little Vietnamese boy aged one and a half years, who had fallen

into a swimming pool and was now in a coma. The doctors had given up all hope of his ever recovering and wanted to let him die peacefully. His family wanted a Buddhist monk to go to the hospital to pray for the child before the doctors disconnected the life-support system.

I went to the hospital immediately with a few friends. There we were escorted into the emergency room where I saw the little boy surrounded by his weeping family and my heart ached. I started the prayers and everyone clasped their hands and closed their eyes. I chanted a prayer over him and suddenly the boy moved! I placed my hand on his forehead and felt him move again. I prayed aloud, asking Kuan Yin Bodhisattva to save the boy and then started chanting again. The boy opened his eyes. Everyone saw this and gasped. I held up the boy's hands in a prayerful clasp and gave him a *Dhamma* name: Hue Can, meaning Wisdom and Good Affinities.

I then continued chanting. A nurse asked the doctor whether she should start removing the tubes stuck into the little boy's body but I stopped her. I chanted once more and the boy moved his hand, so I told the family to let him live. It was clear to everyone then that the boy had chosen life over death.

Three days later, the boy's mother came to the *vihara* to see me. She was in a terrible state, and was weeping and wailing, convinced that I was the only one who could save her son. Her husband wanted the doctors to disconnect the life-support system because after I had left, the little boy lapsed into a coma once again. To the doctors, he was already brain-damaged.



The lady was beside herself with grief and when I gazed at her, images of my own mother carrying me in her arms begging along the road, came flooding back.

I told the lady to call the hospital at once to tell the doctors not to take any action until I reached there. When we arrived at the hospital, I could sense that the staff did not welcome my presence. Anyway, I had my Buddha relic with me and I placed it on the child's forehead. Then, I said aloud to the boy, "Hue Can, your teacher has come. I don't want you to leave. Show me if you can hear what I say." I prayed over him and then placed the relic in his palm. I said, "Hue Can, can you hold the relic for me?" His hand folded over it in response. Then, I said calmly, "Hue Can, can you give me the relic?" His grip relaxed over the relic and his palm opened. No, I told the family, do not let him die. He clearly wanted to live.

The annual three-month retreat came up after that and I lost all contact with the world outside. My fellow monks and I wanted to go en masse to Mainley Beach at the end of the retreat to conduct prayers for the souls of the Vietnamese boat people who had died at sea while trying to reach freedom. The last morning of the retreat dawned and we got ready to set off for the beach when suddenly, a little boy entered the vihara with some people and headed straight for me. I recognised him as the little boy Hue Can in the hospital because I saw his mother behind him. He was only under two years old but he climbed into my lap happily and confidently. I spoke to him and his mother and he was very happy. It was a miracle performed with the grace of Kuan Yin Bodhisattva and this was definitely a lesson to all of us

about the dire need for everyone to perform good deeds in order to generate good *Kamma*.

In 1995 I once again played a part in a rescue mission. Every morning, I would go on my alms round in the Vietnamese neighbourhood in Sydney. Then, after lunch I would say my prayers at the altar. Sometimes people would come and give me pieces of paper with certain names written on them. These were normally names of people suffering from illnesses and I was requested to pray for them. One day, I noticed a young lady in the group of people around me staring at the pieces of paper on the altar table. When I queried her, she pointed at a piece of paper and said that it was her father's name and wanted to know how it had gotten there. I said that someone had asked me to perform some prayers for this man and when I mentioned the person's name, it turned out to be her aunt. So I asked the lady what was wrong with her father.

She had tears in her eyes when she told me that her father, whom she loved dearly, had cancer and that he had only one more month to live. She said, "I've been to many temples and the monks there have promised to pray to the Buddha on my father's behalf so that his life will be spared. Can you do the same?"

I replied, "No, I can't do that. Surely, I don't want to lie to you. How can an old car not break down one day? Similarly how can we avoid sickness and death? If all those monks and priests can save a person from death, then there will be no necessity to have doctors and nurses around. I can't save his body but I can help him to find peace in his mind so that he can

die a meaningful death. Please bring him here tomorrow to meet me.”

She was shocked to hear my answer which was entirely different from what the other monks had told her. She looked at me doubtfully and said, “No, Bhikkhu, my father does not believe in monks. So how can he come to see you?”

“Excellent,” I exclaimed, much to her surprise. “That’s even better. That is the kind of person I would like to meet. Too many people adhere to wrong beliefs and concepts due to blind faith, so people like your father are very rare, precious gems. Bring him to me tomorrow.”

The following morning, a very skinny elderly gentleman entered the vihara supported by two young men. When he saw me sitting in the hall, he shrugged the two young men aside and walked up to me unaided. Then, to their amazement, he went down on his knees and bowed low. As he bowed, I concentrated my gaze at him and said, “Before, I was unable to look after you well, my son. This life, I can help you. Can you take refuge in the *Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha*?” He nodded and I gave him the *Dhamma* name Thien Vuong and he took the five precepts.

I continued, “Now, Thien Vuong, this body is not our body, it is impermanent. We come here like we go to a school. Once we have learned everything, we leave the school behind us. In like manner, we must return our four elements to the earth.”

His children told me again that the doctors had said he had only one more month to live. But I just said, “We’ll see.”

I met Thien Vuong a few times after that and we became like father and son. One month passed then two and three. At

that time, we were preparing to receive another of the Buddha's relics into our vihara and we had to go to the monastery in Katumba to do so. Altogether, thirty monks and three to four hundred lay devotees in five buses and many cars made the trip together which took about eight hours to and fro.

Here, I have to pause a while and dwell on the subject of the Buddha's relics. When the Buddha was cremated, there were plenty of bone relics (*sarira*) left behind and they were placed in stupas in various parts of India. However, only four tooth relics were left – one was given to the Heavenly King, one to the Dragon King, one is now in Kandy, Sri Lanka and one is in a temple in China. Yet, there are *Sangha* members who claim that they have with them the Buddha's tooth relics and his finger – and charge ignorant people money to see them! These *Sangha* members are using the Buddha to earn money – it is like putting one's father on display for cash. Obviously I do not have to tell you not to fall for their tricks. Let me remind everyone that there are two types of relics for us to revere – the Buddha's physical remains and the Teachings He left behind. The latter are called the relics of the Dhamma body, and definitely of greater importance than seeing and worshipping the former. If you cannot see the Buddha's Teachings and practise them, then no matter what relic is placed under your nose, you will never be enlightened.

Anyway, Thien Vuong insisted on going along despite his children's fear that the journey would be too tiring for him. I travelled with him in his Land Cruiser and when we received the casket with the relic in it, I allowed Thien Vuong to carry it in the

ensuing procession. He held it with a firm grip, and walked with his head held high, a smile on his lips – he definitely did not look like a dying man.

Then one day the telephone rang at 6 o'clock in the morning. It was Thien Vuong's daughter and she was very distressed. Her father had been warded and the doctors said it was his final day. I rushed over to the hospital and there, on the bed in the emergency room, lay the poor man in a coma, with blood already oozing out of his ears and nose. The smell of death was certainly in the air. I strode over to him, held his hand and said slowly and clearly, "Thien Vuong, no one asked you to come but you did. Now you want to go without letting me know first?" Then I prayed over him and blessed him. I glanced around at the family and friends gathered there and saw them standing quietly with their eyes closed and hands clasped in prayer. I turned back to the sick man. "Can you open your eyes?" I asked him. He opened his eyes. "In the past, I could not take good care of you, my son because I had to look after the country – but this life, I shall take care of you. Okay, now I shall leave you and go to your house and prepare for *Dana* with the other monks. Can you be discharged today and return home? I will be there waiting for you." He nodded weakly.

I went straight to his house and gathered all my fellow monks from the *vihara* for *Dana*. However, Thien Vuong's return home was delayed due to the hospital staff being slow in processing his papers and some of the monks could not wait for too long so they left his house before he could offer *Dana* to them.

I shall always remember his homecoming that afternoon. I was standing halfway up the stairs when he walked into the house and he came right up to the bottom step before I stopped him. I told him to go and rest and that the next time he planned to leave us, he must give me prior notice. He laughed and said yes.

It is rare that people can recognise loved ones over several births, and this was one such case. I knew he had been my son in two of my rebirths before.

Three days later, the phone rang again and it was Thien Vuong's daughter. She said that her father wanted to see me. All at once, I knew that the time for him to die had finally arrived. I asked another monk to go to their house with me to help with the prayers.

Thien Vuong lay still as we chanted all 108 names of the Buddha. When we stopped, he looked at me and painfully reached for my hand. Then his eyes wandered slowly around the roomful of people until his gaze landed on his youngest son Michael, so I called Michael over to his father. I took Michael's hand and placed it next to mine on his father's chest.

I said slowly, "Thien Vuong, no one asked you to come but you came. No one wants you to go but you have to go. You did a good job as a father, husband and student and I have a good chance now to help you." I chanted aloud once again and as the prayer drew to a close, I heard him heave a last sigh and then, he was gone.

Three days later, after the cremation was over, the family invited me to go along with them to the crematorium to collect his

ashes. This is not usually done by a monk, but I went with them anyway. There, the caretaker of the crematorium handed a small urn to me – instead of giving it to the dead man’s children – and immediately, I said, “There is nothing in this urn.” Everyone was shocked and the caretaker was understandably upset. However, I stood my ground and asked for it to be opened again. Sacrilegious! The caretaker started to argue with me but finally, she removed the seal, opened the urn and had to apologize profusely to the family – it was indeed empty. Someone must have mistakenly sealed an empty urn thinking that it had already been filled with the dead man’s ashes.

When we finally reached their house, Thien Vuong’s children allowed me to carry their father’s urn of ashes into the prayer hall. There was a picture of the deceased man on the wall and strangely there was a big brown moth next to it. I had never seen such a moth in Australia before but it did not bother me. I just looked at it, smiled and said, “Ah, you are already here. You want to show that you have miraculous powers so that we would know that you are now in Heaven? But when I gave you the name Thien Vuong, it was because I knew you would end up in Heaven someday.”

Later, I had a strange dream that night. In my dream Thien Vuong appeared and said that I was once his father and his daughter was once his mother. I woke up and meditated on the truth that the Buddha had once expounded; i.e. that each female has been our mother before, and each male our father.<sup>2</sup>

I remember another incident that happened one day when I was still in Sydney. A man came knocking at the door of

our *vihara* at 5 o'clock in the morning. My fellow monk opened the door and this man came rushing in, brandishing a gun. He demanded to see me and when I came to the hall, he said, "Bhikkhu, please help me. If I cannot solve my problem, I will kill myself here."

I said, "Before I agree to help you, you must agree to help me first. Please go outside the compound of our monastery and shoot yourself there. Then when the police and ambulance arrive, I will not be involved. I don't want to go to court. If you can promise me to do that, I will help you."

Needless to say, the man was shocked at my response. "How can you say that, Bhikkhu? I heard that you are a man of compassion, yet you are asking me to kill myself?"

"I do not want to waste your time and mine," I replied. "If I tell you not to kill yourself but you are determined to do just that, then whatever I say will not change your mind. You might as well go and do it now. I have no time for this. I have compassion only for those who need it. I give water to those who are thirsty. Go and do it now. If you kill yourself, it is only one life gone. There are thousands being born to replace you, don't worry about that."

He understood my message and relaxed his grip on his gun.

"If you want to come in and talk with me, give me the gun. If you don't, you can go."

He came to me and gave me the gun. I told him to go to the prayer hall and sit down in front of the statue of the Buddha and contemplate quietly and that I would talk to him later.



Later, when he looked more composed, I spoke to him. "Suicide is very bad," I said. "You can pay for anything but you cannot repay your parents for giving you your life. If you commit suicide, it means that you have run out of payment to your parents. And not only your parents – you owe the earth for the air, water, earth that you have borrowed - are you a thief to take and not repay?"

He said, "Why didn't you say this just now?"

I smiled at him, "Just now you wanted to die. Now you are feeling better. Go and freshen up in the bathroom and we will talk some more."

The man returned from the bathroom looking much better except that his eyes were still red from not having slept for three days.

"Where do you come from?" I asked him.

"I am from Melbourne, Bhikkhu. I really wanted to kill myself but I had heard of you and came to ask you to pray for my soul." He was a Vietnamese Buddhist.

"Why do you want to die?"

It turned out that he had gambled for three days at a casino and lost AUD\$270,000.00. Then he had borrowed money from some gangsters and lost some more. Now he was desperate because if he wanted to live, he would have to sell all his three houses and end up a bankrupt. He had a pretty wife and two kids and he thought that if he died, his wife would at least have the properties to support their children. I told him, "No – that is wrong. When you agreed to play, you agreed to pay as well. You must honour your word. And if you kill yourself, your pretty wife

might just remarry and your kids will call another man 'dad'! So, don't do that! Just sell your houses and repay your debts then move away and start a new life. After all, when you first met your wife, you had nothing yet you were able to build a good life. You can do that again, together."

So we rang up his wife and he had a long, tearful conversation with her and at the end of the day, the man decided to live on. He was not the only person I talked out of committing suicide. Altogether, I managed to help six people; several of whom are women. They did not want to die because of money, though. They wanted to die for love instead.

## CHAPTER 6

### **INDIA AND THE DALAI LAMA**

In 1997, I made my first trip to India. I landed at the New Delhi airport in the middle of the night but I was too happy to feel tired. It was the first time for me to visit the land where the Buddha had lived and to me, it was like a homecoming.

India being the land of the Buddha's birth must of course be a Buddhist country – or so I thought. Was I in for a rude awakening!

Upon exiting the airport, I went around asking for lifts to the New Delhi University where one of my Buddhist monk friends was staying. I approached bus drivers and taxi drivers but to my surprise, all of them turned me away. In Thailand and Sri Lanka, monks are accorded respectful treatment at all times and can travel free of charge by public transport. Finally, I asked for directions and started walking all the way to the university.

After having walked for a while, a car stopped next to me. The driver asked me where I was going and to hop into his taxi. I told him that I had no money for the fare, but he told me not to worry about that. So I boarded the taxi and found that I was sharing it with three other foreigners. Soon, the foreigners were dropped off one by one and I was the last passenger left because the university was so far away. At long last, the driver pulled up by the side of the road in the darkness and said, "Here you are. Now, pay me and I will take you to the university."

I said, "Sir, I have no money. I told you so just now."

"Yes, yes," he waved his hands. "Of course you have no Indian rupees. You can pay me in American dollars."

I was stunned. "No, sir, I don't have American dollars either."

"Then where are you from? Australia? Okay, Australian dollars will do."

"No, sir, I have no money of any kind. I am a monk and monks are not allowed to touch money," I was getting perplexed.

"You must be joking!" he said, his face scornful. "How can I drive a taxi without petrol? Will water do? If you don't pay me, I have to take you back to where I picked you up just now. Now, are you going to pay me or not?"

I shook my head sadly so he really made a U-turn and headed back towards the airport. Halfway there, he still asked me for money.

"Please, sir," I said. "I have no money. The Buddha himself left behind him a palace, a kingdom – how then can we monks touch money?"

The driver scoffed, "No, the Buddha died more than two thousand years ago. Many Buddhist monks come to India and show off their wealth. They are very rich and they have their own escorts too to drive them around."

"No wonder you look down on practising monks then. But we have rules to follow and all monks should try to abide by them and be good monks."

"Don't say anymore," he waved his hands about in disgust. "Many people come from overseas by air – how do they do it if they don't have money?"

“Sir, what is your religion?” I asked.

“Me? I am a Christian.”

“Ah, that’s good. Jesus himself did not touch money, and went barefoot too. Don’t you recall Matthew Chapter 10.9?”<sup>3</sup>

The man was clearly not in the mood for a religious discussion. “C’mon man,” he said. “What are you talking about? Many Christians came to India and used money to buy and convert us. My father followed them because we needed the money for food and shelter. If the white man is crazy enough to throw good money away, it’s fine by us. These priests and pastors – do they know what they are preaching themselves? They themselves don’t have time to read the bible. They don’t know what’s in the bible. If they knew, they would not have become so rich and would not be living such comfortable lives surrounded by security guards. And I myself have no time for the bible either. I have to work, to drive my taxi. Only money can buy me petrol for the taxi, not anything else. My grandfather earned his rupees with a rickshaw, my father had a horse, and now I drive a taxi. Yet, I still have no money, no passport to go overseas. You come from overseas. How can you not have money?”

At that, I thought to myself, “People think I can’t fly without money. But when we die, we will also have no passport, no visa or air tickets – how can we still get to Heaven or Paradise?”

When we stopped, I got out of the taxi and started walking again in the direction of the university. My heart was heavy and my mind churned with the information the driver had

fed me. I felt very sad that religious leaders had used money to convert others instead of converting their own hearts to the way of peace. I walked till I felt very tired and then I sat down beneath a tree and fell asleep. It was around 3.30 in the morning. When I opened my eyes again, it was already dawn and the first rays of sunshine were filtering through the leaves of the tree. I saw then that it was a Bodhi tree.

That was the year I spent my first rains retreat at Bodhigaya. After I left Bodhigaya, I returned to New Delhi where my fellow monks suggested that we visit the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. I had met His Holiness once before when he was in Sydney, so I was happy to go along with their plans. I called up His Holiness's office to make the arrangements and one day before the appointed day, we stayed overnight in the temple in Dharamsala.

However, before we were allowed to see the Dalai Lama, we had to be subjected to a body search by the security guards! "No," I objected, "A bhikkhu's body cannot be frisked and no, I cannot leave my alms bowl behind me at the entrance. A bhikkhu must always have his alms bowl with him; otherwise he is not a true bhikkhu."

My companions tried to persuade me to just do as I was told, but I was adamant. Finally, I told them to meet the Dalai Lama by themselves and I would wait for them in the garden. I left them then and had a wonderful contemplative time under a tree. All this was witnessed by a group of people from Hollywood who happened to be in Dharamsala at the time too. They had taken video shots of me on my alms round that morning but I had

not known then who they were. I had only presumed that they were people who wanted information on the Tibetan refugees. One of these crewmembers from Universal Film Productions was Barbara and later on, we struck up a conversation and I was able to share some of my ideas with her. Anyway, my fellow monks did not manage to see the Dalai Lama after all because I was the one who had arranged the appointment and since I was not in the group; permission was not granted to the rest of them to meet His Holiness. Hence, I had to call up again to arrange for yet another appointment that took place a few days later – and this time, I was not frisked and I was allowed to have my alms bowl with me.

We had a very good discussion of the *Dhamma* with the Dalai Lama that day. He asked me which tradition I followed. I told him that I studied the Theravada as well as the Mahayana traditions and even the scriptures of other religions but that I follow the Buddha's path and Patriarch Minh Dang Quang's teachings. One of his ministers asked me for my opinion of the annexation of Tibet by China and if I would consider helping them to recover their country but my reply shocked them. I told them that they should be grateful for whatever had happened. If the Chinese had not overrun their country, the Dalai Lama might not have had the chance to go to the West and spread the *Dhamma*. A country is just so much earth, and as monks, our duty is not to secure the borders of our country but to free ourselves of ignorance and desire. That is the only way to win peace.

The Dalai Lama stared at me and said, "But, Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu, don't you know that the communists say that religion is a drug addiction?"

I replied coolly, "But no, not that. Worse than that! Religions today make people believe blindly and they harm others without thinking twice. Why? Just because they believe their religions require them to do so. That is pure ignorance. We must lead the people on the right path. We must not mix religion with politics or business."

Fortunately, the Dalai Lama did not take offence at my outspoken ways and listened attentively as I told him about our Heart For Peace mission. He nodded kindly and asked me if I needed help with my work. I said, "Your Holiness, I want to help your people too. We must go on alms round together and your people can then offer *Dana* to us and the other monks. That way they will win good merits for their future. It will also teach them to give, and thus, to reduce their desires." He agreed without any hesitation and we decided to hold the event in Bodhigaya the following year.

We chose the 28<sup>th</sup> January 1998 to go on our alms round together as it coincided with the day I was to begin my 9000 km walk with a group of monks around the world for World Peace. The Dalai Lama was to walk some distance with us that day to send us off.

During that time, unknown to me beforehand, Hollywood came into the picture again. My friend Barbara and some film crewmembers happened to be with the Tibetan Prime Minister when I met with him on the 26<sup>th</sup> January to discuss the necessary arrangements for the Dalai Lama's first alms round in Bodhigaya.

The following day, I met with the Dalai Lama again, but this time, with some Sangha members who were going to



participate in the Peace Walk with me. They wanted to clarify their stand with His Holiness i.e. that they were not interested in politics. They did not want their participation to be misconstrued as support for Tibet's political struggles. The Dalai Lama reassured them by saying, "The Dhamma is the Universal Teachings of the Buddha and meant for the world. But my country only has 6 million people, so go and spread the Teachings for the benefit of many, not just for Tibet, not to 'free Tibet'."

I told His Holiness that although he had lost Tibet, he had not lost his great heart.

The evening before the Walk, it was raining very heavily and everyone was worried, saying that the Dalai Lama must not be allowed to be caught in the rain; he is a king. I said that none of the monks should go out into the rain and not just His Holiness, but to stop worrying, and that the rain would stop before the Dalai Lama arrived. It rained all through the night but just before 6 o'clock in the morning, the rain stopped completely so the Dalai Lama was able to go on his alms round by 6.45 a.m.

Just before the Dalai Lama's arrival, I went to inspect the route he would take and to my dismay, saw that a red carpet had been laid out in all readiness. A huge crowd had gathered to witness the event and there were military police and guards everywhere. I quickly sought out Ven. Pragassi, the abbot of the Mahabodhi Temple and said, "Venerable sir, can you help me prepare for the Dalai Lama's alms round today? Can you get someone to remove the red carpet? And we don't need so many bodyguards and police personnel around. We want to go on our alms round as calmly and as peacefully as possible."

"What are you talking about?" was the reply I got. "Who are you to come and talk to me like that? I have arranged functions for the Dalai Lama before so I know what to do or not to do."

I had to say, " Sir, you may have arranged all sorts of functions for His Holiness before, but today he is going on his alms round – he is going to be like the Buddha was, like a beggar."

"No," he answered me coldly. "The red carpet, the bodyguards, and the police – everything stays. I only take orders from the Dalai Lama's office or from Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu."

"Sir," I replied. "I **am** Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu."

"You? What are you talking about? I only know you as a beggar. I have seen you begging for food around here before – every morning you go on your alms round and you take food from the people but do not give anything back."

"You do not understand, sir," I explained. "When monks go on alms rounds, it is to give the people a chance to offer *Dana* to the *Sangha*, and hence, to earn merits. That is what the Dalai Lama is doing today. We need to learn to give."

The abbot was getting irritated with me and told me to go away. Barbara, my Hollywood friend turned up and saw what was going on and she too, got very upset with the abbot.

"Please, sir," I insisted. "Please do what I have requested."

"You want to say again that you are Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu? Bullshit!" He strode away angrily.

I had no choice but to ask some other people to help me disperse the crowd. It was surely impossible for thirty thousand people to offer *Dana* to the Dalai Lama! We only wanted a manageable group to stand in as representatives of the Tibetan population in offering alms to the *Sangha*.

As soon as the Dalai Lama's car stopped in front of the temple, I saw that the abbot was among the first people to welcome His Holiness. However, when the door of the car opened, the Dalai Lama searched the crowd for me and addressed me thus, "Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu, what about my slippers?" I answered, "Your Holiness, we must not wear them." The abbot, who was then standing behind me, dashed off to remove the red carpet and in a trice, the police presence also thinned.

The Dalai Lama started to walk barefoot beside me, but after a while, we came to a spot where the red carpet was still laid out, and we had to walk beside it. The Hollywood crew filming the whole event then requested us to start from the beginning again while someone else came along to remove the rest of the carpet.

After praying at the Buddha hall, we sat under the bodhi tree where we meditated for a while. Next a group of monks who had come from 24 countries to join me on the 9,000 km Peace Walk were introduced to the Dalai Lama.

Many of the people who were there to witness the Dalai Lama going on his first alms round sobbed their hearts out. They had never imagined before seeing their beloved king beg for food and then eat it while seated on a low platform and it touched their hearts.

When *Dana* was over, we escorted the Dalai Lama to his car and the crowd surged forward in a huge wave of adoring citizens. We even had to run to avoid being trampled in the human stampede.

At two o'clock that afternoon, His Holiness introduced me and spoke about our mission to the audience gathered in a big marquee. Then we started our 9,000 km Peace Walk witnessed by thousands of people and captured on film by our Hollywood friends. That walk was to last for nearly three years through eighteen countries including the USA, Taiwan, Japan, Nepal, Laos, Bhutan, Africa, Bangladesh, Kampuchea, Singapore, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Burma and it ended in Sydney on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2000 during the Sydney Olympics.

The 9,000 km Walk was a marvellous experience for me; and I hope, for all the people who took part too. We had to fly to the other continents and countries for the Walk to progress around the world, but the distance counted as the Peace Walk was the distance that I myself personally covered step by step. It was a difficult, exhausting task for all of us who took part in the walk. Thousands of people came to join us – some for a day, some for a week or more. Some of the *Sangha* members had to discontinue their participation after a while because they had their duties to take care of in their own countries. We slept wherever we could find a suitable place for the night and walked between ten and fourteen hours a day regardless of the weather. We chanted mantras under our breath and kept our desire for world peace burning like a flame within our hearts, and that became the driving force behind our determination to finish the task.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE PEACE WALK

The Peace Walk started in Bodhigaya, and from there, we went to Chennai, where we then took a flight to Colombo, Sri Lanka. When we reached Colombo, we were well received, as it is a Buddhist country. However, there was political turmoil there at the time due to the Tamil Tigers' struggle against the government and we were warned to be on the lookout for trouble. Anyway, we did not follow the original plan to walk the 300km from the Bodhi Tree in Anuradhapura to the Tooth Relic Temple, Kandy as there had been fierce fighting between the rebels and the government troops in the area a few days before. Instead, we had to choose another route to ensure the safety of the participants.

One day, some Tamil Tigers came to meet me. They asked me a lot of questions about the purpose of the Peace Walk, and about which political party I favoured.

I told them that the Peace Mission was exactly that – for Peace; and that I had no interest whatsoever in politics, except in spreading the message of Peace to erase war. The Tamil Tigers were happy to leave us alone after that. In fact, their parting words were to the effect that all the monks in Sri Lanka should emulate us and keep away from politics too. I agreed with them wholeheartedly, as there are some monks in Sri Lanka as well as in Vietnam who are actually sitting in Parliament and earning comfortable incomes! How can these monks be revered as

students of the Buddha? The Buddha Himself left the palace and all matters of governance behind Him when He left home, so how can these monks be so blatantly false to our Teacher?

We faced a similar scenario in Cambodia later on where it was even more difficult to carry on with our Walk as we were told in no uncertain terms that the Khmer Rouge might attack us. We did not enjoy much support from the people there as many of them were living in fear of untoward consequences. Fortunately, a small group of well-wishers were willing to take care of us there. On our last day, some Khmer Rouge soldiers came forward to meet me. Like the Tamil Tigers, they wanted to know which political party I supported. Here again, I was able to allay their fears as to the real motive behind our Peace Walk and we were left unmolested.

For the most part, the Walk progressed quite peacefully. Of course the weather was one problem to be faced, but I did not want to slow down for anything as mundane as that. Yet, I remember that it was tough going in San Francisco on Highway One because it was winter and freezing cold. Other than my patched robe, I wore no extra clothing; no shoes nor hat. It was the same in Australia when we were near Canberra. It was so cold that freezing to death became a real threat. The other participants followed behind me in motor homes as I walked on alone ahead of them. The cold bit into my bones but once I started chanting my Kuan Yin *mantra*, I forgot the pain. An hour later, I would invariably need help from the others to get into the motor homes – I was too numb with cold to even flex my fingers. In such cold conditions, I could only walk from eight in the

morning till my midday meal, after which I would try to cover as many kilometres as possible before nightfall.

On the other extreme were the hot countries. It was so hot there that I was perpetually drenched in sweat. When it was too hot, the participants could not join me on the road either and just followed behind me in their vehicles. They joined me only in the late afternoons when the sun had dipped somewhat down the horizon. In such hot countries I had to start walking at three o'clock in the morning before I stopped at around seven-thirty to go on my alms round. After our midday meal, we would rest till four o'clock in the afternoon when I would start walking again till midnight.

My feet suffered the consequences, of course. My soles were covered with blisters that bled and by two o'clock every morning; they were very, very painful. They were so sore that I would be afraid I would not be able to carry on the following day; yet miraculously the pain would disappear by dawn.

When the Peace Walk ended in Sydney, the joy was indescribable. Of course the welcoming committee touched our hearts with all the nice things they had to say about our mission and the pigeons we released into the sky to represent peace and freedom were a glorious sight to behold – but best of all was the sense of joy, peace and love that descended upon us that day. I truly felt there and then that our mission had succeeded in reaching out to thousands of people all around the world and that there was hope for World Peace.

1998 was also significant to me for another reason. It was midway through the Walk in Cambodia when the time came

for the three months' *Vasa* retreat. Hence, most of the *Sangha* members participating in the Walk had to return home to their own temples and I found myself alone one day in a small village called Xom Moi Village by the banks of the Mekong River. The villagers were Vietnamese; hence I could communicate comfortably with them.

It was time for my alms round and although poor, the villagers were quite generous with their offerings. After I had received enough for my meal, I sat down under a tree to eat in peace. Some children were playing nearby and I offered them some of the food in my alms bowl; noting how thin many of them were. To my surprise, they requested me to allow them to take the food to a sick man instead. I agreed and asked them to take me to their sick friend.

The children led me to a hut where I found a man lying on a makeshift bed with much of his body covered with scald marks and festering blisters. He had obviously suffered serious scalding and due to a lack of medical aid, he was just lying there in agony, awaiting death. His pregnant wife and two small children were seated nearby; his wife waving a fan above him – more so to wave the bluebottle flies away from his sores than to provide any effective relief from the heat in the small hut. I was taken aback by the horrifying condition of the man and asked why he was not in hospital. The answer I got was sad – they were too poor to afford the trip to the hospital as well as the medical treatment, which would have cost these humble people the earth.

I decided to help the man and made enquiries as to the price for a motorbike ride to the nearest hospital; i.e. in Phnom



Penh. The fare was equivalent to US\$23 but I had no money with me. I have not touched a coin since my ordination and was not about to start breaking my vows then. So, I appealed to the villagers for help and they raised US\$50 to pay for the ride as well as for the medicine I was hoping to obtain for the poor man. In the end, the staff at the clinic where I sourced the medicine did not charge us for it, bless their hearts.

When I reached the hospital in Phnom Penh, I was shocked to find the hospital staff unwilling to help. They told me that they had actually heard about the case but could not treat a patient for free. The poor were a common sight there and the staff often had to deal with patients who actually sneaked out of the hospital a day before being discharged in order to avoid paying their hospital bills. So I promised them that I would arrange for their payment to be remitted from Australia if they would just help this man. The doctors did not believe that I was from Australia – after all, I did not, and still do not, look like a white man. Finally, I gave them a videocassette to watch and they quickly dashed off to borrow a TV and a video cassette player. The video was about the Kartina Festival held in Australia that I had taken part in – and hey presto, the doctors immediately behaved like doctors.

One of them returned to the village with me, and was instantly put off by the stench of rotting flesh emitted by the sick man. I had to help him clean the man's wounds before he was taken to the hospital. Once he had been settled in, I faxed the *vihara* in Sydney to request for monetary aid for the man, but it

turned out that his own people finally realised the need to help their fellowman and they raised more than what was necessary.

The story ended on a happy note – the man recovered, the doctors were ashamed of themselves and decided to treat him free of charge and suddenly, there was a lot of money around to be spent for the good of the community. So, I had a discussion with the people there to see what they needed most and we decided upon building a hospital for the community. Hence, in 1999, their Heart for Peace Mission Hospital was set up and managed to serve the sick in many ways, but today, it has been converted into a religious centre housing a library and living quarters for *Sangha* members. It is time for the people to be healed spiritually and not just physically.

And the reason why the man was so badly scalded? It was near New Year's and the man was cooking *Banh Tet* in a big cauldron. He made this New Year delicacy for sale every year and earned enough money to support his family for months after that. On the day of the accident he was drunk. He stepped on the burning coals and fell into the cauldron. I am sure I do not need to elaborate on the moral lesson to be learnt from his experience.

## CHAPTER 8

### DHAMMA IN AFRICA

The 9,000 km Walk for Peace took me to four continents. I saw excesses in the developed world and a hand-to-mouth existence in the poorer nations. I understand now why it may be difficult to spread the *Dhamma* in both very rich and very poor countries. After all, it would not surprise me if most Westerners were not interested in a Teaching that tells them to curb their desires and attachments – after all, they are having too much fun. I also understand why the very poor may not be keen to follow the Buddha’s Teachings either – they are suffering too much to care about anything else except their daily survival.

I started thinking about Africa which was, and still is, largely untouched by the *Dhamma*, so I decided to try to bring the Teachings there. I invited some people to go with me, but most of the time, I received well-meant advice to change my mind. Their rationale ranged from the deplorable living conditions there, political unrest and all kinds of weird diseases; to the daunting task of teaching *Dhamma* to villagers who do not understand English or Vietnamese. Nevertheless, my mind was made up and in 2001; I went to the African continent with the intention of visiting at least 25 cities. My first student monk from India, Ven. Ratan Bodhi agreed to accompany me but most of the African countries rejected his visa application so we ended up visiting only South Africa, Mozambique and Tanzania

In Africa, I was distressed at the wide gap that existed between the haves and the have-nots. Johannesburg was modern and bustling and reminded me of Adelaide, Australia, but as we moved further into the hinterland, we found the people living in dire poverty. Mozambique was shocking and Tanzania was only slightly better. We also heard stories of villages at war with each other due to sectarian strife and were warned about the possibility of being kidnapped and held for ransom, so we had to be on our guard most of the time.

We were in South Africa for a few weeks and even managed to stay for several days in a big Chinese temple there before we set off for Mozambique on two donated bicycles. The bicycles came in very useful as we had brought with us hundreds of pictures of the Buddha besides our usual *kutis* and bowls – and a video camera. It took us four or five days to cycle all the way to the border.

Then one day, Ven. Ratan Bodhi and I ended up in a small town en route to the border with Mozambique and we had to look for a place to set up our *kutis* (umbrella-tents) for the night. We chanced upon a church where a mass was being held. We waited outside the church for the service to be over before we struck up a conversation with some Westerners there. They turned out to be second generation Dutch farmers and soon we were in the middle of a friendly discussion of Buddhism. A Catholic priest came up to us and we asked him for permission to set up our *kutis* in the compound for just one night. He looked at us and said, "No, there is no place for you here. This is a church; there is no place for you here." We were stunned as it was obviously

untrue; the compound being so big and spacious. Fortunately for us, a lady came forward and offered to take us to her home for the night. That was how we met Joanna and her family and friends. I shall never forget their warmth and kindness in making us feel like their fellow human beings. We stayed in her house for two days and we had many discussions about Buddhism with all the people who came to see us there and even gave out some of the pictures of the Buddha that we had brought along.

Reaching another village, we met a black doctor who was happy to help us get to the border. He piled our two trusty bicycles into his old van and drove us across the mountains. I still recall the smell of fuel mingled with other unidentifiable odours in the van; but most of all, I remember the majestic mountains standing so proudly against the blue, blue sky.

The doctor asked Ven. Ratan Bodhi his age, and then turned to me with the same question. So I asked him in return, "Do you know how old these mountains are?" He looked puzzled. "No, I don't," he replied. "I am older than the mountains," I said. All at once, his eyes lit up with comprehension. "You are very kind," I continued. "You are educated; you have a good heart and do not discriminate against others. You do not look at me the way the Catholic priest did. You understand what I have just said. Yes, our mind consciousness – or soul, as the Christians call it – has wandered for billions and billions of aeons; surely we are older than the mountains."

When we reached the border with Mozambique, it was like dropping in on a different world. The people at the border town there were coarse and rude and the laterite roads were really,

really bad. It was like being in a cowboy town during the era of the Wild, Wild West; except that these people did not look like cowboys. They just looked like they were capable of kidnapping us. Obviously, we stuck out like sore thumbs but we figured that if we had to die, well at least we would be dying while spreading the *Dhamma*.

We had a lot of problems communicating with the folks there but once again, we were fortunate in finding someone who was willing to help us. A taxi driver took us home to his family where we met his daughter who could speak English quite well. Just as we did in Joanna's home, we stayed with the taxi driver's family for a few days. Of course we became the talk of the village and the target of many wide-eyed stares. Many of them wanted to know who - or what - we were and his daughter became our interpreter each time I gave a Dhamma talk to her family and friends.

The taxi driver's wife cast very doubtful eyes at us when we first made her acquaintance. Through her daughter, the good lady finally asked us what religion we professed. I decided against telling her about our Lord Buddha straightaway as it would have been incomprehensible to her, so I told her that I was like a friend or brother of the Lord Jesus Christ and that like Jesus, I had to accomplish a mission to spread peace. When she looked even more doubtful, I asked her to take out her bible and read Matthew Chapter 10.5 – 10.11.(refer to appendix) That settled it for the lady. Her eyes lit up, and she said, "You are the one written about in the Bible! You do not touch money and do not wear sandals. But our priest here does not follow this! Wait, I will

introduce our Catholic priest to you, please wait here.” With that, she swept out of the house to get the priest but she came back after a while looking crestfallen. “The Catholic priest said that you are not a Christian, you are of a different religion, Bhikkhu,” she said. Anyway, she still respected us and tried to make us comfortable in her home.

Tanzania is 1,200 km from Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. Our taxi driver friend advised us not to ride our bicycles in Tanzania as the poor road conditions would make riding the bicycles a near impossibility. Hence we donated the two bicycles to his family and set off on our own. It took us three weeks to reach Tanzania – we walked, hitchhiked and bounced along in dilapidated trucks. We did not know which was worse – the constant jiggling that exercised every bone in our bodies or the red dust that billowed up and enveloped us each time yet another rickety vehicle passed by. It was burning hot as the temperature reached 46°C in the day and there was hardly any respite at night when the temperature dropped to only 31°C. In fact, even the water there was always hot or lukewarm. So, needless to say, we were relieved when it finally rained. Unfortunately, it rained for two whole days, and the place was flooded and that made the roads even worse!

Finally we reached a border town that lay between Mozambique and Tanzania where we spent one week. Here, as in most of the villages we had visited, the people were so backward that when they observed me taking video shots of the children, they were horrified and thought that I had captured the souls of their children in my strange contraption. Yet, everywhere we

went, the people were mostly friendly – especially those who could communicate with us. The children were a special treat for us with their unabashed stares and engaging smiles. At first, they thought we were bald-headed aliens from beyond the stars as they had never seen people of other races before. Then when they were satisfied that we were humans after all, they started to beg money from us. When that failed, they finally decided that we must be poorer than their parents as we were wearing patched robes!

In Tanzania, we found to our pleasure that many of the people there could speak English. My master, Ven. Piyadassi and his senior brother monk, Ven. Narada had built a temple in Dar-es-Salaam during the 1950's in the midst of the Sri Lankan community there, so we were assured of a place to stay in Tanzania. It was during our visit to Dar-es-Salaam when some newspaper reporters came to interview us and our mission received wide coverage over the next few days. That brought Andrew, the late Tanzanian President's son to the temple. As soon as I saw him, I realised that he was once a Bhikkhu in a past life and that his late father, the President, had once made alms offerings to him. As such, in this birth, their lives intertwined as parent and child.

Andrew had once been a trainee fighter pilot and he was sent to China to learn how to fly fighter jets. One day Andrew and his friend were practising loops in midair when suddenly his friend's plane plunged to earth, killing the young man instantly. Andrew was very shaken by what he had witnessed and realised there and then that life is impermanent. He gave up his training



and became a Buddhist, rejecting the Catholic religion his family embraced.

Andrew lived in a comfortable bungalow near the sea and in the compound, I found two grottoes which had once housed images of the Virgin Mary but which were now occupied by statues of the Lord Buddha. I was quite upset to learn that he had removed the statues of the Virgin Mary, and told him that it was not the right thing to do. Being a Buddhist does not require an outright rejection or condemnation of one's previous religious beliefs – in fact, a good Buddhist would see the Buddha nature in all beings, all cultures, all traditions and show respect for all religions.

Anyway, after spending a few days with Andrew, he revealed that he wanted to become a Bhikkhu too. I was troubled to hear this as I knew his mother would never allow him to be ordained and any rebellion on his part would break her heart. Besides, Andrew had once picked us up in his presidential car and as the vehicle was being driven along the streets, I saw policemen giving way to his car in respect. That alarmed me somewhat because it meant that if Andrew ever became a Bhikkhu, he would always be an easy target for unscrupulous warmongers or terrorists or even plain gangsters who want some spending money. I decided to leave Tanzania with Ven. Ratan Bodhi and return to South Africa but the young man insisted on following us, and after failing to dissuade him, we gave up trying to change his mind.

The next few days were stressful indeed. We were travelling with the President's son incognito and we knew that as

soon as his mother found out about his latest exploit, the police would be all over us.

From Tanzania, we had to sail in an old boat cramped with 500 people for 28 hours before we finally made it to the border where two little village children offered me several mud balls as *Dana* - may they have peace always. By a sheer coincidence, the little girl's name, when translated into English, meant Heart. I gave them a picture of Shakyamuni Buddha from my dwindling stock and kept their mud balls with me for as long as I could. Anyway, only the people at the immigration checkpoint recognised Andrew and as soon as they did, they looked after all of us as best as they could.

I remember that we had to take yet another boat ride across a wide river to reach Mozambique; but this time, in a smaller rowing boat that depended a lot on the wind, the waves as well as the tide to stay on course. It was windy at that time and the captain had a tough time handling the boat. In fact, we were not making any progress at all, and I feared greatly for our lives. Desperate, I asked Andrew to tell the captain to beach the boat on the nearest bank as it was too dangerous to attempt rowing on. The captain appeared to disregard Andrew's instructions and it was only fifteen minutes later when the boat finally reached the other bank of the river. When I asked Andrew why the captain had not seemed willing to obey, he said that the place was infested with crocodiles and that just a few days ago; someone had lost a leg to the reptiles there.

Back at the border town in Mozambique, we had to face the rowdy behaviour of some drunks and gangsters who revelled

late into the night – no, till the early hours of the morning. At first, Andrew did not want to sleep in our *kutis* that night, preferring to remain seated outside our tents to protect us but when I told him that there is more danger to be faced in a presidential palace than in that border town, he finally turned in.

Upon reaching Maputo, I persuaded Andrew to telephone his mother who was already frantic with worry. Then, when we finally reached South Africa, we found a 'welcoming committee' from the Tanzanian embassy awaiting us. The poor ambassador had been given strict orders not to allow Andrew to leave the country and he looked most uncomfortable relaying the message to the young man. In South Africa, I once again stayed at the Chinese temple with Ven. Ratan Bodhi. It is a big and beautiful temple, and in Andrew's words, a 'commercial place that is more luxurious than (my) presidential house'. In fact, this temple is five times bigger than Andrew's presidential residence in Tanzania, and cost millions of dollars to build. There are rooms in the temple which are for rental – just like a guesthouse – and the functions that are held in the temple also serve as good income earners for the *Sangha* members there. People who make pilgrimages to this temple are wrong in thinking that by renting those rooms, they are performing a good deed and supporting the temple while being able to tour South Africa on a budget. This is wrong because charity is something you do with your heart, never with conditions attached.

Andrew was given a room to himself but he did not want to leave our side. He said he felt safer with us. So I told him, "In the jungle, the tigers are very dangerous – yet, it is still safer

there than in your presidential house. So, go back to your room and have a good rest. This is a temple.” He understood my meaning.

Anyway, Andrew’s mother was very upset with her son, especially since she had such high hopes for her eldest child and finally, he was forced to turn back for her sake. This just proves that it is not easy to become a bhikkhu after all. One must have enough merits and the timing must be right.

## CHAPTER 9

### WHEN I VISITED HEAVEN

In 2002, I decided to return to India. I wanted to help strengthen the *Sangha* in India to repay the Lord Buddha for expending His life building the Holy *Sangha* and for turning the *Dhamma* wheel 2500 years ago. I went there again in 2003 with a samanera from Singapore but he had to be sent home when he fell very ill, leaving me to carry on the work with a few other local monks.

At that time, there was a heat wave in India and the temperature soared to 51°C in the shade. It was very hot and we were dripping with sweat all the time. We planned to set up a retreat centre in time for the *Vasa* retreat that would be coming up soon and we had to build sixty *kutis* or huts, a *Dhamma* hall, and a dining room. The place we had chosen was up the slope of a mountain and near a lake about 200 km from Nagpur. It was a nice spot except for the unwelcome attention paid us by the thousands of mosquitoes there.

We were in the midst of all our work when I fell ill. I became feverish and had to be sent to the nearest village doctor. The poor man did his best but nothing helped so I was taken to Naipur. The doctors who attended to me there felt that I should be admitted into a hospital so I decided to return to Thailand for treatment because in Thailand, monks can get free medical treatment.

I was very ill and could not concentrate or even eat a meal. I had a train ticket booked for me to travel to Calcutta en route to Bangkok and it was a very difficult eighteen-hour trip to make all alone. I was running a high temperature and felt listless all the time, and could hardly carry my own *kuti* and bowl but when I reached Calcutta, a friend met me at the train station and helped me to a temple near his house where I stayed overnight.

The next day I left the temple and went to yet another friend's house where I stayed the night. Fortunately, at that time, there was another houseguest there - a young Bangladeshi whose father was a doctor. This young man gave me a good massage and that helped relieve my discomfort.

When it was time for me to get to the airport, the lady of the house kindly packed some food for me to eat on the plane but I had no heart to tell her that I could swallow nothing at all. We set off in their car but after about five kilometres, it broke down. When it was finally running again, we were caught in a traffic jam. I was resigned to the idea that I might have to die in India after all, but decided that that would be all right with me – after all, I would then have died doing the work of the Sangha in the Buddha's homeland. But as luck would have it, I reached the airport in time and boarded the plane just seven minutes before it took off.

As soon as I had taken my seat on the plane, I fell into a deep sleep. When the plane landed in Bangkok, I had to take extra care not to arouse the suspicions of the immigration and customs officers because at that time, SARS was a big issue. I got up, arranged my robe carefully and walked as confidently as I

could through customs. Once outside the arrival hall, my friend Mr. Kittichai was there to meet me with his daughter and I nearly collapsed into his arms. I told him that I was feeling really unwell and needed to see a doctor. Mr. Kittichai wanted to help me to his car but I tried my best to walk by myself. They helped me with my baggage and as we got into the car, I asked about Mr. Kittichai's mother. I did not hear his answer though, because that was when I blacked out.

I drifted in and out of consciousness and I felt myself being lifted onto a bed and knew vaguely that I was in a hospital room. I opened my eyes much later to see two nurses hovering over me and for some inexplicable reason, I felt nauseated by the odour that wafted through the air. Somehow, I could not tolerate the smell of anyone around me and I tried to wave them away but my hands refused to obey. So I had to suffer in painful silence until I lost consciousness again.

I woke up once more to see another two nurses in my room fiddling with the tubes stuck into my body. This time, I managed to whisper, "What time is it?"

"2 o'clock," was the reply. I looked at the window and was surprised to see the sun shining through it. How could it be when I had just landed in Bangkok a few hours ago thus making it 2 o'clock in the morning now?

"You say 2 o'clock? How many hours have I been here?"

The nurses' command of English was not very good, so when they said, "No, not hours. 5 and a half days", I thought they were seriously abusing the language.

"What did you say? Do you speak English?"

"Yes, a little. It is 2 o'clock, sir."

"A.M. or P.M.?"

"P.M."

So, it was afternoon. That explained the sunlight. But I wanted them to leave me quickly as they too smelt strange to me. I felt bad to find them repulsive to me but I just could not tolerate their breath and body odour – and I did not understand why.

Later, when the doctor came to see me, he told me that I had been unconscious for 5 and a half days and that I had just recovered from a bad bout of malaria. That sounded so incredible that I had to take some time to absorb it.

The next few hours saw me sleeping a lot but also trying to remember what had happened to me during those 5 and a half days. Slowly my memory returned and I was a mass of emotions when the images played through my mind.

I recall being rushed from Mr. Kittichai's car to the emergency room and on the way there, I was chanting "Namo Amitabha Buddha" over and over again in my heart. Then, I saw Amitabha Buddha coming towards me from a far distance. But the fever was too high, I was too hot and slipping in and out of consciousness so I could not concentrate and He slowly disappeared from my sight. I started chanting "Namo Minh Dang Quang" then and suddenly I found myself floating out of my body. I saw myself lying on the bed surrounded by a doctor and some nurses – and eight old Chinese men with long white hair and beards. I knew intuitively that they were heavenly beings but I could not stay to look at them. I found myself travelling at an incredible speed through space and all at once, found myself



moving between two rows of very, very beautiful ladies. I knew then that I was in heaven but I was not interested to stay there, so I kept thinking, "I am Bhikkhu. I do not want this heaven. I want to go to Paradise."

The next thing I knew, I was in front of a big, beautiful palace. There were thousands of generals and soldiers guarding the place and they looked resplendent in full military attire. Many of them wore shining armour. In their hands, they carried impressive-looking swords, spears and halberds. I saw a splendid throne room and I felt somehow that I had seen that place before. Then I heard someone address me. I answered instinctively, "I am Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu. No, I do not want this place. I don't want to be here. This is not my wish. I want to go to Paradise." That was when I woke up.

It was strange and stifling to wake up in the confines of my body after the incredible feeling of lightness and of flight.

The world is so intelligent that we have even conquered outer space – don't we all remember watching Neil Armstrong take his first steps on the moon and the sense of awe and disbelief that kept us glued to the screen? Space travel has made some critics proclaim that there is no heaven "up there". Yet, what I am telling is the truth – I saw what I saw, I felt what I felt. It was a wonderful feeling of freedom and of flight. I saw a picture of a solar eclipse in an encyclopaedia recently and it brought the memories flooding back. I recognised it immediately. I did not 'go through a tunnel' like some people with near-death experiences have done. I went into a 'hole' in space. My space flight was very, very fast, and in no time at all, I was with those

beautiful ladies. Next, when I had zipped past them, I was in that magnificent palace at once! I had no need of rocket fuel to travel like a rocket! And it was free of charge too. So, heaven is for real; there is no doubt about that. The Buddha himself said that there are many heavenly realms. I was in just one of them and the feeling was truly marvellous. Nothing on earth can compare with it. Yet, I turned it down. It was just one of the heavenly realms; it was not Paradise. (refer to Appendix )

## CHAPTER 10

### REFLECTIONS

People have asked me why my book is entitled 'Returning From Death'. They wonder whether I am referring to my recovery from the horrific burns I suffered due to the napalm bomb or to the five and a half days I lost in my life.

For a child to undergo the sufferings that I did, death would have been a merciful release, but I survived. I survived in order to talk about it to the world leaders so that they can stop their warmongering ways. No other child – nay, not even an adult – should have to lie on a bed covered with festering wounds, each breath a wish for death to come. War is not holy. It is as ugly as the scars that now adorn my back. In that sense, yes, the title of this book can be seen to refer to my lost childhood.

Yet, there is another death that has marked the second half of my life. Life and death go hand in hand. To live, one has to die; to die, one has to live. To live well, let me add here, one has to die well. Or, one's death must be for a purpose. My being 'dead' for five and a half days was meant to give a greater impetus to the purpose of my life, which is to spread Patriarch Minh Dang Quang's message across the world. My 'death' jolted me out of whatever complacency was clouding my mind. I have to speak out now before it is too late for the *Dhamma and Holy Sangha*.

Patriarch Minh Dang Quang's mission is of great importance to the world. Today there are too many false monks

and nuns parading in their *Sangha* robes, making a mockery of Lord Buddha's teachings. They shave their heads and spout their own brand of Buddhism, impressing the ignorant with half-baked sayings and living luxurious lives at the expense of poor devotees who do not know how to discern right from wrong. When the Buddha was alive, he gave up a kingdom for a life of poverty and homelessness. Yet his students today wear 'holy' masks and use the *Sangha* robe to cheat gullible devotees. These monks and nuns wear Rolex watches, drive expensive cars, have bank accounts running into six digits, insist on pomp and pageantry wherever they go and are involved in politics. It is important to clear out the wrong teachings being doled out daily by these so-called Buddhist teachers.

I am clear in my mind that Patriarch Minh Dang Quang sent me to heaven so that I can bear witness to what it is like there. Many *Sangha* members are telling the devotees that by making generous donations to the temples and by hiring monks and nuns to conduct noisy funeral rites; they will earn a place in a heavenly realm. But why go there when there is another reward that is infinitely better? Aren't these monks and nuns sowing the wrong concept of salvation in the devotees? I saw personally what heaven has to offer - I am a witness to the wonderful peace and beauty found there and I now declare to all that heaven is not good enough. Heaven is still impermanent. To end up there in the first place requires a lot of good merits but **no matter how long it takes, the merits will still run dry one day. Then it will be time to rejoin the Wheel of Life and Death.** And since we would have exhausted our good merits in heaven, it is

highly likely that we would then have to be reborn in more deplorable states. And what about the idea of doing meritorious deeds in order to be reborn in a rich family? Is that all you want? Not for me. In the first place, do not do good deeds with a reward in mind. That would make your actions insincere and the merits thus attained would not amount to much. Secondly, if you are born into a life of luxury, chances are high that you will be enjoying yourself so much that you will forget to cultivate your wisdom. Then once you die, you will be reborn in less fortunate circumstances! Look at the rich and famous people around the world – how many of them are really living good, peaceful and happy lives? As such, it is vital for Buddhists to reconsider their priorities and to strive for Paradise (Pure Land Abodes) or achieve Nibbana instead.

I believe that Patriarch Minh Dang Quang was also trying to test my resolution to work for world peace and had I been enamoured of the lovely goddesses or the magnificent palace I saw in heaven, I would have failed my teacher. As it turned out, I made a complete recovery from malaria and my trip to heaven has made me even more determined to carry on with the Heart For Peace mission on earth.

Since my return from heaven, I have been more and more vocal in my attempt to be heard above the din made by the funeral-monks with their '*wooden-fish*' and cymbals. That is my job now till my last day on earth. I spend my time producing VCD's and books as well as giving *Dhamma* talks to devotees wherever I can find them. My task is to clear up their doubts about the Buddha's True Teachings and to teach them how to

think for themselves instead of just blindly following misguided *Sangha* members. My message is Minh Dang Quang's message – let the world be rid of greed, hatred, ignorance; let the world be filled with Universal Peace and Compassion; let us all live in Love and Wisdom; let everyone recognise the Truth.

The value of Truth is very great. Whatever we have here, including the earth, is impermanent but Truth is universal and everlasting. Many have been persecuted throughout history for daring to embrace Truth and declaring it to the masses. The Buddha had to make great sacrifices and many messengers of peace including Jesus Christ had to pay with their lives trying to achieve that. Truth hurts no one but ignorance. The sun may even rise in the west and set in the east someday but Truth never changes.

I do not seek to convert a single person to Buddhism or any other *ism*. That is useless and meaningless. We are born without traditions, religions, or sects and should not be blinded by any of them to hate our fellowmen in the name of religion. We are born with human kindness and compassion and that is enough to lead us to Peace. However, most of us are unaware of this great Truth within ourselves and only seek Peace from without. What futility that has led to for the human race and in consequence, what sorrow. Truth is to be found within us. There is no necessity for you to join spiritual groups or be attached to certain temples. These are, like all religions, just fingers pointing at the moon. They can inspire you to search for the Truth, but they are not the Truth itself. Stop the search now and just look within.

You may find yourself rebelling against some of the concepts presented inside these pages, but pray contemplate the messages put across. Your Peace, and that of the world, rests on everyone's willingness to listen to, contemplate and apply the Truth wherever it is found. Your duty is to journey towards a deeper understanding of life and all that it should be. I am doing my duty as best as I can. Are you doing yours?

## CHAPTER 11

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**QS. You have often referred to Patriarch Minh Dang Quang. Can you tell us who he was?**

ANS. Patriarch Minh Dang Quang's real name was Nguyen Thanh Dat and he was born on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1923 in Tam Binh, South Vietnam to a family of devout Buddhists. His mother was pregnant with him for twelve months before he was born and passed away nine months after that and he was put in the care of a woman named Ha Thi Song.

At the age of 7, his father placed him in a primary school where he received a basic education until he reached 11 years of age. He was well-loved for his intelligence, neat and tidy appearance and gentle ways. Even at a young age, he aspired to become a monk despite much discouragement from his family. When he reached 15 years of age, he decided to follow a certain monk and learn about Buddhism from him. However, after 4 years, he realised that his teacher's knowledge was not wide enough so he returned to his family.

One day he saved a young girl from an untimely death and in return, she offered to marry him and serve him for the rest of his life. They moved to Saigon City where Nguyen Thanh Dat worked in a commercial firm. However, he never stopped researching and learning more about Buddhism which is one



reason why he once again yearned to leave the worldly life in search of the Truth.

Some months later, his wife died while giving birth to a baby girl. Three years later, the little girl also died. He was thus alone once more, and decided to be re-ordained. He had wanted to go to Phu Quoc but because he was too late to catch the last ferry, he started to walk along the beach and then sat down on a big rock to meditate. Seven days passed very quickly and one evening he looked at the choppy sea and observed a boat rocking and bobbing up and down on the waves. All at once, the Truth dawned on him.

He returned home to see his father one more time before he left for the mountain *That Son*. (Seven Mountains in Vietnamese) He lived by begging for alms and at night he went into the jungle to meditate. One day a monk invited him to look after a temple called Linh Buu Tu in My Tho. At this temple, he vowed to adhere to certain basic rules that all monks have to abide by and two years later, he took his 250 vows and was given the name Minh Dang Quang by Amitabha Buddha who appeared to him in a vision.

Patriarch Minh Dang Quang started walking from village to village and from town to town in South Vietnam, teaching people about Buddhism. He begged for his food like the Lord Buddha used to do and generally lived as the Buddha himself had done more than two thousand years ago. In 1946, he established a religious order called *Tang Gia Khat Si* (Bhikkhu *Sangha*) which upholds the mendicant tradition set by the Buddha. On the 1<sup>st</sup>

February 1954, while on his way back from a teaching trip, Patriarch Minh Dang Quang disappeared.

Fortunately for us, Patriarch Minh Dang Quang left behind 69 volumes of books in which he had expounded the Buddha's Teachings and recorded guidelines for all his Mendicant *Sangha* members to study and follow. These students of the Patriarch have since travelled to other parts of Vietnam as well as other countries to spread his message of Universal Peace and Compassion.

**QS. Someone told me that a woman is not allowed to touch a monk, and should in fact stay at least a few feet away from one. Is this a rule laid down by the Buddha?**

ANS. When the Buddha returned home to visit his family, his ex-wife prostrated at his feet and kissed them. Some arahants saw this and complained about the Buddha allowing a lady to touch him as ladies were considered dirty; but that is an Indian concept. The Buddha answered: *When my heart is pure, no one can dirty it. And this lady has suffered because of my leaving home to become homeless. She is the one who has been alone and unhappy for many years in her room where she practised exactly as I did in the forest and she has taken care of my child Rahula. So, to make her happy, I allowed her to touch my feet. It is for the benefit of her happiness and she understands that I left home not because I did not love her, but because of my great love for*

*the Universal Truth and the benefit I can bring to the world to help everyone gain enlightenment.*

The concept of a lady not being allowed to touch a monk is taught to the people because there are certain monks who are not yet well established in mindfulness and can be distracted by the touch of a woman. Besides, some women can be attracted to monks too and temptations can arise. If your heart is clean, you will see every woman as your mother or sister, and in that sense, there is no harm in allowing limited contact.

**QS. As laypeople who have taken the 3 refuges and 5 precepts, we are doubtful about vegetarianism. Firstly, are we really allowed to eat meat and fish as long as we do not witness the slaughtering of the animal, we do not hear it being killed and it is not killed expressly for our own consumption? Secondly, are unfertilised eggs considered vegetarian food or not?**

ANS. We should not talk of hearing or knowing about the slaughter of an animal with our physical senses. We should remember Kuan Yin Bodhisattva's way of seeing, hearing and perceiving – i.e. with WISDOM. Even if an animal is being killed far out of our sight and hearing, it is nevertheless being killed because someone wants to eat its meat. We are thus indirectly the killers. People who practise the way of the Bodhisattva would surely not eat meat and fish because even the animals are future Buddhas.

If we take the vow of vegetarianism, that means we have decided to cultivate a pure mind and to acquire a compassionate heart. Nowadays, many people say that they are vegetarians but in their minds, they are still greedy for meat; hence they use dough to create animal shapes. This is not acceptable at all. I am very sad to see so many temples around the world with refrigerators filled to the brim with vegetarian food shaped like animals. Such *Sangha* members are just feeding their minds with greed. In the same vein, we cannot judge an egg to be lifeless just by looking at it. Out of one thousand unfertilised eggs, we may come across just one egg that is actually fertilised. How would you know for sure unless you crack open every egg you see or study each one of them against a bright light? Are you going to do that whenever you buy them at the supermarket? So, to avoid making all possible mistakes, it is best to exclude them from our vegetarian diet.

When the Buddha was asked to explain the meaning of vegetarianism, the Lord said that vegetarians are those who **take and abide by** the precept of not eating after midday. Here, the Buddha meant those who take part in the 8-precepts retreats as well as the *samaneras* who take the 10 precepts and the bhikkhus who abide by their 250 precepts. If these people eat after midday, that is considered breaking their vow of vegetarianism. Unfortunately, some monks not only eat after midday, they also eat meat and fish. Is that not their greed deliberately twisting the Buddha's words to suit themselves?

Having said all that, we must consider Patriarch Hui Neng who lived among hunters for many years and had to eat

vegetables cooked with meat to survive. He was still pure because he practised Mind Vegetarianism. What is the point of practising Mouth Vegetarianism and then persist in slandering, gossiping and hurting others? Hence, what counts at the end of the day is the mind - so get rid of greed, ego, delusions and keep your mind pure.

**QS. Why is it important to perform *Dana*? Isn't doing charity better?**

ANS. When you perform *Dana*, you learn to give up your desires, anger and ignorance. All of us are full of ignorance due to attachments. The Buddha said that the highest *Dana* to perform is to the Tathagata. That means giving up our greed and laying it at His feet. But nowadays, many false monks just teach the laypeople to perform *Dana* in order to win merits for a better rebirth or to get reborn in this or that heaven. This is sowing the seeds of greed in the minds of the people.

Of course it is true that people who do a lot of charitable deeds and perform *Dana* often will indeed have a better life in their next rebirth which is indeed very desirable. Of course they may even make it to heaven. When their merits ripen, they will reap the rewards – whether sooner or later. However, if we just keep longing for such a rebirth, we will destroy our seeds of cultivation. We must aim higher than just a place in one of the heavenly realms, or rebirth in a rich family – our ultimate aim must be to transfer to Paradise or achieve *Nibbana*.

When you perform *Dana* to *Sangha* members, you have to know if they are really good monks who are true to the Buddha's Teachings. Similarly, when you donate money to charity, you must know the purpose of the charity and how the money will be spent in giving aid to the recipient. We must not give money for the wrong reasons like supporting monks who use their robes to earn a luxurious life for themselves, otherwise we will be indirectly supporting the destruction of the *Dhamma* and the *Holy Sangha*. Then we will have no merits to enjoy – rather, we will have to share the bad *Kamma* acquired by these monks.

**QS. Bhikkhu, you say that monks are not allowed to take or keep money. But some people said that if the money is put into an envelope, then it is ok. Is that true? Also, some people said that, due to changes in modern society, monks still have to survive. So, for those monks who do not have followers and are travelling around, they need to accept money as *Dana*. What about those monks who take '*ang pows*' (small red envelopes filled with money) from laypeople, but put the '*ang pows*' in donation boxes in temples? Is that acceptable?**

**ANS.** No, it is not right for monks to even accept money in envelopes. And don't even consider travellers' cheques or credit cards! Furthermore, monks do not need money to travel around etc. the way you have mentioned. After all, their merits will

protect them – just as a king will be protected by his escorts and bodyguards, a good monk will be protected by his merits.

Buddha said that for every Precept that we keep, we will have 5 Dhamma protectors with us. However, many *Sangha* members do not have enough Wisdom to see the Truth in His teachings; hence they trust the 'money god'. They claim that the Buddha was only referring to His society 2600 years ago, not this modern age. But this is just an excuse for commercial monks to earn money. Although the Buddha imposed His orders on the *Sangha* 2600 years ago, He was not referring only to the ancient days. His Precepts are valid for all time and will benefit both body and mind and the *Sangha* and devotees too. If a monk does not respect the Buddha's orders, it is better for him to disrobe rather than remain a monk and commit a bad sin by using the *Sangha* to earn a living.

It is also unacceptable for monks to accept '*angpows*' and put them in donation boxes in the temples. Firstly, that means they are conducting a business - e.g. performing a ceremony for the laypeople and accepting '*angpows*' as payment and that is wrong. It is the duty of the *Sangha* to help the laypeople anytime with any prayers etc without payment. If we do our duties properly, the laypeople will do their duty of taking care of us with respect. Take for instance, funerals. If monks perform funeral rites for the deceased with sincerity, without seeking or hoping for repayment, then the bereaved family will gain even more merits for themselves as well as for the dead person. Otherwise the ceremony will be degraded into a financial transaction - just like buying and selling in a market place - and this will make monks

greedier while no merits will be acquired for the dead person or his family.

Secondly, temples have committees or trustees to look after them. Why then must a monk be concerned with money matters? We should let the monks face some difficulties in order to learn patience. The monks must learn that it is better for them to live in the forests than be burdened by money problems in temples. Many *Sangha* members do not understand this and make a mess of the *Vinaya*, and the people lose their faith in them. It will only be a matter of time before such monks start quarrelling with the trustees over money and the image of the *Sangha* will be destroyed.

**QS. Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu, you say that the 9,000 km walk which you undertook was to bring peace to the world. Yet, on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, the World Trade Centre was attacked in New York city and that has triggered a lot of conflicts in the world today. Did your mission really help the world?**

ANS. Yes, it did. People learned to practise their religions more sincerely. People have learned to analyse more carefully the religious beliefs and ethics that the spiritual leaders are teaching everywhere and many people have learned to discriminate between right and wrong views. We managed to create awareness among many, many people that living in peace and



harmony with their fellowmen is of utmost importance right now or there will be no more future for their children.

As for the World Trade Centre, that was the national *Kamma* that the Americans had to face. Its root cause goes back more than fifty years to the Second World War. If you recall, two atomic bombs were dropped in Japan and that killed thousands and thousands of people. But before that could take place, the American government had to say 'aye' to support the act. And all those who directly or indirectly supported the murder of so many thousands of people in Nagasaki and Hiroshima were reborn to become victims of the World Trade Centre tragedy. This is what '*Kamma and Retribution*' means.

**QS. But, Bhikkhu, that sounds so unfair. After all, Japan had become militaristic and invaded much of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. They themselves committed a lot of atrocious crimes in the countries they overran.**

ANS. Yes, I agree. However, you must remember that a lot of the Japanese people did not want to go to war, and that among the victims who died in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, there were innocent people and children. To kill others using atomic bombs is really inhuman and only aroused hatred and the desire for vengeance in the unappeased souls of the victims. The American government at that time had set out to do something that they thought would bring back world peace so their intention was good but the method by which they did it was bad. We must not take

action of any sort that would harm others while bringing good to ourselves. Similarly, we must not do anything that would bring harm to ourselves but good to others. We must be balanced and rational at all times. In the same way, I do not condone President George Bush's actions in the Middle East. He wages war on the Muslim countries that do not 'toe the line' and he thinks that that is the best thing to do for the sake of his countrymen, but that is a wrong view. If he wants to change the Muslim mindset, he should do it through love and kindness, not through the use of force. Hate begets hate. The community *Kamma* of the American people will be affected by their president's rash acts now. *Kamma* is always impartial and is easy to understand: you hurt others, you will be hurt in return; you do good to others, you will have good done to you in return. You reap what you sow.

**QS. Is that your solution to world peace then?**

ANS. If we want others to be good, we ourselves must show them that we are good. If we do not allow nations to have nuclear weapons, we ourselves must not produce any either. The American government is now behaving like Big Brother because they have big weapons – that is rubbish. How long can they play this game? Until their last breath on earth?

In 1975, after the fall of South Vietnam, the new Communist government tried to destroy all the Buddhist temples in Vietnam and disrobe all the monks even though during the Vietnam War, the Communists used the monks to win support

from the people. They knew that some monks can be bought with titles or ranks and these monks fell for their tricks. Monks like these do not realise that only the Buddha can give them their due recognition, not some worldly government officials. Anyway, some Communist officials went to see my Second Patriarch, Giac Chanh and said, "Tell the monks to disrobe and go to work. You are all free now." The Second Patriarch replied, "No, we are not free until we give up our ignorance. You can occupy country after country but who occupies your minds? Only when you are free of ignorance can you find peace. Right now, once you conquer a place, you desire to conquer another. Greed is still in your mind, not peace."

In the same manner, I appeal to the world to use wisdom and compassion to work with anger and hatred. Saddam Hussein's ego led to his downfall. George Bush is even more egotistical and when it is time for him to die, how will he escape the retribution piling up and awaiting him?

We have to use love and compassion to save the world. We must teach the children to save the earth, regardless of race, religion or creed or soon there will be no world left for the future generations to inherit.

**QS. What about the *Kamma* of soldiers then? They seldom want to go to war, but they are forced to obey their commanders and fight.**

ANS. When soldiers die fighting for their countries, they still have to pay for having killed others on the battlefield. However, they

do not have to remain for too long in hell – after all, they were just obeying orders. If they still have enough merit left in their ‘records’, they may not even go to hell directly. Take for instance a millionaire who spends every penny he has till he becomes a bankrupt. Wouldn’t he then face a lot of sufferings? Yet, if he can try to earn a little more money, he can delay the inevitable bankruptcy. In just the same way, if we have enough merits to help us, we can lighten the sufferings that are our due for having committed bad deeds.

**QS. What about criminals being punished in prison? Can their prison term help lighten their bad kamma?**

ANS. Yes, certainly. However, worldly justice is often biased and corruption has tainted the judgement of many judges. If a criminal uses corruption to buy an acquittal for himself, for example, or even a lighter sentence, then he will still have to face the impartial law of *Kamma* after death. And at that time, when he faces King Yama in the court of hell, he will have an even worse punishment awaiting him for perverting the course of justice. The judge who helped him would end up sharing his suffering in hell too. Sometimes, we feel angry when we see corrupted people seemingly ‘getting away with murder’ and we think that life is unfair. Well, rest assured that such people are heading straight for trouble because the course of *Kamma* is **always, I repeat, just and impartial.**

**QS. Many people say that they have no choice but to be 'slightly' dishonest. This is a dog-eat-dog world and survival is tough. Their efforts to provide a comfortable life for their children may entail some wrongdoings which would in turn bring about bad *Kamma* and bad rebirths. However, to these people, their attitude is to let the future rebirth take care of itself. If they are meant to be reborn handicapped or as animals, then let it be. What is important to them is only the present moment and how to earn enough money to pay the bills. What is your opinion about this?**

**ANS.** The Buddha has stated clearly that we can know what we did in the past by what we have today. If we have good health and wisdom, and financial security as well, it is due to our good deeds in the past. If we are poor or handicapped, or mentally and physically ill now, it is because we did some very bad things in the past. We always have to pay for our actions. It is just like borrowing money from the bank – we have to pay the interest for the loan.

Do not think that the handicapped don't know why they are in such a state. I have met many handicapped people all over the world and each time I asked them why they were born that way, most of them said they believe they were being punished for something they had done wrong. Our physical bodies are given to us by our parents, but our mind consciousness remains the same from birth to birth and it knows intuitively, and feels ashamed of, its past. And what about animals? I have visited many temples

where the resident monks or nuns used to be attached to the donation boxes although I had advised them not to be corrupted by money. Some of these Sangha members passed away later and when I returned to the temples, I saw scraggy stray dogs loitering around the compounds of the temples. These dogs are definitely reincarnations of those same monks and nuns. They are so attached to the temple property that they have been reborn to hang around the place – but as dirty, smelly dogs! In fact, I have even lectured such dogs before and scolded them for not having listened to my advice – and strangely, these dogs invariably sat down at my feet in absolute silence, nodding their heads as if agreeing with me!

People who say that they want to enjoy their life now, never mind what happens to them in their next life, are indeed very foolish. They should visit the prisons and ask the prisoners why they are in prison. The prisoners are there because they have committed wrongdoings - they have to pay. Wrongdoers who do not get caught in this life will still have to pay after death. No one can escape. Furthermore, our actions will also affect our families. By doing bad, we will cause harm to befall our loved ones too, so everyone must think twice before they commit even the smallest crime.

**QS. The economy is now very bad, Bhikkhu. A lot of people are in financial difficulties. Some have even committed suicide because of the shame of bankruptcy. Do you have any advice for these people?**

ANS. Instead of just thinking about bankruptcy in terms of money, why don't the people think of the greater bankruptcy – the loss of their lives, their bodies? When you die, everything is bankruptcy, gone. But when the bank sues you for money, you still have your body, right? When you were born, you did not even have a thread of cloth on your body – you had no attachments then, no worries and you were loved. Now you are bankrupt – go back to having no attachments, just love.

Anyway, these people must accept the law of the country. You borrow money, you must repay it. Do not try to wriggle your way out of fulfilling your responsibilities. People who kill themselves over bankruptcy will still have to be reborn to repay their debts – one way or another. Plus it is a very bad sin to commit suicide. It violates the very first precept laid down by the Buddha and all the other religions, i.e. do not kill – not even yourself. People who do that will bring even more harm, shame and bad *Kamma* to their surviving family members.

**QS. Okay, if a person in that position is unable to repay his debts – not unwilling, just unable – and he dies suddenly, for example of heart failure, will he still have to return to pay?**

ANS. When a person borrows money from the bank, he signs an agreement by which he promises to repay the loan at a stipulated interest rate. Then, he goes broke. He really tries his best to

keep his promise to the bank but is unable to do so; so the bank follows the agreement and takes legal action against the borrower. He then loses everything – his home, his car, his worldly possessions and his honour and good standing in society etc. etc. He cannot complain that the bank is unjust – they are only trying to recover their losses. In this manner, the borrower is being punished following the rules of the country. Mind you, such action by the bank would create great mental torture for the poor man. When he finally dies, his bad *Kamma* is thus pared down.

Compare that situation with another kind of bankrupt – one who pretends to be broke so as to win sympathy and hope to have his debts written off, never mind the shame, etc – such a person is heading for a big shock when he dies. Just keep this in mind – *Kamma and Retribution* always behave like boomerangs, so be careful.

**QS. It is so much easier for you, as a monk, to say all that. We laypeople have to face all kinds of problems, anxieties and defilements.**

ANS. The Buddha said that it is not easy for laypeople to cultivate the way. But, it is not easy for a monk too. It is easier to get reborn as a king than to be reborn as a monk. If we can just observe the eight precepts for just one day, we can be reborn as kings for sixteen lives! But to be a bhikkhu, one needs enough merits and even when you become a bhikkhu, you will need further merits to ensure that you do not meet a bad teacher who



only enjoys himself and uses the robe to earn money. That kind of teacher will lead you into wrongdoing. That's why it is better for a monk not to have a temple to look after as that will lead to money attachments. A monk's duty is to teach the Dhamma. Let the devotees look after the temples. The monks can then have no access baggage to carry around and can do their proper duties properly.

**QS. Is there a God?**

ANS. Buddhists do not believe in the existence of a Creator God the way Christians do. However, we do recognize the existence of heavenly beings who came from the different heavens to listen to the Buddha when he expounded the Dhamma. In fact, the god Brahma was the deva who pleaded with the Buddha to teach the Dhamma to all and sundry for the benefit of sentient and non-sentient beings. Anyway, what kind of a god are you looking for? The kind who can bring you good and bad luck and metes out punishment to your enemies? What you call luck is actually your *Kamma* asserting itself. You should regard your parents as your gods. Do not forget your gods at home and go searching for the wrong ones. They gave you your life; the least you can do is to take care of them in their old age. Filial piety is one of the noble virtues that a Buddhist should have.

**QS. What kind of funeral rites should Buddhists perform for departed relatives?**

ANS. Just like old cars that will finally break down and end up in the junkyard, we will also get old, sick and die. Then we get buried or cremated – or even fed to the birds and animals the way the Tibetans deal with dead bodies. It is normal to die so everyone must face death with equanimity. We cannot live forever; but what we can do is to go with dignity. Different cultures have different sets of rites and rituals to send off the dead, but what is more important than funeral rites is the merits the 'soul' (mind consciousness) of the deceased is taking with him.

If you really want to show your love and respect to your parents, walk with them on the spiritual path while they are still alive. Do not think about hiring monks and nuns to perform expensive and noisy funeral rituals for them when they die. There are some people who want to show off their wealth and their 'love' for their departed ones and they hire professional mourners who would come and wail over loudspeakers so that the whole neighbourhood can join in the wake! Buddhist funerals are simple dignified affairs that reflect the Universal Truths of Life and Death. No matter who you are, where you are; no matter what cultural practices have been drummed into you since childhood – please rethink those traditions. Some of them can be very harmful, for instance, the practice of *suttee* in India or the now defunct custom of foot binding in China. Do not follow traditions blindly. Use your wisdom at all times.

Many Chinese people even burn hell notes and other paper offerings at the funerals and later, the graves of their ancestors on All Souls' Day. That is tantamount to saying that their parents are in hell! How ignorant can they get? If their parents are really in hell, then why make offerings of food to them? After all, when the Venerable Maudgalyayana visited his mother in hell, he tried to feed her with some food but the food kept changing into burning coals of fire!!!

**QS. How do we find inner peace?**

ANS. You come into the world like coming to a school – to learn something. And when the lessons are done, you graduate. If you find that you have not learnt something well enough, you come back to school again. Life is like that. Unfortunately, due to ignorance and wrong views, we add sufferings to our school-life. We should live life without attachments, or at least, reduce them. Be like a video CD. When it is placed in the VCD player, a movie appears on the TV screen. Yet, the VCD does not feel the emotions felt by the actors and actresses in the show – it is not attached to the movie in it. It just shows us what it has to show without any attachments; hence it does not suffer. Be like that VCD. Look at life as a dream, an illusion and pain will drop off, leaving only peace and wisdom behind. Many of us look at babies and feel jealous of their serenity. A baby's mind is pure at that stage, innocent, without attachments. That is the meaning of

peace. We must strive to be like that so that we can reach Paradise and not be reborn again and again.

People have no peace also when they nurse grudges against others. Human beings do a lot of bad things to each other – as well as to the animals and Mother Earth. Can we forgive each other for all the pain inflicted, whether knowingly or unknowingly? Many of us can't and that is why the world has such a lot of sufferings. Some religions say that God who is perfect and merciful forgives us our sins – how ironic then that man, who is so imperfect, cannot forgive another imperfect being his sins.

Some Buddhist monks and nuns also harbour wrong views – they try to sell peace. I call them the 'commercial monks'. They tell ignorant people that they can pray for them to have peace and prosperity – for a certain fee, of course. If it were that simple to obtain peace, health and wealth, then the world would have no more sufferings by now.

I recall a certain visit I made to a temple in Singapore a few years ago. I sat next to a Thai monk who was 'blessing' a long queue of people. Nobody recognised me so I was able to observe the goings-on undisturbed. I saw each person kneeling before the monk with hands clasped piously in prayer and the monk sprinkling 'holy water' on their heads to give them good luck. Then, to my dismay, I saw the people passing '*angpows*' (red packets of money) to the monk who was chanting, sprinkling and accepting the money all at once.

There was a young lady in that queue and she was weeping. When she reached the monk, he said, "Go, go. I have already blessed you with the holy water. Next, please."

The poor lady said, "Venerable sir, I want to commit suicide. I am suffering so much. Can you help me?"

The monk's reply came sharp and clear. He said to her, "Everyone has problems. Go, go and make way for the next person."

You see what I mean by saying that the *Sangha* needs to be trimmed of such unholy monks doing unholy business? And yet, the people do not use their brains to think for themselves the way the Buddha has asked us to. That young lady was actually more upset with herself after hearing the monk's reply. She did not stop to consider whether such a monk was worth respecting. She was like so many other people who often follow religious leaders blindly. I had to step in and counsel her otherwise she would really have killed herself.

No one can bring peace to you – you must win it for yourself. Cut your attachments and wrong views, be rational and self-reliant. Think for yourself before you undertake a certain task to avoid making painful mistakes and do good deeds. Like the Buddha has taught us - cease all evil, learn to do good and purify your mind.

**QS. Why can't we remember our past lives?**

ANS. You cannot even remember all that happened to you yesterday, so why talk about recalling your past lives? Humans

are so busy with their worldly activities that their minds are not pure and clear. If you want to recall your past – and even see the future – you should concentrate more on your practice. Give up all attachments, and the defilements that blind you will be gone. Then you will be able to see clearly. It is like looking for a misplaced item in a crowded room. Clear that room of the crowd and you will find that item easily.

**QS. Many Buddhist temples sell statues of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas as well as *Dhamma* books. What is your opinion about this?**

ANS. When King Asoka was alive, he disrobed sixty thousand bad monks. I fully agree with him that monks who use their saffron robes to earn a comfortable living instead of spreading the *Dhamma* are actually bald-headed thieves. If such *Sangha* members do nothing but watch over the temple grounds and count the donations they get daily and encourage the laypeople to pay for prayers, they are in fact selling the *Dhamma*. *Dhamma* books should also be distributed free of charge to the public. The Buddha never had a copyright. As for the statues, how can they sell the Buddha to earn a living? Some monks even auction statues of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas and say that they are raising money to help relieve people's sufferings. Yet they do not understand that people suffer because of their own ignorance and greed. We must teach them to have no more greed, and then they will be happy. The Buddha once said that He had enough

good merits to give to everyone whatever they wanted but without curbing their desires, they would still remain in the cycle of life, death and suffering and just crave for more. In their ignorance, such monks think that they will be earning merits by doing this kind of charity, but there are other types of charity that can be done. They are betraying the Buddha and His teachings. This is not what the Buddha wanted and never will be. Please, I advise these business monks and nuns, please change your ways.

Besides this, let me add here some advice for all Buddhists around the world – you do not need to stock up on images of the Buddha to become holy. Only your moral values and your sincerity can make you holy. You also do not need to go to a temple or join a 'spiritual group' or organisation in order to practise Buddhism. You do not need to go to the Buddha through an 'agent'. Go straight to the Buddha yourself. These 'agents' or temple monks and nuns only want to tie you down to them so that they can survive on your donations. Only one temple out of every thousand is following the Buddha's Teachings properly. Go look for it if you wish to. If you cannot find it, remember that making donations to the other nine hundred and ninety-nine temples will get you nowhere. The monks and nuns there will only put your donations into their bank accounts and assure you that you will have a place in heaven. Unfortunately, it is an assurance which they have no way of guaranteeing. So, you will only make them richer while you may become poorer. In fact, some of these commercial monks earn more money in a day than most people do in a month.

**QS. What about the Bodhisattva practice of making vows not to become Buddhas until everyone else has become one?**

ANS. If you do not have a torch in your hands, how can you lead others out of a dark room? How can you show the way unless you know the route first? There is nothing wrong with wanting to be a Buddha first. If I want you to be a Buddha, I must be a Buddha first so that I can teach you how to achieve the same objective. So, do not follow all kinds of concepts blindly. Kuan Yin Bodhisattva and Earth Store Bodhisattva are already Buddhas themselves, but they are using different names as Buddhas, that's all.

**QS. In your VCD Part 4, there is the question, "Was Mary a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus"? Why has this question arisen in your VCD? After all, isn't this a Catholic issue rather than a Buddhist one?**

ANS. I included that question in the VCD because I was asked for my opinion about Virgin Mary quite a number of times. You see, people have their individual interpretations and opinions about all kinds of religious issues and when people do not agree with each other, conflicts can arise due to lack of tolerance and before you know it, the world is filled with hate and violence. I notice that there are **some** Christians who go about criticising the Catholics for being devoted to Mother Mary, and this has caused **some** Catholics to also condemn the Christian sects. Why can't the



people see that it does not matter what we believe in as long as we believe in Peace and Loving-Kindness? Does it really matter whether Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus? Whether we are talking about Mary or our own mother, we must always remember that when they gave birth to us, their minds were filled with pure, unsullied love and hence, their minds were 'virgin' – never mind about their bodily condition. From the viewpoint of spirituality, we should not worry and argue about the human body because it is only made up of the four elements. We should just concentrate on the pure and chaste love that a mother always has for her child. Hence, stop arguing out there, folks.

**QS. Someone once said that if you see the Buddha, kill the Buddha. What does that mean?**

ANS. The Buddha is not here for anyone to kill. However, there are monks and nuns and even laypeople who claim themselves to be Buddhas. These people are deluded about themselves. It is plain arrogance and ego on their part to regard themselves as having reached a high level of achievement without any foundation. The Buddha has taught us that when we sit in meditation, our minds may play tricks with us and we may see visions of Bodhisattvas, Buddhas etc. and we may even imagine ourselves as having attained Buddhahood too. He has told us to keep total mindfulness and not to cling to such images – and certainly not to declare ourselves as Buddhas! That is what is meant by the phrase 'if you see the Buddha, kill the Buddha'. Kill the wrong concepts, the desires and embrace Wisdom.

**QS. Gambling is of course bad. What about the people who set up casinos and then donate a lot of money to charity and engage in all kinds of fund-raising activities? Will their bad Kamma be lessened in intensity then?**

ANS. The Buddha said we should not do evil and after that, try to ease our conscience with good deeds. Casinos only foster more greed and sufferings. Think of the poor families at home, the spouses and children who live in constant despair over their loved one's addiction to gambling. How often have we heard of marriages ending in divorce, or gamblers committing suicide when they are unable to repay their gambling debts? The money earned from running gambling dens and casinos is therefore dirty money! Can we seriously believe that the bad *Kamma* of such "charity-minded" casino bosses will be lessened? Or are they putting aside more money to pay commercial monks to chant prayers for a longer time and with greater force and noise at their funerals? Do they really think elaborate funeral rites will save them from facing up to their misdeeds? I think not.

**QS. Many people go to the temples and beg the gods for help with their businesses. They often promise to build a beautiful temple to repay the gods if they really strike it rich. What is your opinion of this?**

ANS. That sounds like some kind of transaction in the marketplace! People with little wisdom will say that such

businessmen are doing something good because they see the building of temples as a way of doing charity. The ignorant ones will say, ah – these rich people are sharing their good *Kamma* with everyone. But the Buddha said that the best charity we can perform is to help each other to reduce our greed and ignorance. We should not go to the temple and bring our greed to the altar! We should not do good deeds in the hope of receiving rewards. That would be insincerity on our part. What good merits can we expect from that?

There is a Tibetan story that I would like to relate here to clarify this point.

Once there was a rich man who heard it said that he must give generously to charity because the more he gave, the more he would receive. So, he gave as much as he could to the poor and unfortunate people he met. He gave away so much of his wealth that he became a bankrupt and ended up a beggar under a bridge, sick and hungry and near death.

A kind soul gave him a bowl of rice to eat, but he was too weak to even hold it in his hands. Just then, a stray dog came along and eyed the bowl with obvious hunger so the man mustered all his strength to give half of the rice to the starving dog. Later, a monk passed by and saw him lying on the ground. The monk asked him why he was in such a miserable state when his face actually showed that he had good merits to enjoy. The beggar told the monk his story and the monk took out a pair of scales to help the beggar measure the amount of good merits he should have acquired from donating all his money to charity. Nothing registered. He had no merits at all. The monk was

puzzled and said that it was impossible as the man's face showed a different story. After some thought, the beggar remembered the dirty stray dog he had just fed and bingo – that tipped the scales! The monk explained to the beggar that at the beginning, he had given with desires in his heart, but this time, he gave to the dog with no desire for anything in return; and that earned him merits.

You see, we should never do something good for the sake of wanting a reward – we should help others just because we want to help, not because your spiritual leader says that you will go to heaven or you will become rich!

Anyway these people who go to the temples and ask Buddha for three million dollars and promise to spend one million to build a new temple – there is no need for that! We do not need to build a temple out there - build the temple in your hearts. It's free of charge. If you build temples, you will need monks and nuns to look after the temples, and they will in the end become too attached to the place (and the donation boxes) and when they die, they will be reborn as dogs that hang around the temple grounds. Wouldn't that be bad *Kamma* for them as well as for you?

**QS. Some people say that the December 2004 Tsunami that killed nearly 300,000 people was just a natural disaster and not due to the victims' bad Kamma. Do you agree with this viewpoint?**

ANS. No, I don't agree. Of course we do not deny that earthquakes and tsunamis are natural phenomena but let us not forget the fact that human beings have played a vital role in aggravating the already fragile state of the earth's crust with all the nuclear testing that has been carried out so relentlessly in the Indian and Pacific Oceans as well as in other parts of the world. Such injurious acts by 'superpowers' for the sake of selfish gains have caused irreparable loss and damage to Mother Earth and something just had to snap. In fact we must stop all testing and production of nuclear weapons **RIGHT NOW** before other severe earthquakes occur with terrifying frequency. The idea of skyscrapers in the cities collapsing and burying millions of human beings is indeed a horrible thought.

Of course many, many of the Tsunami victims were good people, and most of them were just innocent children. They could not have been washed away into the oceans because they conducted nuclear tests, could they? Due to this reasoning, even eminent monks have decided that the Tsunami was definitely a natural phenomenon rather than bad *Kamma* manifesting itself. I am sorry to say that such ideas are wrong. The Buddha clearly stated that we carry our *Kammic* consequences with us from life to life until they are all exhausted. These poor victims were actually facing some kind of retribution left over from previous lives.

How often must we be reminded of the Law of *Kamma*, the Law of Cause and Effect? You do good deeds, you get good results; you do bad deeds, you get bad results. Even a child can understand that, yet I see grown men and women pretending not

to see the Truth – or perhaps they prefer to turn their eyes away from painful facts. Perhaps too many people would rather spend their waking hours planning their meals, recreation and how to make more money and possess more things than their neighbours than to take a good look at the environmental problems around us, the piles of garbage, the hole in the ozone layer, the cruel treatment often meted out to animals (and underprivileged people) everywhere, the indiscriminate felling of our precious forests ..... Perhaps they will not see, reflect or act until the greenhouse effect makes life unbearable for them and their children keep wheezing from lack of fresh air. Don't just wake up and smell the coffee – wake up and face the facts or the world is doomed.

**QS. The Buddha had so many merits, yet India and so many other Buddhist countries are poor. Why did the Buddha not change the Kamma of these people and so relieve their countries of poverty?**

ANS. First of all, when Lord Buddha was alive (563 – 483 B.C), there was no India at all. There were only small Hindu kingdoms scattered all over the continent, with the kingdom of Magadha, ruled by King Bimbisara as the most powerful.

Secondly, the Buddha was not strictly 'Indian' because he was the prince of the Sakya Kingdom, a state lying somewhere near present day Nepal. His mother was Nepalese and his father, the king was Sakyan. India did not emerge as one country until much later.

Now, let us consider the poverty found in all the poverty-stricken countries around the world. In all these poor countries, there are still some people who are rich. And if we look further, we will notice that very often, their governments are tolerant of corrupt practices and unjust treatment of the man in the street. (Of course I must say here that even in very rich countries, discrimination and corruption also do exist) If all governments run their countries with sincere concern for their people regardless of race and religion, if all governments would respect the poor enough to listen to their pleas, if all governments would love their people more than money – poverty would be eradicated. And if only the rich would be willing to share their wealth with their fellow men – use their money to help the poor – poverty and resentment would be eradicated. Doesn't that simply mean living according to the Buddha's recommended Middle Path? But do the people want to listen to Him? No they don't. People are selfish. They want it all for themselves, they have no love for their fellowmen, so don't blame the Buddha for not helping Buddhist countries to be richer. It is not His fault – it is ours.

The Buddha wants us to practise the right path so that firstly, we would find peace wherever we are. Non-attachment would guarantee that kind of peace and contentment. Secondly, people are born into poverty because of some past *Kammic* retribution, and the best way to relieve themselves of such sufferings would be to do good deeds. Good deeds can change our bad *Kamma* into good *Kamma* – even within this lifetime; and of course, you will enjoy a good rebirth after this life.

Do not let poverty blind you or make you too bitter to practise the *Dhamma*. Try to uplift yourself despite your circumstances – but with honesty and integrity. At the same time, do lots of good deeds and you will slowly see a difference in your life. And always keep in mind that the Buddha was more interested in eradicating the poverty in the people's wisdom than giving them prosperity since wealth only adds to the burden of attachments and robs them of the true treasure awaiting them in Paradise or *Nibbana*.

**QS. Can you explain the meaning of the term 'Nibbana'? Some people think that it means total annihilation of the soul. Is that true?**

ANS. What is *Nibbana* (or *Nirvana*)? This question has been asked by so many people so often and theorised about by so many great thinkers that most laypeople are thoroughly blur about it. I do not want to add yet another lengthy discussion about *Nibbana* in this book to add to the confusion. I just hope to clarify some of the misconceptions that laypeople have about *Nibbana*, and to do so in simple language.

First of all, is peace *Nibbana*? Worldly peace is definitely a poor shadow of *Nibbana*. Let us consider what the world understands by peace.

To political leaders, peace means there is no war, no conflict. But that is outer peace, not necessarily inner peace. You cannot achieve peace by telling the other countries not to go to war, but still carry on producing weapons yourself. Where is the



sincerity of your clarion call then? In our society, peace comes when we have the roots of morality and good moral behaviour. But when they are gone, we have suffering instead, for example leaders like Ferdinand Marcos. Leaders like the Dalai Lama have good morals, yet they still have fears and worries to contend with due to their positions as political leaders.

Religious leaders teach their followers to achieve heavenly peace but the Buddha has said that even the peace in heaven is not true peace. In heaven, the spiritual beings still have desires, and desires breed greed and attachments – wouldn't that lead to a war of the conscience for the beings there? Besides, heaven is not permanent. According to the Buddha's teachings, when we are reborn in any of the heavenly realms due to our good deeds or good *Kamma*, we go there to enjoy ourselves. Everything is beautiful there, peaceful too. Yet, once our good *Kamma* has been exhausted, we still have to leave the heavenly realms and be reborn elsewhere. No doubt life in the heavens lasts much longer than our human life on earth – one day there may be equivalent to eight hundred years on earth, or even sixteen thousand years on earth - still, there is a limit to our lifespan there. Our rebirth in heaven will only be a temporary sojourn. Temporary peace is not *Nibbana*.

The Buddha said that the extinction of craving (*tanhakkhaya*) is *Nibbana*. The Buddha had also often used negative terms to describe *Nibbana*, not because it is a state of annihilation, but because no language on earth can describe *Nibbana* clearly. Our languages are too gross, too inadequate, too imperfect to describe something so splendid and wonderful.

*Nibbana* is first and foremost, freedom from desires and attachments. People cannot achieve true peace on earth unless they become *Arahants*. But though not impossible, it is also not easy to achieve, so it is better for us to 'transfer' to Paradise (e.g. *Amitabha Land*) where we can then learn in a more conducive environment how to destroy our desires, hate and ignorance. Once we have thoroughly uprooted all these three defilements, we are on the way to achieving *Nibbana*.

*Arahants* can see five hundred lifetimes to the past as well as to the future, and when they do so, they see how their past parents, family members and all sentient beings suffered and will carry on suffering unless they too become enlightened. Hence, although *arahants* do not need to take a new rebirth once they have achieved *Nibbana*, they often choose to do so in order to help us understand the Buddha nature within us and so, guide us in our spiritual development.

The next level of *Nibbanic* bliss is that of the *Pacceka Buddhas* – i.e. a Buddha (an enlightened being) who realises the truth by himself. *Pacceka Buddhas* teach indirectly through their actions and if laypeople offer *Dana* to one of these Buddhas, they will be reborn in the heavens for a very, very long time.

Beyond the level of the *Pacceka Buddha* is that of the Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva turns the Wheel of Dhamma to teach the truth to sentient and non-sentient beings. An *Arahant* becomes a Bodhisattva by being reborn in a lotus flower. Through their love and compassion, the Bodhisattvas keep coming back to help us understand the Buddha nature within us and so, become enlightened too.

The highest level of *Nibbanic* bliss is that of Supreme Enlightenment or *Sammā-Sambuddhahood*. All Bodhisattvas have to practise ten transcendental virtues or *Pāramī* to achieve this Supreme Enlightenment. A *Sammā-Sambuddha* not only knows the Universal Truth, He also expounds the *Dhamma* to seekers of truth to help them win release from the cycle of birth and death.

Thus it can be seen that people who say that *Nibbana* means total annihilation, are totally wrong. However, Buddhists do not abide by the concept of a permanent soul or an unchanging entity either. *Nibbana* is not a kind of heaven where a 'soul' resides, but a Dhamma or state which all true seekers can attain. Whether you become an *Arahant*, a *Pacceka Buddha*, a Bodhisattva or a *Sammā-Sambuddha*, you will still be in the universe, but enjoying true peace and joy.

The idea of *Nibbana* is the most difficult to grasp in the teachings of the Buddha. This is not surprising though, because something so perfect, so sublime cannot be captured in just so many words. One must experience the bliss of *Nibbana* by themselves to understand what it is like. Everyone should remember that they created what they are today, and they are now creating what they will be in the future. Nobody can hide from the consequences of their actions. No amount of praying and chanting done in temples or by the roadside can save us from *Kamma* and *Retribution*. The Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, *Arahants* etc cannot 'erase' or 'lessen' the ill effects of our bad *Kamma*. They are just our teachers, they guide us on the right path and we are the ones who must walk the path ourselves. What greater Truth is there but that?

## Notes

1. For those interested in reading about our flight from Vietnam, the details can be found in my book "War and Peace".
2. For further information on this story, the reader is welcome to read my other book "5000 years on Earth".
3. Matthew Chapter 10.5 – 10.11 of the New Testament:

*10.5 These twelve men were sent out by Jesus with the following instructions: "Do not go to any Gentile territory or any Samaritan towns.*

*10.6 Instead, you are to go to the lost sheep of the people of Israel.*

*10.7 Go and preach, 'The Kingdom of heaven is near!'*

*10.8 Heal the sick, bring the dead back to life, heal those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases, and drive out demons. You have received without paying, so give without being paid.*

*10.9 Do not carry any gold, silver, or copper money in your pockets;*

*10.10 Do not carry a beggar's bag for the journey or an extra shirt or shoes or a stick. Workers should be given what they need.*

*10.11 When you come to a town or village, go in and look for someone who is willing to welcome you, and stay with him until you leave that place.*

## **Appendix**

A copy of the Medical Report on Bhikkhu Buddha Dhatu's illness in  
2003



## Glossary

<b><i>Amitabha Buddha</i></b>	The Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life, venerated by all Mahayana Schools. Associated with this Buddha are the two great Bodhisattvas, Mahasthamaprapta and Avalokitesvara (Kuan Yin)
<b><i>Amitabha Land</i></b>	The abode of Amitabha Buddha. Also known as Pure Land, Western Pure Land, Western Paradise, Land of Ultimate Bliss or Sukhavati.
<b><i>Arahant</i></b>	A Buddhist saint who has attained Enlightenment
<b><i>Bhikkhu</i></b>	A Buddhist monk whose life is governed by 250 precepts and rules laid down in the Vinaya pitaka.
<b><i>Bodhisattva</i></b>	One who aspires to Supreme Enlightenment and Buddhahood for themselves and all beings.
<b><i>Dana</i></b>	Alms-giving; often used to refer to an offering, especially of food, to members of the Sangha
<b><i>Dhamma</i></b>	The Teachings of the Buddha
<b><i>Eight Precepts</i></b>	The Buddha laid down rules of conduct or precepts for Sangha members and laypeople to follow. Among the different categories of precepts are these eight precepts which are maintained by some laypeople on certain days or during retreats :

1. *Do not kill*
2. *Do not steal*
3. *Do not engage in sexual activity*
4. *Do not tell untruths*
5. *Do not use intoxicants*
6. *Do not adorn the body or attend musical performances*
7. *Do not rest on luxurious seats or beds*
8. *Do not eat after mid-day*

***Kamma*** Action and fruits of action. Retribution or reward for all deeds done, in current or future lifetimes

***Kutis*** Umbrella-tents used by mendicant monks to get some protection from the elements and mosquitoes esp. when they retire at night.

***Mantra*** A formula or incantation that is recited to gain protection and concentration as well as merits.

***Maudgalyayana*** One of Shakyamuni Buddha's ten foremost disciples, well-known for his spiritual powers.

***Middle Path*** The teachings of the Buddha which stresses avoidance of all extremes such as indulgence in sensual pleasures on the one hand and self-mortification and asceticism on the other.

***Samanera*** A novice monk

***Sangha*** Community of Buddhist monks and nuns

***Shakyamuni Buddha*** Another name for Siddharta Gautama, the Buddha who lived near present-day Nepal more than two thousand years ago and founded the religion of Buddhism.



***Vasa***

The three-months rains retreat that Sangha members observe annually

***Vihara***

Buddhist monastery

***Returning From Death***

*By Messenger of Peace, Beggar of the Century*

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