

**Memoirs of 26 years in Exile in Communist VIET NAM
by Ven. Thich Thien Minh**



**In acknowledgement of those who helped to
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Thich Thien Minh.**

FOREWORD

After 26 years in exile with two life sentences that lasted more than a quarter of a century, I came back from death, in one peace, to the warm and happy welcoming of my blood family members as well as those of my dharma family. At the same time, many organizations namely the UN Human Rights Organization, Amnesty International, The Vietnamese Committee for Human

rights Overseas, The International Buddhist Information Bureau in Paris as well as the Media Overseas also released the good news.

Many Buddhists in and outside the country sent e-mail, telephoned, and some even came to Bac Lieu where I was residing in a poor thatch house to greet and congratulate me. They gave me all kinds of support - gifts, cash..., to help me nursing back my health and coping with the first days of freedom from jail. In the mean time, unfortunately, many fellow prisoners of shorter jail terms who could not endure the harsh slavery time in prison had died, lying in untended graves or in the cold, bare ground of the death valleys, in the middle of the dense forests and high mountains, or somewhere in the remote prisons where I had once lived. Our blood and sweat were shed to fertilize the dry, barren lands we lived on to make them beautiful. Now, wide, straight roads, colorful flower beds, mango trees laden with fruits, and vast ponds could be seen surrounding beautiful, spacious, luxurious houses where powerful prison guards were enjoying their lives. Prisoners were made to build big storages and fill them with food and products from their own labor for the enjoyment of the prison ruling cadres. And there, surely, lay the graves of prisoners of all kinds, political as well as non-political.

This reminded me of some verses by Reverend Thích Liễu Minh:

Those whose blood has watered this land,

So the People can blossom.

And whose bodies have blanketed rivers and mountains,

Hallowed if you are, please come and witness this Song of Peace.

By the time I was released from jail, hundreds of fellow prisoners were still living in the cold and hunger, suffering from the pain in

shackles and chains. Some of them were nearly 90 years old, some were having mental troubles, and some were on the verge of blindness. All of them had spent more than 20 years in detention without the light of being released. They all longed and hoped for the unattainable day of freedom. I strongly believed that they had the right to freedom and that day would not be far. Despite the long and unbearable hardship they had to endure for a long time, most of them did not succumb to the forced labor. They kept their will dignified and dauntless, nursing the fire of freedom, with the will of fighting for the liberation of their country. Among them were the prisoners of conscience from different religions who patiently bore up against miseries, never gave up to dangerous challenges, standing arms in arms for a free, democratic Vietnam with freedom of religion and human rights for everyone.

My younger siblings were still very young by the time I was put to jail, now they were all grown up with families of their own. The old temple of Vinh Binh, where I used to be the Abbot, was now a big high school building named after Le Van Dau, a guerilla and terrorist whose job was to set mine traps to destroy bridges, roads, schools... The graveyard beside the temple, the resting place for people in the district was razed to the ground for the building of a new market place under the name of Chau Hung. In the fields reserved for monks to work for their own living now stood rows of airy beautiful houses for the school principal and teachers. The sanctuary where the Three Noble Holinesses and the Sakyamuni Buddha were revered was totally destroyed, only the ruin of the old pedestal remained with some red-brown tiles sitting there sadly waiting for the former owner to come back. Some monks who used to be my younger dharma brothers, disowned their robes to become laypeople and got married after their release from jail

because they could not stand the vexation as well as the harassment from the authority.

I came back, feeling lost in the new environment because everything had changed. I came to see the old temple but it was gone. The old path leading to the temple was crowded with new houses on the sides. I was a monk with no temple to dwell in, no land to put up a shelter. Many a times I was compelled by the local authority to make household register as a member of my blood family which means I had to return to the secular life. In my visit with Buddhist fellows, I found many of them passed away, those still alive were mostly over 70. The kids who used to hang around the temple to revere Buddha and chant the sutra now all got married and had children of their own. Some monks who, for many years, were my dharma brothers as well as good advisors helping and encouraging each other in our Path of Monk hood were giving up their devotion of their lives due to the lack of either merit or good conditions, or unpaid debts from their previous lives, or bad influences. Some were even after honors and privileges and got deeply involved for fame and gain in this material world. Among them were some highly respected monks once I so admired but now sided with the winners, taking advantage of the evil power of the ruling class. That made me sometimes wonder whether they were well-trained communist cadres planted in the religious environments to work for their system, or whether they were too frightened and lack of strong will to face with difficult situations. They might have been threatened and could do nothing but give up their ideals and go with the winners. They might have some weaknesses which were known to the communists so they had to do whatever they were asked to be left alone and have their secrets safe. The fact that they left their years of practicing Buddhism, the Path of Compassion for the Marxist-Leninist regime so fast was a big surprise for me. What a pity! I still remembered clearly what

they used to teach those who came to them for the abiding of the Three Treasures (Buddha, books of Prayer and Sangha): **“Take refuge in the Three Treasures, not in the wicked groups.”**

While in Bac Lieu, I noticed that just a handful of the monks, and nuns, actually just one or two of them, with determination and true to their faith, still observed the pure rules, kept the precepts, led pure livings, tried to propagate the dharma to benefit all beings, helped organize the sangha, the rest did not have the courage and strong will to do what they were supposed to. Their activities remained limited within the temples due to the constant restraint and encroachment of the Buddhist Congregation organized and directed by the Religious Movement of the National Front, in other words, the Communist Party in power. This is in fact a Buddhist Association that was practically doing politics but, in turn, putting the blame on the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation for their political policy!

Among others, were some new-ordered monks whom I did not yet have a chance to make acquaintance with, but hopefully I would in the future. Very few friends of mine from the old school days made good accomplishment with their living. They were leading modest lives, trying to be happy with what they have got.

My beloved mother had passed away. The graves of my parents beside our house brought a kind of spirited warmth to remind their offspring to share the deep felt brotherly love and **compassion among themselves**. My younger siblings were living from hands to mouths, in poverty, but luckily, they were all safe and sound. We were just happy to meet again in the new circumstance and I did not ask for anything more. Each of us perceived happiness in our own way and circumstance even among our family circle. As a monk, I requested the authority to give back my property as well as my temple so that I could have a quiet place to practice my religion

in an environment fit for a monk. It's only fair and square to get back whatever belonged to me.

This "Memoirs of my 26 years in exile", written with heartfelt thanks, was dedicated to my parents and my teachers who had taught me tirelessly to be a useful person. I was also very grateful to the martyrs, the patriarchs, the heroes who had sacrificed their lives for founding our nation and protecting it, as well as protecting our national religion. My gratitude also went to the political prisoners who had passed away without having a chance to witness the future victory of the nation over the dictatorship. Besides, I felt the pain and prayed for those boat people who tried to seek freedom but unfortunately died at sea. My heart went out for the families of those who lost their lives since the Communist took over our country.

I would like to extend my gratefulness to the International Community, the United Nations and the International Human Rights organizations, the United Nation Human Rights Committee, Mr. Abdelfattah Amor, UN reporter for "Intolerance against Religion" who took the trouble to come with some delegates to visit me on October 24, 1998 while I was in the Xuan Loc Detention, Dong Nai. I would like to thank the Government and Congress of the United States, The United Europe, the Amnesty International Organization in The United Kingdom, Sweden, Spain, The Committee for World Religions in the United States, the Committee for Human rights for Vietnamese overseas, the International Media, the Free Asia Radio, the Homeland Radio that for many years had tirelessly canvassed and supported my fight for justice, and undauntedly spoke up for the release of myself and other prisoners of conscience. With all my heart, I deeply thank those who, in one way or another, had tried to help my family and

myself, emotionally as well as financially, from the time I was still in prison to the first days I was set free.

I started this book only 3 months ago while I had to handle a lot of monastic duties. It has been almost a year since I was set free. The year of the Rooster is coming to an end, replaced by the year of the Dog to take over the time machine. Like a saying in the book “the Song of an Abandoned Imperial Concubine”, the cloud painting of dogs shows the unpredictable changes of life. The year of the Dog is also an omen that with the coming back of years of the Dog and the Pig, the loyal dog will come back to his master.

At the coming of the Spring, I wish all Monks and their dharma families, lay Buddhists, friends of other religions, benefactors, fellow citizens in and out of the country a New Year full of peace, happiness, prosperity, and longevity.

The beginning of the year of the Dog 2006

THICH THIEN MINH

CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD

I, bhikshu Thich Thien Minh, birth name Huynh van Ba, was born on August 29, 1955 at Vinh Loi hamlet, Vinh Loi district, Bac Lieu province. My father was Huynh van Cam, my mother was Nguyen thi Kheo. I have two sisters and four brothers. I came from a family that lived up to good morals. My father was a kind and generous person who enjoyed helping people. My mother was good-natured, a role model wife who worked hard year in and year out caring for her husband and children until the last days of her life. My parents were the followers of Caodaism, a religion that

belonged to Tay Ninh Holy Church. They used to go and worship at holy temples, or pagodas during the holy periods (three holy days according to Buddhism: the 15th day of the first month, the 15th day of the seventh month: the 15th day of the tenth month (lunar calendar) as well as the first day of the 4 seasons of the year.

Since a little boy, I received education and training from the family, especially the strict teaching from my father. There was a time when my parents had to leave our native village in Bac Lieu to move to Tra Vinh (now called Vinh Binh). Vinh Binh was also the name of the temple in Bac Lieu where I was the abbot 26 years ago. That name was a reminder of my childhood when I began to go the temple to pay homage to the Buddha, to chant. I would like to share with you one of the stories of that time.

I still remember when I was 6 or 7 years old, living at Long Binh of Phu Vinh hamlet, Chau Thanh district, Vinh Binh province. Across from our house, there was a young lady in her 20's by the name of Diep, who would take me and some friends my age, to Long Khanh Temple every night to pay homage to the Buddha and to chant. We had to take the road passing rows of big old trees, their big branches laden with leaves and thick, tall grass underneath. Everything looked so scary to us especially at night. From there, we walked up to the Long Binh bridge before reaching the temple. It was at that temple where I had the chance to watch the film about the Life of Buddha from his birth to the day he became enlightened. The film was shown every year to celebrate the Buddha's Birthday. I used to follow the parade with flower decorated cars together with the crowd moving around the town. Since a small child, I had been very interested in listening to the monks and nuns' harmonious chanting, accompanied by the rhythm of the wooden fish tocsin and the pleasant sound of the bell, making everyone feel calm and peaceful. Incense smoke spiralled up from the altar and hovered around the small, beautiful,

quiet temple, bringing out the mild fragrance of the scented wood.

With Buddha statues in their compassionate faces, the words “Great Hall” in Chinese characters skilfully engraved high above the altar, the unique structure of over- a-hundred-year-old temple made it even more ancient and solemn. People who came to visit the temple from all corners would find themselves in a purified world, being in that scenery, breathing the pure air around it. They would feel free from the cravings of life and their afflictions were gone. They wanted to practice the teachings, tried to have purified livings. They would like to attain wisdom from their own discipline and get the joy of being free from the “ocean of sufferings”. As for me, I particularly found the brown robe so beautiful and wanted so much to wear it and deep down, I had a dream of being a monk when I grew up. But whenever I saw the abbot, I always tried to avoid him. I was so afraid of him, not daring to face him or to come near him, frightened to see his beard and his eyes as bright as stars. He looked so austere, having a slow way of speaking, and upright behaviour. He always kept his and actions right, and he seldom smiled. At that time he looked 40 or 50 years old. I did not remember exactly what his dharma name was, it might be Thich Hoang Thong. If he was still alive, he would be a most venerable monk about 80 or 90 years old.

Some years later, my parents again left Vinh Binh and back for Bac Lieu; and I had to leave the small old path leading to school of my childhood days. I came to the school to say goodbye to my teacher and my friends. I also said goodbye to my beloved neighbor, the young lady, as well as the friends who went to the temple with me. I felt so sad and reluctant to leave a place with so much good memories.

I came to say goodbye to her the last time before getting down with my parents to the junk that flowed downstream the Mekong River to Bac Lieu. She hugged me and I burst into tears. She looked sad, her eyes filled with loving tears. She told me to try to

study hard, be a good boy to my parents, a good brother to my sisters and brothers, polite to the neighbors and most of all, not to forget going to the temple regularly to pay homage to the Buddha and to chant if the temple happened to be near my place. Then she told me to write her and come to see her whenever I had a chance to go back to Vinh Binh. As for her, if the good chance arose she would enter the convent to become a nun. Lastly she told me to remember to evoke the name of Amitaba Buddha or the name of Avalokitesvera Bodhisattva before bed time so that I could be protected and supported.

Since then I have not had a chance to go back to that old place. I wondered if she had become a nun or still lived as a lay person with her own family. I believed that she always kept a deep faith, preserved her vows, and resolution. Her boddhichitta would always be strong whether she was a nun to, a dharma teacher or not. She would be a devout Buddhist, I was sure, and a knowledgeable friend, a good supporter who contributed to the cause of developing and propagating the Right Path. The above true story was one of the memories of my childhood, but it had a deep impression in my mind, as it always was in my religious life. I wanted to tell her that thanks to her, I now was a monk heading to the path of enlightenment. I was wearing a brown robe, the robe of Buddha, living in Buddha's house, achieving the mission given by Buddha, doing Buddha's activities. Dear sister, I was a Buddha's messenger and I was on the way to look for the Truth now, living with all my right faith to understand the Truth to serve the right Path. In the process of writing this book, as I mentioned some of the memories of my first steps in getting into the life of a monk, I could not help thinking of you and had the feeling that you were here, right in front of me. I tried to remember the advises that came from your heart, and the image of you in the dark brown robe of a lay Buddhist taking me by the hand as we walked on the

gravel path to the temple to pay homage to the Buddha. You looked so gentle then.

*Back in Bac Lieu, my parents would take me to the Caodai holy church to pray during the holy days. My father taught me how to chant...but I preferred to join in the activities of the Buddhist Youth Group. I also liked to wear the Boy Scout's hat which I found nice and kind. I used to go to the temple to kneel before Buddha, to chant or to do the repentance ritual on the first or the fifteenth day of the lunar month. I studied the Buddha's teachings at the temple and attended a public school for my general education. I studied very hard and got good results. I worked hard and usually ranked first or at least third in my class every month, and at the end of the school year I always got a prize. I was very picky in choosing friends to be with or to study with. How lucky I was! I got a chance to take refuge in the Three Jewels. And not long after that I got my parents' permission to shave my head, renounce the worldly love, say goodbye to my family to enter the monkhood. My life was turning a new page as I began to enter the enchanted liberation path.

I was very diligent in my practice and had many chances to attend courses of Buddha teachings, and three-month-summer-retreats. I also attended some training courses for abbots at Soc Trang and Bac Lieu and was fortunate to be taught by many highly respected monks. I was ordained a novice in 1972 at Long Phuoc Temple, Bac Lieu province. At that time the most venerable Thich Dong Minh still wore the brown toga. He was invited from Nha Trang via Saigon to be the First Most Venerable Witness and I received complete precepts at Thien Hoa Ordination Ceremony at An Quang Root Temple in 1977 led by the most Venerable Thich Tri Thu, the former abbot of the Dharma Development Institute. In this event, the Most Venerable Thich Hanh Tru, then Vice

President of the Most Respected Venerable Organization, was the Venerable Witness. Finally, during my practicing period, I was appointed abbot of a temple at Vinh Binh at a very young age, about 17 years old, with a limited knowledge of teachings and the rules. I was only a novice - not old enough to be ordained a full monk, yet I was an appointed abbot. The temple was located at Cai Day Hamlet, Chau Hung Village, Vinh Loi District in Bac Lieu Province. As I was very young at the time, my dharma brothers used to call me a “baby monk” while other lay people gave me all sorts of titles such as brother, master, monk, uncle, son, even nephew! I tried to correct them step by step until they could call me by one title only.

During the first period at the temple, while practicing my religious teaching, I opened a school, and went on with my general education until graduation. Then, due to the rising need in the local community, I attended the 18-month course for Vietnamese Medicine together with an acupuncture class taught by the herbal doctor and acupuncturist Tran Ba Lan who gave all his heart to the teaching of his students. After graduation, I was directly in charge of the Herbal Institute at Vinh Binh Temple. With the help of my dharma brothers and students, we examined patients, filling prescriptions, as well as doing acupuncture for Temple goers as well as other people in and out the area. At the same time, I was asked to be in charge for Vinh Buu Temple at Tra Van, Chau Hung hamlet. On top of that, I was fortunate to be accepted by the Most Venerable Thich Thien Dinh of Loc Hoa Temple, Thanh Tri district, Soc Trang province as his dharma son to continue his lineage. At the same time, I also acted as advisor and guide for the oriental medicine and acupuncture line for my dharma Brother Thich Thien Tam, the abbot of Khanh Lam Temple of Tuan Tuc hamlet! While being so busy with the non-stop religious activities, I was assigned to open a Vietnamese herbal medicine & acupuncture ward and to give Buddha teachings weekly for the lay

people at Tu Quang Temple, hamlet 1 Cay Dua, Thanh Binh village, Gia Rai district, Minh Hai province. In that situation, I had to stop my general education and I took a course by correspondence at the “Vi Sao” Education Center in Saigon. My major was journalism. Lessons were sent to me at the temple by post and that included documents by professional reporters in and outside the country.

At this period of my hectic life before 1975, sometimes interesting events happened like this one, during the period when I was in charge of Vinh Binh Temple.

While taking a correspondence press course, I tried to read all kinds of magazines and newspapers to update my skill in writing reports, chronicles, essays, commentaries... One day as I was reading the critics about the works just published, I noticed a book of poems with the title “Warfare of the 20” by Ly Thuy Y. A number of early birds who wrote to the author would get a free copy. It was such a rare chance and I immediately wrote to ask for the book. At that time I honestly did not know whether the poet was a lady or a man to address accordingly. If the middle name was Thi, it would easily be recognized as that of a lady, but in the case of Thuy, it was hard to guess. A man could have Thuy for middle name, so I had to think of a best way to address the author whether it was a he or a she. So I just wrote vaguely like: “I happened to read in the newspaper that a book of poems had just been published with the title of “Warfare of the 20” and it would be offered to anyone who wrote to the author the earliest. Though I am a monk, I am very interested in poetry; so I write this letter to ask you the favor of sending me a copy so that I can learn the skill of writing poems, and study the way of choosing words and reciting them, in order to enjoy your poems. With my sincere thanks and wish for peace and happiness to you.”

Whether the author found my letter funny and had an understanding for a clumsy monk, I had no clues, but about one

month later, the book was sent to the temple. At that time I was too busy to write a thank-you note to the author and it was blameworthy mistake. In spite of that, two months later, I got another copy. At that time I was so ashamed about my discourtesy and I wrote to apologize at once and I hoped the author would get my letter. This gracious attitude only deepened my respect and admiration for the author.

More than thirty years later, when I was transferred from a prison at Xuan Phuoc, Phu Khanh province to the prison of Z30A of Xuan Loc district, Dong Nai province, I had a chance to meet with two writers Doan Quoc Sy and Hoang Hai Thuy, through whom I knew that the author Ly Thuy Y whose poems I admired so much was a talented lady poet.

Today, when writing about this at home, not at the temple of the old days where I got the book, I felt a vague melancholy thinking of those poets with their poems full of emotions in the olden days.

And though I had never had a chance to meet this poet in particular, I couldn't help thinking of her poem books and wondered where they might end up during my exile of a quarter of a century.

CHAPTER TWO

APRIL 30th EVENT, A DAY OF SHAME FOR VIETNAM, A HEART RENDING DAY FOR THE MONASTICS

Then all of a sudden, the biggest catastrophe fell on South Vietnam. Like a worst nightmare, the April 30th, 1975 event came as a total blow and the whole nation was under a woe and death curse. I was overwhelmed by prospects of uncertainty for our future, our society, our nation, our religions... Everything was totally upside down and our lives would be changing completely.

The pain and suffering, death and grief that fell on so many

families were beyond description with death, confinement of the conquered people every day, everywhere. Temples, churches, shrines were destroyed or confiscated. People's lands and properties were taken. Prisons were built by leaps and bounds. Death sentences were issued in series to the compatriots who fought against the Communists all over the country. Buddhist monks of all ranks, Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, Caodai priests, Hoa Hao monks, and Bru Son Ky Huong monks...were isolated, put into prison, under surveillance, or under house arrest.

Widows, orphans, invalids, needy people and beggars were wandering in the market places, living under the bridges, at the bus stations, under the awnings or just anywhere they could find a place to live on. It was such a heart-rending scene beyond my imagination. The Vietnamese Communist Party had built their government with bayonets and rifles and ruled their people in a dictatorial, undemocratic and inhumane policy.

The Communist Party has made Vietnam a bloody outpost, leaving religious and secular people in miserable existence.

The bells in the temples have stopped chiming and the chanting ceased.

And the shrines remain silent and desolate.

The chiming of the bells in the (catholic) churches are diminishing
And those holy places are now deserted with only a few people left.

Human beings are replacing buffaloes to pull ploughs in the fields
Toiling the land from dawn to dusk

Having porridge of rice mixed with yam and banana corm for meal
Many people starved to death.

Beggars are seen everywhere.

Finding shelter on the hospital grounds, at the bus stations,
Under the bridges, on the pavements, or under the porch of some inns.

Lying on the ground in the open – oh, it's heart-rending.

The conquerors take over properties, wealth from the defeated.
Some victims, robbed of their wealth, try to end their lives
Or leave their place to lead a new, sad life away from home
To settle down in a new land surrounded by forest and wilderness
In the “new economic zone” with miserable conditions.
Like a bird blown away from its flock,
Family members are forcibly separated and settled in different
parts of the country
Parents’ hair turns grey from missing and feeling sad for their
children in confinement
Wives, their babies in arms, worn out from years of waiting for the
return of their husbands,
And the kids are at loss without the care of their fathers.
Many widows grieve the deaths of their husbands and many infants
never come to know their fathers’ faces,
Who causes that devastation for them?
It is because of the wicked, devilish communists who enticed the
whole people with their nice way of propaganda. There are many
persons who, for decades, have been their fervent supporters, now
silently left for another country!
Many mistakenly followed the Marxist-Leninist and the “three-no”
doctrine; now they realized that they cannot live with the
communists because it is like living with a grave made ready for
their followers.
The communists take advantage of the term “revolution and
proletariat” (which is non-humane in itself) to confiscate properties
of people just like bandits!
They are a gang of unruly and dishonest people who mercilessly
exploit their own people from urban to rural areas, while claiming
that they do everything to serve the people. They issue all kinds of
law to force people to belong to groups with a lot of severe
regulations. Farmers were forced to sell their rice to them in
bushels as a “contribution” to the country!

Young men were drafted into the army under the pretext of obligation toward other nations only to end up in unclaimed graves in other countries. At home, mothers seldom smile for their sons are away from home and husbands blame the unfair God for leaving their wives behind.

Who causes the parting and death?

Who wreaks havoc to the Vietnamese people?

Who entice people to build the paradise on earth, but in fact change the lives of the Vietnamese people into living hell? Millions of people left their country to seek freedom and scattered all over the world. Many of them were robbed on their ships, some ended up in prison while others were fighting for their lives against the storms and rain and then succumbed in the open sea!

Some people live in a strange place far away from their motherland.

They long for homeland, spending their lives in sadness and worries just to be away from the barbarous regime. A lot of young people miss their chances to get married, a lot of children have to stop going to school. A lot of families lose their properties, leaving everything behind and become proletarians.

The campus used to be beautiful in the old days, now, it is sad and deserted. Students have left for faraway lands. The autumn wind blows the sad, lamenting leaves in every direction.

The desolated parks seem to expect people to come back. The flamboyant trees are too sad and lonely to blossom. School girls in their graceful white dresses (ao-dai), now are wearing blouses and work to earn their living.

I have witnessed sufferings, mixing with tears, blood and shame from individuals and families during this period of time. The only place these people could come to find comfort for their soul was the church or temple where they could open their hearts to a priest or a monk to relieve their burden and pain

It was a collective retribution (material environment), a hardship that everyone had to suffer during this turbulent time of the country. And I have learned to listen to all kinds of pain that people brought to me at the temple. I wondered why I had to witness so much misfortune in others. On top of that, there was unjustness caused by bad people who planned to destroy the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation of which I was a member, though only a low rank member. That was a catastrophe for Buddhism, as well as other religions, and it really shook the calmness in the mind and heart of a monk like me!

Thinking of it, I must have had created a lot of bad karmas during my past lives so I could not sit tight and calmly to pray for safety for myself. I felt the urge to do something for those in misfortunes, the victims of the tyrannical regime of the Communist Party. I understood and felt compassionate toward them just like I felt for myself. I thought that whoever caused sufferings to others seemed to do the same thing to me at the same time. From then on, I developed a very strict, almost loathful view against cruelty. I wanted to push it away and bring in the goodness instead. I realized that my ability as well as my knowledge was humble and limited, and yet I decided to do something to help my fellow people and our nation from the dangerous situation. And I began to have true and objective evaluations about the power abuse of the present regime. Realizing the true nature of the Vietnamese communists, its non-humane, non-religious, non-national, and non-democratic characteristics, I decided to actively join the political organizations and set up the liaison with other religions having the same viewpoint in fighting against the communists to rescue the nation and Buddhism out of catastrophe, to restore the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation, to bring freedom, democracy, human rights and freedom of religion in Vietnam.

At that time, my head was spinning around the idea of getting involved in the liberation cause, just like any responsible citizen

would do when the nation fell into calamity. There were moments when I thought of Sakyamuni Buddha, our kind Father, the Perfect Sage, the Teacher of mankind, the Great King of Doctors who knew all about the perfect medicine to cure the mental illness for mankind. He was the greatest benefactor of all sentient beings, the supreme person of the whole universe. He was also one of the great revolutionists, making unforgettably history in this world. He was born into this world, witnessed the suffering of mankind, renounced the family to become a monk, got enlightenment, and entered into the nirvana, all in this world. He was the founder of Buddhism, the supreme balanced and right state of the Truth more than 2500 years ago. It has been present in Vietnam, leaving nearly 2000 years of historical legacy. Buddhism was founded by a human being to serve human beings, aiming at liberating them from their own suffering. Human beings lived in their own infatuation while Buddha was the awakened one but both were in connection with each other. The humanity aspect of Buddhism was expressed in the teaching of equality in enlightenment (Buddha nature), in consciousness and wisdom for all Buddha's followers, monastic as well as lay persons. Buddhism advocated that mankind were responsible for themselves and their society. They could change themselves and their social circumstances the way they liked, once they set their minds to do so. They could reform the conditions of what was, is and will be happening. Everything happened according to the causal law and the karmas that had been created by individuals. For that reason, only these people could change their karmas. This teaching reminded me of what the Most Venerable Thich Tinh Hanh taught me during his visit to my temple. He told me that: "A monk had to consider the teaching of the Buddha's Path as his house chores, and the working for the benefits of all beings as his career. Now you are an abbot, and having attended some courses about being an abbot, you must understand that "abbot" does not mean staying and protecting the

temple, doing the job of a superintendent, but staying at the house of the Dharma King, protecting the Tathagata Store. And you must remember that the life of a bhikhu is a wisdom life so his food is the dharma (tasting like the nectar of *kheer*¹), his clothes are endurance, his house is the heart of great compassion. You should remember that you always have to act according to the Right Path, because if you do not, you will not have the right concentration, and will be led astray by the worldly environment, then you will lose your wisdom life consequently.”

I always remembered what my teacher had taught me. And yet, as I mentioned above, either that my afflictions had not yet been erased, and my karma was thick and my merit was thin or that I had not done any good deed in my past lives but a lot of bad things instead; so I had to endure a lot of suffering in this life. Or was it the retributive calamity that I had to meet with? Consequently, I could not avoid the calamity and had to leave the temple to serve a sentence of hard labour in exile.

I left without a chance to say goodbye to my senior reverends, my dharma family as well as the lay Buddhists. I had not yet repaid any debt for the Three Jewels, the givers, and the supporters. Maybe my time in prison was a way to repay the debt for the country, one of the four debts in the Buddha’s teachings. As for me, all the trials that happened to me were the karma that challenged people on the Path for self enlightenment. The obstacles and adversities serve as support to help us reach our aim.

I still remember in “the Discourse on the King of the Treasures Samadhi”, Buddha had said, “In the True Path, we have to consider sickness as good medicine, calamities as success, difficulties as liberation, devils as dharma friends, hindrances as the help to success, treacherous friends as benefactors, enemy as good friends, favours as broken sandals, discarded gain as glory, injustice as

¹ Indian-style rice pudding made with milk and sugar

impetus to go on. In so doing, from obstruction, we learn to overcome all difficulties.”

I spent the entire 26 years, putting up with constant tortures in the communist jail. They must have been challenges of the resisting cause so I patiently endured all and never felt discouraged. Looking deeper, it might be that in the former lives I had done bad things, putting people in prison, torturing them so in this life I had to pay for what I had done. Anyway, may be I'd better let things take their courses.

THE SLANDERING, TERRORIZING, AND REPRESSING OF RELIGION OF THE LOCAL COMMUNIST AUTHORITY

I still remembered the harassment and bullying of the local communist authority to me and the temple during the first days of the national calamity when the atheistic, inhuman cadres came to Bac Lieu province from their guerrilla bases. I just wanted to point out some of these incidents

Only a few days after the April 30th event, about 4 pm, I saw a middle age man, a floppy jungle hat (nón tai bèo ‘water hyacinth leaf’ hat) on his head, in the outfit made from faded green parachute material, armed with a pistol walking straight through the gate of the temple. He introduced himself as “Hai Tho”, leader of the soldiers of Chau Hung hamlet. He looked angry and surly, his behavior rude, and his way of speaking impolite. I did not want to say that he was stupid but when he saw the five-color Buddhist flag flying on the pole, he said: “You are still displaying the flag of the French colonists now? The American imperialists and the Vietnamese puppet army and government have fled, how come the French colonists are still here? You, guys, are such reactionaries! You deserve to be sent to the re-education camp for a long time. He then entered the temple with an air of a revolutionary officer, his sandals made from the rubber tire smeared with mud and the hat still on his head. Looking at the statue of the Baby Buddha, he pointed at the statue he said, smiling scornfully: “Why do you have

to worship this little Buddha guy? He had nothing to contribute to the revolution in the fight against the American imperialists. He only sits here and waits for the offerings from others. He belongs to the exploitation class!” Then he stepped up the Main Hall, touched the belly of the Sakyamuni Buddha statue and said: “I wonder what this Buddha guy had to eat to be this fat!” When I was in prison, I was told that Hai Tho later came into the temple and said: “Thich Thien Minh has been put into prison, these cement Buddhas will be put away too.” And some years later it was also that Hai Tho, the Secretary to the Chau Hung Hamlet and concurrently an officer of the District Party Committee of Vinh Loi District, who gave the order to confiscate Vinh Binh Temple and remove all the Buddha statues to the Giac Hoa Temple, also called Co Hai Ngo Temple, across the river. Thus, the big black bronze statue that belonged to the Tran family, the ancestor of a Bac Lieu wealthy family, was stolen.

Some more incidents that happened later made me targeted by the local authority. The reverend Thich Hien Giac was assigned by the religious committee to come to temple to warn me of the following incidents: One day I got an invitation letter from the President of the National Front of the province, Mr. Ngo Tam Dao, or Mr. Ba Giao, together with other religious dignitaries in our province to go to the Bac Lieu beach to do ‘socialist labor’ duty, the irrigation mission, a labor duty for show only. The reason I called it ‘for show’ is that the Bac Lieu authority only wanted everyone to be on the spot on time for only about 20 minutes, equipped with a hoe or a trowel, to have pictures taken and to be filmed and then be taken home. Afterward the film would be shown on the provincial TV channel and broadcasted on the radio to encourage people to do the same. And later everyone would be invited to Sung Ky restaurant to have a friendly meal. They would also supply the means of transportation. On receiving the letter, I got in touch with Father Nguyen van Nhi, who was in charge of the Bac Lieu parish and the

Venerable Ngoc Phuong, the head of the Caodaist family of the Vinh Loi District. The three of us went to see Mr. Ngo Tam Dao a day earlier to protest this form of mock labor. I straightforwardly told him that it was against the Buddha's teaching to perform such a dishonest act and it was also against the conduct of a monk.

Father Nhi and the Reverend Phuong also protested the act that was against God's will and the teaching of the Holy Sages. Mr. Ba Giao said: "This is only a suggestion to see if it works. We have to consider the opinions of other religions." Because of that, the mock labor duty was cancelled, and the campaign for public participation was not fulfilled. A meeting was called by the Provincial Front to put the blame on me with warnings.

Two months later, Reverend Thich Hien Giac, a provincial communist cadre, who used to work undercover as a monk to carry out activities in the area under the former regime, organized the meeting to vote for the Buddhist Representative Committee for Bac Lieu Province and for Bac Lieu Town. Among the monks was the Reverend Thich Hue Ha, one of my teachers when I was ordained as a novice. He, too, was under Thich Hien Giac's control to work for the communists. Brother Thich Minh Duc, or professor Thanh, who settled in the United States later, was assigned to be the secretary of the meeting. The meeting was held at Vinh Hoa Temple with the attendance of the Provincial Front, the Town Front, and even the police. To begin the meeting, Thich Hien Giac introduced the agenda and the need to organize the Representative Committee for the Hamlet and the Province... At that moment I stood up and, as a way of protest, I read the order from the General Secretary of the Dharma Development Institute of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation signed by the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do. Among the content of the notice was a paragraph emphasizing that "Every member of the Congregation has to protect temples, Buddhist institutes, monasteries, and other properties belonging to the Congregation. Anyone who willingly

joins the state power is considered as breaking away from the
Congregation.”

After the notice was read, Thich Hien Giac and Thich Hue Ha looked very disappointed, obviously, because they already took part in the state power, and thus had no authority to call this meeting, or more explicitly, they were disqualified as members of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation as long as the above order was still in effect. Thus the meeting was cancelled, and once again, I was being targeted and blamed more severely. What hurt me most was the fact that Reverend Thich Hue Ha, my once respected teacher, was now a fervent follower of communism and I had to renounce him because “if the king was not wise, his subjects do not have to be loyal; if the father was not benevolent, his children do not have to observe filial piety”.

I had to choose my own way, and there were only two to choose from: right or wrong. I had to be clear about my decision. I had no other choice, but the right one for me was in fact, the old way, to be loyal to the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation, not to join the Communist-led, socialist-oriented Congregation created by the government as an instrument for their religious infiltration ruse.

Soon it was the Buddha’s Birthday of year 1976, his 2520th Birthday. I organized a rather big ceremony with flower floats with Buddhist flags, and banners. It was on that same day that the consecration ceremony of Sakyamuni Buddha statue was held.

Buddhist flags were hung along the road for 2 kilometers. Lay Buddhists, holding flags, flowers, or incense sticks, stood along both sides of the road from the temple to as far as highway 1A for more than 200 meters. The Buddhist flags were hoisted along with the national flag in the size recommended by the Provincial Front. The religious flag had to be one-third smaller than the national flag and to be on the left looking from the outside. Although I did exactly what the rule stated, Mr. Pham van Be, the President of the Chau Hung Hamlet (now, the Vice Chairman of the People’s

Council of Bac Lieu Province) ordered the Hamlet Party Committee Secretary named Lenh to come to the temple and ordered me to hoist the religious flag 2 meters lower than the national flag. I answered: “I understand the rule of the Provincial Front in the flag hoisting and I cannot hoist the Buddhist flag at half-mast. If the authority does not agree, I will return the national flag, and from now on, I will not hoist it anymore. Right now I only hoist the Buddhist flag because today is Buddha’s Birthday, not your national holiday. You should know that today, Buddhist flags are hoisted all over the world wherever people practice Buddhism, not only in Vietnam.”

That was a big shock between the authority and my temple, and two days after Buddha’s Birthday, I got the following letter.

REPUBLIC SOUTH OF VIETNAM

Independence – Democracy – Peace - Neutrality

INVITATION

To: Mr. Thich Thien Minh

The Chief of the Army Intelligence of Vinh Loi District Armed Forces requests the presence of Mr. Thich Thien Minh.

Time : 12 midnight today

Location: The office of Chau Hung Hamlet Council.

No excuse or condition of absence will be accepted.

Vinh Loi(day and month) 1976

Chief of the Army Intelligence of Vinh Loi District Armed Forces

(signed and sealed)

Aspirant Ngo Tu Hua

When getting the letter with the appointment at midnight with a compelling implication like that, I knew that things were going bad, so I arranged a group of elder lay Buddhists, especially the ones from the families that had contributed to the so-called “revolution” or from those whose children had participated the war of resistance like Mrs. Huynh thi Tung, 74 years old, also known as Mrs. Tam La. This old lady was the grandmother of Tu Hua’s wife. Besides, there was Mrs. To thi Thoi, 76 years old, whose two sons were working in Bac Lieu, one was Tu Mui, a Police

Lieutenant of Vinh Loi District, the other was Ba Cong, a Captain in charge of the Border Police at Minh Hai province. I asked these old ladies to accompany me for support. When we got there, Tu Hua ordered me to fill out a form to offer the Vinh Binh temple to the Chau Hung Hamlet Council to be used as an office for social services, the reason being that the temple belonged to a "people's blood-suckling" landowner who once did a lot of cruel things to the people. He told me that if I agreed he would help me transfer to any temple in the province, and that everything would be taken care of once I got to the new place. I answered him: "Although the temple was given to me as a place to practice and care for, I am a member of the Congregation and the property belongs to the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation. You can go directly to the Provincial Buddhist Representative Committee to talk about this matter or you'd better get the permission of the Dharma Development Institute of the Vietnamese Buddhist Unified Congregation at An Quang² Temple at 243 Su Van Hanh street, District 10. Though I am the abbot, I have no right to offer the temple to the government because this is the policy of the Administration and the Religious Power of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation."

At that time the group of the old ladies showed up. They shouted: "You want to take the temple, don't you? You want to put this monk into prison? You are a gang of bandits!" At the sight of his wife's grandma, Tu Hua hastily pleaded the group to go back home that night. The following day, I brought Tu Hua's letter to show to Mr. Huynh Nghiep Doan, Chairman of Vinh Loi District Fatherland Front, former Chief of Vinh Loi Police, Mr. Ngo Tam Dao, Chairman of Minh Hai Province Fatherland Front, Reverend Thich Hien Giac, Vice Chairman of the Religious Committee, also a member of the Provincial Front, and Reverend Thich Hue Ha,

² Great Master Yinguang Temple

member of the Provincial Front. Mr. Huynh Nghiep Doan, or Tu Nhan, promised that he would communicate with Mr. To Minh Hien, or Nam Hien, Vinh Loi District Secretary, Mr. Bui van Le, Chief of the district Police, and the Leader of the Army Group to reprimand Tu Hua. I didn't know if Tu Hua was reprimanded or not but one week later I got another letter similar to the first one from him, and especially, the delivery time was 2 a.m. When I came, he threatened me, saying: "I'll definitely confiscate the temple by all means."

The following day I made copies of both letters. Then I went with Venerable Thich Tinh Hanh, then Main Representative of Hau Giang province, to An Quang Temple to report everything and we asked to meet in person with Lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho, the Chairman of the South Liberation National Front. Mr. Nguyen Huu Tho ordered his Chief Secretary to write a letter to the local authority for me to bring back. When I got back to Bac Lieu I came to meet Tu Hua and gave him the letter. After reading, he tore it up and said: "I will only stop seizing this temple if those guys Tho and Phat (Mr. Huynh Tan Phat, the President of the Provisional Revolution Government of South Vietnam) come down here themselves". On hearing that, the whole hierarchy of the communists revealed itself to me. They only pretended to obey the order of their boss, but behind the latter's back, it was just ignored.

From then on, I kept sending petitions to Central Government authorities in Hanoi, namely:

- 1- Mr. Ton Duc Thang, State President.
- 2- Mr. Pham Van Dong, Prime Minister.
- 3-Mr. Tran Huu Duc, Chairman of the Supreme People's Procuracy.
- 4- Mr. Pham Van Bach, Presiding Judge of the Supreme People's Court.

Time passed and I waited and waited but the problem was not solved, and my petition went unanswered. One day Tu Hua came to the temple and said to me: “I happened to promise Hai Tho, the Leader of the Hamlet Army Group, at a boozing party that I would find him a place for the office of the hamlet army group. And he challenged me to take over Vinh Binh temple. So, can you move to another place for me?” I answered: “You must be kidding. Don’t ever dream that I will offer the temple so you can make an office out of it.” Failing that, Tu Hua got angry and from then on, resented me even more. At that time, in Minh Hải Province, Venerable Thich Tri Duc and I secretly campaigned for the formation of the Representative Committee of Provincial Vietnamese Buddhist Unified Congregation. We could not openly do Buddha’s services because our Congregation was always watched and imposed on by the Religious Propaganda Committee and members of the Front. Among other troubles was the fact that some highly respected members of the Representative Committee in Minh Hai broke away from the Congregation at their own will to join the Front and the Congregation organized by the government. They forced members of the Representative Committee of all ranks to take part in the new Congregation. From then on, the activities of the Congregation got stuck and the Congregation itself went downhill. The lay Buddhists in the province did not understand the situation, got confused and became somehow indifferent to our cause due to the doubt and more or less fear of the of the government. In the mean time, at the Head Office of the Congregation, the Council of the Dharma Development Institute began to be terrorized. Some were arrested, others were wrongly charged, threatened, and still others were put in jail. In other areas of the country, the communist government began to suppress Buddhism so strongly that Brother Thich Hue Hien, birth name Pham van Co, the abbot and all monks and nuns committed self-immolation on Nov 2nd ,1975 at Duoc Su Monastery, Can Tho to

oppose the policy of suppressing Buddhism by the dictatorship of the Communist atheistic Government. At Soc Trang, Mr. Nguyen Trung Nhat, or Huru Thuong, Chairman of the Hau Giang Front, Mr. Nguyen Van Nghiem, or Muoi Nghiem, Chairman of the Soc Trang Front, and Mr. Nguyen Van Cheo, or Bay Cheo, leader of the Domestic Security Department of Hau Giang Province set up a meeting at Bo De School to put on trial Venerable Thich Thien Duc, the abbot of Phuoc Son Temple and the former Main Representative of Vietnamese Buddhist Unified Congregation of Ba Xuyen Province, and afterward put him in prison. They accused him of working for the CIA and for that, they confiscated the Bo De School and the worship place including the office of the Provincial Representative Committee. Even at the Headquarter of the Dharma Development Institute, they made a raid on the temple and seized Venerable Thich Thien Minh, birth name Do Xuan Han, the Advisor of the Dharma Development Institute. He was tortured to death with a broken skull in cell X4 at the Police Station on Oct 10, 1978. Besides, in other provinces, many temples, schools, monasteries, and other properties belonging to the Congregation were confiscated.

During those days, at An Quang Temple, people at the office of the Dharma Development Institute were fed on unpolished rice, mixed with potatoes, and some kind of clear soup with a handful of pasta bits. Venerable Thich Thien Hoa, Head of the Institute had to use a wheel chair to move around. Brother Thich Minh Phat worked hard to find frugal food for the senior monks from day to day.

From Bac Lieu, sometimes Venerable Thich Tinh Hanh, current Main Representative of VBUC of Hau Giang Province, Venerable Thich Huyen Van, Vice Representative and dharma brother of the same lineage as the present Fourth Chief Most Venerable in charge of the Highly Most Venerable Committee of the VBUC, and I went to An Quang Temple with one or two bags of white rice to offer to the highly respected venerables. On the way we had to pass many

checkpoints. Sometimes the rice was seized. It was very hard to explain to the police in charge of the market why we did that. We had to use both reason and sentiment to talk to them. Many a time we had to entreat them so they would let us pass the post without losing anything. And it was not easy on a journey of about 300 km with a lot of checkpoints. Once, we underwent so many searches on the way that when we got to Saigon it was very late and we decided to rent some canvas beds at the bus stations to spend the night. There were incidents that we had no experience with, nor any idea of the tricks of the street gang and here was what they did to us. I was lying down, my bag of personal belongings (one outfit, ID, and some cash) under my head, feeling tired after the whole day travelling and about to doze off when some guy passed by and scratched my foot. Startled, I sat upright, and when I lay back down my bag was gone. Just imagine the bad dilemma I was in! Having no money to pay for the bed, I had to ask the lady who rented the bed to postpone the payment until later. After that, I could not sleep a wink, anxiously waiting for daylight. As the day began, the booking office was crowded and noisy with people waiting to buy tickets. At that time, I heard the loudspeaker calling for someone who lost his paper. When my name was called, I rushed to the office of the bus station, and there, I saw my bag hanging near the booking table. After checking it, I found everything in there but the money! At last we had to call a taxi to An Quang temple to see Brother Minh Phat and asked him for the money to pay the taxi. But for that unlucky incident, we had the joy to meet with the Most Venerable Thich Thuyen An, the leader of the Dharma Development Branch, in his room. We told him that during this trip for Buddha's services, we brought some white, perfumed rice to offer the highly respected monks. He smiled cheerfully and talked to us affectionately for a while. He explained some difficulties on the duty of the dharma development and

conversion of the Congregation in the present time. Afterward, he gave us ten New-year calendars for each Province.

During that time we also went to the Headquarter to see Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, Vice President of the Dharma Development Institute to report the Buddha's services at our province. We also went to Giac Minh Temple to see Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, current General Secretary of the VUBC to discuss the way to organize secret Representative Committees at Bac Lieu and Hau Giang. We also wanted to know about some Buddha's services of the Congregation to be done in the future. At that time I was a member of both Representative Committees in Bac Lieu and Hau Giang to help Most Venerable Thich Tri Duc and Most Venerable Thich Tinh Hanh of the above cities. From the experience at the bus station, during the following trips, Most Venerable Thich Tinh Hanh and I tried to leave home earlier or to spend the night at the Hue Nghiem Buddhist College, where Most Venerable Thich Buu Hue was the Dean. On those occasions, we had chances to see Brother Phuoc Tai who was a student monk there.

Back to the event of Vinh Binh Temple, and the petitions I sent to Hanoi to denounce Tu Hua's wrong doings, his abuse of power to try to seize the temple illegally. Many petitions had been sent but no answer came from those dignitaries. Time passed by and I waited in despair. I lived in anxiety, foaming with rage. Besides, I had to deal with so many things that happened incessantly, and Tu Hua's power abuse was escalating. The authority of Chau Hung hamlet seemed to close their eyes on Tu Hua and his perverse behavior.

One day, my teacher, the most Venerable Thich Tinh Hanh, on his way to Soc Trang from Ca Mau, stopped by the temple to see me. Right at that time Tu Hua showed up, standing akimbo, looking very threatening with his distorted mouth, a scar running across his face from a nearly fatal wound that he got during a night he came

to town for his activity long time ago. In a very angry tone, he shouted at my teacher: “Hey, you old monk, where are you going? Have you got a permission to travel?” The Most Venerable smiled and answered: “I am passing by and finding that I get no money left, so I just come to ask Brother Thien Minh for some money and then leave right away.” Paying no attention to what he said, Tu Hua ordered while spitting and smelling alcohol: “Go to the office of the Hamlet Police to “work” with us. You are stopping by this hamlet illegally”. On hearing the news, I came to see Mr. Tran van Trong, or Mr. Nam Trong, General Secretary of Chau Hung hamlet, Mr. Pham van Be, or Mr. Nam Be, Chairman of the hamlet, and Mr. Ha van Tien, or Tam Tien, Chief of the Hamlet Police. I suggested that they set the Most Venerable free but they could not do any of such things because they were afraid of Tu Hua, a person from the district level, who was also from the Army Intelligence. It was about 6 pm then, about 400 to 500 lay Buddhists from the nearby hamlets gathered around the hamlet police post and the road got jammed. While talking to people who wanted to know what was going on, I heard the crowd shouting: “Down with Tu Hua! Down with Tu Hua, the wicked, heartless, cruel evil who put the monk into prison.” Tu Hua paid no attention, pacing in and out in a cocky manner and talking imperiously. In the mean time, members of the hamlet People’s Committee witnessed it but did nothing. I knew this was a self-important and swollen-headed habit that was shown in Tu Hua’s behaviour in the new circumstance although he himself was only an aspirant. After April 30, 1975, he acted as if he was a man of power, putting on airs, showing off. Everyone in this hamlet knew that he once was a mole for Vietcong at Cai Day hamlet. He was a member of the People Self Defense Militia of the old regime but at night he acted like an informant for Vietcong to kidnap the hamlet chief, his assistant, and some of the members of the People Self Defense Militia and brought them to the forest. For that reason, he always

boasted to have achieved a wonderful feat, and that was also the reason for the hamlet committee to show considerations for him and say nothing about his actions. At that point, the Assistant of the Hamlet Police Chief, Mr. Tam Minh, came and said to me: “Everybody, please go home. Tonight I will give the Venerable my canvas bed to sleep on, so don’t worry.” So my teacher had to spend the night at the Chau Hung Police post. As for me, I went back to the temple feeling very anxious. I knew that was a normal thing, except that Tu Hua wanted to dramatize it to show off his power over me. The following morning, dressed in a very old set of clothes, I had in my bag a loaf of bread and a cup of coffee and milk. I intentionally let everyone see me like that, especially Tu Hua’s mother, Mrs. Muoi Quang and his sister, Miss Ba Kiem. They were decent people in the hamlet, who ran a small tea shop on the roadside. I knew that if they saw me and the reason I behaved, they would blame him for doing it. By an ironic turn of events and true to the saying in Buddhist writings - “the suffering that comes from being together with those whom one hates” - on the way, I saw Tu Hua coming from the opposite direction. Though I did not want to look at that wicked person’s face at all but there was no way to avoid him so I had to speak to him: “Mr. Tu Hua, I suggest you let my teacher go back to the temple.” Tu Hua said with a wry smile: “Why didn’t you ask me last night? You look down on me? If you asked, I would have let him go.” Then he pointed at the office of Chau Hung hamlet and continued: “Those devils in there got no authority at all so it is useless to ask them. Alright, go bring him back to the temple. Tell them this is an order from Tu Hua. From now on, remember not to belittle me, OK?” When I came to take the Venerable back to the temple, Mr. Nam Be, Chairman of the Hamlet Committee said to me: “Tu Hua said that you have to fill out the form to sponsor the Venerable.” Being so anxious for my teacher’s safety, I did what I was told. Afterward my teacher and I went back to the temple.

Back at the temple, while we were having our lunch, Tu Hua reappeared. He walked boldly and insolently into the temple without saying hello to anyone. Looking at our food he said: “what kind of monks are you? Having three and four dishes for lunch! Salad, salted tofu, preserved bean curds, and vegetable soup! Remember that after being sponsored, this old man has to report to me whenever I want to meet with him!”

With that, he then left.

CHAPTER THREE SUPPORTING POLITICAL GROUPS

1- From treating sick people to supporting political groups and involving in trials

Once taking over South of Vietnam, the communist government showed the power of dictators to suppress and harass their conquered people without mercy. They not only oppressed and exploited the common people out in the society but, in their wild dreams, also showed their will to gradually bring their harm and encroachment to the temples.

Just one day after the April 30th, 1975 event, countless number of unjust events happening everywhere. I was very disappointed with this dictatorial regime and I had no faith in their governing policy.

They did not bring happiness to their people even at its lowest level. Since then, in my Dharma talks, I always included either some fables with very profound moral meanings from our ancestors or some classic reference from the Best Lessons from the Ancients. Since I understood the mind, the innermost feelings as well as the wishes of the mass, I tried to choose stories appropriate to their psychological needs and close to their current livelihood.

Many elderly people enjoyed those dharma talks or dharma teachings thoroughly because these were very suitable to what was happening around them. After those talks, I tried to listen to their

opinions and ideas about what I said. I felt happy to have chosen the themes that suited their needs at the right time, in the right situation. I tried to keep doing that, to meet the criteria of the religion as well as that of the present times and circumstance. At that time, I was assigned by the Most Venerable Thich Tri Duc, the main Representative of the Bac Lieu VUBC (Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation) to open another charitable herbal medicine and acupuncture ward at Tu Quang Temple, Cay Gua hamlet, Gia Rai district and that kept me busy all day long. One day I came back to Vinh Binh Temple from Tu Quang temple after one week of giving free medical treatment and herbal medicine to people in that area. As the car stopped at the temple's gate, I saw at the porch a woman about 30 years old, whom I later I knew as Mrs Ho Thi Hue, carrying a new born baby about one month old. At her feet, she got a bag with clothes, milk and other necessary things for the baby. She was sobbing her heart out. Looking up, she saw me and greeted me with a nod of her head. I asked her: "Why are you crying?" On that she answered: "Oh, Master, my baby was seriously sick and dying. The doctor at the hospital told me there was no hope, and I should bring her back home to prepare her funeral!" Then she asked me if she could stand under the porch waiting for a passing boat to go home. I asked her what went wrong with the baby. She said that the baby got a very serious lung problem. I came to examine the baby's face, and her forefinger. I looked at the three knuckles for the wind point, lung point, and life point. Since the baby was still too young to have a full pulse system, I had to look at these knuckles. From that, I believed that the baby could not breathe because of the phlegm that blocked her pharynx and it was not a serious lung disease. It might come from the milk that her mother breast fed her while the former had too much "yang" in her system. I said to her: "Don't you worry. The baby is not very sick. Bring her into the ward and I will try to help."

I then asked an old lady, a lay Buddhist, who was very good at treating small children, Mrs. Nguyen thi Nga or Mrs. Hai Hue to take care of the baby. Mrs. Nga was still alive, at 76 years old, living at Cai Day hamlet, Chau Hung village. Miss Hai Hue dipped a hen feather in the mixture of alum, some coconut husk fibre, and vinegar then used that feather to tickle the baby's throat to induce vomiting. The baby threw up a lot of phlegm. And only a minute later she could breathe normally, her face got some color, and she cried loudly. Mrs. Hue, the mother, smiled happily while drying her eyes with a handkerchief. I gave her some powder medicine to take home for the baby. She heartily thanked everybody and said goodbye when she got a ride on a boat to go home at Chau Thoi hamlet.

About three days later, at sunset, I saw some young men passing briskly through the gate of the temple. Each of them stood at one side of the temple, and some lingered behind the range of coconut trees then hid themselves behind the trees. Hurrying out to see what was going on, I saw a young man deeply tanned, about 30 years old. Seeing me, he took off his hat to greet me and asked: "You are Brother Thich Thien Minh, the abbot of this temple, aren't you?" "Yes, I am," I answered and invited him into the temple. In the conversation he identified himself as Trinh Thanh Son, 29 years old. He just came back home to visit his family from U Minh Mangrove forest, and his wife, Mrs. Ho thi Hue, told him that I had saved his baby's life. The reason he came to the temple today was to thank me and asked for some more powder medicine for the baby. After that, he asked me to read his fortune to see if he could succeed in carrying out his big plan.... Then, he talked more about himself. We came to a deep mutual feeling, having quite a few things in common when discussing some of the present social problems. He then confided in me that he and some of his friends, soldiers, officers, evaded the re-education camp. They were now

living in the Lower U Minh forests and were planning to organize a secret group to fight against the Communists for the freedom of the country. But for the time being they were still hiding and everything was so difficult at the first stage. There was a shortage of everything, from kerosene for lights, batteries, medication(for malaria especially), mosquito repellents, raincoats, paper, pens, typewriters, food, cloth for flags, fabric for uniforms, military equipments, military goods to personal weapons. I understood that they needed everything, and there was no source of support as yet. Son had not been able to find any good and strong supporters to help strengthening and developing the Group. After listening, I felt a great sympathy for him and promised to contribute whatever I could within my capacity because I knew that his Group was still at its embryonic stage and needed supports badly.

From then on, I began to rally all I had to help him; and at the same time I introduced and encouraged some of my able acquaintances to support him with money as well as goods whenever he had a chance to come back to Bac Lieu from Ca Mau forests. I also tried to encourage some powerful friends to plant our people in the Communist Machinery such as the Communication and Transportation Department, courts, police at all levels...so that these people could have means to help with the needs of the Group. First of all, I lent them a typewriter and gave them paper, pens, pencils, fabric for flags, raincoats, medication for malaria, rice, masks against poisonous gas, maps of Bac Lieu and Ca Mau provinces, maps of Military Zone 4... Together with members in the districts as well as in the whole province I helped to print copies of the Group's fundamental regulations and notices. We also tried to distribute leaflets in a large scale, from ground to air. And I found a way to do so. We tied the documents to a burning incense stick then to a flying balloon, or a bird's foot, and then we released them into the air. As the incense stick burnt, the leaflets

dropped all over the places, on tall buildings, on the trees, on the rivers.

At that point, the Police at some provinces panicked and blamed the American silent airplanes for those leaflets distribution. The leaflets were distributed this way from Can Tho to Soc Trang, Bac Lieu and Ca Mau, 4 provinces in all. This incident gave the Communists a scare of their lives during the boisterous celebration of their victory. They thought that the situation had been reversed and so did many of the victims in the falling regime. On top of that, I organized commemorations for the deaths at some families so that members of different political groups from Saigon, Bien Hoa and Hue had a chance to attend secret meetings and joined the big group or to create a high tide combat all over the nation. At that time, the U Minh Group called themselves “the Militia Front for the National Recovery” and they wanted my input on that name. I suggested that they changed it to “the Partisan Front for the Salvation of Vietnam”. The reason for my suggestion was that I wanted the movement to follow the example of King Le Loi and his insurgent army with their strong will to regain the country and not to recover the old regime only. In my opinion, the old regime also needed to be adjusted; it was passive because it was dependent, and once it was entirely dependent on other power, it could never stand on its own feet when the support was no longer there and would fall down in total despair. The name I suggested was accepted unanimously. From then on, I was given more attention in the Group and they considered me as their official political advisor.

I, myself, did not know about this kind of promotion. I did not think that I was a political person, and did not have such capacity to carry out the duty that the group assigned to me. Only when I was arrested and investigated many times did I learn that some among those in the Group who were in custody, including Trinh Thanh Son, declared that they had voted me to be their advisor.

Based on my fervent help and support, they unanimously did that without having a chance to let me know. For this reason, in the first indictment, I was classified as an accused of particularly dangerous class, and according to Section A of Decree 03, the punishment would be a death sentence. It was a high time for the suppression, and all the sentences were meant to be very severe to set example for everybody. So, in all the political cases throughout the country, there were always from 3 to 5 people sentenced to death, from the leader to the followers. Many death sentences were carried out. As for me, because I was promoted to such a high position in the Group, the District Attorney and the Court of Minh Hai accused me as leader of the organization, “the Partisan for the Democracy of Vietnam Front”. This was something I could never imagine before; I only knew that whoever was the first on the accused list would get a death sentence. That was what happened at the past trials in the country. Perhaps it was my karma! I also realized that when one was in charge of the leading role, the consequences were hard to imagine. Given that, before the Court, I did not contradict their accusation and, just letting everything go its way, I waited to see where the Creator take me through my destiny.

Deep down, I was afraid that if I denied that role of leader, surely Trinh Thanh Son and some of the other members would be given death sentences. And if they got those sentences, their families would suffer extremely. As for me, as a monk, I must have the merit of sacrifice. Even if I got that sentence, it would not matter, and it would be a chance for me to renounce this body. In spite of all reasoning, I was still worried that, a monk was like a traveler with a long journey ahead, and what would happen if I died before reaching my destination? If I came to the last stage of a human life (death) before experiencing the others, namely birth, old age, sickness then I wondered if the merits and good conditions I had been collecting during this life as a monk would be enough for the

preparations for this life as well as for the next one. No matter what, living or dying, in my present life as well as the next one, I vowed to continue cultivating good deeds, accumulating merits, serving the Right Path to bring blessings and joy to all sentient beings in order to pay back some of my debts to the Buddhas. Moreover I always remembered the saying, “Being a patriot is not a sin, and his spirit will never die”. The law convicting a person for patriotism was a bad law, the law of the wild; the law of those who sold their country and fellow citizens for their own profits, the law of those who crushed the weak and caused harm to the country. And the law that convicted religious persons was the law of the immoral, of the killers. Therefore, if I was convicted, I would feel honoured because I did not do anything wrong, did not harm my fellow citizens and my country, let alone leaving a bad name behind. Besides, in this world, whenever a new regime came into being, either by replacement or usurpation, those who were in power always claimed to represent the right cause, and their opponents to be all wrong and evil. And those who confronted them would be considered outlaws. In one word, just because of power and self interest that people judged, blamed and accused each other of being traitors ... All of these only happened under a dictatorial regime.

I wanted to confirm that from my childhood until that time, I knew nothing about politics. I was only a monk, not a politician, nor a statesman. I did not have good knowledge about politics and I was lucky enough not to have anything to do with the civil war in my country. Being put into prison for a serious offence, especially a political offence, was a rare, unexpected experience to me. I knew that the communist authority had a hatred for me just because I was a member of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation who did not support the government’s wrongdoings and fought for the freedom of religion instead. And this was a chance for them to show off their power. I often thought that being a monk I did not

pay attention to worldly affairs, turned a deaf ear to the right and wrong of society, stayed away from noisy and crowded places, ignored dreams of fame, privilege, or passion for worldly life. But the tense situation around me and all over the country had urged me to close the temple and go out to fight in the hope to save our country and to solve religious distress. I still remembered a poem which I was not sure whether it was written by Nguyễn Bình Khiem or the Honorable Huynh Phu So of Hoa Hoa Buddhist Sect. That poem with four meaningful lines was so becoming to my mood at that point of time. I knew it by heart since I was 13 years old and heard it recited by the elders:

A monk, with great resolution, closes the temple,
Draws the golden sword out of its sheath on riding the horse to the
battlefield
Having accomplished the duty to the country, and avenge for the
family,
Comes back to the temple and resumes his religious duty.

I had a chance to repeat the content of the poem when being interviewed by Ms Y Lan, a reporter of the Free Asia Radio. A month later, I got a phone call from a Buddhist, a nun from Hoa Hao Buddhist Sect, Ms Nguyen Thi Hanh, 46 years old, of Bac hamlet, Tan Thanh village, Thanh Binh district, Dong Thap province. She, on behalf of the Hoa Hao followers, expressed deep gratitude to the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, the head of the Institute for the Propagation of Dharma of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation, and me, for having spoken out about the cruel suppression of the Congregation of the Hoa Hoa Buddhist Sect that had inspired some of the members to self-immolate to become martyrs. At the same time Ms Hanh confirmed the above Prophecy poem was written by the Honorable Huynh Phu So, the Founder of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Sect. Sometime later, Mr. Le

Minh Triet, a Hoa Hao monk who had spent many years in prison and shared the experience of hardship there with me, also confirmed that the Honorable Huynh Phu So was the author of that poem.

Right now, as I was recording these incidents for my Memoir, I still deeply felt the meaning of those four lines. Realizing that the duty of a citizen was to pay his debt to the country, I, with my limited wisdom, assumed the meaning of the term “politics” (chinh tri) in a plain way. That term itself was very clear in its meaning, because “chính” meant straight, not curved, wrong or evil and tri meant govern). Thus “chinh tri” meant to govern with justice and not with mental reservation. Also, according to Confucius, “chinh tri” means righteousness”. So, politics meant correctness, righteousness or a right way. Anything that was not right, not stable should be adjusted to be right, stable, and consolidated.

I also heard someone define that, “politics means to design the law according to the human nature and administer it with the principles of kindness, goodness, and beauty.” This meant the rulers should design the law and execute it in accordance with the wishes of the people to bring them real freedom, comfort, and happiness. I wanted to emphasize on the term “real”, not the nominal, empty word. Besides, the citizens needed to be taught and guided to become useful for their families and society. Some others defined politics as an art to manage the society ...It was too bad that the term “politics” was being abused by empty promises, mischievous scheme and tricks to achieve the aim; so it lost its beautiful meaning.

Nowadays people looked at political activities with cautiousness and doubts or valued them unjustly. In fact, politics itself was beautiful. It was not bad by itself, but those who abused it for their own interest smeared its name with their ambition. To me,

politicians were like those who navigated the ship (of their country) on a river or in the ocean. Call it a river, if it was a small country and the ocean if it was a big one. On that ship were hundreds of people whose lives depended on the skill of those navigators. The ship had to cross thousands of nautical miles, avoid the ships coming from the opposite direction, or pass the ones on the same direction. The navigator had to exert his best skill in dealing with big waves, undercurrent, hidden rocks, and to successfully steer the ship at the turns of the river. These turns were the feelings, emotions, wishes, and basic needs of citizens of all levels in the society. The navigator had to learn how to navigate, have a compass, basic mechanical skills and know how to operate the engine. In short, he had to navigate with care and enthusiasm. Especially he had to know how to bring the ship into every turn, and wind of the river. This was the crucial point because he could not stop the ship whenever he came to a turn and brought it to the shore. That was just not politics. So those who governed had to meet the wishes and basic needs of the citizens. If they did not do so, they did not deserve to be in their positions.

Truthfully speaking, the basic needs of mankind consisted of spiritual and material ones. Spiritually, they've got to have their cultural and religious needs; and materially, they've got to have their economical needs met. Any government in the world tried to serve their people in these two aspects, no matter how many ministries or departments they had. Vietnam had to come up with a Democracy that respected the most basic human rights. These rights had to be specified in the Constitution in accordance with International Laws and the Declaration of International Human Rights. To assure the international aspect and the application of the democratic policies, the Constitution had to be strictly respected in reality. It was important that a new policy be developed to meet the basic needs of the citizens. "People were the base," not "people

were taken as the base”. And that policy had to be in keeping with the trend of the new world.

2. ARREST AND INVESTIGATION AT THE MINH HAI POLITICAL PROTECTION BUREAU.

During the period prior to my arrest, I had the feeling that a disaster was going to happen to me. At the end of 1978 my father passed away from a serious disease. My family fell into poverty and my mother, with her delicate health had to take care of everything since my siblings were still young and helpless. Every time I came back to Bac Lieu to help my patients with acupuncture, I would drop in to see and give them support. On March 28, 1979, I felt so nervous and restless that I could not do anything. I felt homesick and I missed my father (despite his passing away 5 months ago) and my mother. I rushed home to burn incense on the altar for him, checking on my mother’s health then I left for the temple. About 5 minutes after I entered my bedroom, a blue bird flew in through the window and dropped dead on the table. It was actually hard for the bird to fly in through the window with pretty close wooden bars and a hanging curtain. I thought that it was a bad omen because the elders often said that when “birds drop, fish sink”, something bad would happen. I hurried to bring the dead bird to the foot of the banana tree at the side of the temple to bury it while reciting the Rebirth Dharani Mantra then I went back to my bedroom to have the afternoon nap.

It was exactly 1:30 when the alarm went off and at that moment, the police were all over the temple. Mr. Duong Van Nho - or Tu Nho, the Deputy Police Chief of Vinh Loi District and some of his officers, in coordination with Police of Chau Hung hamlet suddenly appeared in the Buddha Hall and quickly entered the

sitting room. The Deputy Police Chief of Chau Hung hamlet, Mr. Tu Huong, introduced everybody then Mr. Duong Van Nho asked my student Thich Thien Tin, whose birth name was Truong Phuoc Hoa, and me, to follow them. We hurriedly took some belonging and followed them to national highway 1. I noticed that there were not only police, but also a lot of soldiers from Vinh Loi army, rifles in hands, their faces inflamed with murderous look, their eyes glancing surreptitiously around.

They put us into an old, tattered black car. Sitting on both our sides were two policemen with guns ready in their hands. At about one-fifth of the way, the car broke down and stopped on the roadside for a long time to be fixed. After that it went straight to the police office of Vinh Loi district. When we got there it was nearly dark, although it was only about 10 kilometers course. Once there, we were put in two separate rooms. I sat in the room waiting for a long time but nobody came or said anything. Outside, it got darker. It was such a gloomy and desolate evening. I realized that I could not go back to the temple this evening. They wanted to keep us there.

Around 7 o'clock, a young policeman about 17 or 18 years old came and told me to go to the next room to rest. On entering the room, I saw that everything had been prearranged as if to impress me with a psychological test, a brain test, pre-emptive mental strike without words in a battle of wits. Things that were put in the room were one canvas bed with a mosquito net, a blanket, a pillow, and a very bright neon lamp. Specially, there was a wardrobe with three shelves without doors. On one of the shelves was a copy of the poem "Verses on Religion and Life" composed by me. (This poem was published in 1973 for free distribution. And it had more than 100 pages.) There were some gas masks, a map of the Minh Hai province, a map of Military Zone IV printed by the Cartography Bureau of the old regime, and some cloth for flags... In short, those were all the stuff that I had sent to the Group in the

jungle. Looking at them exhibited that way in the room, I knew exactly what was in their mind. It was the basic method of the investigators before questions were asked. There was nothing new in this! It was a little bit hard for me to fall asleep that night, thinking of the stuff in the wardrobe opposite from my bed. They seemed to tell me that I would be put in prison, convicted and things would no longer be the same.

The next morning, when I got up, they transferred me to another room. And about 3 pm on March 30, 1979 a brand new shiny white car from Minh Hai Province came to take only me to the Political Protection Bureau. The one who escorted me was Captain Tran Trung Thu, Deputy Chief of the Political Protection Office of the Provincial Police. When we got there, I was put in one of the office rooms in which there were two beds, one for me and the other one for a second lieutenant to guard me.

That night, a Captain, reeked with alcohol smell, came into the room and told me to get up. He said: “Once in here, you must have known who you are and what you should do. You have to declare truthfully so the Party and the Government can be lenient to you. Don’t force us to do anything rude.” Then he introduced himself as Captain Nguyen Huu Phuoc, Deputy Chief of the Bureau. I said: “You told me to declare truthfully but what is there to declare? And what about doing something rude? Are you going to hit or shoot me?”

As soon as I finished speaking, he rushed upon me, grasping my robe and wrenched it off the buttons while saying: “A robe does not make a monk.” I retorted: “And the hat you are wearing does not make you a revolutionist.” The Captain continued: “On behalf of our Party Cell, I will give you a new lesson and I can answer any question of yours if you feel that you do not know enough

about the Party. Moreover, by all means, you have to be educated about the Party policy to become a new person of the socialist society.”

I answered: “If you can, on behalf of your Party, answer any question of mine, then I would like to ask you when your regime can reach the Communist and the stateless, classless status of the World Community like Max and Lenin had declared.” He said curtly: “You can ask any question but this one.” I said: “If it is so, I will ask another one. Is it fair for a person like you, a so-called revolutionist who represents the Party Cell, a well armed officer to deal with a monk having nothing to defend himself like me? Are you trained or instructed by your Party to rush on me and wrench my robe off the buttons like that? ” At that point, the color on his face changed, he shouted at me, using vulgar language of scoundrels: “Damn you, yes. My Party taught me like that. My Party also ordered us to shoot all of you, reactionaries. Wrenching the robe off its buttons is only a small thing. Just wait and see. Your verdict will not be light. The next thing is to bury you!” On that, he stepped out, mumbling: “Damn it, such a stubborn guy, what about a monk?”

Late in the morning, he came back, looking around the room with questioning eyes, then back to me and said: “No lunch today, no dinner either. No meals for a long time. I’ll torture your stomach to see if you are going to declare truthfully or not.” I slightly opened my mouth and challenged him: “Go ahead.” As he said, there was no lunch, and then no dinner that day. Fasting for 3 to 5 days was a normal thing to me. The lucky thing was that I was free to go to the washroom, so I could drink the water with much alum there to ease my thirst and hunger. I was left with no food for two and a half days, and luckily in the afternoon of the third day a delegation from Minh Hai Commanding Police Service came. The delegation consisted of:

Mr. Nguyen Viet Thong or Tu Thong, Head of Service

Mr. Vo Thanh Tong or Ba Truong, Deputy Head of Service

Mr. Vo Minh Quan or Bay Ngoi, Deputy Head of Service

Mr. Pham Minh Chanh or Ba Lat Gung, Head of the Law
Execution Committee.

Also present was Mr. Phan Ngoc Sen or Muoi Ky, Secretary of
Minh Hai Provincial Party Committee.

Captain Tran Trung Thu, Deputy Head of the Provincial Political
Protection Bureau.

At their order, I was transferred to the sitting room to be identified.

Nguyen Huu Phuoc came to call me out. I refused to go there saying I was too weak to do so after being starved for the last few days. I said that I was too weak to move because of being left without food for some days. He turned pale from scare and pleaded with me: "Please go out to meet them and don't say that it was my order to leave you without food. This evening I will have food brought to you as usual." I then went out to meet with the delegation. Everybody stared at me from head to toes as if they were looking at an alien or they were at the zoo for the first time. For the past 5 or 6 days, I was starving and deprived of sleep at the strange place. I became much thinner with a gaunt face; my clothes stank for not being washed; I felt a little dizzy and walked with swaying steps like a drunkard.

3. THE PRISON OF VINH LOI DISTRICT, MY FIRST PRISON

About a week later I was escorted to Vinh Loi Prison by Mr. Nguyen Huu Phuoc himself and handed over to the head of Prison Warden there. I was searched all over by two of the Prison Policemen. They seized all my personal papers like the deed of Vinh Bao temple, the monk ID, the abbot ID....They also stripped off my robe as well as the clothes under the robe. The only piece of clothes left on my body was the shorts. The head warden ordered them to take me to cell number 2. They handcuffed me and put my feet in iron shackle then left, shutting the door noisily behind.

From this time on, cell #2 was the true hell on earth to me. In the cell I was put in the same shackle with 5 or 6 other people who were all political prisoners. Though not yet convicted, they had already been shackled in there for more than four years! They looked emaciated and pale, their legs were so thin and to the point of paralysis, their eyes sunken, their foreheads full of deep creases and their hair and beards almost grey. After the two policemen had left the cell, they shook my hands and greeted me cordially. The fact that they impatiently questioned me and then listened with all their attention when I told them what was happening outside showed that they had been missing information from the outside world for a long time. Sometimes they smiled happily and excitedly...but I knew it was only superficially. Deep down, there were a lot of sadness and longing for freedom. They in turn told me about their families, the reason they were put into prison and the difficulties of the daily life in this cell.

Here we were shackled to an iron bar 5 to 6 meters long. A pretty big iron bar threaded through the rings of shackle and at the end was a special lock that was very hard to open. It was very hard every time we wanted to move the bar and especially inconvenient when someone wanted to urinate, especially at night. Many of us were awakened by the rattling noise of the chain and its bumping into the wall or the mosquito nets of those who were sleeping. Lack of

sleep made these people upset and grumpy although many of the co-prisoners were very understanding. On top of that, the cell seemed much smaller for that many prisoners and there was not enough light and air for breathing. When sleeping, we had to lie in an overlapping way like pickled fish in the tin can. It was simply overcrowded. And it was very inconvenient every time it came to urinate because you had to do that into a small vase next to the wall. When a new prisoner joined in the cell, he had to lie next to that vase, then with time, he could move farther away from it unless a policeman or a warden ordered him to lie somewhere else. That was an exception. From my experience, you'd better be on your watch when a political prisoner was assigned to a sleeping place in the cell. The one lying next to you could be the one who underwent painful indignities to spy on you. Or again, one day a new cell mate was ordered to lie beside you then you should be careful, too, because he might be one of the informants. Apart from those cases, good places were reserved for relatives of the police, or those of powerful families, officials who violated the law or anyone with recommendations of the police. Even those who were of slight acquaintances of the wardens, or those who got money and knew how to deal with the wardens also got good sleeping places and help in other activities.

In this country, from the society outside to the prison, if you got money and good connections you would be in first priority category (of treatment). It was a society of injustice. In my case, I was supposed to be next to the vase, but because of the shackle, there were some distance between the vase and me. If your place was next to the vase, you would have to stand the smell, and whenever somebody used it, the urine would splash on you, which was so filthy. On top of that, there was not enough water for washing and people got scabies, itching and it was infectious. Let alone on hot and humid afternoons, when it was burning hot, the cell became so stuffy simply because there were too many people

in it. Some older person fainted and had to be brought to the emergency ward. Others were bathing in their own sweat.

According to the rule, people shackled to the same bar had a bath every few days. When we went bathing, besides the shackle, there were iron rings on our wrists to which a string about 5 or 7 meters long was attached. 5 to 7 of us were strung together. Since we could use only one free hand to scoop up water, we could hardly clean ourselves properly from dust and filth. Our bathing place was a shallow and dirty pond. Dirty water from the higher bank trickled down and we used it to clean ourselves with, even to drink when one was thirsty. It made me sick just thinking or talking about it. It was horribly filthy. The women prisoners also went there to bathe. Everything was being washed there, including baby diapers. The water was getting dry and its color muddy every day, but in their thirst, the prisoners scooped up some and drank it to their hearts' content. They just did not care of what was happening to that pond. And nearby was a pigsty with more than 10 pigs and the sewer from the pigsty and the kitchen went straight to the pond. As for our food, it was always rice and dried fish. The stink of dried sea fish made the food hardly edible. The prisoners of Vinh Loi district could not heat their own food. They had to ask the cook to do that for them, and the cook did that by mixing everything in a big caldron.

I had never had to endure such a difficult situation in my life. During the first days there, I would throw up everything I ate, but little by little I got used to it. It was a survival instinct that you had to eat to live on. Moreover, to keep your brain active, you got to maintain your health up to a minimum level. If you were physically weak, your brain could not work effectively. Though I realized that this body was impermanent, and compared to the unlimited time and space of the universe, it was empty; and that

human life was like morning dew that would melt away when the sun rose, yet, it was a means that you used to achieve self liberation. Without it you had no way to reach our aim.

Moreover, in Vinh Loi Prison, whenever a prisoner was called for interrogation, he would be led to the place in handcuffs on both hands. It was therefore very hard for him to avoid any fist, kick or knee from the guard. If he tried to ward off any of those, he would not be spared of punishment by sticks and canes or rifle butts. Thus, anyone who was called up to be investigated would have a swollen face and bruises on his body when brought back to the cell, and no way to fall asleep that night. Fellow prisoners in the cell jokingly called that person “tattered as a torn banana leaf”. Especially when the interrogator of the day was a new follower (the so-called April 30-revolutionist), who got the post because of his little higher education and some Taekwondo. He would then hit the victim fast and thick with his martial arts. That was simply because he wanted to show off or to get credit from his superior. Many prisoners got internal injuries because of these opportunists. Once during the interrogation, the one who questioned me got angry because I did not give him satisfactory answers and he threatened to beat me up. No sooner had he done that than an April- 30- guard there jumped up, kicking at my face and punching me with both hands, using a Shaolin movement. In such situation, I had to move aside to keep my face from being injured. Then I boldly said: “Excuse me, I am under your guard, otherwise, both of you would not be my equal in fair play. He stared at me for a moment then left, boiling with rage, after being ordered to do so by the one who was questioning me.

Vinh Loi prison was built midway from Bac Lieu to Hoa Binh Town, near an immense rice field. Most of the prisoners were forced to work in the field, dig ponds, carry soil, build brick kilns, breed animals or go fishing for the district police... Staying there

for just about one month, I witnessed so much indignant, shocking injustice, and ill treating that the prisoners had to undergo. At that point I deeply felt the old saying “one day in prison is as long as one hundred years outside.” especially during the sleepless nights, tossing around, thinking about problems facing me. I lay there, listening to night noises from the clucking of the gecko to the buzzing of mosquitoes like a sad night concert.

4. FAILURE IN RESCUING PRISONERS

It must be the lack of experience due to my first time in prison together with the negligence that caused the failure. Better speaking, I was still naive and inexperienced with the life in prison. Also, being a monk I was credulous and unable to measure people’s mind, so it was easy for me to be deceived. I felt so ashamed to be so green in dealing with some people’s hypocrisy that caused some friends of mine to be put into prison including my own brother and I would regret this until the end of my days. I still remembered the teaching of Buddha’s: “Compassion without wisdom is blind compassion; wisdom without compassion is just a bag for books. But compassion and wisdom must go with imposing bravery to be completed.” Here was the story:

In my one month stay at Vinh Loi Prison, I met hundreds of persons in custody for all kinds of offences, most of whom were non-political prisoners. All of them were ill-treated and humiliated. After hard thinking, I came up with a plot to rescue some and bring them to Ca Mau Forest. I began to make friends with Tiet Sa Ret, a Vietnamese of Cambodian origin from Vinh Chau District, who was some years older than me. Under the old regime, he was a parachutist in the Commando Division, trained by the Americans. After April 30, 1975 his unit was listed among the most dangerous and fierce ones and he was sent to a Re-education Camp for almost a year. After being released from the Re-Education Camp, he had

to report to the local authority where he was pushed around all the time. Dissatisfied, one night, he threw grenades at some local government officials' houses and that caused injuries to some people. He got arrested and was waiting to receive a criminal verdict, surely a death penalty. He had been staying at Vinh Loi Prison for three years so he was allowed to do his labor duty in a wider area far from the prison because they found him hard-working and honest. After studying his background as well as his case, I approached him and gave him some necessary stuff and cash because his family seldom came to visit him. Afterward I asked if he could transfer a letter, that I wrote with a pencil he got for me, to my own brother Huynh Huu Tho, who was working at Bac Lieu Town. In that letter I asked my brother to get some weapons and bring some of my acquaintances who were members of the Group in the forest to come and rescue us from Vinh Loi Prison.

Taking the letter, he promised that he would let me know the result within the day. But he went back on his promise, and instead, gave the letter to the warden board as a special service to redeem his offence. The letter was the evidence of my plot to rescue the prisoners. So that evening, after work, Ret did not come back to the cell as usual, but was hurriedly transferred to another cell instead. At that time, I thought that he could not tell me the result due to the sudden change, and I gave him the left over from what my family had just sent me as a token of my gratitude. But what really happened was beyond my imagination. That evening the ward police brought barbed wire to surround the path to cells. They specially paid attention to our cell. Only at that time did it dawn on me that something was going to happen to me because of Ret's betrayal.

That night, the police increased their turns of guards. They made more rounds, looked into our cell carefully, and counted the people

in the cell every 15 minutes. Around 8 o'clock the next morning, an open jeep stopped right in front of the cell door with about five policemen with arms. At that point, the head warden showed up and ordered me and some people of the same offence, namely: 1- Trinh Thanh Son; 2- Nguyen Van Ba; 3- Thich Thien Tri (Truong Phuoc Hoa) to get on the jeep. They brought us to the Criminal ward of Minh Hai police. I was put into special cell 8A with hands and feet shackled for 8 months. The others were under the same condition in the next cell. And foes met with foes! Coincidentally, Tiet Sa Ret was also transferred to Bac Lieu and was put in cell 8B in the same shackle with Nguyen Van Ba. He might have been the witness to our plot to escape. One day, being called for questioning, I happened to see him but he averted his eyes from me. Sometimes he glanced stealthily at me instead of looking at me squarely. Could it be that he felt guilty of what he had done to me? He reported my plan to the police to make up for what he had done to avoid the death penalty. He must have tried every way to avoid it even if he had to trample on others' lives in order to save his. In learning about Ret's betrayal, Ba and some of the other criminals got so angry with him. Ba called me over the wall to say that he would teach Ret a lesson that would affect his health to the end of his days, if I agreed for him to do so.

I thought that this had been a done thing, and being a monk, I considered compassion as a guideline for life, and perseverance as a manner of action, so I advised my friends to leave him alone. About 6 months later, Ret was set free after 5 years in prison for the big achievement he had made to the warden board.

About 2 years later, a new cell mate from Vinh Chau, Ret's native district, told me that Ret had died of a head injury from a car accident after coming back to the family for some months. The lesson I learned from that incident was: "At a near death situation,

one may become a traitor when looking for a way to save his own life.” Though I realized that “one should do the best for the dead because it is the last chance to do anything for him;” and: “something special should be said for the dead” and that I should not write about Ret’s betrayal, especially now that he was gone, but I had to do this out of my guilt and repentance for the misery I had caused to some friends of mine.

Chapter IV **The Second Prison:** **Police Head Office, Minh Hải Province**

Ever since I was transferred from Vĩnh Lợi District Detention to the Criminal Division of Minh Hai Police, I was to face with even more problems. First of all, due to my carelessness, I made a terrible mistake that would haunt me to the last of my days. That was the reason why I had to bring out the truth about it in this memoir, hoping it could help me unload the guilt which had been overshadowing my soul over the years.

With the letter I sent home intercepted, the Provincial Police made more arrest of people, namely:

- 1/ Mr. Huynh Huu Tho, my younger brother.
- 2/ Mr. Hồ Văn Minh, a Buddhist who was residing in a nearby the temple.
- 3/ Mr. Nguyễn Văn Kiêm
- 4/ Mr. Trần Văn Giải

It was about seven months since I had been released when these memories were written down. At this time, I had paid a visit to the people mentioned above. I came to visit Mr. Nguyễn van Giai first, trying to console him and giving him a bit of materials which I

thought might help him and his grand-children get by, now that he was an elderly and blind man. As for Ho Van Minh, by the time he got out of jail, his wife had already left him for another man. He had to find a way to make a living and move on with his life, but unfortunately, he passed away in a fatal accident which happened a few years ago.

Nguyen Van Kiem had left his hometown, Bac Lieu, in order to keep his life moving, and I did not have any chances to see him since then.

About my younger brother Huynh Huu Tho, when he got back to his family, his wife had left him for another man. Later, he remarried, but the pressure on him day by day was so great, especially from the local police force that he had decided to leave his hometown for Rach Gia, Kiên Giang in order to restart his life. As he had a big family to take care of and things were not going well in his business, Tho eventually became an alcoholic which made him lose his dignity. I had visited Tho one time, and I tried to advise him on this matter, but it was unlikely that Tho would be able to get rid of that bad habit. It was a really tragic circumstance in which I was partly responsible.

The detention facility where we were kept was under the command of the Police Criminal Division and supervised by a captain named Châu Trọng Nam. This was the place where new prisoners of various crimes were held and interrogated and exploited with all imaginable means and tools for the execution of the job. At any time of the day, the prisoners underwent torture of all kinds, from beating by hands, feet, bludgeon, rifle butt, hand-cuffing, to confinement in an isolation cell. The executors came from various backgrounds: some were police coming from the North, including those who had long joined the then Resistance force, others were the new recruits after the fall of Saigon, commonly known as the “April 30 police”. They all had special techniques for the

investigation, using corporal punishments like raining blows on the inmates, hand-cuffing them in different cruel and spiteful positions, and I myself was not spared of these inhumane tortures. Both of my legs were in stocks day and night for so many months at a time that it was impossible for me to stand straight and they ended up paralyzed little by little. As for use of the toilet jar, I needed someone to help bring it over each time. The jar contained both excrement and urine and was emptied each day but sometimes it wasn't done for 2 or 3 days and when the content was too full, it spilled to the floor where we were living and made the whole room stink. The jar was never thoroughly cleaned since the one who emptied it was always rushed to get back to the cell and he only had time to rinse it roughly before filling it with water from that cleaning place and brought it back for those who were in stocks like me to bathe. Each of us used the individual food container to get 2 or 3 cup of that water for our bath. There were always excrements remaining on the inside of the container, and it would stick all over the prisoners when they had a bath with the water stored in it.

The “discipline” cell measured about 3 square meters, and sometimes would hold more than 20 inmates so there was not enough space to sit let alone to lie down.

It was very hot and muggy in the summer and bathing was extremely necessary to cool down our body temperatures and to give some relief to our tense minds while we were all sweaty and exhausted. For that, we had to be thankful and show your appreciation to the one who had cleaned the jar and brought water back for us to use.

At night time, using their own sedge mats, the prisoners took turns fanning the entire room to bring a light breeze for everyone and to keep the mosquitoes away. The fanning session lasted about an hour and the one on duty would do night watch at the same time.

According to the regulations, each cell would have one inmate on watch each night. Once the guard in one cell made 3 strikes on a tin with chopsticks, those in the next cells would then respond in the same way, making it in unison throughout the night. In the mean time, the guards on duty made their tour outside, rifles in hands, glancing at each cell. If there was no response from a cell, it meant that the inmate on duty in that cell had fallen asleep! The guard would then make a report or threaten the prisoners in vulgar language; or worse, he might suggest to the proctor board to impose discipline measures like disallowing them to receive gifts from their families, shackling them by both hands and feet, or restricting their daily food rations for a certain time.

1. A SELF-INFLICTED INJURY PLOY TO PLANT INFORMANTS AMONG INMATES

During the days in cell A 8, I discovered a self-inflicted injury ploy that the B2 Agency, i.e. the Provincial Political Protection Division, had set up to follow every move I made in order to get information. The assigned person was Ho Cong Son, a former Ranger Petty Officer in the army of the Republic of Viet Nam. He was the nephew of Ho Nghi, Secretary of the Province Party Committee of Quang Nam Province, Da Nang. Actually Son had been contacted to work for the North before the year 1975. Right after April 30, 1975, he joined the B2 Agency, also known as “Political Protection Division of Minh Hai Province” .

One day, around midnight, a guard suddenly opened the steel door of the special cell where I was being held, making such a loud noise that woke up everyone in the closeby cells. Before us was a hand-cuffed man in an elegantly dressed in black wearing a black hat, black sun-glasses, and shiny leather sandals also in black. The

fragrance of the perfume he was wearing soon filled the air in the cell.

He entered the room, bowed to all the inmates politely. After that, one of his feet was tied in chains and laid down next to me. Being a planted informant, he must have known who I was, but he was playing his role and asked me what my offense was. I replied, “I committed a political crime: I was a Buddhist monk, residing at Vinh Binh Temple, Cái Dầy.”

To which he quickly said hypocritically: “Holy Buddha, please forgive me for my ignorance”. Then, like a true Buddhist follower, he introduced himself “Master, my name was Ho Cong Son, a former Ranger. I was the Head of the Buddhist Youth Association under the religious name of Tam Nguyen and I used to work with the Vietnamese Buddhist Unified Congregation (VBUC) of Quang Nam, Da Nang.

My girlfriend and I were traveling on a rental car from Saigon to Bac Liêu on the way to the seaside to flee the country by boat tonight, when we were caught by the Border Police, and sent to this detention facility.” He went on saying, “ We cannot live under the Communist rule and have to flee, you know. This is such a tyrannical regime”

During the next few days, he told me many stories concerning Buddhism and asked me about the VBUC, as well as Vinh Binh Temple where I had been the abbot. He also offered to help me get in touch with the outside world if necessary because he strongly believed that he would soon be released. He even went as far as to promise to find papers or pens for me if I happened to need those. All the things he said stirred up doubts in me particularly on the 3 factors:

- 1) I had just learned from a fatal mistake by trusting Tiết Sa Rết, and was very vigilant.
- 2) There was something about his appearance that caused mistrust in me: his curly hair, his pouting lips, his upstream sideburns, bad signs in physiognomy.
- 3) He was a new inmate to the detention center, so how could he promise to find pen and papers for me?

I had an absolute mistrust in Son and I only told him what I had already told the authorities. Thus, after spending more than a month in very poor living conditions in the detention center without collecting any information from me, he was eventually transferred to another place.

Eight months later, when the investigation on my case was over, I was transferred to Ca Mau. Once again, Son was the inmate to share the cell with me for the next month. Whether it was the police urgent need for getting information from me, he had somehow revealed his intention and thus did not get what he was aiming for. In the end, he was transferred to another place. When the 21 inmates in my case were taken from Ca Mau to Bac Lieu for the trial at the lower Court House, as the car we were in passed by Minh Hai Provincial Police Headquarter, I saw Ho Cong Son in an elegant suit, driving a Honda motorcycle entering the head office with another B2 who worked for the Provincial Political Protection Division, sitting behind him.

I brought this to everyone's attention in order to caution them about the evil means that the Communist had been using in their investigations.

2. FIERCE ARGUMENT WITH PHAM MINH CHANH ,THE CHIEF OF THE EXECUTIVE DIVISION OF MINH HAI POLICE.

Pham Minh Chanh alias Ba Lát Gừng (literally Three Slices of Ginger) was the chief of the Executive Division as well as a member of the Command Headquarters of the Police Force.

According to the people who knew him, before joining the Vietnamese Communist party he was an herb doctor and he always added three slices of ginger in each of the parcel of medicinal herb for his patients. He must have learned the 10 basic ingredients in herbal medicine, therefore the prescription always came with 3 of slices of ginger.

Among the ten basic ingredients were: *Bedding grass* (Alang Grass roots), *Cassod Tree* (Senna), *Asiatic pennyworth* (Centella), *Lemon grass*, *Dried Tangerine peels*, *Cocklebur*, *Fresh Ginger*

After joining the Communist in their jungle base, Pham Minh Chanh kept on working as herbal doctor, and the above ingredients were his signature prescriptions. His skill for interrogating must have been noticed so he was chosen for the job. He was cunning like a fox, very experienced and mischievous in doing this job but not without many shortcomings of his own; therefore he still remained in this provincial level whereas his contemporaries had been promoted to the central positions. Most of the leading staff in the Police Department was his juniors and they all had respect for him.

Ba Lat Gung was also known as a professional framer for his tricks in manipulating the victims during his interrogation. This conduct led to some innocent people's deaths under his control in the past when he was in the jungle base. As a result, he was degraded and slowly worked his way back to the present position as Head of the Executive Commission. And this time, he was assigned to directly investigate my case. Actually, this was a game to measure wits

between two men: a powerful conquerer and a helpless conquered; the former with the power to manipulate the way of questioning and the latter with no chance to mentally prepare for his answers. In this game, I was definitely in a disadvantage, passive position because I was constantly interrogated by him, day and night, never knowing what he was going to question whereas he had all the time to think and prepare for the next move.

Luckily, while helping with the escape, I was aware of the precarious position we were in and had accordingly prepared what to say in the interrogation should we ever be captured or the list of companions discovered. I would give to the police the following information in one of the 4 situations:

- 1) Names of deceased people for the Leaders of the organization.
- 2) Names of people who had fled the country for leaders of the organization.
- 3) Names of high ranking Communist leaders involved in the organization.
- 4) Making a shock so that I would be sent back to my cell and thus had time to think over and prepare for a good answer.

Since the only answers I gave were along the lines of those mentioned above, Ba Lat Gung had been very upset since he got nothing out of me. At one time when he failed in his ploy to put words into my mouth, he sat and bit his fingernails. He must have had this habit of nail biting because every time I came for the interrogation I saw him doing that. On that particular day he became so frustrated that the veins on his neck were showing, his face turned red, and his entire body was shaking; he completely lost his temper. He looked at me and spoke in the language of a rabble: “Listen, Thien Minh, did the “Revolution” excavate your father’s tomb, rape your mother or your sisters? And why did you join the reactionary force against us?”

When I heard these disgraceful words meant to libel my entire family, I knew he had revealed his true nature of a fake “revolutionist”. With a wry smile I confidently replied, “Mr. Ba, I have been practicing Buddhism since I was young and I never joined the government of South Viet Nam, but objectively, I would like to ask you this question, “Did the Saigon regime excavate your father’s tomb? Did they rape your older or younger sister?” I am sure they did not. Now, suppose those things happened and made you join the “revolutionary force” then would you do so if they did not happen to you? Maybe not. So you joined the “Revolution” because your interest was harmed and you would close your eyes and never care for the “big cause” if it involved other’s interest, right? I really question the integrity of your “revolutionary ideal”.

You do not deserve the word “revolution” that you proudly identify yourself with and normally, you are not qualified to sit and work with me unless you use the power of a winner.

On those words, Ba Lat Gung’s hands were shaking; he clenched his fists tightly and smashed the table so hard that the papers, pens, and other things on it fell onto the ground. His eyes flashed with rage; his anger seemed uncontrollable, and he snarled, “ You, Thien Minh, you are a dirty traitor, a reactionary who licks the boots of the Americans, a toady for the International Gendarmery who causes harm to this country and the people under the cloak of religion. No one would feel sorry if hundreds of men like you were executed. Even your family would do the same thing had they known that you planned to rebel against the government. Go back to your cell right now.”

I stood up and said, “This is ridiculous and inappropriate” and walked out, with him following right behind me. Normally, after the questioning period, he would ask an officer to take me back to

my cell and he himself never followed me like this. On getting to cell 8A, I bent down to get the rings of the shackle to put my legs in once in the cell as usual. Being on high alert, he suddenly stepped aside and yelled in panic: “Look, everybody, Thiên Minh is hitting me!!”

Surprised by his sudden reaction, I stood still, the shackle still in my hands, and I calmly explained the circumstance when several groups of armed police officers came running toward us.

I said, “During the past several months, whenever I come back to the room, I have the habit to put my feet in this shackle myself. I do not intend to hit you with it. If I did, I would do it in your office, and you, an old man of 60 -70 years old, would not be able to stand the blow of my bare hands, let alone the chair if I used it when necessary.

Ba Lat Gung then gave an immediate order, “The leader of this room must make a report of Thich Thiên Minh having the intention of committing assault on the chief of police, and all of the inmates must sign on it.”

At that time, Nguyen Van Hung was my room leader; he used to be a Communist Party member and also a High school Principal in Vinh Loi district. He was detained and charged for the alleged murder of his wife.

Having observed the entire situation from the beginning, Hung objected to Ba Lat Gung’s order. Hung said, “I have been the leader of this room for the last three years. In all honesty, I want to confirm with all of you that since transferred to this room, every time Master Thich Thiên Minh came back after an interrogation, he always shackled his feet himself.

“All the inmates in the room witnessed this, even the officer who supervised the detention center. Therefore, your order for a report that he had the intention to hit you was not correct. This is a

forced injustice, a wrong accusation, a harmful slander and we object to it and will not sign it.

When Hung finished, Ba Lat Gung was mad with rage. His face was all red and he threatened Hung by saying, “Hung, how dare you protect a reactionary? You are displaying disloyalty to the Party, and you will die for that, let alone objecting or refuting me. Just wait and see what I will do for you! Bearding a lion in his den!!!

Upon that, he left to go back to the criminal department office. He ordered Captain Chau Trong Nam to prepare the statement and keep it in my file to add it on to my list of crimes so the judge would be able to see when my file was to be reviewed at the court house.

That afternoon, Chau Trong Nam came to room 8 A and read the report to the inmates and everybody in the room just sneered at it.

A few days later, Ba Lat Gung summoned me again for more interrogation. I flatly refused and told the guard who came to get me, “Please tell Mr. Ba Lat Gung that if he wants to domineer or kill me, then just go ahead. I will not leave this room unless that statement is torn in front of me and the rest of the inmates in this room.”

Over a week later, Mr. Vo Thanh Tong—also known as Ba Truong Son—the Deputy Police chief, came to my room himself and asked me to come to the office to work with him. As we began, I saw the statement in his hands. He showed it to me and told me to tear it up with my own hands. He told me: “you should try to cooperate with Mr. Ba so that the interrogation could finish as it had been on for more than 7 months. The case should go on a trial, unless you wanted to be held in this detention forever. What happened

between Mr. Ba Lat Gung and you recently was just a misunderstanding, and you two should forget about it.” He then walked over to the next room and invited Ba Lat Gung to come over and said something to appease the tension between us so I would agree to work with Mr. Ba again. Ba Lat Gung smiled and greeted me as if nothing had happened between us. From then on, he was very careful with his choice of words whenever he questioned me. Even when he smiled, I knew for sure that behind that smiling appearance there lay a mind of true evil...!

CHAPTER V

CA MAU, THE THIRD PRISON

LOW COURT HOUSE VERDICT SUSPENDED

My case was closed after one more month of interrogation by Ba Lat Gung. At the order of the provincial Police Department of Minh Hai, I was transferred, together with people involved in my case, from the Criminal Division of Minh Hai Police Department to Ca Mau Prison. (Minh Hai was joined by two provinces: Bac Liêu and Ca Mau). All of the government main offices were located in Bac Liêu while Ca Mau was just a city, but the provincial prison was set up there. So when the interrogation was completed, they sent us to the provincial prison. We were all loaded on a small truck. The distance was about 60 km, and two prisoners were tied together in one handcuff. We were escorted by armed police in a car behind and some 90cc Honda scooters in front of us.

Back then, the national roads were rough with so many pot-holes—and our truck was very old, and running so slowly that it made everybody very uncomfortable. We got very tired as the truck was moving at a snail’s pace and the daylight was fading into the night. All of us were hungry as well as

thirsty, some got car sick and wanted to throw up. The truck made it as far as 2/3 of the journey when it broke down and it took more than 2 hrs before it was replaced with another one sent from Ca Mau by one of the escort crews who had driven back there for a new supply. The young police officers around 16-17 years of age looked nervous. They came to talk with us in a most polite way possible because they were afraid that we might do something to them while waiting for the car to be fixed. Knowing this, I spoke with them calmly in order to lessen their worries because I understood the reason for their nervousness.

It had been almost 8 months since we (the people with whom I associated with in rebelling against the regime) had a chance to be together albeit in such circumstance, and it was a good feeling for us all. No matter if the truck was running at a snail's pace or breaking down on the way, we did not mind at all, as it was a great opportunity for us to talk about what was happening during those days when we were kept for investigation. We all sympathized with each other's hardship being in the same boat, but as it turned out, I was the one who suffered most, particularly on the mental aspect. I felt extremely guilty for the suffering that my inmates' families went through due to my actions. Due to the economy controlled solely by the government, and the mean distribution of goods; even the basic necessities were hard to acquire. These poor living conditions incited satirical verses such as:

“Down with Thiệu Kỳ, under whose government, people could
easily buy
whatever they wanted.

Hurrah for the Ho Chi Minh regime under which people had to line
up even just for buying a nail.”

During that time, if a member of a family was jailed for committing a “political crime”, that family was then subjected to discrimination, harsh treatment in all aspects, and isolated from others in the society. Even their relatives would not dare to pay a visit out of fear that it would get them into trouble by seeing them. The neighbors who had positions in the government looked them down. Under Communist regime, being a political prisoner meant that one didn’t have long to live. If the accused one was lucky, his family members including parents, siblings, wife and children did not turn away from him. Not all cases were like that, however, as there is always an exception. Poverty had a funny way of affecting a person, such as the wife not being able to wait for the husband to come back, etc.... After all, if society was not changed, second class citizens like us would be down at the bottom of the societal food chain for the rest of our lives.

Since life was tough and oppressive under the new regime, the image of Ho Chi Minh, either in the form of a statue, picture hung at public buildings or the most venerable place in the church, temple altars or even at people’s houses, arouse bitterness, anger and hatred within the conquered people of the South. The only thing they could do at the time was passing on among themselves bitterly satirical verses and curses for the national hero and the regime that brought them so much misery.

1. FAMILY LIVING IN DESPERATE CIRCUMSTANCES

My family alone was the victim of threat and control, oppression and scorn from local authorities of different levels. They encroached on our land, building a fence that went deep into the limit of the house and harassed us verbally. There was this one officer Bùi Minh Quyền—also known as Tư Quyền—whose brother Bùi Văn Le was the chief of police of the Vinh Loi district.

Relying on his brother's power, he acted arrogantly as if he was the authority himself. Tư Quyền had a son-in-law named Tiến who was also cruel and would intentionally do harm to his neighbors if they upset him. Everyone in the area was fret with resentment against him. On top of that, Huynh Hoang Lam, Head of the 7th Ward ordered the house to be torn down and the land to be used as a market place. He attributed us with the crime of Reactionaries and our land with illegal occupation having no document from the new authorities.

This decision was made “based on Decision 36, Order 317 by the Prime Minister and Order 20 by the Provincial Committee on the public safety of the city transportation”, though my brother's house had nothing to do against the safety of city transportation at all. The order had to be carried out in 3 days from the 7th of August, 1995 to the 10th of August, 1995, and if there was any delay, we would be penalized according to the Law set by the Minister (see the order in the appendix).

Destitution caused by the distressing new regime had taken a toll on its citizens, my family included.

- My seventh brother Nghĩ had to quit school and start selling bread in order to support the family.
- My sixth brother Nhiều earned his living by driving a bicycle with a trunk attached to it that could seat several passengers.

- My fifth brother, who was married for a little more than a year; was put in jail right after his baby girl was born, being the suspect in the incident I was involved with.
- My sister, the fourth in the family, had been selling snacks and fruits in front of the house in order to help with the family's survival.

My mother's health was worsening; the recent passing away of my father and imprisonment of my younger brother and myself had put even more pressure on her frail health. Of the saddest things was the one that all my younger siblings who, at their ages, should have been in school, had to quit and work for their living, at the same time, looking after our elderly sick mother and putting by their meager shares for the visit of their 2 brothers being held in the Ca Mau Prison every month. On rainy days when my brother Nghĩa could not sell all his breads, he had to come to a Khmer Temple located in Sóc Đồn, Bac Liêu begging the monks to trade the rest of them for some rice so the whole family could have dinner that night. Sometimes when Nghia came home with his unsold bread, the family would have plain bread for dinner. Other times, they had to buy sweet potatoes and mix them with rice or ate porridge for supper.

My younger brother was a bright student. He not only did well in school, but he was also polite to his teachers, kind to his classmates, as well as a devoted son to our parents. His grades were usually ranked top of the class and even elected as class leader. Unfortunately he had to drop out of school because of the family's situation. Sometimes when passing by his old school on his way to sell breads, he would walk as fast as he could and pull his hat down to his ears for fear that his classmates would recognize him. Indeed, it caused a mixed feeling of joy and pain in him thinking of seeing his teachers and classmates. That feeling

almost prevented him from moving forward . . . his eyes full of tears all the while.

One day, one of his female teachers happened to see him passing by, she invited him into the classroom; his classmates were very happy to see him and welcomed him back. The teacher asked everyone in the class to help buying his breads. That day he felt great on the way back home since the breads were sold so quickly, but this happy moment did not last long. He became so sad when he thought of the love and kindness he received from his old teacher and classmates. A few days later, the teacher came to see my mother, aiming at encouraging Nghĩa to come back to school. She said, “Nghĩa has been known as a bright and hardworking student; it’s too bad he drops out of school. If the family cannot afford to let him continue with his studies, I will gladly help him with his basic school supplies or part of the fees to get him back in school.”

Without the concerns and the help of those good-hearted, devoted teachers, my brother would not be able to go back to school and finish his High school studies and eventually enter the Teachers’ College. This reminded me of the old time when the ethics of teacher-students relation was always highly thought of. It was a heart-warming feeling to see that this virtue was still kept up, even under the current cruel regime with their inhuman officers.

Although I did not have a chance to personally meet and thank my brother’s teacher after getting out of jail, I did my best to show my appreciation to those people y praying for their blessings every night. They were benefactors who had helped my entire family get through the hardest time, having to put up with so much cruelty, injustice by the authorities of the time while I was in jail.

2. CA MAU Prison and The Horrible Facts after April 30, 1975

Ca Mau Prison was one of the few buildings that remained from the time of the old Regime. This building was built to meet with standards of a detention center, so this facility was fine in regards to its living space, ventilation, light and rest rooms. But by that time thousands of people of all ages and social classes gathered here on their way to flee the country by boat; many succeeded and got settled in other countries while others lost their lives in the ocean. In the mean time, hundreds were captured and put in this detention center in one day; it caused this building to become overwhelmingly crowded and suffocated, scabies spread quickly among the prisoners due to water shortage and everybody used the same bucket for bathing and washing!

At this location, we were controlled by the ruthless rule imposed by the person who was the head of each cell in the building to put prisoners under his control. Just like the rule at the prison in Vinh Loi District, the new inmate had to lie by the restroom, and being the new inmate, it was my place in cell number 2. The room was too small for us that we had to sleep like herrings in a can. For the first few nights, four or five prisoners had to share a mosquito net and often I found someone's scabby legs on my face as we had to squeeze in the a small space, lying one person's face next to the legs of the other on the opposite direction. Waking up the next morning, I felt something on my face, and it smelt so awful! One can imagine how disgusting I felt when some mornings I could not wash my face because there was no water. In addition, the new inmates transferred to this facility were isolated for a certain time, and all of their activities such as walking, lying down, sitting, or

even talking to someone required permission from the head of the cell. Each room was supervised by a gang of six people:

1 cell leader
2 assistants
1 cell security guard
1 cell secretary
1 sanitary worker

Inmates in each room were also divided into many small groups, each with a group leader and an assistant. The gang of six had the power in their grips and enjoyed all the priorities and benefits they could get from the inmates especially the latter got a scheduled visit from their family member who would bring long waited foods or clothing for them. Since their voice was heard by above authorities, they openly asked for gifts, money from the inmates. Those who were not assigned by the gang to do some duty had to stay “isolated” in the room from early morning until noon, then from 1:30 PM - 5:30 PM, to study the prison policy – until they knew it by heart and could explain its meaning correctly in order to have their isolated situation reconsidered. Only the really sick were allowed to lie down with the permission of the cell leader.

The sight of the cell leader sitting imposingly, served by the inmates day by day that made me very sick! Nothing was more ironical for those fighting against social injustice than having to witness the same thing happening in front of them right in the prison cell day in day out. To make things worse, some of the so called “political prisoners” now betrayed their ideals by fawning on the new protectors to gain favor and played dirty tricks and even oppressed their fellow prisoners.

I had to say something, even if it made me ashamed. If those people chosen as leaders of cell #2 happened to be of the old regime, I would say they were cruel, crafty, and selfish individuals. They must have been scared of being involved with inmates so they would not concern or help their fellow inmates, especially the political ones. Sometimes, they even made fun of these political prisoners, saying the latter were trying to *“fit a square in a circle”*. Thus, once chosen to be a cell leader, that person would absolutely respect the rule of the time, making himself in a position which allowed him to get as much benefits as he could.

Out of compassion, I would not mention the names of those heartless opportunists in this book. But it was ironic to find the then communist officers turned out to be prisoners of the new regime for breaking the law to be open-minded, generous and less severe and brutal to the inmates once they were appointed cell leaders. Their understanding and kindness brought a somewhat easy, relaxing atmosphere to the cell. I had to say this because the contradictory behavior of those cell leaders had been a heavy burden in my heart especially that of some officials of the old regime in South Viet Nam. I definitely wanted to tell the truth because I was the one who experienced it. With prisons being built by the hundreds all over the country, I could not help but wonder if there was any difference in the treatment of the prisoners in those places.

The fact was that, after April 30, 1975, thousands of soldiers in South of Viet Nam were detained to be “re-educated”. Many of them had been languishing in concentration camps, many others executed. On top of that, in the attempt to transform Industry and Business, in the so called “bourgeois reform”, the government had seized and “managed” properties of their citizens. They claimed that those properties now belonged to the State funds, but in

reality, these properties and the monetary gains that they received from them had gone straight to their own pockets. This brought to the Era of a new social class called “the red Capitalists”.

With the society as we knew it turning upside down, everything fell into chaos. Many of the new Proletarian Class could not face the loss of their money and property attempted suicide or became insane. Others fled the country, trying to make a living in the foreign land.

Life became particularly difficult for people such as widows, old-regime disabled veterans, and especially orphans who were living in the streets. Some of them, driven to extremity, committed crimes and ended up in the Juvenile Detention Center under the misleading name of the “Education and Care Center”, among them were children as young as 10 years old. Naturally this place was not lacking in various methods of punishing these young inmates, including whipping, beating, forced labor and even shackles.

This period of time was by far one of the worst in the country’s history, considering the number of people fleeing Viet Nam which increased to 2 or 3 million. They willingly exchanged their lives for the winds and waves in the ocean, would rather be robbed, raped or even died at sea than stay back to live under the new Totalitarian Communist regime. The stories of the “boat-people tragedy” and the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese in the Refugees Camps in many Asian countries had revealed a significant truth to the world about the communist government’s treatment of its people since they took over the South.

After the 30 April 75 event, many patriotic groups had rebelled, fighting for freedom, democracy, human rights but they were quenched, arrested and jailed by the Communist authorities. They were deported far away from their native places, sentenced to hard labor or even to death no matter if it was a female prisoner who was pregnant. Many concentration and “re-education” camps were being built in Minh Hai Province, some were located deep down in the jungle. Hundreds more policemen were recruited since this was a police-run government while the Vietnamese Communist Party’s Central Committee was absolutely faithful to the Marx-Leninist Doctrine. They blindly followed this foreign doctrine though it was not suitable with the national tradition nor was it with the sentiment ties among the Vietnamese people. Loyalty to the country, love and service for countrymen were just pompous words used by the authorities.

Vietnamese Communists governed with arbitrariness and autocracy on politics, media and communication. The citizens were stripped of their basic freedom, human rights were violated. There were no such things as freedom of speech, of religion, of gathering, of forming a group, an association... They strongly maintained their mono party regime in order to subdue the citizens. They controlled politics so they could share powers and benefits among their privileged clique.

3. SECOND TRIAL CONDUCTED BY GOOD/ EVIL INTERROGATORS.

The transfer of prisoners, including me, to the prison in Ca Mau made it rather hard for the visitation from our loved ones due to the distance of the remote location and the fact that I had to go through the interrogation with 2 of the investigators, Trần Văn Ôn and Lâm Quang Dũng, in order to verify the first indictment before it was

submitted to Minh Hải People's Court of Investigation for trial. During that time, Ôn and Dũng were the incarnation of the Good and the Evil. Trần Văn Ôn was the son-in-law of Nguyễn Việt Thống, Minh Hải's Provincial Chief of Police. Charging others with crimes they didn't do, relying on the "reason of the ruler" to accuse them of serious offences was his forte. He was a cruel, wicked, and inhumane person; in order to show off his power of Proletarian dictatorship, he always ruled in favor of the death penalty for his victims. According to witnesses, there were at least 20 prisoners who had died on his orders. He concluded my case on the following 5 points:

Huỳnh Văn Ba, also known as Thích Thiện Minh in religious name has committed a crime based on the following causes and motives:

1. Being receptive to the American Imperialist ideologies in South Vietnam;
2. Being influenced by the reactionary and backward education of the old Saigon regime;
3. Joining the Vietnam Unified Buddhist Congregation that once worked for the CIA and had an anti-communist policy;
4. Showing extremist attitude, discriminating against the regime of the people, for the people and by the people and plotting to overthrow this current regime;
5. Opposing the local government; dishonoring the country's flag, and protesting against the establishment of the representatives in the Buddhist Congregation which belonged to the Religious Movement of the National Front.

With these reasons, it looked like I had no chance to survive. He definitely wanted me dead; it seemed that my fate was already decided.

On the other hand, Lâm Quang Dũng's conclusion was different.

Dũng concluded my case with the following 3 points:

1. Since the governing policy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam did not follow the testament of president Ho Chi Minh,
2. Since the governing body of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam did not follow through all the promises that Madame Nguyễn Thị Bình, Foreign Affairs Minister in the Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam, confirming that South Vietnam would be under neutral regime for 5 years,
3. Based on the reason that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam had the intention of suppressing religions, among them the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation, putting some of its members in jail, the defendant had to find an alternative way to pursue his beliefs.

I still wondered if this submission by Lam Quang Dung had convinced the Court of Investigation to give me some leniency.

4. AN ARGUMENT WITH THE CHIEF OF MINH HAI PEOPLE'S PROCURACY OFFICE

Nearly a year after the working session, lasting over one week, with the two aforementioned interrogators I was again interrogated by Mr. Nguyễn Ngọc Cơ, known as Sáu Búa, Head of the People's Procuracy of Minh Hải Province. I wanted to say something about his nickname -the reason why he was called Sáu Búa, meaning Six Blows of Hammer. During the time working in the jungle, he was in charge of executing death penalty on convicts. That day, an elderly woman over the age of 70 was executed. She was accused of being an informant for the army of the Republic of Vietnam. Usually he would execute the convict by using a machete. But the

trial of that day was by a special roving People's court - where the jury was composed of commoners - so once the verdict was reached, it was immediately executed. That day, he did not bring the machete with him, so he borrowed a hammer from the villagers. He had to hit hard, and only after the 6th hammer strike did the old woman succumb and die. According to some witnesses, being victim of an injustice, her eyes remained opened after she died. Since then, he was stuck with that terrifying nickname, Sau Bua. Since he came to work for the Office of Procuracy, whoever came under his interrogation rarely had a chance of staying alive for long. Just hearing his name, criminals would shrink in horror and fear!

The day I was sent to be interrogated by him, I had already foreseen what was going to happen to me. Before examining, interrogating, and confirming facts related to the case, he expressed his solemn attitude by clenching his teeth and frowning. Sáu Búa stared at me, gestured me to sit down. When I sat down, he nodded haughtily, then sitting cross-legged, he then introduced himself as a public prosecutor of Minh Hải Province coming to review this case before it was finalized before the court. His first question was:

“Are you afraid of death?”

I replied, “Everyone in this world wants to live, but no one lives forever. Besides, you only die once. So, to live or die for a good cause that is of benefit to others is the essential thing, just as an old saying goes: to die for one's dream is everybody's wish. I did what it takes so my people could live with dignity according to Article 217A dated December, 10th, 1948 of the International Declaration of Human Rights.

He asked, “And just what does living up to the meaning of the International Declaration of Human Rights involve?”

I replied, “It means that people have the right to live, to have freedom and to be able to pursue happiness. Civil rights cannot be deprived, and human dignity cannot be trampled upon. Happiness and fortune must be obtained by the right means and not by seizing them from others.”

He went on: “And if our verdict is the death penalty, what would you think?”

I replied, “If the cause requires you to live for it then you must live to keep it flourish, but when it requires you to die for it then that’s what you must do. It’s the sacrifice and courage that make one immortal, and for a monk, it sanctifies the soul.” Then I continued, “Furthermore, death also means liberation in Buddhism.”

He said, “Stop preaching. You can do it when you return to the temple. Actually, I doubt if you’d be able to survive even half of your sentence, let alone going back to the temple!

For more than half an hour, both sides continued the argument, but the game was not going anywhere. He became annoyed and asked, “Who was the head of your Central Organization?”

I replied, “General Trần Văn Trà and Madam Nguyễn Thị Bình. They both were the leaders of the Central Organization.”

The color on his face changed; he smashed his hands onto the table and said angrily, “How dare you mention two of my senior officers? Those 2 comrades have contributed many years to the

Communist Party and helped bring the glory and success of today. How dare you say they are reactionaries like you! Why don't you include me, Nguyễn Ngọc Cơ—a.k.a. Sáu Búa—as well, huh?!"

When he finished, I looked at him with my eyes narrowed and my eyebrows furrowed and said, "Excuse me, I am not a general, but if I were one, your appearance would not even be acceptable for a soldier under my command; so why would I include you in my organization?" Perhaps he was so shocked by my reply that he looked as if he was just doused with a bucket of cold water on his face. He reached out to grab a teapot on the table and was about to throw it at me.

I remained calm and said, "Is that the behavior of the Chairman of the Provincial People's Procuracy? How can you show that kind of attitude towards a political-religious-prisoner like me?" He came to his sense, stopped and shouted, "You're nothing but a thick-headed reactionary who tried to slander the Party. Get out of here!"

I knew exactly that he meant to tell me to go back to the detention cell, but I pretended to misunderstand his words I said, "I am very thankful to you." Then, slowly heading towards the prison gate, I walked as if nothing had happened. He must have seen me from his office, and he quickly rushed outside and asked, "Hey, where do you think you are going?"

I replied, "I am going back to the temple, just as you ordered me to".

He shouted, "I told you to go back to the detention cell, and not to the temple! Criminals like you deserve a death sentence or life

imprisonment, let alone release! What a stubborn stupid you are!
Stop playing dumb!”

After working with Mr. Sáu Búa for almost 3 months, in 1981 I was served an indictment by the secretary of the Minh Hải People’s Provincial Court. More than a week later, I was summoned for a trial together with 21 other accused. We were kept in 11 different cells and on the last day, every one of us was mentally ready to be taken to Bac Lieu for the trial.

Inmates from the 11 different rooms gave us food and drinking water. It was a common practice here to boost the moral of other political prisoners before they faced their trial in court. We were loaded onto a completely covered truck, followed by a convoy-escort with fully armed taskforces wearing nametags on their uniforms. Suddenly, I remembered a poem from my childhood, a poem about a prisoner’s life written by an author whose name I could not remember:

Being transported around without having to pay
High officials, elderly and youth all keep away
Being guarded when in the restroom
Watched when sleeping in the cell
Vehicles, convoys, always there for use
Shuttle back and forth like a dreamland
Meals served without fees
This is indeed a better place than a Buddhist Temple!

Arriving in Bạc Liêu, we were kept in custody at the provincial criminal police station, where we were two years ago. There I met some old criminal prisoners whose faces I recognized—most of them got serious sentences. Besides those, there were a good numbers of new prisoners in the 60-70 age range and even scores

of children as young as 13-16 years of age. They all looked so skinny in their torn clothes; their faces very pale and their bodies all covered with scabies.

We were informed that the trial would go public in Bạc Liêu City to set an example to the people. Based on the experiences of those who were imprisoned long enough, it looked like I would be executed when the case was reviewed, according to Act 03, Section A. The trial was set to begin at 8:00 A.M. the next day. That night I could not sleep a wink. My eyes were wide open; my mind drifted away. I prayed to Buddha while waiting for the next morning when my fate would be decided. Suddenly, early the next morning, two passenger cars came up into the criminal police department. I saw 4 strangers dressed casually but neatly. They passed by and looked into our cell. They then ordered the police to tell the prisoners—all 21 of us—to get dressed quickly and get onto the car, each pair of prisoners handcuffed together. As soon as we got in the car, we learned that the trial was postponed, and we were to be transferred back to Cà Mau.

Three months later, I received the decision that the second indictments would be tried according to Decree 3, Articles A & B.

My fellow inmates guessed that with this kind of trial I would hopefully receive a life sentence, but there was no guarantee that I would escape the death sentence. This time, the trial would be held at the court house and not in public like the previous one in Bạc Liêu.

Once again, fellow inmates in the ward sent gifts to the 21 of us as a way to say farewell. They even asked me to bring their gifts for those who were to face death penalty, should I be given death sentence and come to stay with the formers in their cell. It was the cell for those convicts having the worst sentences and kept in complete isolation from others.

First, they were isolated from the general ward; with both their hands and legs shackled all day and night. There, they were waiting for their death sentence to be commuted to life imprisonment or to be taken away for execution.

So, for the third time the 21 of us returned to the Criminal Police office. When the trial began in the court room, I saw people come in and out constantly. Among the people who attended the hearing that day, besides relatives of the accused, I noticed a few Buddhists around the age of 80; who traveled from Cái Dầy Hamlet and Châu Hưng Village to the court. Seeing me in handcuffs, they sobbed; many asked the guard for permission to give us something such as little gifts or money.

When the trial began, the first thing each accused was asked was his/her personal history followed by questions and cross examination. I was always the last one to be called. That day, standing at the witness stand, I stared directly at the prosecutor, judge, and jury. I asked the judge, Mr. Ung Ngọc Uyển, “Since 15-06-1976, there have been 2 official delegations in the country: one led by Mr. Phạm Hùng, secretary of the Southern Region of the Vietnamese Communist Party, representing the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam; the other by Mr. Trường Chinh, representative of the North, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The two sides have sought a political settlement in order to reunify the two regions of the country. Since that date, the two governments are unified under one new name: the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, having the same flag, emblem, badge, national anthem and so on, and the flag of the National Liberation Front of South of Viet Nam was declared dead - so how come my Indictment was based on Decree 03, signed on 10-11-1967 by the Provisional Revolutionary

Government of South Vietnam which is the law during wartime?

Thus, I request that the Judicial Committee of today's Court confirm which government they represent. Do they represent the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Viet Nam or the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam?

Judge Ung Ngọc Uyển- an intellect during the time Vietnam was ruled by France (both he and his younger brother studied in France, his brother being the former Minister of Foreign Affairs under the Northern Regime) -was an expert in reasoning and had a lot of experience in the court house. He quickly explained that, "All the questions and arguments by the defendant are quite good. Since that day, 15-06-1976, all the Decrees by the Republic Government of South Viet Nam and the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam were systematized to be the general law of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. The reason why it was not written in the subpoena must be the mistake of the court secretary, and we will review it later."

In this trial, Mr. Ung Ngọc Uyển also asked, "Do the accused, Thích Thiên Minh, realize that your actions have caused harm to the people or not?"

I replied, "Any political organization is formed with people at the base, because people are the foundation that gives it the strength.

The organization would then fight for its people and with its people to achieve true benefits, welfare and happiness for everyone. It was my purpose to do just that. Should any of my actions accidentally go against people's wishes it would be against my wish."

Ung Ngọc Uyển asked, “Do you, the accused, find yourself guilty of your actions to the people or not?”

I countered, “Your honor, I feel guilty to the people (at that, the whole Judicial council nodded in consent); I feel sorry because my mission ended in premature failure and that caused my miserable people even more suffering. I could not fulfill my duty to my people or to my homeland, For a Buddhist monk like me, it was one of the four greatest gifts that I should offer to the people. Had I been successful in that duty, I would definitely not be here today.”

On hearing my answer, Mr. Ung Ngọc Uyển ordered the guard to turn off the microphone; then he threw at me some uncivil words: he said that I was a devil wearing a monk’s outfit, an evil being out to destroy people’s lives and to betray the fatherland.

The verdict came two days after the trial. Prior to the sentencing, the court was adjourned for 20 minutes before the deliberation of verdict (I knew for a fact that they were actually inside the hall taking a leisurely break and the verdict had already been made!

When I pretended to go to the restroom, I saw them sitting, drinking, smoking in the room). After the 20 minute recess, Mr. Ung Ngọc Uyển, on the behalf of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and the Minh Hải Provincial Court declared:

“The People’s Court of Minh Hai Province, based on Articles A & B of Decree 3, issued on November 10, 1967 by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam, has carefully considered the case of the accused, Thích Thiện Minh and sentenced him to life imprisonment.”

5. AT THE COURT OF APPEAL.

Several months after I went to court, the detention center in Cà Mau was moved to the Cây Gừa detention center located in ward 5 of Thạnh Bình village in Giá Rai district, Minh Hải province. This facility held about one thousand prisoners, and was about 300 meters away from the Re-education Camp of Cây Gừa.

At that time, this Re-education Camp was holding approximately five to six thousand prisoners on average. Sometimes, the population grew as high as ten thousand, especially during the time of mass concentration for Re-education. The chief invigilator was Tam Y, a Lieutenant Colonel. Thousands of prisoners, servicemen of all ranks as well as civil employees of the old regime were once kept here. The population of the center reached its peak during the time when people flocked to flee away to seek freedom and new place to live and got caught. Hundreds of escapees were captured and about 50 to 70 were released each day, most of them were children, sick or elderly people or expecting mothers etc...

Healthy people were also released if they had money or gold to bribe for their freedom. It was by those means that the chief of the detention center and the management team quickly became rich. Just like “Tám Y”, the chief of Cay Gua detention center, a captain by the name of Võ Văn Tiến got rich quickly with his cruel, wicked, greedy way to treat the prisoners

Since April 30, 1975, thousands of prisoners shed their sweat and tears and worked tirelessly to transform Cây Gừa center, an immense rice field to a nice barrack with adequate shelters and facilities. Many tombs of prisoners executed from a confrontation with the detention center's guards could still be found on the ground around the barrack.

I still remembered a few days after April 30, 1975; Mr Diem, the village chief who used to put to jail many Việt Communists who came out at night to sabotage the area with things like blowing up roads and bridge with dynamite, or spreading handbills against the regime etc.

When the Việt Communists took over the South, he was among the first to be executed in the village. Prior to the execution, they assembled the villagers to be told of his crimes. Some who had previously gone over to the Communists beat him up ruthlessly with sticks, stones or poles. He was bleeding profusely with wounds from head to toe. His hands were tied, and they put a cloth and lime in his mouth, and then covered it with a black handkerchief. A few people even ran up and gave dead blows on his head with big stones before he was tied to a tree and shot three times. When he finally collapsed under those blows, the execution leader came and, drawing his head up, gave the last “favor shot” on his temple. His body was then thrown into a big pit.

Going back to the time when I was transferred to Cây Gừa detention center, more than a month later, I received the Decision to review my Sentence from the Provincial Court of Appeal signed by Judge Hũn Vi Định.

This resulted in my having to go back to the Provincial Criminal Police Detention for the fourth time. I spent a night in this facility waiting for the trial, which began the day after. This time in particular, all members of the Judicial Committee were from the North except for the Representative of the Court of Investigation who was a Southerner.

They all looked imposing in their black suits; their close-set teeth dyed an ominous black. I knew nothing about physiognomy of the devils, but the first sight of those gave me the impression that I was facing the real ones. I thought I was taken by imagination or

optical illusion and I tried to focus my eyes on their appearances. I guessed they were about 60-70 years old, and in the North, the custom of dying one's teeth black also dated back to about that time range. But it was no longer practiced these days, and it might still be seen only in places where Ethnic minorities lived up in the mountains of North Vietnam. I wondered if this judge or those jurors serving in the Court of Appeal or Supreme Court were keeping this custom as a way of showing off "their power" of executioners.

In this trial, myself aside, I noticed the presence of my mother and my younger brother Huỳnh Hữu Nhiêu. The rest were the four policemen who escorted me and the Judicial Committee which consisted of five people:

1. One prosecutor
2. Two civilian jurors
3. One Judge
4. One Secretary

It was meant to be closed to the public and the defendant's family was not informed of the trial. My mother learned about it thanks to my brother who was making his living as the driver of a carriage-bicycle and it was by chance that he learned where and when my trial would begin.

When I was standing at the witness stand, the judge asked me, "What was the motive that drew you to join the movement against the government?"

I replied, "Seeing our people in deep suffering, having no freedom; human rights disrespected; the Vietnam Reunified Buddhist Organization threatened, and religions in danger of extinction. In addition, religion is considered a kind of opium to be eliminated according to Marxist-Leninism. The temple where I was residing

as an abbot was threatened then seized and turned into a government place. This is why I stood up to fight for justice.”

The judge stared at me. He then methodically analyzed the situation and lectured me. He said: “The present disarray is due to the havoc wreaked by the war, This government is left with the remnants of the old regime of the Saigon and American governments. The country is in a state of transition, and the government officials’ expertise is still limited. Instead of sympathizing with the situation and joining others in rebuilding the country, the defendant shows strong opposition and conspires to overthrow the government. The defendant is obsessed with reactionary thinking, fawning upon the American imperialists and aggressive international groups. In fact, thousands of both civil and military officials, armed with modern weapons such as tanks, ships, planes, etc., had to run away and surrender unconditionally. Thus, what can a group of 30-50 dissenters without a weapon in their hands do? It is like throwing eggs at stones, or putting themselves in a tiger’s mouth!”

The judge’s lecture went on and on for 20 minutes. Many times, I raised my hand to oppose or have my reasoning, but he refused and/or avoided to hear my arguments. Finally, the verdict was delivered: lifetime-imprisonment as before. The judge recommended that the evidence and of this trial not to be destroyed and to be kept on file by the People’s Court of Minh Hai Province. At the same time, he severely blamed the People’s Lower Court of Minh Hải People for its inappropriate adjudication of Thích Thiên Minh’s case.

In listening to them, I knew exactly what these executioners with blackened teeth wanted. They wanted to give me few gunshots and a last shot in favor as well. The statement of the judge was full of

hatred and horrible words that stemmed from his discrimination and the long standing feud in class spirit.

As soon as the trial finished, the two police officers put handcuffs on my hands and took me to the car. I quickly turned to look at the back rows with the hope to see my mother or my younger brother.

I saw my mother pull out a handkerchief and wipe her tears. Her hair was all white. My brother's skin was very dark with sunburn. He was skinny and very tall. Every day, he sweated transporting people on his carriage bicycle to make sure his family survives. Every time I received support from home, I knew that it came from my brother's blood and sweat!

After the verdict was delivered in the Court of Appeal, on the way back to detention center of Cây Gừa, the car stopped at the market of "Hộ Phòng". Before, it was a dense and prosperous town with streets full of people and cars. Only six years after the Communists took control, the town became devastated. Several police officers got out of the car and walked through a group of students to the market. Only a few stayed in the car to watch over me. From a distance, passers-by saw me in the car with handcuffs surrounded by police and they knew that I was a prisoner. They bought cookies, cigarettes, medicated oil, etc., and approached the car in order to toss them to me. The policemen waved their hands to say no and shouted, "You are not allowed to come close to the car and bring gifts to the prisoner! Do you know what crime he's committed? He is a reactionary who conspired to overthrow the government. He just got a life-sentence!"

Among the crowd, a woman answered, "We do not care what crime he's committed! We just want to help prisoners; we know this person is in need!" An elderly woman, walking along with her grand-daughter said, "You say that he conspires to overthrow the

government, huh? Then it is the absolutely right thing to do because people have been suffering so much. We will gradually die day by day, if people like you are still in power. No one can survive under this cruel government.”

At that, two policemen quickly shut the car door and pulled the plastic cover down. Inside the car, I sat and pondered over those words and I could figure out what was going on in the mind of my people and what they really wanted.

6. CÂY GỪA DETENTION CENTER

My life-sentence was upheld by the Appeal Court. One day, Mr. Lâm Quang Dũng, the one who finalized my case before it was brought to court for trial, the one that I named “the good guy”, came to my detention cell and said, “Brother Ba Minh, do you want to be transferred to Cây Gừa detention center for outside labor work so you will be able to get the sunlight and fresh air? There’s so little sunlight in this cell, and you will easily get sick if you were to stay in here from dawn to dusk!”

I replied, “Thank you. Being a monk I am not concerned as to where I stay. Where there are people who believe in Buddha, then it’s the place for a monk. On the other hand, the monk’s presence should bring the faith in Buddha for people around that place. However, it’s not easy to get these favorable circumstances in prison, albeit good aspiration. Therefore I leave the decision to you.”

He continued, “Tomorrow, I will recommend a list of prisoners whose sentences have already been determined to be transferred over there in order to do physical labor. You should pack your belongings and get ready.” He then bid me farewell and on his

way to the door, he turned his head, smiled and said, “Keep well, will you, Brother Ba Minh?”

Two days later, I was transferred to detention Cây Gừa along with some of the other inmates. At this facility, they search our belongings and bodies very thoroughly. Many personal belongings were seized; then we were kept in a separate ward, isolated from the others. I met some inmates who were detained in the same centres with me in Bạc Liêu and Cà Mau; they were also political prisoners.

This separate ward was a strong flat-top building, surrounded by three walls under constant round the clock watch by a squad of policemen. The building consisted of two rows divided back to back by a wall, with 6 consecutive rooms in each row. The front row held domestic political prisoners; the back row was for political prisoners from overseas comprising military and paramilitary forces in the organization under the command of Mr. Lê Quốc Túy and Mai Văn Hạnh.

The collapse of this organization was caused by a planted secret agent acting as a refugee to infiltrate in political and counter-intelligence organizations working in Thailand. Rumor had it that that secret agent's name was Tám Thâm, a police lieutenant at Cây Gừa Detention Center. After the incident he was promoted to be chief of police in Cà Mau province and right now he was a colonel in the army.

The rumors regarding Tám Thâm were as follows:

He was a lieutenant with little education. He was arrogant, obstinate, proud, etc., with a brutish looking beard. During the time he was on duty at Cây Gừa Detention center, his behavior was often under review for his violation of internal discipline and lack

of ethics in his work. He often showed his discontent by developing a close relationship with old regime's military officers who were being "re-educated" there. In Cây Gừa, alcohol was not permitted, but Tám Thậm frequently bought booze and organized it so that they would get drunk with him. Actually, he played a friendly role to gain confidence in the old regime officers so he could infiltrate their operations easily.

It slowly built up the relationship among them and eventually, Tám Thậm and these officers planned to escape to Thailand by stealing a boat that was seized and docked at the detention's harbor. At first, it was the plan of the communist Party leaders to have him help the officers flee the camp but deep down, he hoped that the officers would recommend him to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees as a reward for his help and he would be interviewed and admitted to resettle in a third country.

For more than 2 years in Thailand; people in his boat took turns getting interviewed and left the refugee camp for resettlement in a third country except for him. He had to wait and wait. He lost hope and became desperate. The High Commission for Refugees simply could not accept a person with three consecutive generations of communist record. His wish and his beautiful dream did not come true.

Thus when he heard about the recruitment for Lê Quốc Túy and Mai Văn Hạnh's political organization, he eagerly joined it. After being a member of this organization, he got all the training needed as well as funding for many activities. When the mission "Bring the Torch Back Home" started, he was among the first in the advance unit assigned to transport weapons, money, and military equipments of the organization to its secret base in Vietnam.

When the boat came to land, he was assigned to come ashore to scout out the area. Instead, he went to the area police and informed them of the whereabouts of the ship. Police troops and local guerrillas laid a massive siege. They searched the boat and confiscated all weapons, machinery, radio transmitters, and a large amount of counterfeit money. Since then, he was considered a hero for his achievement. He started bragging about his coming to Thailand and infiltration in the enemy organization in order to break down the conspiracy to overthrow the regime from abroad.

With his glib tongue, he made himself to be perceived as a great person with lofty aspiration, dedicated to the well-being of the people and the glory of the Party. The media at that time also extolled his “outstanding, victorious achievement”, which they claimed was “due to the education and discipline of the Party,”

Sometimes during drinking parties, he would declared himself as following the steps of Uncle Hồ who had ventured alone overseas in search for the salvation of the country. And he climbed up quickly in his career. In fact, everyone was fooled, and his success was due to more to his adherence to “opportunism” rather than “socialism”.

He was always proud of his well earned promotion, considering it the outcome of his ability and intellect. He was self conceited and looked down on others as if he were a national hero. Those who used to work with him pointed out that he was not actually a B2 or anything the like, that he got this post because of the above mentioned feat. They said he was a person of insignificant talent and mediocre education and the communist party would not use such a fool in international espionage. And they concluded: “Talent is no comparison to luck”.

But I have digressed too much. Let me come back to the separate cell where I was confined. A police squad was posted on the flat roof day and night in order to watch and control our every move. On average, every 2 to 3 weeks, inmates in the front row cells were allowed to get outside once in the morning, to get some sunlight. But my cell, being considered black listed, was often denied that favour. The ones in the back row cells, labeled “foreigners”, were treated differently. They got standard treatment and basic personal necessities and were even allowed to get out for sunlight twice a day, in the morning and afternoon.

For some reasons, infiltrators from overseas to work against the regime, caught and imprisoned, received a preferential policy. From time to time, they passed on to us news from abroad, and in return we informed them of the country’s current situation.

Some among them knew me from way back but I completely forgot about them. They reminded me of the time when they were kept in this facility for re-education purpose while we were there for other reasons. This building used to be a school, and the authorities of that time used it as a concentration camp, since there was no detention center to keep all detainees as yet.

Being atheistic, the communists,
Never believing in God, Buddha, Deities or Saints
Utter blasphemous words towards them,
Destroy shrines, pagodas, churches
And keep priests, monks in re-education camp
Accusing religions of conspiracy
Turning schools into detention centres
Their sins and hatred pile up like a mountain

The connection between these inmates and myself went back like this:

About 2-3 years before I was arrested, Venerable Thích Trí Đức, representative of the Vietnam Reunified Buddhist Organization in Bạc Liêu assigned me to open a facility for charity acupuncture at Từ Quang temple, located in the village of Thạnh Bình in the Cây Gừa ward of Giá Rai district in Minh Hải province. This temple was just over 1 kilometer away from the concentration camp (then Cay Gua school) where the old regime's officers were held.

Everyday, soldiers of the first and second battalions of U Minh 1&2 of Minh Hải province came to the concentration camp and took prisoners out in order to build the barracks for their two battalions. Prisoners lined up in single file half a kilometer long with the troops strictly guarded from both sides. They were prohibited to have any contact with people.

When they passed by the temple, I noticed that most of them were middle-aged. They were so thin, and their skin had been tanned to dark sunburn. Some of them could not walk straight due to their sickness; many of them wore sandals with different straps. Their tattered clothes, mended with different colored rags or simply tied with pieces of string, barely protected them from the daily rain or sunshine.

I found out that most of them seldom got visits from their families. Due to food shortage and poor nutrition, inadequate medication, lack of bathing and insufficient clean drinking water, they succumbed to malaria, edema, and paralysis. Some lay writhing and groaning on the floor. Their only consolation they got came from their fellow inmates who, themselves, were in no better circumstances.

Seeing that, I entrusted a Buddhist member, who knew the officer in charge of the detention center by the name of Ba Đô, a.k.a. Ba Giò, to inform him about the acupuncture and herbal medicine service at Từ Quang temple and urged him to allow the sick prisoners to come there for free treatment.

A few days later, Captain Ba Đô replied, “After consulting with the leaders, we will allow the sick prisoners to come to the Temple for treatment, but the Temple has to submit a request to the camp leaders of Cây Gừa detention, Minh Hải province, and the content of the request must be clearly stated”. As you can see, I had to ask for permission to do a good deed. A few days later, sick prisoners came to the temple for treatment. Among them, were members, officers as well as non-commissioned officers, from many different services such as special police, military security, outpost commanders, US commandos, etc. , .

Each day, about 5 to 10 of them came. Before they left, the Venerable Bhikkhuni Huệ Giác, Từ Quang temple’s abbess, always gave them some food such as bags of salted soybeans paste, rice coconut cakes, fruits, and items such as hats, raincoats, and even tobacco occasionally to cheer them up.

The most comfort thing for them was to see their families. Every week when I came back to Bạc Liêu, I informed their families, so they could come to meet and talk with their family members while being treated at the temple. This, however, had to be done discreetly; for had the police known about it, the treatment would be banned right away, and the temple would be in danger!

After their release, some detainees took their wives and children to visit the temple to pay homage to Buddha and to thank us. Not only did they come to Từ Quang temple where I treated them to show their appreciation, they also came as far as Vĩnh Bình

temple, where I was resident abbot, in Cái Dầy Hamlet of Châu Hưng village in Vĩnh Lợi district of Bạc Liêu province.

Even now when I was at home writing my memoir of the 26 years I spent in prison, I was extremely surprised and very touched to receive gifts, as well as money from abroad going to the funds for my treatment. Among the senders were some I knew and some I didn't. I also got letters from fellow citizens in Bac Lieu now residing in the US recalling stories of the old days when they were in the re-education camp of Cay Gua.

Some of them left the country under H.O. Program, while others fled by boat. I like to think that the miracle of the law of karma is very fair. It could be the small things I did for others during the time I was in prison for 26 years that got me out of danger whenever I faced with troubles or desperate situations, just like there were angels helping me.

I absolutely believe in the law of karma. As I stated above, it could be seen in the help of: Venerable Thích Huyền Quang – the Most Venerable Thích Quang Đô, Fourth Supreme Patriarch, Deputy Director of Vietnam Reunified Buddhist Organization, all the Venerables, the International Amnesty in London, all of my benefactors, my fellow citizens of Bac Lieu, relatives of my fifth aunt, Ms Đoàn Trang - Director of the Quê Hương radio station, Mr. Võ Văn Ái - Head of the International Buddhist Information Bureau and the Vietnam Reunified Buddhist Organizations in all continents.

I would like to acknowledge those good deeds which came from those hearts of gold and consider them as the most unforgettable

memories during my life of religious practice. Being released after 26 years of imprisonment, sick and helpless without a place to live while my family members were in difficult time, I found it difficult to cope with things while trying to integrate to the new environment which seemed so unfamiliar during the first few days. The support from my benefactors was an indescribable boost to the morale and source of energy for those who did and will dedicate their life to the fight for their fellow countrymen and their religion. I always pray that those benefactors be blessed with security and good health as well as good wealth.

a. Karmic debt. All is well that ends well.

Back to the separate cell where we were confined at Cay Gua Detention Center, there was a story that still impressed me until these days:

In the squad that was watching on us day and night from the roof, there was a very young officer by the name of Tai. He was about 19 or 20 years of age with grade 8 or 9 of education. He seemed to have a dislike for me. It must be something bad we had done for each other during our previous lives that made me cross his path in this life. I had no sympathy for him just looking at his appearance, his attitude. He must have had the same feeling for me. He told some inmates in other cells next to us that he felt a dislike for me just by listening to my voice, though I did not do or say anything about him. I was just a prisoner and he a warden. I considered him a domineering, mischievous young man and I tended to ignore him. He must have felt that and showed his hatred in every possible occasion. Normally when a family sent gift/food to a prisoner, it would be brought to the cell for him. When gift from my family was sent on days that he was on duty, instead of having

it brought to the cell for me, he would leave the parcel outside until it got rotten. Another time, my family sent money for my meal in the canteen, he did not inform me so I could manage my expense. It caused me some irritation at the beginning, but I later ignored it and considered it as nothing but karmic responses.

Tai had a brother in law in the Security Investigation squad, a lieutenant known all over the Detention center as a wicked thug. He lived with his wife in a house reserved for them by the center. One day, his wife got serious breast infection after giving birth to their first child and it caused her great pain. At that time western medicine was hard to find and the hospital was quite a distance from the detention center. They were told of an herbal doctor at Tu Quang Pagoda, about 2 kms from the center, who was well known for his acupuncture and herbal prescription service. People in the area recommended them to go there for treatment.

A few days later they came to pay visit to the temple. When the Abbess of the temple, Bikkhuni Thich Nu Hue Giac, learned that the lieutenant was working at Cay Gua Detention Center, she told him that the herbal doctor was in fact the Rev. Thich Thien Minh who had been in custody there for the past 3 years. She then urged them to come and seek for his help right away.

Once they came back to the Detention center, the lieutenant checked and found out that I was indeed in custody at the separate cell under the guard of his brother in law Tai. He then told the latter to come and ask me for help.

The next morning, out of the blue, Tai came to open our cell and said: “It is beautiful and sunny outside. You guys can go out and get some sunshine.” He then left for his post on the flat roof and walked back and forth, glancing down as if there was something in

his mind. All 5 of us went out to the sun, looking at one another in bewilderment. We wondered why this scoundrel suddenly became so nice to us, how come he only opened our cell and not others.

There must be something going on...

As expected, a few minutes later, the little devil came to stand right on top of my cell and looked down. With a nice gait and gesture, he smiled rather awkwardly and said: “Mr. Ba Minh, can I ask you something? Is it right that while living out there, you were an herbalist and acupuncturist at the nearby temple?”

I answered:” I didn’t live “out there”. I lived in the temple. I practiced acupuncture and filled out herbal medicine all right. Why do you ask? Are you going to investigate more on my personal history? In that case, you have to do it at a proper place.”

He smiled and said:” I just want to make sure before asking for your help. It has nothing to do with investigation. Don’t be so difficult.”

I said: “What do you need my help for?”

Tai told me all about his brother in law and his sister coming to the temple to seek treatment for her....He finally asked if I had a way to help his sister. When I got all details about her sickness, I told Tai to bring me a spoonful of coconut oil and I would prepare the medicine in 5 minutes. I then told him to spread it on the swollen spot, using a chicken feather, and not to tell her anything about it.

About half an hour after the medicine was administered, the swollen spot got better, the redness decreased and the pain almost gone. That same evening, the troublesome warden came to my cell with his thanks and said his sister got a lot better. He then offered me a pack of expensive cigarettes. Though not a smoker, I took it and later gave it to my fellow inmates in the cell. From that day

on, his behavior changed. He became friendly and always spoke to me in a nice way. As for me, I also found some good thing about his character and gradually had sympathy with him.

b. Failed attempt to escape Cay Gua detention Center.

I had been confined in the separate cell for nearly 6 months. There were five people in the cell; three of them-myself included-were political criminals: Quách Văn Hoạch, with a death penalty commuted to life sentence, Trịnh Thanh Sơn with a 20-year sentence, and myself with a life sentence.

The other two common prisoners were Nguyễn Văn Tấn, a former special commando lieutenant assigned to be Leader of Vĩnh Mỹ village combatants in Vĩnh Lợi district, Bạc Liêu, and Đỗ Thành Công, a forest ranger both with life sentences.

Although we were here for different charges, being in the same situation, we helped and consoled each other through times of illness and difficulty. It could be said that we shared everything together; from a sip of water, a bowl of rice, a hand towel, a tablet of medicine to the trivial things such as needles, thread, etc.

In short, we understood and supported each other physically as well as mentally. We prisoners had the same desire: freedom.

Sometimes we made a joke, which reflected the truth, like, “If you spend a 20 years sentence in a prison under Communist regime and wait until the day to be released then your life is as black as ink and you have no future to look for. So shall we just sit here and accept that ill fate to come?”

From that mutual thinking, we unanimously consented to dig an escape under the wall. The five of us would join together, dead or alive, to settle a life of anxiety and depression.

After our group discussion, I was assigned to set up the date and time to execute the plan as soon as possible. Based on a prisoner's experience, when the plan was made, we could not wait nor postpone it because the delay would put us at risk since it was a dangerous and critical matter that affected each of us. Nguyễn Văn Tấn was a special-mission combatant with expertise in digging tunnels and scaling walls, so he was responsible for digging and teaching us how to stealthily climb, crawl, lie down, sit, run, etc..., how to camouflage, what color clothing to be worn at night or under the moonlight; how not to make scratchy sounds while crawling on the dried leaves, or not to be detected when moving on corrugated iron roof. We also learned to break the surface of water without causing any splashing and how to wade in the mud and not leave our footprints or make them look like animal tracks – just to destroy the evidence or disorient the enemies. The rest of us were to bring the soil up from the tunnel and I had to supply them with food and water.

As the mission began, Tấn was very enthusiastic, being the first one to start the digging. He used a cast iron pot lid about 15 cm in diameter to dig a hole on the floor. It turned out that serious problems came up as we were proceeding further down. It took him a lot of sweat and tears to cut the big wooden piles that lay under the foundation. Besides, the air got stuffy as he went deep down and we had concerns regarding the possibility of suffocation or fainting. Moreover, this job was performed at night and candles or peanut oil lamps were immediately extinct when brought in the tunnel. To add to our problem, the amount of soil brought up from the tunnel was a few cubic meters and it covered most of our room space. In order to get to the outside, the tunnel had to be about 6-7 meters in length.

As I had planned and set a specific time for our escape, it would be raining around midnight. It happened exactly as planned, but I did not foresee the circumstances or obstacles and the ability of the digger that would impede the escape. Thus when it was time for us to go, the digging was not finished yet. There were so many sharp objects, pieces of broken glass and metal that cut the digger's hands. Tấn almost died of suffocation several times, and had to be treated with CPR. It was unfortunate seeing him exhausted with the hard work. Right at that moment, I became sick with dysentery. It was so annoying that I had to use the restroom so often due to my bowel problem. Besides, Đỗ Thành Công's long dead mother's soul entered his body and said, "Fill up the tunnel; don't try to escape or you'll be in danger". But things were already in progress, so we had to keep going.

We were all exhausted by so many unexpected things that happened in the past few days. While we were taking a break, suddenly Trịnh Thanh Sơn got panicked and shouted, "Look, look! That's horrible! He's coming." He then fell down unconscious which frightened us even more. When he came to himself, we asked him what was happening.

Sơn said, "I saw a man about 60-70, naked with his ribs showing. His hands were cuffed in iron chains, and his body covered with blood, his long white hair went past his shoulder. He begged me to save him." This story following the diabolic recommendation of Công's mother, were clearly omens to warn us about the failure of the escape.

Since the mission had been in process, there was no way we could stop it and thus had to move on as planned. Outside, it was raining cats and dogs as the night wore on. We could hear the sound of the policemen's boots patrolling up and down the hall. Due to the rain, the ground became soft and that caused the tunnel to collapse. Tấn had been digging, and he was covered in the mud. Once again, I

had to get under the tunnel to bring him up for CPR. It took a while for him to regain consciousness. When he awoke, he said that he was worn out and had no strength to continue with the digging. On the other hand, the four of us could not bring up the huge land mass that just filled up the collapsed tunnel. It looked like we were back to square one. We were indeed in a dilemma.

The next morning, we came to the bathroom to wash up. The incident of last night left us with an awkward aftermath since the soil from our room blocked the entire restroom in the back cells, occupied by inmates from Lê Quốc Túy and Mai Văn Hạnh's organization. They notified the security staff on duty. The police then unlocked all the cells on both front and back rows to check on them.

When they opened the door to our room and saw the huge mass of soil, they ran out and up to the watchtower to sound the alarm by shooting into the sky.

We finally ended up in failure. The Court investigators came to take pictures and film the scene. We were each put in a separate room for questioning. Records were made, and the camp superintendent recommended the Court of Investigation to prosecute the five of us.

Family's visit and gift/food were banned. My legs were shackled for days and nights for more than a year until I was transferred to Xuân Phước camp, in the Phú Khánh province of central Vietnam. Tấn was brought to court for a trial. He was charged with betrayal the Party, helping the reactionaries in the plot to break the prison and escape to collaborate with hostile people to overthrow the so called revolutionary government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. He received the death penalty and was executed.

Although our plan to escape failed and Tấn had to pay for it with his life, I would like to say this aloud to acknowledge his enthusiastic contribution in the unsuccessful escape from jail, and prayed that his spirit -- my fellow inmate from Bạc Liêu - would be free in the pure land.

CHAPTER THREE

SUPPORTING POLITICAL GROUPS

1- From treating sick people to supporting political groups and involving in trials

Once taking over South of Vietnam, the communist government showed the power of dictators to suppress and harass their conquered people without mercy. They not only oppressed and exploited the common people out in the society but, in their wild dreams, also showed their will to gradually bring their harm and encroachment to the temples.

Just one day after the April 30th, 1975 event, countless number of unjust events happening everywhere. I was very disappointed with this dictatorial regime and I had no faith in their governing policy.

They did not bring happiness to their people even at its lowest level. Since then, in my Dharma talks, I always included either some fables with very profound moral meanings from our ancestors or some classic reference from the Best Lessons from the Ancients. Since I understood the mind, the innermost feelings as well as the wishes of the mass, I tried to choose stories appropriate to their psychological needs and close to their current livelihood.

Many elderly people enjoyed those dharma talks or dharma teachings thoroughly because these were very suitable to what was happening around them. After those talks, I tried to listen to their opinions and ideas about what I said. I felt happy to have chosen the themes that suited their needs at the right time, in the right situation. I tried to keep doing that, to meet the criteria of the religion as well as that of the present times and circumstance.

At that time, I was assigned by the Most Venerable Thich Tri Duc, the main Representative of the Bac Lieu VUBC (Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation) to open another charitable herbal medicine and acupuncture ward at Tu Quang Temple, Cay Gua hamlet, Gia Rai district and that kept me busy all day long. One day I came back to Vinh Binh Temple from Tu Quang temple after one week of giving free medical treatment and herbal medicine to people in that area. As the car stopped at the temple's gate, I saw at the porch a woman about 30 years old, whom I later I knew as Mrs Ho Thi Hue, carrying a new born baby about one month old. At her feet, she got a bag with clothes, milk and other necessary things for the baby. She was sobbing her heart out. Looking up, she saw me and greeted me with a nod of her head. I asked her: "Why are you crying?" On that she answered: "Oh, Master, my baby was seriously sick and dying. The doctor at the hospital told me there was no hope, and I should bring her back home to prepare her funeral!" Then she asked me if she could stand under the porch waiting for a passing boat to go home. I asked her what went wrong with the baby. She said that the baby got a very serious lung problem. I came to examine the baby's face, and her forefinger. I looked at the three knuckles for the wind point, lung point, and life point. Since the baby was still too young to have a full pulse system, I had to look at these knuckles. From that, I believed that the baby could not breathe because of the phlegm that blocked her pharynx and it was not a serious lung disease. It might come from the milk that her mother breast fed her while the former had too much "yang" in her system. I said to her: "Don't you worry. The baby is not very sick. Bring her into the ward and I will try to help."

I then asked an old lady, a lay Buddhist, who was very good at treating small children, Mrs. Nguyen thi Nga or Mrs. Hai Hue to take care of the baby. Mrs. Nga was still alive, at 76 years old, living at Cai Day hamlet, Chau Hung village. Miss Hai Hue dipped

a hen feather in the mixture of alum, some coconut husk fibre, and vinegar then used that feather to tickle the baby's throat to induce vomiting. The baby threw up a lot of phlegm. And only a minute later she could breathe normally, her face got some color, and she cried loudly. Mrs. Hue, the mother, smiled happily while drying her eyes with a handkerchief. I gave her some powder medicine to take home for the baby. She heartily thanked everybody and said goodbye when she got a ride on a boat to go home at Chau Thoi hamlet.

About three days later, at sunset, I saw some young men passing briskly through the gate of the temple. Each of them stood at one side of the temple, and some lingered behind the range of coconut trees then hid themselves behind the trees. Hurrying out to see what was going on, I saw a young man deeply tanned, about 30 years old. Seeing me, he took off his hat to greet me and asked: "You are Brother Thich Thien Minh, the abbot of this temple, aren't you?" "Yes, I am," I answered and invited him into the temple. In the conversation he identified himself as Trinh Thanh Son, 29 years old. He just came back home to visit his family from U Minh Mangrove forest, and his wife, Mrs. Ho thi Hue, told him that I had saved his baby's life. The reason he came to the temple today was to thank me and asked for some more powder medicine for the baby. After that, he asked me to read his fortune to see if he could succeed in carrying out his big plan.... Then, he talked more about himself. We came to a deep mutual feeling, having quite a few things in common when discussing some of the present social problems. He then confided in me that he and some of his friends, soldiers, officers, evaded the re-education camp. They were now living in the Lower U Minh forests and were planning to organize a secret group to fight against the Communists for the freedom of the country. But for the time being they were still hiding and everything was so difficult at the first stage. There was a shortage

of everything, from kerosene for lights, batteries, medication(for malaria especially), mosquito repellents, raincoats, paper, pens, typewriters, food, cloth for flags, fabric for uniforms, military equipments, military goods to personal weapons. I understood that they needed everything, and there was no source of support as yet. Son had not been able to find any good and strong supporters to help strengthening and developing the Group. After listening, I felt a great sympathy for him and promised to contribute whatever I could within my capacity because I knew that his Group was still at its embryonic stage and needed supports badly.

From then on, I began to rally all I had to help him; and at the same time I introduced and encouraged some of my able acquaintances to support him with money as well as goods whenever he had a chance to come back to Bac Lieu from Ca Mau forests. I also tried to encourage some powerful friends to plant our people in the Communist Machinery such as the Communication and Transportation Department, courts, police at all levels...so that these people could have means to help with the needs of the Group. First of all, I lent them a typewriter and gave them paper, pens, pencils, fabric for flags, raincoats, medication for malaria, rice, masks against poisonous gas, maps of Bac Lieu and Ca Mau provinces, maps of Military Zone 4... Together with members in the districts as well as in the whole province I helped to print copies of the Group's fundamental regulations and notices. We also tried to distribute leaflets in a large scale, from ground to air. And I found a way to do so. We tied the documents to a burning incense stick then to a flying balloon, or a bird's foot, and then we released them into the air. As the incense stick burnt, the leaflets dropped all over the places, on tall buildings, on the trees, on the rivers.

At that point, the Police at some provinces panicked and blamed the American silent airplanes for those leaflets distribution. The

leaflets were distributed this way from Can Tho to Soc Trang, Bac Lieu and Ca Mau, 4 provinces in all. This incident gave the Communists a scare of their lives during the boisterous celebration of their victory. They thought that the situation had been reversed and so did many of the victims in the falling regime. On top of that, I organized commemorations for the deaths at some families so that members of different political groups from Saigon, Bien Hoa and Hue had a chance to attend secret meetings and joined the big group or to create a high tide combat all over the nation. At that time, the U Minh Group called themselves “the Militia Front for the National Recovery” and they wanted my input on that name. I suggested that they changed it to “the Partisan Front for the Salvation of Vietnam”. The reason for my suggestion was that I wanted the movement to follow the example of King Le Loi and his insurgent army with their strong will to regain the country and not to recover the old regime only. In my opinion, the old regime also needed to be adjusted; it was passive because it was dependent, and once it was entirely dependent on other power, it could never stand on its own feet when the support was no longer there and would fall down in total despair. The name I suggested was accepted unanimously. From then on, I was given more attention in the Group and they considered me as their official political advisor.

I, myself, did not know about this kind of promotion. I did not think that I was a political person, and did not have such capacity to carry out the duty that the group assigned to me. Only when I was arrested and investigated many times did I learn that some among those in the Group who were in custody, including Trinh Thanh Son, declared that they had voted me to be their advisor. Based on my fervent help and support, they unanimously did that without having a chance to let me know. For this reason, in the first indictment, I was classified as an accused of particularly dangerous class, and according to Section A of Decree 03, the

punishment would be a death sentence. It was a high time for the suppression, and all the sentences were meant to be very severe to set example for everybody. So, in all the political cases throughout the country, there were always from 3 to 5 people sentenced to death, from the leader to the followers. Many death sentences were carried out. As for me, because I was promoted to such a high position in the Group, the District Attorney and the Court of Minh Hai accused me as leader of the organization, “the Partisan for the Democracy of Vietnam Front”. This was something I could never imagine before; I only knew that whoever was the first on the accused list would get a death sentence. That was what happened at the past trials in the country. Perhaps it was my karma! I also realized that when one was in charge of the leading role, the consequences were hard to imagine. Given that, before the Court, I did not contradict their accusation and, just letting everything go its way, I waited to see where the Creator take me through my destiny.

Deep down, I was afraid that if I denied that role of leader, surely Trinh Thanh Son and some of the other members would be given death sentences. And if they got those sentences, their families would suffer extremely. As for me, as a monk, I must have the merit of sacrifice. Even if I got that sentence, it would not matter, and it would be a chance for me to renounce this body. In spite of all reasoning, I was still worried that, a monk was like a traveler with a long journey ahead, and what would happen if I died before reaching my destination? If I came to the last stage of a human life (death) before experiencing the others, namely birth, old age, sickness then I wondered if the merits and good conditions I had been collecting during this life as a monk would be enough for the preparations for this life as well as for the next one. No matter what, living or dying, in my present life as well as the next one, I vowed to continue cultivating good deeds, accumulating merits, serving the Right Path to bring blessings and joy to all sentient

beings in order to pay back some of my debts to the Buddhas. Moreover I always remembered the saying, “Being a patriot is not a sin, and his spirit will never die”. The law convicting a person for patriotism was a bad law, the law of the wild; the law of those who sold their country and fellow citizens for their own profits, the law of those who crushed the weak and caused harm to the country. And the law that convicted religious persons was the law of the immoral, of the killers. Therefore, if I was convicted, I would feel honoured because I did not do anything wrong, did not harm my fellow citizens and my country, let alone leaving a bad name behind. Besides, in this world, whenever a new regime came into being, either by replacement or usurpation, those who were in power always claimed to represent the right cause, and their opponents to be all wrong and evil. And those who confronted them would be considered outlaws. In one word, just because of power and self interest that people judged, blamed and accused each other of being traitors ...All of these only happened under a dictatorial regime.

I wanted to confirm that from my childhood until that time, I knew nothing about politics. I was only a monk, not a politician, nor a statesman. I did not have good knowledge about politics and I was lucky enough not to have anything to do with the civil war in my country. Being put into prison for a serious offence, especially a political offence, was a rare, unexpected experience to me. I knew that the communist authority had a hatred for me just because I was a member of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation who did not support the government’s wrongdoings and fought for the freedom of religion instead. And this was a chance for them to show off their power. I often thought that being a monk I did not pay attention to worldly affairs, turned a deaf ear to the right and wrong of society, stayed away from noisy and crowded places, ignored dreams of fame, privilege, or passion for worldly life. But the tense situation around me and all over the country had urged

me to close the temple and go out to fight in the hope to save our country and to solve religious distress. I still remembered a poem which I was not sure whether it was written by Nguyễn Bình Khiem or the Honorable Huynh Phu So of Hoa Hoa Buddhist Sect. That poem with four meaningful lines was so becoming to my mood at that point of time. I knew it by heart since I was 13 years old and heard it recited by the elders:

A monk, with great resolution, closes the temple,
Draws the golden sword out of its sheath on riding the horse to the
battlefield
Having accomplished the duty to the country, and avenge for the
family,
Comes back to the temple and resumes his religious duty.

I had a chance to repeat the content of the poem when being interviewed by Ms Y Lan, a reporter of the Free Asia Radio. A month later, I got a phone call from a Buddhist, a nun from Hoa Hao Buddhist Sect, Ms Nguyen Thi Hanh, 46 years old, of Bac hamlet, Tan Thanh village, Thanh Binh district, Dong Thap province. She, on behalf of the Hoa Hao followers, expressed deep gratitude to the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, the head of the Institute for the Propagation of Dharma of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation, and me, for having spoken out about the cruel suppression of the Congregation of the Hoa Hoa Buddhist Sect that had inspired some of the members to self-immolate to become martyrs. At the same time Ms Hanh confirmed the above Prophecy poem was written by the Honorable Huynh Phu So, the Founder of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Sect. Sometime later, Mr. Le Minh Triet, a Hoa Hao monk who had spent many years in prison and shared the experience of hardship there with me, also confirmed that the Honorable Huynh Phu So was the author of that poem.

Right now, as I was recording these incidents for my Memoir, I still deeply felt the meaning of those four lines. Realizing that the duty of a citizen was to pay his debt to the country, I, with my limited wisdom, assumed the meaning of the term “politics” (chinh tri) in a plain way. That term itself was very clear in its meaning, because “chính” meant straight, not curved, wrong or evil and tri meant govern). Thus “chinh tri” meant to govern with justice and not with mental reservation. Also, according to Confucius, “chinh tri” means righteousness”. So, politics meant correctness, righteousness or a right way. Anything that was not right, not stable should be adjusted to be right, stable, and consolidated.

I also heard someone define that, “politics means to design the law according to the human nature and administer it with the principles of kindness, goodness, and beauty.” This meant the rulers should design the law and execute it in accordance with the wishes of the people to bring them real freedom, comfort, and happiness. I wanted to emphasize on the term “real”, not the nominal, empty word. Besides, the citizens needed to be taught and guided to become useful for their families and society. Some others defined politics as an art to manage the society ...It was too bad that the term “politics” was being abused by empty promises, mischievous scheme and tricks to achieve the aim; so it lost its beautiful meaning.

Nowadays people looked at political activities with cautiousness and doubts or valued them unjustly. In fact, politics itself was beautiful. It was not bad by itself, but those who abused it for their own interest smeared its name with their ambition. To me, politicians were like those who navigated the ship (of their country) on a river or in the ocean. Call it a river, if it was a small country and the ocean if it was a big one. On that ship were hundreds of people whose lives depended on the skill of those

navigators. The ship had to cross thousands of nautical miles, avoid the ships coming from the opposite direction, or pass the ones on the same direction. The navigator had to exert his best skill in dealing with big waves, undercurrent, hidden rocks, and to successfully steer the ship at the turns of the river. These turns were the feelings, emotions, wishes, and basic needs of citizens of all levels in the society. The navigator had to learn how to navigate, have a compass, basic mechanical skills and know how to operate the engine. In short, he had to navigate with care and enthusiasm. Especially he had to know how to bring the ship into every turn, and wind of the river. This was the crucial point because he could not stop the ship whenever he came to a turn and brought it to the shore. That was just not politics. So those who governed had to meet the wishes and basic needs of the citizens. If they did not do so, they did not deserve to be in their positions. Truthfully speaking, the basic needs of mankind consisted of spiritual and material ones. Spiritually, they've got to have their cultural and religious needs; and materially, they've got to have their economical needs met. Any government in the world tried to serve their people in these two aspects, no matter how many ministries or departments they had. Vietnam had to come up with a Democracy that respected the most basic human rights. These rights had to be specified in the Constitution in accordance with International Laws and the Declaration of International Human Rights. To assure the international aspect and the application of the democratic policies, the Constitution had to be strictly respected in reality. It was important that a new policy be developed to meet the basic needs of the citizens. "People were the base," not "people were taken as the base". And that policy had to be in keeping with the trend of the new world.

2. ARREST AND INVESTIGATION AT THE MINH HAI POLITICAL PROTECTION BUREAU.

During the period prior to my arrest, I had the feeling that a disaster was going to happen to me. At the end of 1978 my father passed away from a serious disease. My family fell into poverty and my mother, with her delicate health had to take care of everything since my siblings were still young and helpless. Every time I came back to Bac Lieu to help my patients with acupuncture, I would drop in to see and give them support. On March 28, 1979, I felt so nervous and restless that I could not do anything. I felt homesick and I missed my father (despite his passing away 5 months ago) and my mother. I rushed home to burn incense on the altar for him, checking on my mother's health then I left for the temple. About 5 minutes after I entered my bedroom, a blue bird flew in through the window and dropped dead on the table. It was actually hard for the bird to fly in through the window with pretty close wooden bars and a hanging curtain. I thought that it was a bad omen because the elders often said that when "birds drop, fish sink", something bad would happen. I hurried to bring the dead bird to the foot of the banana tree at the side of the temple to bury it while reciting the Rebirth Dharani Mantra then I went back to my bedroom to have the afternoon nap.

It was exactly 1:30 when the alarm went off and at that moment, the police were all over the temple. Mr. Duong Van Nho - or Tu Nho, the Deputy Police Chief of Vinh Loi District and some of his officers, in coordination with Police of Chau Hung hamlet suddenly appeared in the Buddha Hall and quickly entered the sitting room. The Deputy Police Chief of Chau Hung hamlet, Mr. Tu Huong, introduced everybody then Mr. Duong Van Nho asked my student Thich Thien Tin, whose birth name was Truong Phuoc Hoa, and me, to follow them. We hurriedly took some belonging and followed them to national highway 1. I noticed that there were

not only police, but also a lot of soldiers from Vinh Loi army, rifles in hands, their faces inflamed with murderous look, their eyes glancing surreptitiously around.

They put us into an old, tattered black car. Sitting on both our sides were two policemen with guns ready in their hands. At about one-fifth of the way, the car broke down and stopped on the roadside for a long time to be fixed. After that it went straight to the police office of Vinh Loi district. When we got there it was nearly dark, although it was only about 10 kilometers course. Once there, we were put in two separate rooms. I sat in the room waiting for a long time but nobody came or said anything. Outside, it got darker. It was such a gloomy and desolate evening. I realized that I could not go back to the temple this evening. They wanted to keep us there.

Around 7 o'clock, a young policeman about 17 or 18 years old came and told me to go to the next room to rest. On entering the room, I saw that everything had been prearranged as if to impress me with a psychological test, a brain test, pre-emptive mental strike without words in a battle of wits. Things that were put in the room were one canvas bed with a mosquito net, a blanket, a pillow, and a very bright neon lamp. Specially, there was a wardrobe with three shelves without doors. On one of the shelves was a copy of the poem "Verses on Religion and Life" composed by me. (This poem was published in 1973 for free distribution. And it had more than 100 pages.) There were some gas masks, a map of the Minh Hai province, a map of Military Zone IV printed by the Cartography Bureau of the old regime, and some cloth for flags... In short, those were all the stuff that I had sent to the Group in the jungle. Looking at them exhibited that way in the room, I knew exactly what was in their mind. It was the basic method of the investigators before questions were asked. There was nothing new in this! It was a little bit hard for me to fall asleep that night, thinking of the stuff in the wardrobe opposite from my bed. They

seemed to tell me that I would be put in prison, convicted and things would no longer be the same.

The next morning, when I got up, they transferred me to another room. And about 3 pm on March 30, 1979 a brand new shiny white car from Minh Hai Province came to take only me to the Political Protection Bureau. The one who escorted me was Captain Tran Trung Thu, Deputy Chief of the Political Protection Office of the Provincial Police. When we got there, I was put in one of the office rooms in which there were two beds, one for me and the other one for a second lieutenant to guard me.

That night, a Captain, reeked with alcohol smell, came into the room and told me to get up. He said: "Once in here, you must have known who you are and what you should do. You have to declare truthfully so the Party and the Government can be lenient to you. Don't force us to do anything rude." Then he introduced himself as Captain Nguyen Huu Phuoc, Deputy Chief of the Bureau. I said: "You told me to declare truthfully but what is there to declare? And what about doing something rude? Are you going to hit or shoot me?"

As soon as I finished speaking, he rushed upon me, grasping my robe and wrenched it off the buttons while saying: "A robe does not make a monk." I retorted: "And the hat you are wearing does not make you a revolutionist." The Captain continued: "On behalf of our Party Cell, I will give you a new lesson and I can answer any question of yours if you feel that you do not know enough about the Party. Moreover, by all means, you have to be educated about the Party policy to become a new person of the socialist society."

I answered: "If you can, on behalf of your Party, answer any question of mine, then I would like to ask you when your regime can reach the Communist and the stateless, classless status of the World Community like Max and Lenin had declared." He said curtly: "You can ask any question but this one." I said: "If it is so, I will ask another one. Is it fair for a person like you, a so-called revolutionist who represents the Party Cell, a well armed officer to deal with a monk having nothing to defend himself like me? Are you trained or instructed by your Party to rush on me and wrench my robe off the buttons like that?" At that point, the color on his face changed, he shouted at me, using vulgar language of scoundrels: "Damn you, yes. My Party taught me like that. My Party also ordered us to shoot all of you, reactionaries. Wrenching the robe off its buttons is only a small thing. Just wait and see. Your verdict will not be light. The next thing is to bury you!" On that, he stepped out, mumbling: "Damn it, such a stubborn guy, what about a monk?"

Late in the morning, he came back, looking around the room with questioning eyes, then back to me and said: "No lunch today, no dinner either. No meals for a long time. I'll torture your stomach to see if you are going to declare truthfully or not." I slightly opened my mouth and challenged him: "Go ahead." As he said, there was no lunch, and then no dinner that day. Fasting for 3 to 5 days was a normal thing to me. The lucky thing was that I was free to go to the washroom, so I could drink the water with much alum there to ease my thirst and hunger. I was left with no food for two and a half days, and luckily in the afternoon of the third day a delegation from Minh Hai Commanding Police Service came. The delegation consisted of:

Mr. Nguyen Viet Thong or Tu Thong, Head of Service

Mr. Vo Thanh Tong or Ba Truong, Deputy Head of Service

Mr. Vo Minh Quan or Bay Ngoi, Deputy Head of Service

Mr. Pham Minh Chanh or Ba Lat Gung, Head of the Law
Execution Committee.

Also present was Mr. Phan Ngoc Sen or Muoi Ky, Secretary of
Minh Hai Provincial Party Committee.
Captain Tran Trung Thu, Deputy Head of the Provincial Political
Protection Bureau.

At their order, I was transferred to the sitting room to be identified. Nguyen Huu Phuoc came to call me out. I refused to go there saying I was too weak to do so after being starved for the last few days. I said that I was too weak to move because of being left without food for some days. He turned pale from scare and pleaded with me: "Please go out to meet them and don't say that it was my order to leave you without food. This evening I will have food brought to you as usual." I then went out to meet with the delegation. Everybody stared at me from head to toes as if they were looking at an alien or they were at the zoo for the first time. For the past 5 or 6 days, I was starving and deprived of sleep at the strange place. I became much thinner with a gaunt face; my clothes stank for not being washed; I felt a little dizzy and walked with swaying steps like a drunkard.

3. THE PRISON OF VINH LOI DISTRICT, MY FIRST PRISON

About a week later I was escorted to Vinh Loi Prison by Mr. Nguyen Huu Phuoc himself and handed over to the head of Prison Warden there. I was searched all over by two of the Prison Policemen. They seized all my personal papers like the deed of

Vinh Bao temple, the monk ID, the abbot ID....They also stripped off my robe as well as the clothes under the robe. The only piece of clothes left on my body was the shorts. The head warden ordered them to take me to cell number 2. They handcuffed me and put my feet in iron shackle then left, shutting the door noisily behind.

From this time on, cell #2 was the true hell on earth to me. In the cell I was put in the same shackle with 5 or 6 other people who were all political prisoners. Though not yet convicted, they had already been shackled in there for more than four years! They looked emaciated and pale, their legs were so thin and to the point of paralysis, their eyes sunken, their foreheads full of deep creases and their hair and beards almost grey. After the two policemen had left the cell, they shook my hands and greeted me cordially. The fact that they impatiently questioned me and then listened with all their attention when I told them what was happening outside showed that they had been missing information from the outside world for a long time. Sometimes they smiled happily and excitedly...but I knew it was only superficially. Deep down, there were a lot of sadness and longing for freedom. They in turn told me about their families, the reason they were put into prison and the difficulties of the daily life in this cell.

Here we were shackled to an iron bar 5 to 6 meters long. A pretty big iron bar threaded through the rings of shackle and at the end was a special lock that was very hard to open. It was very hard every time we wanted to move the bar and especially inconvenient when someone wanted to urinate, especially at night. Many of us were awoken by the rattling noise of the chain and its bumping into the wall or the mosquito nets of those who were sleeping. Lack of sleep made these people upset and grumpy although many of the co-prisoners were very understanding. On top of that, the cell seemed much smaller for that many prisoners and there was not enough light and air for breathing. When sleeping, we had to lie in

an overlapping way like pickled fish in the tin can. It was simply overcrowded. And it was very inconvenient every time it came to urinate because you had to do that into a small vase next to the wall. When a new prisoner joined in the cell, he had to lie next to that vase, then with time, he could move farther away from it unless a policeman or a warden ordered him to lie somewhere else.

That was an exception. From my experience, you'd better be on your watch when a political prisoner was assigned to a sleeping place in the cell. The one lying next to you could be the one who underwent painful indignities to spy on you. Or again, one day a new cell mate was ordered to lie beside you then you should be careful, too, because he might be one of the informants. Apart from those cases, good places were reserved for relatives of the police, or those of powerful families, officials who violated the law or anyone with recommendations of the police. Even those who were of slight acquaintances of the wardens, or those who got money and knew how to deal with the wardens also got good sleeping places and help in other activities.

In this country, from the society outside to the prison, if you got money and good connections you would be in first priority category (of treatment). It was a society of injustice. In my case, I was supposed to be next to the vase, but because of the shackle, there was some distance between the vase and me. If your place was next to the vase, you would have to stand the smell, and whenever somebody used it, the urine would splash on you, which was so filthy. On top of that, there was not enough water for washing and people got scabies, itching and it was infectious. Let alone on hot and humid afternoons, when it was burning hot, the cell became so stuffy simply because there were too many people in it. Some older person fainted and had to be brought to the emergency ward. Others were bathing in their own sweat.

According to the rule, people shackled to the same bar had a bath every few days. When we went bathing, besides the shackle, there were iron rings on our wrists to which a string about 5 or 7 meters long was attached. 5 to 7 of us were strung together. Since we could use only one free hand to scoop up water, we could hardly clean ourselves properly from dust and filth. Our bathing place was a shallow and dirty pond. Dirty water from the higher bank trickled down and we used it to clean ourselves with, even to drink when one was thirsty. It made me sick just thinking or talking about it. It was horribly filthy. The women prisoners also went there to bathe. Everything was being washed there, including baby diapers. The water was getting dry and its color muddy every day, but in their thirst, the prisoners scooped up some and drank it to their hearts' content. They just did not care of what was happening to that pond. And nearby was a pigsty with more than 10 pigs and the sewer from the pigsty and the kitchen went straight to the pond. As for our food, it was always rice and dried fish. The stink of dried sea fish made the food hardly edible. The prisoners of Vinh Loi district could not heat their own food. They had to ask the cook to do that for them, and the cook did that by mixing everything in a big caldron.

I had never had to endure such a difficult situation in my life. During the first days there, I would throw up everything I ate, but little by little I got used to it. It was a survival instinct that you had to eat to live on. Moreover, to keep your brain active, you got to maintain your health up to a minimum level. If you were physically weak, your brain could not work effectively. Though I realized that this body was impermanent, and compared to the unlimited time and space of the universe, it was empty; and that human life was like morning dew that would melt away when the sun rose, yet, it was a means that you used to achieve self liberation. Without it you had no way to reach our aim.

Moreover, in Vinh Loi Prison, whenever a prisoner was called for interrogation, he would be led to the place in handcuffs on both hands. It was therefore very hard for him to avoid any fist, kick or knee from the guard. If he tried to ward off any of those, he would not be spared of punishment by sticks and canes or rifle butts. Thus, anyone who was called up to be investigated would have a swollen face and bruises on his body when brought back to the cell, and no way to fall asleep that night. Fellow prisoners in the cell jokingly called that person “tattered as a torn banana leaf”. Especially when the interrogator of the day was a new follower (the so-called April 30-revolutionist), who got the post because of his little higher education and some Taekwondo. He would then hit the victim fast and thick with his martial arts. That was simply because he wanted to show off or to get credit from his superior. Many prisoners got internal injuries because of these opportunists. Once during the interrogation, the one who questioned me got angry because I did not give him satisfactory answers and he threatened to beat me up. No sooner had he done that than an April- 30- guard there jumped up, kicking at my face and punching me with both hands, using a Shaolin movement. In such situation, I had to move aside to keep my face from being injured. Then I boldly said: “Excuse me, I am under your guard, otherwise, both of you would not be my equal in fair play. He stared at me for a moment then left, boiling with rage, after being ordered to do so by the one who was questioning me.

Vinh Loi prison was built midway from Bac Lieu to Hoa Binh Town, near an immense rice field. Most of the prisoners were forced to work in the field, dig ponds, carry soil, build brick kilns, breed animals or go fishing for the district police... Staying there for just about one month, I witnessed so much indignant, shocking injustice, and ill treating that the prisoners had to undergo. At that point I deeply felt the old saying “one day in prison is as long as

one hundred years outside.” especially during the sleepless nights, tossing around, thinking about problems facing me. I lay there, listening to night noises from the clucking of the gecko to the buzzing of mosquitoes like a sad night concert.

4. FAILURE IN RESCUING PRISONERS

It must be the lack of experience due to my first time in prison together with the negligence that caused the failure. Better speaking, I was still naive and inexperienced with the life in prison. Also, being a monk I was credulous and unable to measure people’s mind, so it was easy for me to be deceived. I felt so ashamed to be so green in dealing with some people’s hypocrisy that caused some friends of mine to be put into prison including my own brother and I would regret this until the end of my days. I still remembered the teaching of Buddha’s: “Compassion without wisdom is blind compassion; wisdom without compassion is just a bag for books. But compassion and wisdom must go with imposing bravery to be completed.” Here was the story:

In my one month stay at Vinh Loi Prison, I met hundreds of persons in custody for all kinds of offences, most of whom were non-political prisoners. All of them were ill-treated and humiliated. After hard thinking, I came up with a plot to rescue some and bring them to Ca Mau Forest. I began to make friends with Tiet Sa Ret, a Vietnamese of Cambodian origin from Vinh Chau District, who was some years older than me. Under the old regime, he was a parachutist in the Commando Division, trained by the Americans. After April 30, 1975 his unit was listed among the most dangerous and fierce ones and he was sent to a Re-education Camp for almost a year. After being released from the Re-Education Camp, he had to report to the local authority where he was pushed around all the time. Dissatisfied, one night, he threw grenades at some local government officials’ houses and that caused injuries to some

people. He got arrested and was waiting to receive a criminal verdict, surely a death penalty. He had been staying at Vinh Loi Prison for three years so he was allowed to do his labor duty in a wider area far from the prison because they found him hard-working and honest. After studying his background as well as his case, I approached him and gave him some necessary stuff and cash because his family seldom came to visit him. Afterward I asked if he could transfer a letter, that I wrote with a pencil he got for me, to my own brother Huynh Huu Tho, who was working at Bac Lieu Town. In that letter I asked my brother to get some weapons and bring some of my acquaintances who were members of the Group in the forest to come and rescue us from Vinh Loi Prison.

Taking the letter, he promised that he would let me know the result within the day. But he went back on his promise, and instead, gave the letter to the warden board as a special service to redeem his offence. The letter was the evidence of my plot to rescue the prisoners. So that evening, after work, Ret did not come back to the cell as usual, but was hurriedly transferred to another cell instead. At that time, I thought that he could not tell me the result due to the sudden change, and I gave him the left over from what my family had just sent me as a token of my gratitude. But what really happened was beyond my imagination. That evening the ward police brought barbed wire to surround the path to cells. They specially paid attention to our cell. Only at that time did it dawn on me that something was going to happen to me because of Ret's betrayal.

That night, the police increased their turns of guards. They made more rounds, looked into our cell carefully, and counted the people in the cell every 15 minutes. Around 8 o'clock the next morning, an open jeep stopped right in front of the cell door with about five policemen with arms. At that point, the head warden showed up

and ordered me and some people of the same offence, namely: 1- Trinh Thanh Son; 2- Nguyen Van Ba; 3- Thich Thien Tri (Truong Phuoc Hoa) to get on the jeep. They brought us to the Criminal ward of Minh Hai police. I was put into special cell 8A with hands and feet shackled for 8 months. The others were under the same condition in the next cell. And foes met with foes! Coincidentally, Tiet Sa Ret was also transferred to Bac Lieu and was put in cell 8B in the same shackle with Nguyen Van Ba. He might have been the witness to our plot to escape. One day, being called for questioning, I happened to see him but he averted his eyes from me. Sometimes he glanced stealthily at me instead of looking at me squarely. Could it be that he felt guilty of what he had done to me? He reported my plan to the police to make up for what he had done to avoid the death penalty. He must have tried every way to avoid it even if he had to trample on others' lives in order to save his. In learning about Ret's betrayal, Ba and some of the other criminals got so angry with him. Ba called me over the wall to say that he would teach Ret a lesson that would affect his health to the end of his days, if I agreed for him to do so.

I thought that this had been a done thing, and being a monk, I considered compassion as a guideline for life, and perseverance as a manner of action, so I advised my friends to leave him alone. About 6 months later, Ret was set free after 5 years in prison for the big achievement he had made to the warden board.

About 2 years later, a new cell mate from Vinh Chau, Ret's native district, told me that Ret had died of a head injury from a car accident after coming back to the family for some months. The lesson I learned from that incident was: "At a near death situation, one may become a traitor when looking for a way to save his own life." Though I realized that "one should do the best for the dead because it is the last chance to do anything for him;" and:

“something special should be said for the dead” and that I should not write about Ret’s betrayal, especially now that he was gone, but I had to do this out of my guilt and repentance for the misery I had caused to some friends of mine.

Chapter IV
The Second Prison:
Police Head Office, Minh Hải Province

Ever since I was transferred from Vĩnh Lợi District Detention to the Criminal Division of Minh Hai Police, I was to face with even more problems. First of all, due to my carelessness, I made a terrible mistake that would haunt me to the last of my days. That was the reason why I had to bring out the truth about it in this memoir, hoping it could help me unload the guilt which had been overshadowing my soul over the years.

With the letter I sent home intercepted, the Provincial Police made more arrest of people, namely:

- 1/ Mr. Huynh Huu Tho, my younger brother.
- 2/ Mr. Hồ Văn Minh, a Buddhist who was residing in a nearby the temple.
- 3/ Mr. Nguyễn Văn Kiém
- 4/ Mr. Trần Văn Giải

It was about seven months since I had been released when these memories were written down. At this time, I had paid a visit to the people mentioned above. I came to visit Mr. Nguyễn van Giai first, trying to console him and giving him a bit of materials which I thought might help him and his grand-children get by, now that he was an elderly and blind man. As for Ho Van Minh, by the time he got out of jail, his wife had already left him for another man. He had to find a way to make a living and move on with his life, but

unfortunately, he passed away in a fatal accident which happened a few years ago.

Nguyen Van Kiem had left his hometown, Bac Lieu, in order to keep his life moving, and I did not have any chances to see him since then.

About my younger brother Huynh Huu Tho, when he got back to his family, his wife had left him for another man. Later, he remarried, but the pressure on him day by day was so great, especially from the local police force that he had decided to leave his hometown for Rach Gia, Kiên Giang in order to restart his life. As he had a big family to take care of and things were not going well in his business, Tho eventually became an alcoholic which made him lose his dignity. I had visited Tho one time, and I tried to advise him on this matter, but it was unlikely that Tho would be able to get rid of that bad habit. It was a really tragic circumstance in which I was partly responsible.

The detention facility where we were kept was under the command of the Police Criminal Division and supervised by a captain named Châu Trọng Nam. This was the place where new prisoners of various crimes were held and interrogated and exploited with all imaginable means and tools for the execution of the job. At any time of the day, the prisoners underwent torture of all kinds, from beating by hands, feet, bludgeon, rifle butt, hand-cuffing, to confinement in an isolation cell. The executors came from various backgrounds: some were police coming from the North, including those who had long joined the then Resistance force, others were the new recruits after the fall of Saigon, commonly known as the “April 30 police”. They all had special techniques for the investigation, using corporal punishments like raining blows on the inmates, hand-cuffing them in different cruel and spiteful positions, and I myself was not spared of these inhumane tortures.

Both of my legs were in stocks day and night for so many months at a time that it was impossible for me to stand straight and they ended up paralyzed little by little. As for use of the toilet jar, I needed someone to help bring it over each time. The jar contained both excrement and urine and was emptied each day but sometimes it wasn't done for 2 or 3 days and when the content was too full, it spilled to the floor where we were living and made the whole room stink. The jar was never thoroughly cleaned since the one who emptied it was always rushed to get back to the cell and he only had time to rinse it roughly before filling it with water from that cleaning place and brought it back for those who were in stocks like me to bathe. Each of us used the individual food container to get 2 or 3 cup of that water for our bath. There were always excrements remaining on the inside of the container, and it would stick all over the prisoners when they had a bath with the water stored in it.

The “discipline” cell measured about 3 square meters, and sometimes would hold more than 20 inmates so there was not enough space to sit let alone to lie down.

It was very hot and muggy in the summer and bathing was extremely necessary to cool down our body temperatures and to give some relief to our tense minds while we were all sweaty and exhausted. For that, we had to be thankful and show your appreciation to the one who had cleaned the jar and brought water back for us to use.

At night time, using their own sedge mats, the prisoners took turns fanning the entire room to bring a light breeze for everyone and to keep the mosquitoes away. The fanning session lasted about an hour and the one on duty would do night watch at the same time. According to the regulations, each cell would have one inmate on watch each night. Once the guard in one cell made 3 strikes on a tin with chopsticks, those in the next cells would then respond in

the same way, making it in unison throughout the night. In the mean time, the guards on duty made their tour outside, rifles in hands, glancing at each cell. If there was no response from a cell, it meant that the inmate on duty in that cell had fallen asleep! The guard would then make a report or threaten the prisoners in vulgar language; or worse, he might suggest to the proctor board to impose discipline measures like disallowing them to receive gifts from their families, shackling them by both hands and feet, or restricting their daily food rations for a certain time.

1. A SELF-INFLICTED INJURY PLOY TO PLANT INFORMANTS AMONG INMATES

During the days in cell A 8, I discovered a self-inflicted injury ploy that the B2 Agency, i.e. the Provincial Political Protection Division, had set up to follow every move I made in order to get information. The assigned person was Ho Cong Son, a former Ranger Petty Officer in the army of the Republic of Viet Nam. He was the nephew of Ho Nghi, Secretary of the Province Party Committee of Quang Nam Province, Da Nang. Actually Son had been contacted to work for the North before the year 1975. Right after April 30, 1975, he joined the B2 Agency, also known as “Political Protection Division of Minh Hai Province” .

One day, around midnight, a guard suddenly opened the steel door of the special cell where I was being held, making such a loud noise that woke up everyone in the closeby cells. Before us was a hand-cuffed man in an elegantly dressed in black wearing a black hat, black sun-glasses, and shiny leather sandals also in black. The fragrance of the perfume he was wearing soon filled the air in the cell.

He entered the room, bowed to all the inmates politely. After that, one of his feet was tied in chains and laid down next to me. Being

a planted informant, he must have known who I was, but he was playing his role and asked me what my offense was. I replied, “I committed a political crime: I was a Buddhist monk, residing at Vinh Binh Temple, Cái Dầy.”

To which he quickly said hypocritically: “Holy Buddha, please forgive me for my ignorance”. Then, like a true Buddhist follower, he introduced himself “Master, my name was Ho Cong Son, a former Ranger. I was the Head of the Buddhist Youth Association under the religious name of Tam Nguyen and I used to work with the Vietnamese Buddhist Unified Congregation (VBUC) of Quang Nam, Da Nang.

My girlfriend and I were traveling on a rental car from Saigon to Bac Lieu on the way to the seaside to flee the country by boat tonight, when we were caught by the Border Police, and sent to this detention facility.” He went on saying, “ We cannot live under the Communist rule and have to flee, you know. This is such a tyrannical regime”

During the next few days, he told me many stories concerning Buddhism and asked me about the VBUC, as well as Vinh Binh Temple where I had been the abbot. He also offered to help me get in touch with the outside world if necessary because he strongly believed that he would soon be released. He even went as far as to promise to find papers or pens for me if I happened to need those. All the things he said stirred up doubts in me particularly on the 3 factors:

- 1) I had just learned from a fatal mistake by trusting Tiết Sa Rết, and was very vigilant.
- 2) There was something about his appearance that caused mistrust in me: his curly hair, his pouting lips, his upstream sideburns, bad signs in physiognomy.

3) He was a new inmate to the detention center, so how could he promise to find pen and papers for me?

I had an absolute mistrust in Son and I only told him what I had already told the authorities. Thus, after spending more than a month in very poor living conditions in the detention center without collecting any information from me, he was eventually transferred to another place.

Eight months later, when the investigation on my case was over, I was transferred to Ca Mau. Once again, Son was the inmate to share the cell with me for the next month. Whether it was the police urgent need for getting information from me, he had somehow revealed his intention and thus did not get what he was aiming for. In the end, he was transferred to another place. When the 21 inmates in my case were taken from Ca Mau to Bac Lieu for the trial at the lower Court House, as the car we were in passed by Minh Hai Provincial Police Headquarter, I saw Ho Cong Son in an elegant suit, driving a Honda motorcycle entering the head office with another B2 who worked for the Provincial Political Protection Division, sitting behind him.

I brought this to everyone's attention in order to caution them about the evil means that the Communist had been using in their investigations.

2. FIERCE ARGUMENT WITH PHAM MINH CHANH ,THE CHIEF OF THE EXECUTIVE DIVISION OF MINH HAI POLICE.

Pham Minh Chanh alias Ba Lát Gừng (literally Three Slices of Ginger) was the chief of the Executive Division as well as a member of the Command Headquarters of the Police Force.

According to the people who knew him, before joining the Vietnamese Communist party he was an herb doctor and he always

added three slices of ginger in each of the parcel of medicinal herb for his patients. He must have learned the 10 basic ingredients in herbal medicine, therefore the prescription always came with 3 of slices of ginger.

Among the ten basic ingredients were: *Bedding grass* (Alang Grass roots), *Cassod Tree* (Senna), *Asiatic pennyworth* (Centella), *Lemon grass*, *Dried Tangerine peels*, *Cocklebur*, *Fresh Ginger*

After joining the Communist in their jungle base, Pham Minh Chanh kept on working as herbal doctor, and the above ingredients were his signature prescriptions. His skill for interrogating must have been noticed so he was chosen for the job. He was cunning like a fox, very experienced and mischievous in doing this job but not without many shortcomings of his own; therefore he still remained in this provincial level whereas his contemporaries had been promoted to the central positions. Most of the leading staff in the Police Department was his juniors and they all had respect for him.

Ba Lat Gung was also known as a professional framer for his tricks in manipulating the victims during his interrogation. This conduct led to some innocent people's deaths under his control in the past when he was in the jungle base. As a result, he was degraded and slowly worked his way back to the present position as Head of the Executive Commission. And this time, he was assigned to directly investigate my case. Actually, this was a game to measure wits between two men: a powerful conquerer and a helpless conquered; the former with the power to manipulate the way of questioning and the latter with no chance to mentally prepare for his answers. In this game, I was definitely in a disadvantage, passive position because I was constantly interrogated by him, day and night, never

knowing what he was going to question whereas he had all the time to think and prepare for the next move.

Luckily, while helping with the escape, I was aware of the precarious position we were in and had accordingly prepared what to say in the interrogation should we ever be captured or the list of companions discovered. I would give to the police the following information in one of the 4 situations:

- 1) Names of deceased people for the Leaders of the organization.
- 2) Names of people who had fled the country for leaders of the organization.
- 3) Names of high ranking Communist leaders involved in the organization.
- 4) Making a shock so that I would be sent back to my cell and thus had time to think over and prepare for a good answer.

Since the only answers I gave were along the lines of those mentioned above, Ba Lat Gung had been very upset since he got nothing out of me. At one time when he failed in his ploy to put words into my mouth, he sat and bit his fingernails. He must have had this habit of nail biting because every time I came for the interrogation I saw him doing that. On that particular day he became so frustrated that the veins on his neck were showing, his face turned red, and his entire body was shaking; he completely lost his temper. He looked at me and spoke in the language of a rabble: “Listen, Thien Minh, did the “Revolution” excavate your father’s tomb, rape your mother or your sisters? And why did you join the reactionary force against us?”

When I heard these disgraceful words meant to libel my entire family, I knew he had revealed his true nature of a fake “revolutionist”. With a wry smile I confidently replied, “Mr. Ba, I have been practicing Buddhism since I was young and I never

joined the government of South Viet Nam, but objectively, I would like to ask you this question, “Did the Saigon regime excavate your father’s tomb? Did they rape your older or younger sister?” I am sure they did not. Now, suppose those things happened and made you join the “revolutionary force” then would you do so if they did not happen to you? Maybe not. So you joined the “Revolution” because your interest was harmed and you would close your eyes and never care for the “big cause” if it involved other’s interest, right? I really question the integrity of your “revolutionary ideal”.

You do not deserve the word “revolution” that you proudly identify yourself with and normally, you are not qualified to sit and work with me unless you use the power of a winner.

On those words, Ba Lat Gung’s hands were shaking; he clenched his fists tightly and smashed the table so hard that the papers, pens, and other things on it fell onto the ground. His eyes flashed with rage; his anger seemed uncontrollable, and he snarled, “ You, Thien Minh, you are a dirty traitor, a reactionary who licks the boots of the Americans, a toady for the International Gendarmery who causes harm to this country and the people under the cloak of religion. No one would feel sorry if hundreds of men like you were executed. Even your family would do the same thing had they known that you planned to rebel against the government. Go back to your cell right now.”

I stood up and said, “This is ridiculous and inappropriate” and walked out, with him following right behind me. Normally, after the questioning period, he would ask an officer to take me back to my cell and he himself never followed me like this. On getting to cell 8A, I bent down to get the rings of the shackle to put my legs in once in the cell as usual. Being on high alert, he suddenly stepped aside and yelled in panic: “Look, everybody, Thiên Minh is hitting me!!”

Surprised by his sudden reaction, I stood still, the shackle still in my hands, and I calmly explained the circumstance when several groups of armed police officers came running toward us.

I said, “During the past several months, whenever I come back to the room, I have the habit to put my feet in this shackle myself. I do not intend to hit you with it. If I did, I would do it in your office, and you, an old man of 60 -70 years old, would not be able to stand the blow of my bare hands, let alone the chair if I used it when necessary.

Ba Lat Gung then gave an immediate order, “The leader of this room must make a report of Thich Thiên Minh having the intention of committing assault on the chief of police, and all of the inmates must sign on it.”

At that time, Nguyen Van Hung was my room leader; he used to be a Communist Party member and also a High school Principal in Vinh Loi district. He was detained and charged for the alleged murder of his wife.

Having observed the entire situation from the beginning, Hung objected to Ba Lat Gung’s order. Hung said, “I have been the leader of this room for the last three years. In all honesty, I want to confirm with all of you that since transferred to this room, every time Master Thich Thiên Minh came back after an interrogation, he always shackled his feet himself.

“All the inmates in the room witnessed this, even the officer who supervised the detention center. Therefore, your order for a report that he had the intention to hit you was not correct. This is a forced injustice, a wrong accusation, a harmful slander and we object to it and will not sign it.

When Hung finished, Ba Lat Gung was mad with rage. His face was all red and he threatened Hung by saying, “Hung, how dare

you protect a reactionary? You are displaying disloyalty to the Party, and you will die for that, let alone objecting or refuting me. Just wait and see what I will do for you! Bearding a lion in his den!!!

Upon that, he left to go back to the criminal department office. He ordered Captain Chau Trong Nam to prepare the statement and keep it in my file to add it on to my list of crimes so the judge would be able to see when my file was to be reviewed at the court house.

That afternoon, Chau Trong Nam came to room 8 A and read the report to the inmates and everybody in the room just sneered at it.

A few days later, Ba Lat Gung summoned me again for more interrogation. I flatly refused and told the guard who came to get me, “Please tell Mr. Ba Lat Gung that if he wants to domineer or kill me, then just go ahead. I will not leave this room unless that statement is torn in front of me and the rest of the inmates in this room.”

Over a week later, Mr. Vo Thanh Tong—also known as Ba Truong Son—the Deputy Police chief, came to my room himself and asked me to come to the office to work with him. As we began, I saw the statement in his hands. He showed it to me and told me to tear it up with my own hands. He told me: “you should try to cooperate with Mr. Ba so that the interrogation could finish as it had been on for more than 7 months. The case should go on a trial, unless you wanted to be held in this detention forever. What happened between Mr. Ba Lat Gung and you recently was just a misunderstanding, and you two should forget about it.” He then walked over to the next room and invited Ba Lat Gung to come over and said something to appease the tension between us so I would agree to work with Mr. Ba again. Ba Lat Gung smiled and greeted me as if nothing had happened between us. From then

on, he was very careful with his choice of words whenever he questioned me. Even when he smiled, I knew for sure that behind that smiling appearance there lay a mind of true evil...!

CHAPTER V

CA MAU, THE THIRD PRISON

LOW COURT HOUSE VERDICT SUSPENDED

My case was closed after one more month of interrogation by Ba Lat Gung. At the order of the provincial Police Department of Minh Hai, I was transferred, together with people involved in my case, from the Criminal Division of Minh Hai Police Department to Ca Mau Prison. (Minh Hai was joined by two provinces: Bac Lieu and Ca Mau). All of the government main offices were located in Bac Lieu while Ca Mau was just a city, but the provincial prison was set up there. So when the interrogation was completed, they sent us to the provincial prison. We were all loaded on a small truck. The distance was about 60 km, and two prisoners were tied together in one handcuff. We were escorted by armed police in a car behind and some 90cc Honda scooters in front of us.

Back then, the national roads were rough with so many pot-holes—and our truck was very old, and running so slowly that it made everybody very uncomfortable.

We got very tired as the truck was moving at a snail's pace and the daylight was fading into the night. All of us were hungry as well as thirsty, some got car sick and wanted to throw up. The truck made it as far as 2/3 of the journey when it broke down and it took more than 2 hrs before it was replaced with another one sent from Ca Mau by one of the escort crews who had driven back there for a new supply. The young police officers around 16-17 years of age looked nervous. They came to talk with us in a most polite way

possible because they were afraid that we might do something to them while waiting for the car to be fixed. Knowing this, I spoke with them calmly in order to lessen their worries because I understood the reason for their nervousness.

It had been almost 8 months since we (the people with whom I associated with in rebelling against the regime) had a chance to be together albeit in such circumstance, and it was a good feeling for us all. No matter if the truck was running at a snail's pace or breaking down on the way, we did not mind at all, as it was a great opportunity for us to talk about what was happening during those days when we were kept for investigation. We all sympathized with each other's hardship being in the same boat, but as it turned out, I was the one who suffered most, particularly on the mental aspect. I felt extremely guilty for the suffering that my inmates' families went through due to my actions. Due to the economy controlled solely by the government, and the mean distribution of goods; even the basic necessities were hard to acquire. These poor living conditions incited satirical verses such as:

“Down with Thiệu Kỳ, under whose government, people could
easily buy
whatever they wanted.

Hurrah for the Ho Chi Minh regime under which people had to line up even just for buying a nail.”

During that time, if a member of a family was jailed for committing a “political crime”, that family was then subjected to discrimination, harsh treatment in all aspects, and isolated from others in the society. Even their relatives would not dare to pay a visit out of fear that it would get them into trouble by seeing them.

The neighbors who had positions in the government looked them down. Under Communist regime, being a political prisoner meant that one didn't have long to live. If the accused one was lucky, his family members including parents, siblings, wife and children did not turn away from him. Not all cases were like that, however, as there is always an exception. Poverty had a funny way of affecting a person, such as the wife not being able to wait for the husband to come back, etc.... After all, if society was not changed, second class citizens like us would be down at the bottom of the societal food chain for the rest of our lives.

Since life was tough and oppressive under the new regime, the image of Ho Chi Minh, either in the form of a statue, picture hung at public buildings or the most venerable place in the church, temple altars or even at people's houses, arouse bitterness, anger and hatred within the conquered people of the South. The only thing they could do at the time was passing on among themselves bitterly satirical verses and curses for the national hero and the regime that brought them so much misery.

2. FAMILY LIVING IN DESPERATE CIRCUMSTANCES

My family alone was the victim of threat and control, oppression and scorn from local authorities of different levels. They encroached on our land, building a fence that went deep into the limit of the house and harassed us verbally. There was this one officer Bùi Minh Quyên—also known as Tu Quyên—whose brother Bùi Văn Le was the chief of police of the Vinh Loi district. Relying on his brother's power, he acted arrogantly as if he was

the authority himself. Tu Quyèn had a son-in-law named Tién who was also cruel and would intentionally do harm to his neighbors if they upset him. Everyone in the area was fret with resentment against him. On top of that, Huynh Hoang Lam, Head of the 7th Ward ordered the house to be torn down and the land to be used as a market place. He attributed us with the crime of Reactionaries and our land with illegal occupation having no document from the new authorities.

This decision was made “based on Decision 36, Order 317 by the Prime Minister and Order 20 by the Provincial Committee on the public safety of the city transportation”, though my brother’s house had nothing to do against the safety of city transportation at all. The order had to be carried out in 3 days from the 7th of August, 1995 to the 10th of August, 1995, and if there was any delay, we would be penalized according to the Law set by the Minister (see the order in the appendix).

Destitution caused by the distressing new regime had taken a toll on its citizens, my family included.

- My seventh brother Nghĩa had to quit school and start selling bread in order to support the family.
- My sixth brother Nhiều earned his living by driving a bicycle with a trunk attached to it that could seat several passengers.
- My fifth brother, who was married for a little more than a year; was put in jail right after his baby girl was born, being the suspect in the incident I was involved with.
- My sister, the fourth in the family, had been selling snacks and fruits in front of the house in order to help with the family’s survival.

My mother's health was worsening; the recent passing away of my father and imprisonment of my younger brother and myself had put even more pressure on her frail health. Of the saddest things was the one that all my younger siblings who, at their ages, should have been in school, had to quit and work for their living, at the same time, looking after our elderly sick mother and putting by their meager shares for the visit of their 2 brothers being held in the Ca Mau Prison every month. On rainy days when my brother Nghĩa could not sell all his breads, he had to come to a Khmer Temple located in Sóc Đồn, Bac Liêu begging the monks to trade the rest of them for some rice so the whole family could have dinner that night. Sometimes when Nghia came home with his unsold bread, the family would have plain bread for dinner. Other times, they had to buy sweet potatoes and mix them with rice or ate porridge for supper.

My younger brother was a bright student. He not only did well in school, but he was also polite to his teachers, kind to his classmates, as well as a devoted son to our parents. His grades were usually ranked top of the class and even elected as class leader. Unfortunately he had to drop out of school because of the family's situation. Sometimes when passing by his old school on his way to sell breads, he would walk as fast as he could and pull his hat down to his ears for fear that his classmates would recognize him. Indeed, it caused a mixed feeling of joy and pain in him thinking of seeing his teachers and classmates. That feeling almost prevented him from moving forward . . . his eyes full of tears all the while.

One day, one of his female teachers happened to see him passing by, she invited him into the classroom; his classmates were very happy to see him and welcomed him back. The teacher asked

everyone in the class to help buying his breads. That day he felt great on the way back home since the breads were sold so quickly, but this happy moment did not last long. He became so sad when he thought of the love and kindness he received from his old teacher and classmates. A few days later, the teacher came to see my mother, aiming at encouraging Nghĩa to come back to school. She said, “Nghĩa has been known as a bright and hardworking student; it’s too bad he drops out of school. If the family cannot afford to let him continue with his studies, I will gladly help him with his basic school supplies or part of the fees to get him back in school.”

Without the concerns and the help of those good-hearted, devoted teachers, my brother would not be able to go back to school and finish his High school studies and eventually enter the Teachers’ College. This reminded me of the old time when the ethics of teacher-students relation was always highly thought of. It was a heart-warming feeling to see that this virtue was still kept up, even under the current cruel regime with their inhuman officers.

Although I did not have a chance to personally meet and thank my brother’s teacher after getting out of jail, I did my best to show my appreciation to those people by praying for their blessings every night. They were benefactors who had helped my entire family get through the hardest time, having to put up with so much cruelty, injustice by the authorities of the time while I was in jail.

3. CA MAU Prison and The Horrible Facts after April 30, 1975

Ca Mau Prison was one of the few buildings that remained from the time of the old Regime. This building was built to meet with standards of a detention center, so this facility was fine in regards

to its living space, ventilation, light and rest rooms. But by that time thousands of people of all ages and social classes gathered here on their way to flee the country by boat; many succeeded and got settled in other countries while others lost their lives in the ocean. In the mean time, hundreds were captured and put in this detention center in one day; it caused this building to become overwhelmingly crowded and suffocated, scabies spread quickly among the prisoners due to water shortage and everybody used the same bucket for bathing and washing!

At this location, we were controlled by the ruthless rule imposed by the person who was the head of each cell in the building to put prisoners under his control. Just like the rule at the prison in Vinh Loi District, the new inmate had to lie by the restroom, and being the new inmate, it was my place in cell number 2. The room was too small for us that we had to sleep like herrings in a can. For the first few nights, four or five prisoners had to share a mosquito net and often I found someone's scabby legs on my face as we had to squeeze in the a small space, lying one person's face next to the legs of the other on the opposite direction. Waking up the next morning, I felt something on my face, and it smelt so awful! One can imagine how disgusting I felt when some mornings I could not wash my face because there was no water. In addition, the new inmates transferred to this facility were isolated for a certain time, and all of their activities such as walking, lying down, sitting, or even talking to someone required permission from the head of the cell. Each room was supervised by a gang of six people:

- 1 cell leader
- 2 assistants
- 1 cell security guard
- 1 cell secretary
- 1 sanitary worker

Inmates in each room were also divided into many small groups, each with a group leader and an assistant. The gang of six had the power in their grips and enjoyed all the priorities and benefits they could get from the inmates especially the latter got a scheduled visit from their family member who would bring long waited foods or clothing for them. Since their voice was heard by above authorities, they openly asked for gifts, money from the inmates. Those who were not assigned by the gang to do some duty had to stay “isolated” in the room from early morning until noon, then from 1:30 PM - 5:30 PM, to study the prison policy – until they knew it by heart and could explain its meaning correctly in order to have their isolated situation reconsidered. Only the really sick were allowed to lie down with the permission of the cell leader.

The sight of the cell leader sitting imposingly, served by the inmates day by day that made me very sick! Nothing was more ironical for those fighting against social injustice than having to witness the same thing happening in front of them right in the prison cell day in day out. To make things worse, some of the so called “political prisoners” now betrayed their ideals by fawning on the new protectors to gain favor and played dirty tricks and even oppressed their fellow prisoners.

I had to say something, even if it made me ashamed. If those people chosen as leaders of cell #2 happened to be of the old regime, I would say they were cruel, crafty, and selfish individuals. They must have been scared of being involved with inmates so they would not concern or help their fellow inmates, especially the political ones. Sometimes, they even made fun of these political prisoners, saying the latter were trying to “*fit a square in a circle*”. Thus, once chosen to be a cell leader, that person would absolutely

respect the rule of the time, making himself in a position which allowed him to get as much benefits as he could.

Out of compassion, I would not mention the names of those heartless opportunists in this book. But it was ironic to find the then communist officers turned out to be prisoners of the new regime for breaking the law to be open-minded, generous and less severe and brutal to the inmates once they were appointed cell leaders. Their understanding and kindness brought a somewhat easy, relaxing atmosphere to the cell. I had to say this because the contradictory behavior of those cell leaders had been a heavy burden in my heart especially that of some officials of the old regime in South Viet Nam. I definitely wanted to tell the truth because I was the one who experienced it. With prisons being built by the hundreds all over the country, I could not help but wonder if there was any difference in the treatment of the prisoners in those places.

The fact was that, after April 30, 1975, thousands of soldiers in South of Viet Nam were detained to be “re-educated”. Many of them had been languishing in concentration camps, many others executed. On top of that, in the attempt to transform Industry and Business, in the so called “bourgeois reform”, the government had seized and “managed” properties of their citizens. They claimed that those properties now belonged to the State funds, but in reality, these properties and the monetary gains that they received from them had gone straight to their own pockets. This brought to the Era of a new social class called “the red Capitalists”.

With the society as we knew it turning upside down, everything fell into chaos. Many of the new Proletarian Class could not face the loss of their money and property attempted suicide or became

insane. Others fled the country, trying to make a living in the foreign land.

Life became particularly difficult for people such as widows, old-regime disabled veterans, and especially orphans who were living in the streets. Some of them, driven to extremity, committed crimes and ended up in the Juvenile Detention Center under the misleading name of the “Education and Care Center”, among them were children as young as 10 years old. Naturally this place was not lacking in various methods of punishing these young inmates, including whipping, beating, forced labor and even shackles.

This period of time was by far one of the worst in the country’s history, considering the number of people fleeing Viet Nam which increased to 2 or 3 million. They willingly exchanged their lives for the winds and waves in the ocean, would rather be robbed, raped or even died at sea than stay back to live under the new Totalitarian Communist regime. The stories of the “boat-people tragedy” and the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese in the Refugees Camps in many Asian countries had revealed a significant truth to the world about the communist government’s treatment of its people since they took over the South.

After the 30 April 75 event, many patriotic groups had rebelled, fighting for freedom, democracy, human rights but they were quenched, arrested and jailed by the Communist authorities. They were deported far away from their native places, sentenced to hard labor or even to death no matter if it was a female prisoner who was pregnant. Many concentration and “re-education” camps were being built in Minh Hai Province, some were located deep down in the jungle. Hundreds more policemen were recruited since this was a police-run government while the Vietnamese Communist Party’s

Central Committee was absolutely faithful to the Marx-Leninist Doctrine. They blindly followed this foreign doctrine though it was not suitable with the national tradition nor was it with the sentiment ties among the Vietnamese people. Loyalty to the country, love and service for countrymen were just pompous words used by the authorities.

Vietnamese Communists governed with arbitrariness and autocracy on politics, media and communication. The citizens were stripped of their basic freedom, human rights were violated. There were no such things as freedom of speech, of religion, of gathering, of forming a group, an association... They strongly maintained their mono party regime in order to subdue the citizens. They controlled politics so they could share powers and benefits among their privileged clique.

4. SECOND TRIAL CONDUCTED BY GOOD/ EVIL INTERROGATORS.

The transfer of prisoners, including me, to the prison in Ca Mau made it rather hard for the visitation from our loved ones due to the distance of the remote location and the fact that I had to go through the interrogation with 2 of the investigators, Trần Văn Ôn and Lâm Quang Dũng, in order to verify the first indictment before it was submitted to Minh Hải People's Court of Investigation for trial. During that time, Ôn and Dũng were the incarnation of the Good and the Evil. Trần Văn Ôn was the son-in-law of Nguyễn Việt Thống, Minh Hải's Provincial Chief of Police. Charging others with crimes they didn't do, relying on the "reason of the ruler" to accuse them of serious offences was his forte. He was a cruel, wicked, and inhumane person; in order to show off his power of Proletarian dictatorship, he always ruled in favor of the death penalty for his victims. According to witnesses, there were at least

20 prisoners who had died on his orders. He concluded my case on the following 5 points:

Huỳnh Văn Ba, also known as Thích Thiện Minh in religious name has committed a crime based on the following causes and motives:

3. Being receptive to the American Imperialist ideologies in South Vietnam;
4. Being influenced by the reactionary and backward education of the old Saigon regime;
3. Joining the Vietnam Unified Buddhist Congregation that once worked for the CIA and had an anti-communist policy;
4. Showing extremist attitude, discriminating against the regime of the people, for the people and by the people and plotting to overthrow this current regime;
5. Opposing the local government; dishonoring the country's flag, and protesting against the establishment of the representatives in the Buddhist Congregation which belonged to the Religious Movement of the National Front.

With these reasons, it looked like I had no chance to survive. He definitely wanted me dead; it seemed that my fate was already decided.

On the other hand, Lâm Quang Dũng's conclusion was different.

Dũng concluded my case with the following 3 points:

1. Since the governing policy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam did not follow the testament of president Ho Chi Minh,
2. Since the governing body of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam did not follow through all the promises that Madame Nguyễn Thị Bình, Foreign Affairs Minister in the Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam, confirming that South Vietnam would be under neutral regime for 5 years,

3. Based on the reason that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam had the intention of suppressing religions, among them the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation, putting some of its members in jail, the defendant had to find an alternative way to pursue his beliefs.

I still wondered if this submission by Lam Quang Dung had convinced the Court of Investigation to give me some leniency.

4. AN ARGUMENT WITH THE CHIEF OF MINH HAI PEOPLE'S PROCURACY OFFICE

Nearly a year after the working session, lasting over one week, with the two aforementioned interrogators I was again interrogated by Mr. Nguyễn Ngọc Cơ, known as Sáu Búa, Head of the People's Procuracy of Minh Hải Province. I wanted to say something about his nickname -the reason why he was called Sáu Búa, meaning Six Blows of Hammer. During the time working in the jungle, he was in charge of executing death penalty on convicts. That day, an elderly woman over the age of 70 was executed. She was accused of being an informant for the army of the Republic of Vietnam. Usually he would execute the convict by using a machete. But the trial of that day was by a special roving People's court - where the jury was composed of commoners - so once the verdict was reached, it was immediately executed. That day, he did not bring the machete with him, so he borrowed a hammer from the villagers. He had to hit hard, and only after the 6th hammer strike did the old woman succumb and die. According to some witnesses, being victim of an injustice, her eyes remained opened after she died. Since then, he was stuck with that terrifying nickname, Sau Bua. Since he came to work for the Office of Procuracy, whoever

came under his interrogation rarely had a chance of staying alive for long. Just hearing his name, criminals would shrink in horror and fear!

The day I was sent to be interrogated by him, I had already foreseen what was going to happen to me. Before examining, interrogating, and confirming facts related to the case, he expressed his solemn attitude by clenching his teeth and frowning. Sáu Búa stared at me, gestured me to sit down. When I sat down, he nodded haughtily, then sitting cross-legged, he then introduced himself as a public prosecutor of Minh Hải Province coming to review this case before it was finalized before the court. His first question was:

“Are you afraid of death?”

I replied, “Everyone in this world wants to live, but no one lives forever. Besides, you only die once. So, to live or die for a good cause that is of benefit to others is the essential thing, just as an old saying goes: to die for one’s dream is everybody’s wish. I did what it takes so my people could live with dignity according to Article 217A dated December, 10th, 1948 of the International Declaration of Human Rights.

He asked, “And just what does living up to the meaning of the International Declaration of Human Rights involve?”

I replied, “It means that people have the right to live, to have freedom and to be able to pursue happiness. Civil rights cannot be deprived, and human dignity cannot be trampled upon. Happiness and fortune must be obtained by the right means and not by seizing them from others.”

He went on: “And if our verdict is the death penalty, what would you think?”

I replied, “If the cause requires you to live for it then you must live to keep it flourish, but when it requires you to die for it then that’s what you must do. It’s the sacrifice and courage that make one immortal, and for a monk, it sanctifies the soul.” Then I continued, “Furthermore, death also means liberation in Buddhism.”

He said, “Stop preaching. You can do it when you return to the temple. Actually, I doubt if you’d be able to survive even half of your sentence, let alone going back to the temple!

For more than half an hour, both sides continued the argument, but the game was not going anywhere. He became annoyed and asked, “Who was the head of your Central Organization?”

I replied, “General Trần Văn Trà and Madam Nguyễn Thị Bình. They both were the leaders of the Central Organization.”

The color on his face changed; he smashed his hands onto the table and said angrily, “How dare you mention two of my senior officers? Those 2 comrades have contributed many years to the Communist Party and helped bring the glory and success of today. How dare you say they are reactionaries like you! Why don’t you include me, Nguyễn Ngọc Cơ—a.k.a. Sáu Búa—as well, huh?!”

When he finished, I looked at him with my eyes narrowed and my eyebrows furrowed and said, “Excuse me, I am not a general, but if I were one, your appearance would not even be acceptable for a

soldier under my command; so why would I include you in my organization?” Perhaps he was so shocked by my reply that he looked as if he was just doused with a bucket of cold water on his face. He reached out to grab a teapot on the table and was about to throw it at me.

I remained calm and said, “Is that the behavior of the Chairman of the Provincial People’s Procuracy? How can you show that kind of attitude towards a political-religious-prisoner like me?”

He came to his sense, stopped and shouted, “You’re nothing but a thick-headed reactionary who tried to slander the Party. Get out of here!”

I knew exactly that he meant to tell me to go back to the detention cell, but I pretended to misunderstand his words I said, “I am very thankful to you.” Then, slowly heading towards the prison gate, I walked as if nothing had happened. He must have seen me from his office, and he quickly rushed outside and asked, “Hey, where do you think you are going?”

I replied, “I am going back to the temple, just as you ordered me to”.

He shouted, “I told you to go back to the detention cell, and not to the temple! Criminals like you deserve a death sentence or life imprisonment, let alone release! What a stubborn stupid you are! Stop playing dumb!”

After working with Mr. Sáu Búa for almost 3 months, in 1981 I was served an indictment by the secretary of the Minh Hải People’s Provincial Court. More than a week later, I was summoned for a trial together with 21 other accused. We were kept in 11 different cells and on the last day, every one of us was mentally ready to be taken to Bac Lieu for the trial.

Inmates from the 11 different rooms gave us food and drinking water. It was a common practice here to boost the moral of other political prisoners before they faced their trial in court. We were loaded onto a completely covered truck, followed by a convoy-escort with fully armed taskforces wearing nametags on their uniforms. Suddenly, I remembered a poem from my childhood, a poem about a prisoner's life written by an author whose name I could not remember:

Being transported around without having to pay
High officials, elderly and youth all keep away
Being guarded when in the restroom
Watched when sleeping in the cell
Vehicles, convoys, always there for use
Shuttle back and forth like a dreamland
Meals served without fees
This is indeed a better place than a Buddhist Temple!

Arriving in Bạc Liêu, we were kept in custody at the provincial criminal police station, where we were two years ago. There I met some old criminal prisoners whose faces I recognized—most of them got serious sentences. Besides those, there were a good numbers of new prisoners in the 60-70 age range and even scores of children as young as 13-16 years of age. They all looked so skinny in their torn clothes; their faces very pale and their bodies all covered with scabies.

We were informed that the trial would go public in Bạc Liêu City to set an example to the people. Based on the experiences of those who were imprisoned long enough, it looked like I would be executed when the case was reviewed, according to Act 03, Section A. The trial was set to begin at 8:00 A.M. the next day.

That night I could not sleep a wink. My eyes were wide open; my mind drifted away. I prayed to Buddha while waiting for the next morning when my fate would be decided. Suddenly, early the next morning, two passenger cars came up into the criminal police department. I saw 4 strangers dressed casually but neatly. They passed by and looked into our cell. They then ordered the police to tell the prisoners—all 21 of us—to get dressed quickly and get onto the car, each pair of prisoners handcuffed together. As soon as we got in the car, we learned that the trial was postponed, and we were to be transferred back to Cà Mau.

Three months later, I received the decision that the second indictments would be tried according to Decree 3, Articles A & B.

My fellow inmates guessed that with this kind of trial I would hopefully receive a life sentence, but there was no guarantee that I would escape the death sentence. This time, the trial would be held at the court house and not in public like the previous one in Bac Lieu.

Once again, fellow inmates in the ward sent gifts to the 21 of us as a way to say farewell. They even asked me to bring their gifts for those who were to face death penalty, should I be given death sentence and come to stay with the formers in their cell. It was the cell for those convicts having the worst sentences and kept in complete isolation from others.

First, they were isolated from the general ward; with both their hands and legs shackled all day and night. There, they were waiting for their death sentence to be commuted to life imprisonment or to be taken away for execution.

So, for the third time the 21 of us returned to the Criminal Police office. When the trial began in the court room, I saw people come in and out constantly. Among the people who attended the hearing that day, besides relatives of the accused, I noticed a few Buddhists

around the age of 80; who traveled from Cái Dầy Hamlet and Châu Hưng Village to the court. Seeing me in handcuffs, they sobbed; many asked the guard for permission to give us something such as little gifts or money.

When the trial began, the first thing each accused was asked was his/her personal history followed by questions and cross examination. I was always the last one to be called. That day, standing at the witness stand, I stared directly at the prosecutor, judge, and jury. I asked the judge, Mr. Ung Ngọc Uyển, “Since 15-06-1976, there have been 2 official delegations in the country: one led by Mr. Phạm Hùng, secretary of the Southern Region of the Vietnamese Communist Party, representing the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam; the other by Mr. Trường Chinh, representative of the North, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The two sides have sought a political settlement in order to reunify the two regions of the country. Since that date, the two governments are unified under one new name: the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, having the same flag, emblem, badge, national anthem and so on, and the flag of the National Liberation Front of South of Viet Nam was declared dead - so how come my Indictment was based on Decree 03, signed on 10-11-1967 by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam which is the law during wartime? Thus, I request that the Judicial Committee of today’s Court confirm which government they represent. Do they represent the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Viet Nam or the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam?”

Judge Ung Ngọc Uyển- an intellect during the time Vietnam was ruled by France (both he and his younger brother studied in France,

his brother being the former Minister of Foreign Affairs under the Northern Regime) -was an expert in reasoning and had a lot of experience in the court house. He quickly explained that, “All the questions and arguments by the defendant are quite good. Since that day, 15-06-1976, all the Decrees by the Republic Government of South Viet Nam and the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam were systematized to be the general law of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. The reason why it was not written in the subpoena must be the mistake of the court secretary, and we will review it later.”

In this trial, Mr. Ung Ngọc Uyển also asked, “Do the accused, Thích Thiên Minh, realize that your actions have caused harm to the people or not?”

I replied, “Any political organization is formed with people at the base, because people are the foundation that gives it the strength.

The organization would then fight for its people and with its people to achieve true benefits, welfare and happiness for everyone. It was my purpose to do just that. Should any of my actions accidentally go against people’s wishes it would be against my wish.”

Ung Ngọc Uyển asked, “Do you, the accused, find yourself guilty of your actions to the people or not?”

I countered, “Your honor, I feel guilty to the people (at that, the whole Judicial council nodded in consent); I feel sorry because my mission ended in premature failure and that caused my miserable people even more suffering. I could not fulfill my duty to my people or to my homeland, For a Buddhist monk like me, it was one of the four greatest gifts that I should offer to the people. Had I been successful in that duty, I would definitely not be here today.”

On hearing my answer, Mr. Ung Ngọc Uyển ordered the guard to turn off the microphone; then he threw at me some uncivil words: he said that I was a devil wearing a monk's outfit, an evil being out to destroy people's lives and to betray the fatherland.

The verdict came two days after the trial. Prior to the sentencing, the court was adjourned for 20 minutes before the deliberation of verdict (I knew for a fact that they were actually inside the hall taking a leisurely break and the verdict had already been made!

When I pretended to go to the restroom, I saw them sitting, drinking, smoking in the room). After the 20 minute recess, Mr. Ung Ngọc Uyển, on the behalf of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and the Minh Hải Provincial Court declared:

“The People's Court of Minh Hai Province, based on Articles A & B of Decree 3, issued on November 10, 1967 by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam, has carefully considered the case of the accused, Thích Thiện Minh and sentenced him to life imprisonment.”

5. AT THE COURT OF APPEAL.

Several months after I went to court, the detention center in Cà Mau was moved to the Cây Gừa detention center located in ward 5 of Thạnh Bình village in Giá Rai district, Minh Hải province. This facility held about one thousand prisoners, and was about 300 meters away from the Re-education Camp of Cây Gừa.

At that time, this Re-education Camp was holding approximately five to six thousand prisoners on average. Sometimes, the population grew as high as ten thousand, especially during the time of mass concentration for Re-education. The chief invigilator was Tam Y, a Lieutenant Colonel. Thousands of prisoners, servicemen of all ranks as well as civil employees of the old regime were once kept here. The population of the center reached its peak during the time when people flocked to flee away to seek freedom and new place to live and got caught. Hundreds of escapees were captured and about 50 to 70 were released each day, most of them were children, sick or elderly people or expecting mothers etc...

Healthy people were also released if they had money or gold to bribe for their freedom. It was by those means that the chief of the detention center and the management team quickly became rich. Just like "Tám Y", the chief of Cay Gua detention center, a captain by the name of Võ Văn Tiến got rich quickly with his cruel, wicked, greedy way to treat the prisoners

Since April 30, 1975, thousands of prisoners shed their sweat and tears and worked tirelessly to transform Gây Gừa center, an immense rice field to a nice barrack with adequate shelters and facilities. Many tombs of prisoners executed from a confrontation with the detention center's guards could still be found on the ground around the barrack.

I still remembered a few days after April 30, 1975; Mr Diem, the village chief who used to put to jail many Việt Communists who came out at night to sabotage the area with things like blowing up roads and bridge with dynamite, or spreading handbills against the regime etc.

When the Việt Communists took over the South, he was among the first to be executed in the village. Prior to the execution, they assembled the villagers to be told of his crimes. Some who had previously gone over to the Communists beat him up ruthlessly

with sticks, stones or poles. He was bleeding profusely with wounds from head to toe. His hands were tied, and they put a cloth and lime in his mouth, and then covered it with a black handkerchief. A few people even ran up and gave dead blows on his head with big stones before he was tied to a tree and shot three times. When he finally collapsed under those blows, the execution leader came and, drawing his head up, gave the last “favor shot” on his temple. His body was then thrown into a big pit.

Going back to the time when I was transferred to Cây Gừa detention center, more than a month later, I received the Decision to review my Sentence from the Provincial Court of Appeal signed by Judge Hũn Vi Định.

This resulted in my having to go back to the Provincial Criminal Police Detention for the fourth time. I spent a night in this facility waiting for the trial, which began the day after. This time in particular, all members of the Judicial Committee were from the North except for the Representative of the Court of Investigation who was a Southerner.

They all looked imposing in their black suits; their close-set teeth dyed an ominous black. I knew nothing about physiognomy of the devils, but the first sight of those gave me the impression that I was facing the real ones. I thought I was taken by imagination or optical illusion and I tried to focus my eyes on their appearances. I guessed they were about 60-70 years old, and in the North, the custom of dying one’s teeth black also dated back to about that time range. But it was no longer practiced these days, and it might still be seen only in places where Ethnic minorities lived up in the mountains of North Vietnam. I wondered if this judge or those jurors serving in the Court of Appeal or Supreme Court were keeping this custom as a way of showing off “their power” of executioners.

In this trial, myself aside, I noticed the presence of my mother and my younger brother Huỳnh Hữu Nhiều. The rest were the four policemen who escorted me and the Judicial Committee which consisted of five people:

5. One prosecutor
6. Two civilian jurors
7. One Judge
8. One Secretary

It was meant to be closed to the public and the defendant's family was not informed of the trial. My mother learned about it thanks to my brother who was making his living as the driver of a carriage-bicycle and it was by chance that he learned where and when my trial would begin.

When I was standing at the witness stand, the judge asked me, "What was the motive that drew you to join the movement against the government?"

I replied, "Seeing our people in deep suffering, having no freedom; human rights disrespected; the Vietnam Reunified Buddhist Organization threatened, and religions in danger of extinction. In addition, religion is considered a kind of opium to be eliminated according to Marxist-Leninism. The temple where I was residing as an abbot was threatened then seized and turned into a government place. This is why I stood up to fight for justice."

The judge stared at me. He then methodically analyzed the situation and lectured me. He said: "The present disarray is due to the havoc wreaked by the war, This government is left with the remnants of the old regime of the Saigon and American governments. The country is in a state of transition, and the government officials' expertise is still limited. Instead of sympathizing with the situation and joining others in rebuilding the

country, the defendant shows strong opposition and conspires to overthrow the government. The defendant is obsessed with reactionary thinking, fawning upon the American imperialists and aggressive international groups. In fact, thousands of both civil and military officials, armed with modern weapons such as tanks, ships, planes, etc., had to run away and surrender unconditionally. Thus, what can a group of 30-50 dissenters without a weapon in their hands do? It is like throwing eggs at stones, or putting themselves in a tiger's mouth!"

The judge's lecture went on and on for 20 minutes. Many times, I raised my hand to oppose or have my reasoning, but he refused and/or avoided to hear my arguments. Finally, the verdict was delivered: lifetime-imprisonment as before. The judge recommended that the evidence and of this trial not to be destroyed and to be kept on file by the People's Court of Minh Hai Province. At the same time, he severely blamed the People's Lower Court of Minh Hải People for its inappropriate adjudication of Thích Thiên Minh's case.

In listening to them, I knew exactly what these executioners with blackened teeth wanted. They wanted to give me few gunshots and a last shot in favor as well. The statement of the judge was full of hatred and horrible words that stemmed from his discrimination and the long standing feud in class spirit.

As soon as the trial finished, the two police officers put handcuffs on my hands and took me to the car. I quickly turned to look at the back rows with the hope to see my mother or my younger brother. I saw my mother pull out a handkerchief and wipe her tears. Her hair was all white. My brother's skin was very dark with sunburn. He was skinny and very tall. Every day, he sweated transporting people on his carriage bicycle to make sure his family survives.

Every time I received support from home, I knew that it came from my brother's blood and sweat!

After the verdict was delivered in the Court of Appeal, on the way back to detention center of Cây Gừa, the car stopped at the market of "Hộ Phòng". Before, it was a dense and prosperous town with streets full of people and cars. Only six years after the Communists took control, the town became devastated. Several police officers got out of the car and walked through a group of students to the market. Only a few stayed in the car to watch over me. From a distance, passers-by saw me in the car with handcuffs surrounded by police and they knew that I was a prisoner. They bought cookies, cigarettes, medicated oil, etc., and approached the car in order to toss them to me. The policemen waved their hands to say no and shouted, "You are not allowed to come close to the car and bring gifts to the prisoner! Do you know what crime he's committed? He is a reactionary who conspired to overthrow the government. He just got a life-sentence!"

Among the crowd, a woman answered, "We do not care what crime he's committed! We just want to help prisoners; we know this person is in need!" An elderly woman, walking along with her grand-daughter said, "You say that he conspires to overthrow the government, huh? Then it is the absolutely right thing to do because people have been suffering so much. We will gradually die day by day, if people like you are still in power. No one can survive under this cruel government."

At that, two policemen quickly shut the car door and pulled the plastic cover down. Inside the car, I sat and pondered over those words and I could figure out what was going on in the mind of my people and what they really wanted.

6. CÂY GỪA DETENTION CENTER

My life-sentence was upheld by the Appeal Court. One day, Mr. Lâm Quang Dũng, the one who finalized my case before it was brought to court for trial, the one that I named “the good guy”, came to my detention cell and said, “Brother Ba Minh, do you want to be transferred to Cây Gừa detention center for outside labor work so you will be able to get the sunlight and fresh air? There’s so little sunlight in this cell, and you will easily get sick if you were to stay in here from dawn to dusk!”

I replied, “Thank you. Being a monk I am not concerned as to where I stay. Where there are people who believe in Buddha, then it’s the place for a monk. On the other hand, the monk’s presence should bring the faith in Buddha for people around that place. However, it’s not easy to get these favorable circumstances in prison, albeit good aspiration. Therefore I leave the decision to you.”

He continued, “Tomorrow, I will recommend a list of prisoners whose sentences have already been determined to be transferred over there in order to do physical labor. You should pack your belongings and get ready.” He then bid me farewell and on his way to the door, he turned his head, smiled and said, “Keep well, will you, Brother Ba Minh?”

Two days later, I was transferred to detention Cây Gừa along with some of the other inmates. At this facility, they search our belongings and bodies very thoroughly. Many personal belongings were seized; then we were kept in a separate ward, isolated from the others. I met some inmates who were detained in the same centres with me in Bạc Liêu and Cà Mau; they were also political prisoners.

This separate ward was a strong flat-top building, surrounded by three walls under constant round the clock watch by a squad of policemen. The building consisted of two rows divided back to back by a wall, with 6 consecutive rooms in each row. The front row held domestic political prisoners; the back row was for political prisoners from overseas comprising military and para-military forces in the organization under the command of Mr. Lê Quốc Túy and Mai Văn Hạnh.

The collapse of this organization was caused by a planted secret agent acting as a refugee to infiltrate in political and counter-intelligence organizations working in Thailand. Rumor had it that that secret agent's name was Tám Thậm, a police lieutenant at Cây Gừa Detention Center. After the incident he was promoted to be chief of police in Cà Mau province and right now he was a colonel in the army.

The rumors regarding Tám Thậm were as follows:

He was a lieutenant with little education. He was arrogant, obstinate, proud, etc., with a brutish looking beard. During the time he was on duty at Cây Gừa Detention center, his behavior was often under review for his violation of internal discipline and lack of ethics in his work. He often showed his discontent by developing a close relationship with old regime's military officers who were being "re-educated" there. In Cây Gừa, alcohol was not permitted, but Tám Thậm frequently bought booze and organized it so that they would get drunk with him. Actually, he played a friendly role to gain confidence in the old regime officers so he could infiltrate their operations easily.

It slowly built up the relationship among them and eventually, Tám Thân and these officers planned to escape to Thailand by stealing a boat that was seized and docked at the detention's harbor. At first, it was the plan of the communist Party leaders to have him help the officers flee the camp but deep down, he hoped that the officers would recommend him to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees as a reward for his help and he would be interviewed and admitted to resettle in a third country.

For more than 2 years in Thailand; people in his boat took turns getting interviewed and left the refugee camp for resettlement in a third country except for him. He had to wait and wait. He lost hope and became desperate. The High Commission for Refugees simply could not accept a person with three consecutive generations of communist record. His wish and his beautiful dream did not come true.

Thus when he heard about the recruitment for Lê Quốc Túy and Mai Văn Hạnh's political organization, he eagerly joined it. After being a member of this organization, he got all the training needed as well as funding for many activities. When the mission "Bring the Torch Back Home" started, he was among the first in the advance unit assigned to transport weapons, money, and military equipments of the organization to its secret base in Vietnam.

When the boat came to land, he was assigned to come ashore to scout out the area. Instead, he went to the area police and informed them of the whereabouts of the ship. Police troops and local guerrillas laid a massive siege. They searched the boat and confiscated all weapons, machinery, radio transmitters, and a large amount of counterfeit money. Since then, he was considered a hero for his achievement. He started bragging about his coming to Thailand and infiltration in the enemy organization in order to break down the conspiracy to overthrow the regime from abroad.

With his glib tongue, he made himself to be perceived as a great person with lofty aspiration, dedicated to the well-being of the people and the glory of the Party. The media at that time also extolled his “outstanding, victorious achievement”, which they claimed was “due to the education and discipline of the Party,”

Sometimes during drinking parties, he would declared himself as following the steps of Uncle HỒ who had ventured alone overseas in search for the salvation of the country. And he climbed up quickly in his career. In fact, everyone was fooled, and his success was due to more to his adherence to “opportunism” rather than “socialism”.

He was always proud of his well earned promotion, considering it the outcome of his ability and intellect. He was self conceited and looked down on others as if he were a national hero. Those who used to work with him pointed out that he was not actually a B2 or anything the like, that he got this post because of the above mentioned feat. They said he was a person of insignificant talent and mediocre education and the communist party would not use such a fool in international espionage. And they concluded:
“Talent is no comparison to luck”.

But I have digressed too much. Let me come back to the separate cell where I was confined. A police squad was posted on the flat roof day and night in order to watch and control our every move. On average, every 2 to 3 weeks, inmates in the front row cells were allowed to get outside once in the morning, to get some sunlight. But my cell, being considered black listed, was often denied that favour. The ones in the back row cells, labeled “foreigners”, were

treated differently. They got standard treatment and basic personal necessities and were even allowed to get out for sunlight twice a day, in the morning and afternoon.

For some reasons, infiltrators from overseas to work against the regime, caught and imprisoned, received a preferential policy. From time to time, they passed on to us news from abroad, and in return we informed them of the country's current situation.

Some among them knew me from way back but I completely forgot about them. They reminded me of the time when they were kept in this facility for re-education purpose while we were there for other reasons. This building used to be a school, and the authorities of that time used it as a concentration camp, since there was no detention center to keep all detainees as yet.

Being atheistic, the communists,
Never believing in God, Buddha, Deities or Saints
Utter blasphemous words towards them,
Destroy shrines, pagodas, churches
And keep priests, monks in re-education camp
Accusing religions of conspiracy
Turning schools into detention centres
Their sins and hatred pile up like a mountain

The connection between these inmates and myself went back like this:

About 2-3 years before I was arrested, Venerable Thích Trí Đức, representative of the Vietnam Reunified Buddhist Organization in Bạc Liêu assigned me to open a facility for charity acupuncture at Từ Quang temple, located in the village of Thạnh Bình in the Cây Gừa ward of Giá Rai district in Minh Hải province. This temple was just over 1 kilometer away from the concentration camp (then Cay Gua school) where the old regime's officers were held.

Everyday, soldiers of the first and second battalions of U Minh 1&2 of Minh Hải province came to the concentration camp and took prisoners out in order to build the barracks for their two battalions. Prisoners lined up in single file half a kilometer long with the troops strictly guarded from both sides. They were prohibited to have any contact with people.

When they passed by the temple, I noticed that most of them were middle-aged. They were so thin, and their skin had been tanned to dark sunburn. Some of them could not walk straight due to their sickness; many of them wore sandals with different straps. Their tattered clothes, mended with different colored rags or simply tied with pieces of string, barely protected them from the daily rain or sunshine.

I found out that most of them seldom got visits from their families. Due to food shortage and poor nutrition, inadequate medication, lack of bathing and insufficient clean drinking water, they succumbed to malaria, edema, and paralysis. Some lay writhing and groaning on the floor. Their only consolation they got came from their fellow inmates who, themselves, were in no better circumstances.

Seeing that, I entrusted a Buddhist member, who knew the officer in charge of the detention center by the name of Ba Đô, a.k.a. Ba Giò, to inform him about the acupuncture and herbal medicine service at Từ Quang temple and urged him to allow the sick prisoners to come there for free treatment.

A few days later, Captain Ba Đô replied, “After consulting with the leaders, we will allow the sick prisoners to come to the Temple for treatment, but the Temple has to submit a request to the camp

leaders of Cây Gừa detention, Minh Hải province, and the content of the request must be clearly stated”. As you can see, I had to ask for permission to do a good deed. A few days later, sick prisoners came to the temple for treatment. Among them, were members, officers as well as non-commissioned officers, from many different services such as special police, military security, outpost commanders, US commandos, etc. , .

Each day, about 5 to 10 of them came. Before they left, the Venerable Bhikkhuni Huệ Giác, Từ Quang temple’s abbess, always gave them some food such as bags of salted soybeans paste, rice coconut cakes, fruits, and items such as hats, raincoats, and even tobacco occasionally to cheer them up.

The most comfort thing for them was to see their families. Every week when I came back to Bạc Liêu, I informed their families, so they could come to meet and talk with their family members while being treated at the temple. This, however, had to be done discreetly; for had the police known about it, the treatment would be banned right away, and the temple would be in danger!

After their release, some detainees took their wives and children to visit the temple to pay homage to Buddha and to thank us. Not only did they come to Từ Quang temple where I treated them to show their appreciation, they also came as far as Vĩnh Bình temple, where I was resident abbot, in Cái Dầy Hamlet of Châu Hưng village in Vĩnh Lợi district of Bạc Liêu province.

Even now when I was at home writing my memoir of the 26 years I spent in prison, I was extremely surprised and very touched to receive gifts, as well as money from abroad going to the funds for my treatment. Among the senders were some I knew and some I didn’t. I also got letters from fellow citizens in Bạc Liêu now

residing in the US recalling stories of the old days when they were in the re-education camp of Cay Gua.

Some of them left the country under H.O. Program, while others fled by boat. I like to think that the miracle of the law of karma is very fair. It could be the small things I did for others during the time I was in prison for 26 years that got me out of danger whenever I faced with troubles or desperate situations, just like there were angels helping me.

I absolutely believe in the law of karma. As I stated above, it could be seen in the help of: Venerable Thích Huyền Quang – the Most Venerable Thích Quang Đô, Fourth Supreme Patriarch, Deputy Director of Vietnam Reunified Buddhist Organization, all the Venerables, the International Amnesty in London, all of my benefactors, my fellow citizens of Bac Lieu, relatives of my fifth aunt, Ms Đoàn Trang - Director of the Quê Hương radio station, Mr. Võ Văn Ái - Head of the International Buddhist Information Bureau and the Vietnam Reunified Buddhist Organizations in all continents.

I would like to acknowledge those good deeds which came from those hearts of gold and consider them as the most unforgettable memories during my life of religious practice. Being released after 26 years of imprisonment, sick and helpless without a place to live while my family members were in difficult time, I found it difficult to cope with things while trying to integrate to the new environment which seemed so unfamiliar during the first few days. The support from my benefactors was an indescribable boost to the morale and source of energy for those who did and will dedicate their life to the fight for their fellow countrymen and their religion. I always pray that those benefactors be blessed with security and good health as well as good wealth.

a. Karmic debt. All is well that ends well.

Back to the separate cell where we were confined at Cay Gua Detention Center, there was a story that still impressed me until these days:

In the squad that was watching on us day and night from the roof, there was a very young officer by the name of Tai. He was about 19 or 20 years of age with grade 8 or 9 of education. He seemed to have a dislike for me. It must be something bad we had done for each other during our previous lives that made me cross his path in this life. I had no sympathy for him just looking at his appearance, his attitude. He must have had the same feeling for me. He told some inmates in other cells next to us that he felt a dislike for me just by listening to my voice, though I did not do or say anything about him. I was just a prisoner and he a warden. I considered him a domineering, mischievous young man and I tended to ignore him. He must have felt that and showed his hatred in every possible occasion. Normally when a family sent gift/food to a prisoner, it would be brought to the cell for him. When gift from my family was sent on days that he was on duty, instead of having it brought to the cell for me, he would leave the parcel outside until it got rotten. Another time, my family sent money for my meal in the canteen, he did not inform me so I could manage my expense. It caused me some irritation at the beginning, but I later ignored it and considered it as nothing but karmic responses.

Tai had a brother in law in the Security Investigation squad, a lieutenant known all over the Detention center as a wicked thug. He lived with his wife in a house reserved for them by the center.

One day, his wife got serious breast infection after giving birth to their first child and it caused her great pain. At that time western medicine was hard to find and the hospital was quite a distance from the detention center. They were told of an herbal doctor at Tu Quang Pagoda, about 2 kms from the center, who was well known for his acupuncture and herbal prescription service. People in the area recommended them to go there for treatment.

A few days later they came to pay visit to the temple. When the Abbess of the temple, Bikkhuni Thich Nu Hue Giac, learned that the lieutenant was working at Cay Gua Detention Center, she told him that the herbal doctor was in fact the Rev. Thich Thien Minh who had been in custody there for the past 3 years. She then urged them to come and seek for his help right away.

Once they came back to the Detention center, the lieutenant checked and found out that I was indeed in custody at the separate cell under the guard of his brother in law Tai. He then told the latter to come and ask me for help.

The next morning, out of the blue, Tai came to open our cell and said: "It is beautiful and sunny outside. You guys can go out and get some sunshine." He then left for his post on the flat roof and walked back and forth, glancing down as if there was something in his mind. All 5 of us went out to the sun, looking at one another in bewilderment. We wondered why this scoundrel suddenly became so nice to us, how come he only opened our cell and not others. There must be something going on...

As expected, a few minutes later, the little devil came to stand right on top of my cell and looked down. With a nice gait and gesture, he smiled rather awkwardly and said: "Mr. Ba Minh, can I ask you

something? Is it right that while living out there, you were an herbalist and acupuncturist at the nearby temple?

I answered:” I didn’t live “out there”. I lived in the temple. I practiced acupuncture and filled out herbal medicine all right. Why do you ask? Are you going to investigate more on my personal history? In that case, you have to do it at a proper place.” He smiled and said:” I just want to make sure before asking for your help. It has nothing to do with investigation. Don’t be so difficult.”

I said: “What do you need my help for?”

Tai told me all about his brother in law and his sister coming to the temple to seek treatment for her....He finally asked if I had a way to help his sister. When I got all details about her sickness, I told Tai to bring me a spoonful of coconut oil and I would prepare the medicine in 5 minutes. I then told him to spread it on the swollen spot, using a chicken feather, and not to tell her anything about it.

About half an hour after the medicine was administered, the swollen spot got better, the redness decreased and the pain almost gone. That same evening, the troublesome warden came to my cell with his thanks and said his sister got a lot better. He then offered me a pack of expensive cigarettes. Though not a smoker, I took it and later gave it to my fellow inmates in the cell. From that day on, his behavior changed. He became friendly and always spoke to me in a nice way. As for me, I also found some good thing about his character and gradually had sympathy with him.

b. Failed attempt to escape Cay Gua detention Center.

I had been confined in the separate cell for nearly 6 months. There were five people in the cell; three of them-myself included-were

political criminals: Quách Văn Hoạch, with a death penalty commuted to life sentence, Trịnh Thanh Sơn with a 20-year sentence, and myself with a life sentence.

The other two common prisoners were Nguyễn Văn Tấn, a former special commando lieutenant assigned to be Leader of Vĩnh Mỹ village combatants in Vĩnh Lợi district, Bạc Liêu, and Đỗ Thành Công, a forest ranger both with life sentences.

Although we were here for different charges, being in the same situation, we helped and consoled each other through times of illness and difficulty. It could be said that we shared everything together; from a sip of water, a bowl of rice, a hand towel, a tablet of medicine to the trivial things such as needles, thread, etc.

In short, we understood and supported each other physically as well as mentally. We prisoners had the same desire: freedom. Sometimes we made a joke, which reflected the truth, like, “If you spend a 20 years sentence in a prison under Communist regime and wait until the day to be released then your life is as black as ink and you have no future to look for. So shall we just sit here and accept that ill fate to come?”

From that mutual thinking, we unanimously consented to dig an escape under the wall. The five of us would join together, dead or alive, to settle a life of anxiety and depression.

After our group discussion, I was assigned to set up the date and time to execute the plan as soon as possible. Based on a prisoner’s experience, when the plan was made, we could not wait nor postpone it because the delay would put us at risk since it was a dangerous and critical matter that affected each of us. Nguyễn Văn Tấn was a special-mission combatant with expertise in digging tunnels and scaling walls, so he was responsible for digging and teaching us how to stealthily climb, crawl, lie down, sit, run, etc..., how to camouflage, what color clothing to be worn at night or under the moonlight; how not to make scratchy sounds while

crawling on the dried leaves, or not to be detected when moving on corrugated iron roof. We also learned to break the surface of water without causing any splashing and how to wade in the mud and not leave our footprints or make them look like animal tracks – just to destroy the evidence or disorient the enemies. The rest of us were to bring the soil up from the tunnel and I had to supply them with food and water.

As the mission began, Tấn was very enthusiastic, being the first one to start the digging. He used a cast iron pot lid about 15 cm in diameter to dig a hole on the floor. It turned out that serious problems came up as we were proceeding further down. It took him a lot of sweat and tears to cut the big wooden piles that lay under the foundation. Besides, the air got stuffy as he went deep down and we had concerns regarding the possibility of suffocation or fainting. Moreover, this job was performed at night and candles or peanut oil lamps were immediately extinct when brought in the tunnel. To add to our problem, the amount of soil brought up from the tunnel was a few cubic meters and it covered most of our room space. In order to get to the outside, the tunnel had to be about 6-7 meters in length.

As I had planned and set a specific time for our escape, it would be raining around midnight. It happened exactly as planned, but I did not foresee the circumstances or obstacles and the ability of the digger that would impede the escape. Thus when it was time for us to go, the digging was not finished yet. There were so many sharp objects, pieces of broken glass and metal that cut the digger's hands. Tấn almost died of suffocation several times, and had to be treated with CPR. It was unfortunate seeing him exhausted with the hard work. Right at that moment, I became sick with

dysentery. It was so annoying that I had to use the restroom so often due to my bowel problem. Besides, Đỗ Thành Công's long dead mother's soul entered his body and said, "Fill up the tunnel; don't try to escape or you'll be in danger". But things were already in progress, so we had to keep going.

We were all exhausted by so many unexpected things that happened in the past few days. While we were taking a break, suddenly Trịnh Thanh Sơn got panicked and shouted, "Look, look! That's horrible! He's coming." He then fell down unconscious which frightened us even more. When he came to himself, we asked him what was happening.

Sơn said, "I saw a man about 60-70, naked with his ribs showing. His hands were cuffed in iron chains, and his body covered with blood, his long white hair went past his shoulder. He begged me to save him." This story following the diabolic recommendation of Công's mother, were clearly omens to warn us about the failure of the escape.

Since the mission had been in process, there was no way we could stop it and thus had to move on as planned. Outside, it was raining cats and dogs as the night wore on. We could hear the sound of the policemen's boots patrolling up and down the hall. Due to the rain, the ground became soft and that caused the tunnel to collapse. Tấn had been digging, and he was covered in the mud. Once again, I had to get under the tunnel to bring him up for CPR. It took a while for him to regain consciousness. When he awoke, he said that he was worn out and had no strength to continue with the digging. On the other hand, the four of us could not bring up the huge land mass that just filled up the collapsed tunnel. It looked like we were back to square one. We were indeed in a dilemma.

The next morning, we came to the bathroom to wash up. The incident of last night left us with an awkward aftermath since the soil from our room blocked the entire restroom in the back cells, occupied by inmates from Lê Quốc Túy and Mai Văn Hạnh's

organization. They notified the security staff on duty. The police then unlocked all the cells on both front and back rows to check on them.

When they opened the door to our room and saw the huge mass of soil, they ran out and up to the watchtower to sound the alarm by shooting into the sky.

We finally ended up in failure. The Court investigators came to take pictures and film the scene. We were each put in a separate room for questioning. Records were made, and the camp superintendent recommended the Court of Investigation to prosecute the five of us.

Family's visit and gift/food were banned. My legs were shackled for days and nights for more than a year until I was transferred to Xuân Phước camp, in the Phú Khánh province of central Vietnam. Tấn was brought to court for a trial. He was charged with betrayal the Party, helping the reactionaries in the plot to break the prison and escape to collaborate with hostile people to overthrow the so called revolutionary government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. He received the death penalty and was executed. Although our plan to escape failed and Tấn had to pay for it with his life, I would like to say this aloud to acknowledge his enthusiastic contribution in the unsuccessful escape from jail, and prayed that his spirit -- my fellow inmate from Bạc Liêu - would be free in the pure land.

Chapter 6

Xuan Phuoc Detention Center

primeval haunted jungle – A Death Valley

1. Thai Thi Kim Van, a heroin.

After the failed in escape from the detention center, for over a year, I was chained to a shackle day and night, deprived of family visits and gifts. My legs got shrunk to a crippled state, my vision blurred, my body wasted away. Then one day, out of the blue, a security officer came and told me to gather my belonging for an immediate transfer. Less than 5 minutes later, the door was open and inmates from next door cells came, lifted me up and carried me to the vehicle for a trip to an unknown destination.

My new group consisted of 20 males and one female namely:

1. Mr. Huynh quang Tien, major, former commander of the Engineer Battalion of Bac Lieu Province.
2. Mr. Danh Hong, former non-commissioned officer in the Army Band of the 21st Division.
3. Mr. Truong Hong Phen, former non-commissioned supply officer in the 4th Army corps.
4. Mr. Quach Van Hoach, former non-commissioned supply officer in the Regional Forces of Bac Lieu Province.
5. Mr. Huynh Huu, former officer of the Dalat Military Academy.
6. Mr. Nguyen Hong Phuc, former officer of the Thu Duc Military Academy.
7. Mr. Nguyen Long Hoi.
8. Thai Kim Lai.

9. Truong Van Nam.
10. Dang Van Hai.
11. Trinh Thanh Son.
12. Le Van Tai.
13. Vo Anh Dung.
14. Lam Van Hoang.
15. Nguyen Van Manh.
16. Nguyen Thanh Xuan.
17. Nguyen Thanh Phong.
18. Huynh Van Ba.
19. Lam Hong Suong.
20. Ly Son.
21. Ms. Thai Thi Kim Van, former Instructor of the Women Military Academy.

It was an interesting coincidence that my former political prisoner group happened to consist of 20 males and a female and this journey also had the same number of male and female prisoners. Especially during this journey into exile, Thai Thi Kim Van got all the attention and favor from all of us. It was not only that she was the only female inmate but she was highly regarded, respected and admired for her reputation as a heroin in Bac Lieu Province. In fact she had the iron will of a nobleman and the heart of a ‘woman of outstanding talent and sense of purpose’. She used to be an instructor in history and geography at the Women Military Academy. A native of Saigon, she joined the ‘National Self-determination Front’ and was sentenced to life imprisonment for her rank of Chief of Cabinet at the Front Headquarter. When I first got to prison, she had been known among the prisoners for her enthusiasm, skill, loyalty and courage. She was also eloquent with trenchant words. Twice, her skill in retorting at the judicial committee made the jurors short of argument. For that, she was hated but not treated with disrespect. I heard so much about her but

never had a chance to meet with her. She always led struggle movements for the right to live, and the demands of prisoners. Her iron will surpassed that of many men. She got shackled and ill treated with all measures applied for male prisoners. On top of that she was hit on the face by the guards and lost her teeth for shouting ‘Down with the Communists’ in front of the camp. During this long journey I had a chance to meet and talk with her . In return, she told me she had heard about me, a monk who always braved many dangerous battles for others. This encounter left a memorable souvenir during the time of hardship living in exile, experienced by those who had been fighting for their country and their people.

Two nights in transit at Chi Hoa prison – a confrontation with prison bully with a peaceful end.

The 21 of us were loaded into a vehicle which left early in the morning. But due to formalities, fuel, food supplies and armed escorts, we didn’t come to Saigon until the evening. In those years, street lighting in the city was patchy and gloomy. Places like army barracks, police stations or important government buildings were well lit, others looked dim and desolate. Not many people went out. The streets were desert with a few stores. But there appeared many VCs in a hodgepodge of uniforms of a ragtag army. Just looking at the front of the high rises with cloth lines of garments of all kinds and colors – from women’s underwears to men’s T-shirts fluttering in the wind, one could see the new way of life, the so called ‘civilized way of life’ that the new regime bragged about during their victorious achievements! The tall buildings with big red flags with a yellow star or huge slogans denoted locations for commie big shots. Thus:

Saigon, capital of many splendors
Known for its graceful and joyful past
Now becomes so gloomy and deserted

Thanks to the austere law of the Communist regime.

Before people traveled around in cars, scooters
Now they walked around on foot
The 'civilization' that the political commissars brag about
In fact brings the country back to hundred years' time.

The lack of fuel, electricity, charcoal, water
And other basic necessities
Is like an arrow shot in the sky
And falls to the ground as there was no target up there to hit.

Having committed myself to riding the tiger's back
I close my eyes and let fate runs its course
Getting off is to be devoured in pieces
So I'd leave it to fate

Seeing the country in a gloomy state
Young generations in dilemma
Many indulge themselves in wild, extravaganza
While others are disappointed and pessimistic

Living in jail and becoming disabled
My life is hanging on a thin thread
Like a mistletoe on a tree
Easily destroyed like a dew in the sunray

Those who can distinguish between good and evil
Quickly leave the noisy and gaudy places
For the secret bases in the jungle and fight
Against the devilish wicked rulers.

Temple churches, pagodas are shut down

Priests, monks, dignitaries, pastors
Christians, and believers in all religions oppressed.

Together with youth, old men and women
They rise up like tempest on the sea
Some open, others secretly leave for the good cause
From urban to rural areas
They all come on their own will.

It took us one day to reach Saigon and it was Saturday evening when we got there. We were sent to Chi Hoa prison to spend two nights. The journey would continue on early Monday morning. On Sunday, the small town oafish cops from Bac Lieu took time off for sightseeing in Saigon, Cho Lon. They took the rice in our food supply and sold it for their own expenses because the price of rice was very high in Saigon at that time. The 20 male prisoners in our group were to stay in the upper floor of section AH where the common prisoners were kept. Ms. Thai Thi Kim Van was confined on the main floor reserved for female prisoners.

As of courtesy, we, the newcomers all smiled and nodded to greet the prisoners in the cell. All of a sudden, a young man in his 20, half naked, wearing a pair of blue shorts with lots of tattoos on his body, came to stand in the middle of the room, pulling his shorts down very low to the pubic hairline. He clapped his hand three times, standing akimbo and shouted: "Quiet! Order" Everyone in the room got completely quiet, sitting up and stared at us. When everyone was quiet, the young man looked at us and said: "You newcomers, listen to me. You'll have to obey the rules in this cell. Right now, I ask all of you to take off your clothes except for your shorts, kneel down on your knees and face the wall. Do it now!". I was taken aback by this strong, authoritative behavior and could not believe my ears at such impossible command. We all looked at

each other in bewilderment, not knowing what to do. The young prison bully got impatient and repeated his order again’

Meanwhile, in the first row, Major Huynh Quang Tien and Mr. Nguyen Long Hoi turned and looked at me at the back row to ask what to do. I noticed that the majority of the 40-50 inmates of the cell looked weak and sick, while those in our group were physically fit because they used to be military officers and martial arts instructors, especially Mr. Danh Hong, of Khmer origin, whose kungfu trained muscle is said to be knife proof. As for myself, though I was weak in walking but I could use my hands for self defense when it came to blows. I just couldn’t accept this attitude towards those who fought for a good cause like us. So, I said aloud: “ We are a group of political prisoners, most of us got life sentences commuted from death sentence. We revolted to save our people, including you all. We are here for just 1 or 2 nights and would be gone by Monday morning to an exile in Central Vietnam. We do not know if we can survive it or when to be released. How can you treat us like this during our temporary stay here

The young prison bully asked again: “What kind of sentence did you say you guys got?

I answered: ‘We are all political prisoners, involved in a plot to overthrow the regime. We all get death sentences reduced to life imprisonment’.

On that, the young guy quickly pulled his shorts up, had an inmate handed him a shirt to put on. His attitude completely changed. He became very mild and courteous in his words, calling us his elderly and asked for forgiveness. He said this AH quarter was for common criminals and he thought we were of those natures. Then coming straight to where I was sitting, he sat down and said: ‘Please forgive me. You are rather hot tempered yourself’. He then came to the middle of the room, clapped his hand three times again and ordered the old inmates to move to the rear and leave the

middle space for us. He also asked those who still had some water reserved to bring it down so we could have a bath.

After the wash up, we all felt nice and good after a long, tiring journey. A basket of steaming hot rice was brought up from the jail kitchen, but our food and luggage were left in the vehicle. Once again, the young guy gave order to those who had food in reserve to bring it to us. It was moving to see everyone gleefully sharing their food with us. There was even vegetarian food for me too!

That night the 20 of us could hardly sleep while everyone in the cell sat around to share their stories and experience with us in a cozy atmosphere. Apparently the severe atmosphere in the room was relaxed on our behalf and everyone could sit comfortably and talk. Two young kids were assigned to massage my crippled legs and an inmate helped me walk around for the blood circulation in my feet. The next morning was Sunday and the whole cell was alive with singing. Since I did not know any song, I told some stories. Very early the following day, the whole cell got up at 4 o'clock to see us off. It was a farewell full of sentiment and hope.

We shook hands and gave each other the best wishes possible. The vehicle left Chi Hoa prison and headed for Dong Nai. On the way we passed by provinces of Dong Nai, Long Khanh, Binh Tuy, Binh Thuan, Ninh Thuan. As it was getting dark, we stopped at Nha Trang prison and passed a night there. The 20 male inmates each had one foot in the stock chained to a shackle in the investigation room while Ms. Kim Van spent the night in a room in the woman penitentiary where leaf hats were made. The next morning when we were all set in the vehicles, Kim Van gave us the good news that the Nha Trang woman penitentiary gave each of us a dry pancake and a leaf hat with good wishes for the journey. As the vehicles passed along the dry, parched fields, we saw yards of cassava (the H34 type from India) put out to dry in front of every house, even on the roads. They were cut into slices and dried to eat

with rice for food. Away on the patches of grass, some cows looking all skin and bones, walked slowly with long necks, flat belly and dazed eyes. In this place, even human did not have enough to eat, let alone animals.

As I was taken by the new sceneries; the sun set down behind the Truong Son mountain range, leaving a fading pink light over the distant horizon. Wild birds came back to their nests when we arrived at the gate of the detention center. A huge board mounted on two concrete pillars of 7 to 8 meters said ‘Xuan Phuoc Re-education Camp’. Multicolored flags fluttered on the top of the pillars, giving the image of a sorcerer’s cave or shrine. Indeed this was the place that those who had stayed and survived gave a horrifying name ‘The Death Valley’ – a living hell for the inmates. After going through the admission formalities we were first struck by the bad news: this camp is for males only and Ms. Kim Van would be admitted and had to be brought back to Bac Lieu. I felt so bad for a woman like her to spend all the time traveling back and forth for a place in prison. Though she was known to be dauntless and tough, Ms. Kim Van could not hide her emotion when she came to say goodbye to our group. Tears ran down on her face as she wished to stay and share the hardship with the group in this miserable exile. Only a year later did we learned that she was transferred to Ham Tan Z30D re-education camp in Binh Thuan. The harsh weather and the forced labor at the camp took a heavy toll on her and she was taken down with pulmonary tuberculosis. Her family sent many requests for her release on bail to be treated outside but we didn’t know what happened after that. We have not heard from her since. With this memoir, I would like to send my best wishes for her peace and wellbeing.

CHAPTER 7

Living witnesses at the Death Valley

The distance between Cay Gua Education Camp in Minh Hai and the one at Xuan Phuoc in Phu Khanh (now Phu Yen Province) was over 1,200km and it would take 2 nights and 3 days to arrive at the destination in case the truck stopped overnight at a resting place. Xuan Phuoc camp (aka camp A20) was composed of 3 sub camps, each could hold about 1,000 prisoners. The camp was located in a valley, surrounded by gloomy mountains and forests of the Truong Son mountain chain. It looked like the end of mountains and rivers or the end of the earth with no people in sight.

Prisoners doing their labor duties might see some ethnic minorities with backpack baskets on their shoulders going to work on the hills or looking for woods or hunting. At the time, almost all prisoners of national security violation were held in cells of Sub Camp 1. Formerly, the whole camp was the re-education center for military officers of the old regime, except for 2 cells for non-political offenders. Because of severe weather conditions with extreme heat or endless rains in the forest, prisoners easily got sick with diseases such as malaria, jaundice, paralysis, kidney stones, blindness, tuberculosis or insanity. Living in miserable conditions, having not enough food, medicine and family support, prisoners arriving here would either never make it to the end or come back home in a tattered body and be a burden to their families.

Following were my verses describing Xuan Phuoc prisoner camp:

Xuan Phuoc camp, Phu Khanh
In the prison at Chi Thanh, Dong Xuan,
Notoriously known as the Death Valley,
Prisoners from far and wide in the country
Come to this highland reformatory
Surrounded by rolling mountains and forests.

Truong Son mountain chain serves as a fort
To guard the border of Central Vietnam

Phu Khanh is a combination
of Phu Yen and Khanh Hoa

Not a house in sight along Truong Son mountains
Only parched meadows far from the green streams
A horrifying desolate region
With nothing but burning sun, endless rains and wild beasts

Clouds shrouded the gloomy forests
In the valley lie three immense prisons
Where thousands of prisoners doing hard labor
Or detained, shackled in dark cells.

Many people had already died before I arrived at this camp
... and now:

Many graves covered by green grass for years
With no one burning a joss-stick for them
And no friend accompanying the deceased to their grave.

Surviving prisoners said that when people on the Viet Nam Thuong Tin ship, for some reason, came back to Vietnam after their trip to escape the regime, hundreds of them were kept as prisoners at this camp. Most were finally gone, with only a few lucky ones who made it until now. Xuan Phuoc camp was known for its discipline sections with 3 kinds of shackles: round, V shape and V shaped with saw-notches swivels. Depending on their attitudes, prisoners were treated differently. Some were given rice soaked in salted water, so salty that nobody could swallow. At these prisons, security guards were assigned to torment the prisoners, beat them up cruelly, reduce their water or meal supplies. At K1 camp the security guard by the name of Tan, a criminal convict with bloodshot eyes, was known for allegedly

eating human's livers in Cambodia. The security guard at K2 camp was Cua, another criminal convict, formerly a Captain in the Army. These 2 people, both military convicts, were chosen by the camp supervisor to keep order of the camp. During my detention at K2, whenever it was Cua's turn to distribute meal, he always shockingly lashed out at political and religious prisoners, swearing at and even insulting the holy spirits.

While in solitary confinement at K2, I once felt badly sick and was transferred to camp K1 for treatment. I could only walk step by step with the help of 2 crutches. Annoyed with my slowness, Cua nagged me endlessly and pushed me down with the sole of his foot so fiercely that I could not stand up. He then used ropes to tie me up in some coconut leaves and dragged me along the stony road so badly that I was covered with blood all over and shouted at me all the while. Luckily, an ox cart from the prison camp passed by on the way to collect cassava. He stopped it and, with the help of the driver, threw me on the cart like a piece of log. And he let me all trussed up until we almost arrived at the camp.

During the time at the discipline confinement at K2, Father Nguyen Huy Chuong died of starvation, serious illness, without being treated in time because of red-tape procedures, especially out of religious prejudice. There were days when Father Nguyen Huy Chuong and Reverend Thich Hue Dang (aka Nguyen Ngoc Dat) had to wash and count their portions of rice grain by grain, about some tens of grains altogether. The two religious leaders looked at each other and shook their heads: the water was too salty, the rice full of grits and the slices of manioc were mouldy. The water given was so salty that prisoners were all dried up with thirst. Whenever a prisoner was called up for questioning, on the way back, he would make a quick drop at the smithery and gulped down as much as possible the water used to cool hot iron in the forge so that they would later urinate to share it with others in the cell. Those

doing labor duties and allowed to take a bath also tried to drink as much as they could to share the water with others in that way.

Under the ruling of Colonel Than Yen, the most cruel warden of them all, Xuan Phuoc was a living hell. From prisoners living at Xuan Phuoc during this period one learned about the brutality of the wicked Communist regime. No one but inmates working as ‘antennas’ would support this thug. Things got a little better when Than Yen was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Van Bang. But Bang was a military type who preferred fighting to politics. He used to disparage political prisoners, even his subordinates. One day, it rained so hard that part of the rice seedlings that our group had just planted was washed away. Standing on the rice bank, Bang lashed us out as lazy parasites. When Educator-warden Truc tried to point out the prisoners’ difficulty in putting rice out to dry during rainy season, Bang scolded him in front of all of us, calling him an ill-bred subordinate who was defending reactionaries.

Bang used to tell us that we, subversive saboteurs, “would be detained until the day we were too weak to walk”. This was also a phrase used often by the wicked heads of wardens. So it must be a directive from Vietnamese Communist Party’s Central Committee in Hanoi that they must follow to the letter. Prisoners at Xuan Phuoc camp came from 3 different regions of the country, different social backgrounds and ages, from callow youth to seniors over 80 years old.

There are crippled war veterans,
Those who lost their limbs
Youth as young as 15
And seniors over 80

People of different religions, ethnic groups
Some Catholics, Buddhist, Caodaiist
Others polytheist, *Hòa Hảo*, B'hai
And Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese, *Tày*, *Chàm*, highland
mountaineers

There are heads of hamlet, village, district, city and ministers
Field officers, generals and officials
Teachers, doctors, students
People of different levels of alliances and parties

There are members of Humanism, People's Revolutionary
Party, Coexistence, Humanitarianism
Labor, Great Vietnam, National Citizens' Parties
They are all political prisoners
Under Communist Law

Prisoners have to work all week long, including Sundays.
Sometimes they work through the night
Those who object will be put into isolated cells
With four limited rations plus internal regulations

Prisoners' labor is taken for granted
When power is in the hand of the Authorities
With bayonet, machine guns,
Electric whip to torture those who dare to resist

There are solitary confinements or dark cells
With different kinds of fetters, stocks, shackles
And the cut of visits, gift or money from family
Or hard discipline in isolated cells at "white house"

Wardens disparage prisoners with coarse words

And torture them brutally with rods
Three, four of them whip one prisoner with electric rod
Until he's all covered with blood.

While being investigated or tortured
Prisoners are asked whether they are "at ease" with the re-
education policy,
In order to be left alone,
They certainly have to deceive themselves in this reply

For "at ease" is only a formula
Since there is no ease while being banished to this hell on
earth

Or when having a hard labor sentence
Living far away from one's native land

There is no ease of mind
When thinking of "the country" during the night
There is no ease of mind in this dishonest and greedy
Communist regime
When their words and actions are unreliable
There is no ease of mind while living far from one's family
and relatives

From one's siblings, from blood relatives
Far from one's wife, children and loved ones
Devoid of everything, spiritual or material

There is no ease of mind when freedom is lost
When being down with diseases
When one's family is in destitute
And some die in poverty

There is only ease of mind when truth is found

There is only ease of mind when there is strong will to fight
There is only ease of mind when there is dauntless ideal
And with those, one day we shall win

1. THE MENTAL AND MATERIAL LIFE OF PRISONERS AT XUAN PHUOC.

Prisoners at this Death Valley Camp valley were facing serious shortage and difficulties in their mental and material lives.

- a. Spiritually, prisoners were limited or forbidden to practice their religious beliefs. No religious publications of any kind were allowed, even those published by the government. The only newspaper they could read was Nhan Dan, a Government propaganda.
- b. Materially, with their life sentences, living far from their native places, many prisoners came here in their prime and left prisons old men.

It is pitiful for those who have to search for wild greens to live

Eating grass, banana peels or water hyacinth

Raw crickets, locust, toads, shell fish, crab or tree frogs
Beetle, larvae, snake or even salamander
Those who find an extra piece of manioc would consider
themselves lucky
Prisoners live in that condition
Regardless what weather of the year be
They easily get scabies, edema, paralysis
Blind, deaf, tuberculosis, kidney, bladder
And finally succumb and die at Xuan Phuoc prison

Those long time prisoners, addicted to cigarettes but having no means to buy, having no supplies from family, had to beg it from their fellow inmates. This was not easy since the others were not better off themselves, and it was more difficult to give up smoking. The only way they could do to ease their craving was looking for some butts from others' ashtray at night to make "new" cigarettes for themselves.

The prison slang for cigarette butts hunting is "mole cricket hunting" [i.e. rough and smelly], a butt with more cigarette left is called "large brown cricket" [i.e. meaty and juicy]

Some prisoners addicted to cigarettes had to pick up butts to satisfy their craving

Others stayed under the verandah during hot summer to bake flour to ease their hunger

How unjust and absurd it is to condemn those who do not believe in Communist theory as "reactionaries"

And those who show their patriotic love to be guilty of "overthrowing" the Government.

During the high time of the boat people exodus, thousands of people tried to flee the country. Those who were caught and brought back would be charged for being "traitors" or illegal emigrants.

However those lucky ones who made it to another country, after settling down overseas and had a chance to come back to visit Vietnam would be respectfully called "Vietnamese patriots" due to the US dollars they brought with them. Those unlucky ones being caught back would be put in prison, even for a short time, and their properties confiscated. With no visit from family, not enough food to eat and living in poor conditions in deep forests, many of them finally died.

Millions of people fled away
Not able to live under the Communist regime
They are also patriots
Not traitors against their fellow citizens

Even lamp posts would dream of fleeing if they had legs
People who fail to flee away would be condemned as illegal
emigrants

Those who escape and have comfortable lives in other countries,
upon their return to visit their relatives in Vietnam, would be
respectfully treated by the government as patriots.

2. Failure in the second attempt to escape prison and free prisoners.

In the Death Valley of Xuan Phuoc, prisoners were cruelly treated,
living in destitute and severe conditions. Hundreds of elderly
inmates were in critical conditions, suffering with their pain and
miseries like rotten tree branches that could die any time. Invalids
whose desperation wore them down every hour of the day had to
resign to their fates. Many more were burned down by forced labor
or cruel, savage beating. All that brought to a few deaths every
month. Witnessing those terrible scenes, I felt sad for those who
died and for my own fate.

The first days, when the camp was just established, were horrible.
There was no medicine for severely ill inmates though good
doctors, inmates themselves, were on hand but could not do
anything to help. They empathized with those who were under
these circumstances but their hands were tied. During that time,
those who died were wrapped in old mats and buried. Later on,

caskets were provided but the lids were not properly sealed due to the lack of nails. They were put on a so-called 'modified cart' pushed by fellow inmates. Sometimes, on the way to the burial ground on bumpy road, the walls of the casket fell apart and the body slipped and fell on the road.

Thousands of prisoners were living in miserable conditions writhing under the suppression and cruelty of the wardens. To be honest, I myself could endure hardship in the camp but I could not ignore others suffering from those miserable conditions and tried to think of a way to get them out of it all. I realised that it was a rash venture that could get me into troubles and even danger but I had to give it a try. I began to get connections with some good friends like Dr. Nguyen Kim Long, a surgeon working at the camp hospital, Dinh Van Long, a camp security, and Tran van Long a young man of virtue but full of guts and loyalty. Together with some other friends we planned to take over the camp and free the prisoners, taking 700 out of 1,000 prisoners to live in the jungle to fight against them. Unfortunately, the plot was discovered and we were disciplined and shackled day and night for more than 3 years.

During the investigation I was savagely beaten, sometimes collectively by a group of camp 3 security cadres namely Tri, Thi and Lam. They beat me up using rifle butts, their hands and feet as well as whipped me 100 times with electric rods. The person who gave me the worst beating was Tri, originally a teacher from Binh Dinh, with a nice face and a soft spoken voice. I later learned that he was transferred to his hometown and worked for the police there. Lam was currently security chief at Xuan Phuoc camp. They must have reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel at least, if still working in that field.

I remember precisely during an exploitative investigation to arrest more accomplices, the three of them beat me mercilessly on my face and body. The blows were so hard and I had no choice but turning my back toward the thatch wall of the house so I could resist only at one side. Unfortunately there was an armed warden waiting there. He thrust the sharp point of the gun at my back. It went straight to my lungs which landed me unconscious on the floor with blood pouring through my clothes. When I came to myself those evils refused to give me new clothes and I had to wear those blood stained ones until they worn out. The wound on my lungs could still be felt today. On bad weather days, I felt sharp pain on my chest and coughed continuously. On top of that Tri gave me 99 whippings (he miscounted one blow) with his electric rod with big copper inner tub whose tip would thrash into my armpit, hip and other vulnerable spots on my body. At the end of the investigation, I was found guilty of organizing the revolt against the camp. In the last meeting the Supreme Court of Investigation ordered the itinerant court of Phu Khanh to have a public trial at the camp.

Before the trial I worked with a People's defense, a lawyer in the old regime, who told me that if I got a death sentence then my family members would be given a chance to see me for the last time and I myself could request a pardon within 15 days. He was also kind enough to ask for my family's address to let them know of my situation.

After 3 months of working on the case, we were led out of the discipline cell to get some sun for a week. Each of us was then given a new outfit to appear in court for the trial on the next morning. During the trial I saw hundreds of cadres, leaders of wardens and security officers from all three sub camps. I got a life sentence in 1987. Thus another life imprisonment was set on me.

Following is a poem to mark that event:

A monk and a prisoner³

With two life sentences, I'll be in prison for thousands of autumn
My hands and feet in shackles I spend my life in a dark cell
Surrounded by high walls and iron gates.

My body looks miserable but my spirit is bright like moonlight
This is a place of Heaven and Hell for a prisoner monk
Leaving the temple for a wandering prisoner life
I keep my spirit high and practice the teaching of giving humanity
and compassion for feud.

Keeping the monk robe though away from praying and studying
When my obligation to the country is done then my path of
enlightment is also completed.

On leaving the solitary confinement, Mr. Huynh Quang Tien, an
engineer, former Head of Bac Lieu Engineering Battalion, my
companion on the long exile journey, dedicated this poem to me:

Perfection in jail life and monkhood

A monk's life is meant to be away from that of a lay person
But the creator and his tricky play
Put him in jail for fighting for his country
He, a monk in hateful circumstances,
Always keeps his faith though in shackles and among miseries
With brave heart and great mind he hangs on to his ideals

³ In Vietnamese language the word for 'monk' (tu) differs from 'prisoner' (tù) by only a tone mark

Making his jail life and monkhood in perfection

During my time in the dark isolation cell, the only light that came was the moonlight that shone through the cell slit and that inspired me to write a poem:

Moonlight at the solitary confinement.

The moon comes through the slit of the isolation cell,
“Who are you looking for in this place? Oh moon!”, I ask,
“I am wandering by and curious to know if brother Thien Minh is
the one in that cell
And wonder if you are still writing poems”.
I answer: “My pen is rushing forward as a weapon to fight against
the devilish regime”.

Following was a song dedicated to me by Nguyễn Hồng Phúc, a fellow prisoner from Bac Lieu who shared the long journey to exile at Xuan Phuoc, Phu Khanh.

The brown robe.

This heartfoll song is written to you from the gloomy place, feeling deeply for you on the way to exile, crying for those who died for our country and countrymen, getting out of the dark place to look for the starlight for humanity love.

I’m writing this to you who, from the darkness tries to build up a dream. Time has burned your youthful life, but flowers bloom under your steps, in search for the starlight of humanity love.

The old brown robe has faded with time, wiping out your sad childhood life, taking you to the temple where you find your path to enlightenment.

With eyes still clouded with the past and heart heavy with memories, you keep going forward through upheavals to a future filled with golden rice field.

This never ending song is written for you from the darkness of the cell where we met. This is a song from hell written for those who survive to help you forget the time and misery. From the hell with shackles and yoke, we're looking for a bright future.

(All that I remember of this song is its lyrics but it is a reminder of a fellow prisoner in that miserable period).

3. GRATITUDE TO MY PARENTS DURING THE PARENTS REMEMBRANCE DAY

How could I express all the sadness and anguish in me when the season for filial gratitude towards our parents came back every year. I had no way to pay back what they had done for me. It reminded me of the story of the filial monk Maudgalyāyana, one of Buddha's closest disciples who tried to save his mother from hell. I, a humble monk of bad karma, the only thing I could do in this circumstance was to pray hard so that my parents would benefit from my prayer.

The following poem was written for those who shared the same circumstance, missing their parents while being imprisoned.

Missing Mom during the winter in prison

When the cold winter wind comes, bringing the permanent loneliness

My heart is filled with intense filial love for my parents

My Mom is getting thin and withered from waiting for her son in prison

At each coming of spring my heart is heavy with love and sadness,
being so far away from home

So many long years have passed and tears have welled up so many
times in my eyes for being separated from my loved ones

How can I express all my sadness, loneliness in this misery

I want to send all my feelings with the wind

I miss home, even the way home, with all my love

Hoping it will tell them that I miss my family and my younger
siblings.

My Mom whose eyes sagged with sadness and her hair grey from
grief

Has to spare money to come and see me in jail for a short, hasty
visit.

In my sleep, I dream of coming back to the old house with my
young siblings clinging to me and my Mom, so glad for my
comeback

Then I wake up to solitude, still happy by the dream

Looking at the swallows at the gate, flowers in the yard
I feel so sad and lonely when everyone else is celebrating the
coming of Spring

The Xuan Phuoc camp is isolated with mountains around and
forest of tall trees

This is a secluded and thinly populated, dry plain with burnt grass

Here is the place for hard labored prisoners like me

With a life sentence and the long imprisonment
I can only hope to see you all in the next spring
With all dream in my hear, I pray to my ancestors, begging them to
forgive my unfulfilled duty while in prison
I do not forget my filial duty but I cannot do it while being
imprisoned
Thus I will welcome spring with my fellow prisoners though no
one happy to do so
Writing for you, Mom, in this atmosphere, I miss you so much and
prey that you will always stay healthy.

4. THE SOLITARY CONFINEMENT AT XUAN PHUOC CAMP, A CONFLUENCE FOR ALL RELIGIONS.

In 1984, I was imprisoned at the discipline area and in 1987 I was
procecuted for ‘plotting to take over the camp and free the
prisoners’. For that accusation, I had a chance to be in the same
shackles with other religious personalities such as:

- Mr. Phan Duc Trong, then aged 72, Head of the ‘Living in
Peace’ Congregation at Tay Ninh. He was the adopted son of
Lieutenant General Tran quang Vinh, Commander in Chief
of Cao Dai army.
- Mr. Tran Van Nhanh, a fervent fellower of genuine Hoa
Haoism.
 - Father Nguyen Van Vang, of the Society of Jesus
 - Father Nguyen Quang Minh of Vinh Son (Vincent)
Cathedral.
 - Father Nguyen Luan, Phan Rang.
 - Father Nguyen Tan Chuc.

During that time in confinement, our clothes were all in tatters. Father Vang got thick scabies and mange all over except his face. Father Nguyen Quang Minh was badly beaten until blood came from his mouth and anus for simply bringing with him some sacramental bread. He died a few days later. Father Nguyen Van Luan got serious pulmonary disease (cancer) from years of living in discipline cell in worst conditions. I myself got pulmonary edema and scrofula. Everyone was living in a badly polluted cell with the jars full of urine and feces that were only emptied every few days. My legs got pustules from being shackled over a long time and every night maggots would come out of these spots.

According to the camp rule, prisoners could go and empty their jars once a day and each prisoner got 2 litres of boiled water to drink. When wicked wardens were on duty, that routine could only be done every 5 to 7 days and drinking water was just 1 litre a day.

For food, everyone got half a bowl of rice with 3 slices of industrial cassava (H34 variety) dipped in concentrated salt water which dripped and left white traces on the floor. Due to the lack of vegetable, those in discipline cells all got oedema, paralysis, bad vision, scabies and mange, pulmonary tuberculosis.

Every time allowed to go out to empty the jar, I would quickly pick a bunch of crowfoot grass (*Eleusine indica*) that cattle fed on. Once back inside, I would clean it with water to remove the smell of feces on it, and shared it with other cell mates. We would chew it to get some 'greens' and enjoy it. Since it was not allowed to bring the grass into the camp, if detected I would say it was used to cover the urine jars to reduce splashing.

Once in a while, a non-political criminal was sent to our cell and be shackled for 7 days and, after 7 days of 'answering nature's call' on the spot, his shorts would turn stinky. And yet, everyone in the room silently wished to have his dirty, disgusting shorts but no

one would dare asking for them. After his 7 days' time was over, he threw away his dirty shorts on his way out, and the one who caught them felt like winning a jackpot. After a few months in the same cell we were constantly transferred, separated to live in different cells. One day, Father Nguyen Quang Minh suggested each one of us to join in a group poetry writing for fun. To begin with, he gave his own lines:

Father Minh started with the following verses:

*It is by coincidence that we meet here in this prison
And become good friends to share this misery*

I joined him:

*This misery is not our own but of every citizen in the country
Each shares his part to make it a common burden.*

Father Vang:

*This pain is overflowing with tears of citizens
Their lives are shattered, their religions slowly disappearing
Religious leaders join the big cause for freedom
Determined to wipe out the greedy and cruel atheists*

Lastly Father Nguyen Luan concluded with:

*It's not difficult to wipe out those atheists
All religions join in to save the people from this anguish disaster
A snake will not only be killed just by a thrashing its body but its
head must be smashed.*

We later asked Father Luan about the saying “killing a snake by crushing its head”. Here was his explanation:

The former South Vietnam was a unicorn head while the North, a snake head. To have a unicorn dance there must be a head and also a tail, without a tail the unicorn can not dance. When a unicorn's head is smashed it is replaced by another. In the event of April 30, when the citizens, servicemen (the unicorn tail) were in disarray, the leaders (the head) then left the country. The snake, on the other hand, had many heads. In the case of Communist Vietnam, this snake had more than 11 heads, usually in odd numbers and one extra one in case of emergency to pop off. This head, he hinted, was the Soviet Unions. Once this big head was crushed, the Communist regimes all over the world would fall down and the ones in East Europe, i.e. its body, would die too and others in the world would be in disarray consequently. That was his prediction of the Communist regime.

During my jail term, I learned that Father Luan rarely got a chance to stay with others. For his long term in solitary confinement, he got the nickname of 'Permanent commissioner of the discipline cell'. Very tall and big like a Westerner, he was composed, friendly, taciturn and ever so slow in his ways. Once I asked what political organization he had joined when he was outside and he said it was a "Rapid Action Force". I laughed at this and told him it could not be as he was so slow but he assured me he was very fast when it came to action.

After his long period in the discipline area, he was brought to come and work with the wardens. All they asked from him was to write and sign the slogan:

Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Independence – Freedom – Happiness

And he would be released from that area.

But he always wrote:

Socialist Republic of Vietnam

No Independence – No Freedom – No Happiness

For that reason, he stayed in the discipline cell until the day he died. He always told me: ‘Brother Minh, I have to write the truth and nothing else because that would be against my conscience’. I had many chances to be in the discipline cell next to him. His health gradually failed and his voice got weak but he would not bow to their force. He always kept his spirit high and staunch and his standpoint unchanged. As we were next door neighbors, we would exchange ideas everyday. I called him Lima, phonetic spelling for L, the first letter of his name ‘Luan’ and he called me Manh Me (Strength), phonetic spelling of M, the first letter of my name Minh.

When his pulmonary cancer spread and his health deteriorated due to the lack of medicament and poor living conditions, his family members came to visit him but he was not allowed to see them or to receive their gifts. In spite of those misfortunes, he wrote a poem dedicated to me and I tried to memorize it. It was the last time we talked to one another at Xuan Phuoc prison. But I always cherish his friendship as a cell mate and a spiritual companion.

The poem by Father Luan, Phan Rang before his death.

Though never heard of each other before, by coincidence, we are gathered at this place.

Up there, Jesus and Buddha reign and down here in jail, we strike up a good friendship.

We make a vow to die for our People and for the peace of our country.

Thus Earth and Heaven seem to be ours in harmonious religious spirit.

We're both looking for the sublime truth and taking the same path.

Here is a heartfelt farewell to you from your friend Luan.

Mr. Phan Duc Trong, a Caodaist who lived 'in peace' in imprisonment for 40 years under the 2 regimes.

During my time in discipline, I also knew about Mr. Phan Duc Trong, a Caodaist, the leader of the 'Peaceful Coexistence' Congregation, a tireless fighter devoted to fighting for freedom, democracy, human rights and freedom of religion. In Xuan Phuoc camp he stood up and fought for the rights of prisoners though he himself was not badly treated. Under Ngo Dinh Diem Regime, he was imprisoned a few times and again under the Communist regime, for a total of 40 years in prison. He was 85, having only one daughter by the name of Nguyet.

There was a time when strict regulations on receiving gifts by family visits or by post were applied. Food like noodle, flour, rice and spices would be confiscated at the prison gate by wardens on duty. They believed that once the prisoners got enough nutrition with those supplies, they would get physically strong and in good spirit, ready to oppose the regime. These foods would end up in the meals of the wardens instead. I could not say enough of their shameless behavior. Witnessing those shameless exploitations, he wrote a petition asking for the prisoner's right and the improvement of the jail system. He was ready to receive death sentence so other prisoners could live better.

Even those lucky enough to receive gifts from their families got only a restricted amount of dried food, sugar and meat enough to use for 10 days at most. Due to the far and strenuous way to the camp, even well off families would only make trips every 3 or 4 months. Some prisoners were jailed for 15 years without a visit from their family members. During the Lunar New Year or the regulated family visits, those unfortunate ones just wished to have their names called but that never happened. Seeing others in eager bustle to meet with their loved ones, some unlucky inmates would come and sit in the verandah feeling sorry for themselves. Others would lie in their beds, trying to sleep away their loneliness and misfortune.

The hard prison life, together with the pressure caused by the wardens was the perfect ground for selfishness to develop. You would be starving if you shared your food with others. Witnessing that tragic plight, Mr. Phan Duc Trong made a petition asking for freedom, human rights, improvement of the jail system, changes in family visits, and gift receiving rules. For that, he was put in solitary cell for almost 5 years in the discipline area with his hands and feet in shackles. Only when Superintendent Nguyen Van Bang came to replace the old one that some changes in the rule for visits and gift receiving were made. However the new superintendent had new constraints in his own way with forced labor in much more brutal and impudent way. He was another cruel devil, a blood sucker of prisoners. I felt saddened each time thinking of the unknown tombs in that place and I would never forget the cruelty, brutality and inhumanity of those devils at Xuan Phuoc camp. Those countrymen were bad eggs among us and I wonder if they should be removed like appendixes because:

Being offsprings of the same ancestors living in the motherland

Those are like appendixes to be removed for they can get
dangerously infected

We have to do it or we will soon be on the death list

We are from two different front lines so they go their way and we
do ours

But we will treat them humanely once they come back to the way
of the people – to our front

They laugh while the people are in tears
Because they are the cause of our sufferings
Winning or losing is the law of fighting

Everything has its origin
War must be started by someone

The culprit of the nation's misery must be revealed
Though everyone knows the one behind it
As a monk, I practice the teaching of Buddha to returning good for
evil

This is the guiding principle of Buddhism.

The above leaders of different religions spent their times together
at the solitary confinements, sharing the miseries and humiliation
at the Death Valley. From that, mutual understanding sprang from
time of forced labor under the battering rain or scorching sun. Even
so it was not easy to exchange ideas and feelings except when they

shared the same discipline cell or were assigned to be in the same work squad. Among them were:

- Father Khau from Ban Me Thuot
- Father Nguyen, a righteous and generous person who was full of compassion toward others
 - Father Hieu of the Co-Redemptrice congregation
- Father Pham Minh Tri of the Co-Redemptrice Congregation
 - Brother Nguyen Viet Huan of the Co-Redemptrice Congregation

And some others whose names I did not remember

- Reverend Thich Thien Tan from Hue
- Reverend Thich Thien Tanh from Hue
- Reverend Thich Tam Can from Phan Thiet
- Reverend Thich Phuoc Vien from Hue

I myself got protection, help and love from those leaders. The person with whom I used to exchange ideas was Reverend Thich Phuoc Vien. He was modest, friendly and adhered to the ethics of a monk in spite of the difficulties on the religious path. He was subtle and nice with everyone. It was a sad thing when I was transferred to Dong Nai camp and had to leave this friendship. But after my release I had a few chances to meet with him again at the Central Congregation, being the disciples of Buddha sharing the same mission of seeking bodhi and saving sentient beings.

5. MY YOUNGER BROTHER HUYNH HUU NHIEU CARRIED OUT MY MOTHER'S LAST WISHES.

On the 1,000 km trip to visit me, he got robbed on the train and when he came to the camp he was not allowed to see me nor send me the gift.

Being a monk, and according to the teachings in *Guishan jingce (Guishan's Admonitions)*⁴, I realized that the benefactions I got I owed to my country, my parents, my master, the Three Jewels of Buddhism, and those from my coreligionists and compatriots. I have never been able to return those favors, not to mention the love of my brothers and sisters who always cared for me, shared my misfortune and went all the way to visit me in confinement during my 26 years in jail. During her last days, on her death bed, my mother left her last words with my younger brother Huynh Huu Nhieu that he must do his best to visit and care for me while I was still in my exile or in jail, that she would not be able to wait for me any longer and that her spirit would always be with me to bless me for my early return. She asked him to tell me, on my return, that she always loved and missed me until her last day and that I should always keep good faith in the Buddha path no matter what happens.

My brother promised my mother to do it and subsequently, he tried to work hard to be able to go from Bac Lieu to Phu Khanh to visit me. He came there 4 or 5 times but was allowed to see me only one single time for 15 minutes. The first time he made the 1,000km trip to Phu Khanh, he had to work for 3 months, carrying people on his bicycle to make enough money to buy the train fare and some gifts for me. During his first trip to see me, he was robbed when the train came to the towns of Phan Rang and Phan Ri. Two guys in the gang of 4 or 5 fierce looking young men around 20 years old, shiny bayonets in hand, came to his side and ordered him to hand all money and belongings to them if he wanted to stay alive. My brother implored them to spare him from those things, saying that

⁴ Guishan jingce (Guishan's Admonitions) 沩山警策. An early Chinese Zen text by Guishan Dayuan 沩山大圓(771–853), an eminent master more commonly referred to as Guishan Lingyou 沩山靈祐 - *The Record of Linji* By Yixuan – University of Hawaii Press, 2009 (ISBN 978-0-8248-2821-9)

these were gifts he was bringing to a prisoner in a re-education camp, that it was for his brother who was a monk and political prisoner for 20 years and the food were all vegetarian.

Hearing that they were somewhat toned down and one among them said they would not take the food but still wanted my brother's clothings and money. My brother again appealed for their pity, asking them to leave him some money to get a train fare back to Bac Lieu but they just ignored his pleas. They then robbed him of all his belongings, leaving him with the foods brought for me, a little money to buy some bread and a cheap watch they didn't happen to see. Thus he did not have money for his return train ticket to Bac Lieu. On top of that, one more misfortune hurt him much more than the robbery. After the incident, it took him one more day before the train came to Phu Khanh Province. At the T-junction of Chi Thanh, Dong Xuan, there was a temporary shelter for Xuan Phuoc camp where visitors waited for the camp truck to take them to the camp. My brother spent a fortnight there before he got a chance to go to the camp for the visit. Due to the overflowing rain, the roads got flooded and slippery, it took them half a day to cover the distance of 40 – 50km. During the fortnight at the temporary shelter for visitors, my brother had no choice but to feed on the 30 packets of noodles he brought for me. So by the time he reached the camp, there was no noodle left.

At the camp my brother showed his application for visit with the signature of local authorities. But the warden board refused to let him see me or receive gift for me, the reason being I was a bad prisoner. An education cadre told my brother that 'Huynh Van Ba was a very stubborn prisoner and did not deserved a visit. On that my brother burst out in tears and, getting down on his knees, he pleaded with the cadre that he had come a long way and, because the family was very poor, it was very hard to come and visit. He

also said that the rumor went that I had been dead for a few years. Now that they heard that I was still alive they tried to come for a visit. He implored the cadre to at least let me have the gift on humanitarian ground but to not avail. The cadre told him: 'This is my last answer. We will exert dictatorship with the stubborn prisoners but show mercy for those who show repentance. We work on principle - not on humanness or sentimentality. This case will not be addressed, that's it.' On that he left the scene.

My brother then had no choice but to leave with a broken heart. He gave all the foods brought for me to other visitors so he did not have to carry it on the way back. Eventually my brother got back to Bac Lieu after a heart rending trip. He had to rely on the kind hearted truck, bus drivers who gave him free rides and the help of other passengers to make it back to Bac Lieu. At home he tried to hide the truth from my mother lest she was in shock but he couldn't keep it for long and had to let her know. On hearing that, she was in shock and it led to her death in 1986. It was worth mentioning that when I was transferred from Cay Gua Re-education camp to Xuan Phuoc jail, my mother had come many times to Cay Gua camp and asked for me but the wardens glossed over the truth and the police might have known it but they didn't dare to say anything.

Then there was a rumor that a religious leader by the name of Minh was beaten to death in prison. In fact, it was Father Nguyen Quang Minh. My brother then drew a picture of me and put it on the altar among the deceased in the family. For 3 long years, everyday they made the offerings of rice and a piece of salted bean curd for my soul. By that time I went to court, and my family was informed by the lawyer, the incense urn had been full of incense sticks that they had burnt for me. Later at Xuan Loc camp, on a visit, my brother brought me the picture on the altar. It was the

picture taken when I was abbot at Vinh Binh temple. This picture can be seen in the first appendix of this Memoir.

Chapter 8

Leaving ‘the Death Valley’ for Z30A prison at Xuan Loc, Dong Nai

After my 2nd term of life imprisonment at Xuan Phuoc Prison in 1987, I was assigned to a labor group for digging pond and carrying soil and rocks. Two years later, I was transferred to Z30A prison in Xuan Loc, Dong Nai. This used to be the camp where high ranking officers of the old regime- from the rank of Major to General - were placed in confinement for 10 years and over. After waves of release to appease public opinion, some were lucky to be resettled in different countries, others lived in destitution in their homeland, only the deceased remained in the cemetery named ‘Cay Sung’ (the fig tree). This was a dreary forsaken place with no visit for the unsung heroes who died not in the war but in the time of “Peace”. Later, on Memorial Days, political prisoners were sent to clear dead trees and hoe up the weeds. Every year, on such occasion, brother Nguyen Viet Huan of the Co-Redemptrix Order, Mr. Pham Tran Anh and myself would buy incense sticks, and some fruit for these prisoners to bring to the cemetery as offering to the deceased. There was a memorable event between Reverend Thich Tue Si and myself on the day we went to the funeral of Nguyen Van Mac. The deceased was a member in the organization led by Hoang Co Minh of the Viet Tan Party who died suddenly from an acute disease after a soccer match in the camp. At that time, after the release of the prisoners in the re-education camp, K1 camp was empty. So 250 political prisoners, myself included, were transferred from Phu Khanh to Dong Nai. These prisoners were known to be stubborn, chosen from the ‘black list’

of the warders. I still remembered clearly a Friday morning, 16 years ago, prisoners from Xuan Phuoc camp were gathering at the yard to go for hard labor as usual when all of a sudden, sub-camp leader Boi hurriedly entered the gate, followed by the camp security officers carrying various piles of files of different colors.

We were all surprised and wondered what was happening. An 'education' officer came to stand in front of the prisoners and said 'Attention! All prisoners at sub-camp A! When your name is called, come to sit on the other side'. I sat there listening for more than an hour. Some names sounded very familiar. I assumed they picked those who used to protest and I hope I would be among them and be transferred to another camp though I was not sure if it was for the better or the worse! I had had enough here. I sat there waiting impatiently for my name to be called. I believed if it was those who were disciplined and needed to be controlled like Mr. Pham Tran Anh that they picked, then I must be among the first ones to be chosen. I got along with those who shared the same ideal and always wanted to be with them. As the list of names came to the last few, I became nervous because my name was still not called. When it came to file 248, 249 and 250, I saw the last file twice as thick as others. And when my name was finally called I couldn't believe my ears. At that time, Rang, and inmate who sat behind me tapped on my shoulder and said happily 'There, it is your name all right!'

After that, the 250 of us were gathered at the assembly hall. Those whose names were not called then went for the daily labor as usual. We were then ordered to take our belonging and move to another section, completely separated from others, and not to contact with those who were left behind. Police then rushed into our room and rummaged through our belongings. Many things were confiscated to make it light and easy for the trip. That night, not many of us could sleep a wink. Everyone felt nervous. In the

other cells those who were left behind gathered in small groups, whispered and commented all night long.

Around 4 a.m. on 20/3/1989 we were waken up and told to get ready and bring our belongings to the vehicle. Each of us got 2 loaves of glutinous rice and some salted crushed roasted peanut to eat during the 2-day trip and they also gave cuffed us in pairs. We were loaded on 5 fully covered trucks. It was dark and stuffy inside. Every time the trucks stopped along the road, some inmates were found suffocated due to the lack of air. One remarkable thing happened each time the trucks stopped: seeing prisoners on the trucks, people who were passing by would throw food, cigarettes, and candies for the prisoners despite the police trying to drive them away.

1. We had a 5 minutes' rest on arriving at Binh Thuan when an incident happened that moved us all to tears:

A small girl of about 12 years of age was on her way to school when the trucks were slowing down. Seeing the prisoners inside, she ran to buy 2 sticks of boiled sweet potatoes worth of 1,000 dong (Vietnam currency unit). Coming quickly to the vehicles, she said 'My Dad was jailed at Gia Trung camp. I went to visit him once, but then he died in jail. It reminds me so much of him just seeing you here. This morning my Mom gave me 1,000 dong for breakfast and I use it to buy sweet potatoes for you. It will relieve me from my aching for my Dad'. Upon that she sobbed and then wiped her tears on her sleeves. Everyone of us was so moved that tears welled up in their eyes. Many were thinking of the pain leaving their children at home while they themselves were in prison.

The 5 trucks then continued non stop on the road until late evening of 21/3/1989 when we finally reached sub-camp A, camp Z30A in Xuan Loc, Dong Nai. During the trip we knew that we were

heading South but had no ideas which camp we would be coming to. But the feeling was that the further South we went the easier it would be, especially for keeping up with our families as well as for visits. It was almost dark when we arrived at K1 camp. It was a desolate area. A few lone birds were flying toward the hill near Chua Chan mountain range. In the camp, a few people were walking on the verandah of dilapidated rooms with rusty, crumbling tin roofs. Again, our belongings were searched and rummaged so thoroughly that things were all topsy-turvy. Everyone was carefully searched from head to toes. Exhausted by the long, tiring trip, we now felt so disgusted and spiteful with their slipshod and slow search. After that, the 250 of us were divided into different groups.

2. Section 1 of Z30A camp at Xuan Loc, Dong Nai.

After a few days, religious leaders and intellectuals were summoned to the camp meeting room by the camp chief Lai Thanh Hung, later promoted to Permanent Deputy Chief of the Supervisory Committee of many sections. Among the people assembled I noticed:

- Priests from Co-Redemptrix Order
- Priests from Jesuites Order
- Dignitaries of Caodaim
- Dignitaries of Hoa Hao religion
- Buddhist priests - myself included
- Lawyers, teachers...

Camp chief Hung called upon us to live in harmony, to do our bits to better the camp. He asked us to abide by the sentence and camp regulations - in general he encouraged everyone to come closer to each other. He then looked at me and asked: 'You are Huynh Van Ba a.k.a. Thich Thien Minh, aren't you?' When I answered yes, he said 'How come you got such a bad re-education history? Your file is at the top of the worst ones among the newcomers'. Now I saw

why my name was the last one to be called at Xuan Phuoc camp the day we were transferred here.

A few days later, Mr. Hung came to our cells to meet with us – religious leaders. He then asked us to make contribution of money to repair and improve the conditions of the cells. I told him bluntly ‘Who would be silly enough to buy cord to tie himself up?’ Mr. Hung was disappointed and cast an unfriendly look at me. At the new place, I was not allowed to work in the field, because of my very serious offence. Instead they assigned me to prepare the rice for cooking. The rice at the camp was full of grits and paddies. It took time and tedious labor to pick them out before washing. It was a waste of labor and water and when it was done, not much rice was left for the prisoners to eat so we went hungry most of the time. One day while doing the rice, I saw Mr. Hung and told him ‘You encourage us to come closer to each other, but look at the rice full of paddies and grits you give us to eat. This way, how can you expect us to come closer to you? Mr. Hung glanced at the 2 baskets of rice that I was doing and said ‘OK, I’ll have this rice rehusked’. I could feel that he was uncomfortable with me in just a few days of our arrival.

3. The cruel warders and devils at Z30A camp in Xuan Loc

A few days after we arrived, I was assigned to zone B also known as K2. For the first few days, it was somewhat easy going here due to some improvements in the world situation and the relation between VietNam and other countries. Since this was the quarter for many religious leaders and intellects, the camp management applied a better treatment to ease up the opposition from the prisoners and boast about their new open policy.

Among us were well known religious leaders such as:

BUDDHIST

- Reverend Thich Duc Nhuan (Dong Van Kha), Principal Secretary for the Sangha Council of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in the time of the late First Supreme Patriarch the Most Venerable Thich Tinh Khiet
- Venerable Thich Tri Sieu (Le Manh That) with 4 Ph. D. degrees from the US
- Venerable Thich Tue Si (Pham Van Thuong), a well known Zen master, a talented, distinguished scholar on Buddhism.
 - Venerable Thich *Tâm Lãm*
 - Venerable Thich Nguyen Giac
 - Venerable Thich Minh Thong
 - Venerable Thich Tam Can
- CATHOLIC
- Reverend Tran Dinh Thu, Father Superior of the Congregation of the Mother Co Redemptrix
- Reverend Le Thanh Que, Ph. D. in Theology and Religion, the Order of Jesuits.
 - Reverend Doan, Ph. D. in Theology from Roma.
 - Reverend Nguyen Tan Chuc
 - Reverend Tuyen
 - Reverend Huyen Linh, a well-known musician
- CAODAIISM
- Mr. Nguyen Van Trac, age 83
- HOA HAO
- Mr. Ba Dau
- Mr. Bay Khanh
- Mr. Tu Nhanh
- Mr. Doan Van Huynh (monk)

As days went by, the treatment towards prisoners got more tense and strict. Another evil, Nguyen Trung Binh, was sent by the Ministry of the Interior to be the new ward leader. Many warders worked as middlemen between the camp governing board and the

prisoners for illicit profits. Some prisoners were looking for easier labor jobs or being examined for a lighter sentence and they needed those favors and bribed those people almost openly. Political and religious prisoners were under the control of Nguyen Quang Huy who used many imposing, repressing enticing measures like cutting food rations, visits, limiting money and gifts receiving. Other security officers followed him by threatening, slandering, just to get things from prisoners.

I was kept in this camp for 16 years from 1989 – 2005. During this period I underwent so much hardship, separately confined 5 times and more than 8 years “under discipline” having my hands and feet in shackles day and night.

3. A shameless lie by the Xuan Loc Camp Governing Body

Some remarkable events. In 1994, Judge Louis Joinet from the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention was allowed to come to Vietnam to investigate on prisons, re-education camps and the judicial system regarding Vietnamese political prisoners. On receiving this news, though the above delegation was yet to come to Z30A camp, Mr. Lai Xuan Hung, the camp leader, arranged and chose a list of 27 prisoners to be kept away in another section - among them religious leaders, and those who, to them, had extreme ideas and those who would boldly speak up the truth if they had a chance to meet with the international delegation. Among those on the list were Venerable Dat (big Dat and small Dat), Reverend Nguyễn Văn Huan of Co-Redemptrix Order, Venerable Huynh Van Ba (Thich Thien Minh) and other political prisoners such as Mr. Nguyen Van Chien, Nguyen Huu Cau, Nguyen Linh Tuan.

One morning at subcamp A, those 27 names were called on the camp loudspeaker to get ready for a ‘medical check up’. As soon as the names were read, we were all bewildered since it was the first time that only a few people were given privilege to be chosen

for medical check up. Two brand new Ford buses came to the camp ground to pick us up. It was a very hasty decision and the 27 of us were taken back to K2 in subcamp B and kept in the same room. It looked like the old occupants had just been moved away to make room for the newcomers so the room was full of litters and miscellaneous things scattered all around.

We spent a day and a night there and no check up was done so we had to speak up and ask for our belongings to be brought there. I asked Le Luu, a cadre in charge of education why we were told to be taken here for medical check up and so far nothing has happened. He promised to bring up the matter to the Supervisory Board. A moment later he summoned a special meeting among themselves and put up a show for us. This was a caddish trick that those warders used put up in order to deceive people. We then were called to the medical post for a cursory check up by medical officers from Xuan Loc medical center specially summoned for the “show”. The next morning we were brought to the meeting hall to have our pictures taken and personal history read. The officer in charge, Nguyen Trung Co, told us while smiling that those pictures would be put in our files but we all knew too well that there was no film in the camera. It was just another dirty trick to deceive people. Nothing could escape our attention. After 4 days at K2 we were brought back to K1 after the *International* delegation left.

The year after, Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh, Vice President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam paid a visit to Xuan Loc camp. All the refugees and political prisoners at camp K1 were sent out for labour from morning until late evening to avoid contact or exchange ideas with her. They even wanted to hide those things from their own people, let alone the International delegation coming to look into Human Rights matters in Vietnam.

During this year, 1995, the Central committees of different departments, together with the Institute of Science and Sociology and the National Institute for History came to the camp and gave a lecture on ‘the Vietnamese national traditions’. Prisoners were allowed to come to the podium and express their ideas and later the meeting minutes were made. During the discussion, I came up twice to express my ideas in front of those ‘education’ officers of V26 Department (i.e. Department for the Administration of Prisons) and the microphone was turned off while I was speaking. After that we were divided into small groups. Four days after the meeting, one afternoon as we passed the camp gate on coming back from labour with clothes wet with sweat and bodies dirty with mud, Quang, a warder on duty called my name and told me to go back to my room, gather my belonging and quickly come to the car. At that moment, a Russian made car slowly came to the ground. Venerable Thich Tri Luc helped me gathering my belonging and Reverend Nguyen Viet Huan of Co-Redemptrix Order gave me a kilogram of sugar and flour. A police stood waiting and urged me to go on, so I just had time to wave goodbye to my fellow inmates in the room before rushing to the car. It was a trip to solitary confinement and I only saw my fellow inmates until 6 years later. I was taken to camp B and a security officer named Thang or Thang Dia made a report on which I was alleged to take advantage of the Meeting and the Humanitarian policy of the Party to publicly incite a revolt against the regime. I was then disciplined with shackled hands and feet for many long months. This was also the place where Dr. Nguyen Dan Que was kept in custody. During this time at Xuan Loc camp I wrote many poems. The following was one about Chua Chan Mountain in Xuan Loc.

Chua chan Mountain⁵

⁵ The poem is a play on words. The spoonerism of “Chúa chan” [name of the mountain meaning ‘overflowing’] is “Chán chua” [have you had enough, what a disgrace!]

Have you had enough, Oh, Chua Chan Mountain

With the miserable life around here?

The Mountain replies that it has not

Because this is my Karma

There's still imprisonment

And a lot of hardship ahead

Political prisoners have to put up with miserable life

But the Liberation Day will be all glories.

5. A memorable souvenir of my prison life: an encounter with Dr. Nguyen Dan Que

I heard of Dr. Nguyen Dan Que in the 1980's when I was just transferred from Cay Gua Re-Education camp to Xuan Phuoc camp in Phu Khanh. I was told about him by Dr. Nguyen Kim Long and other inmate intellectuals and I wished to have a chance to meet with him but he had just been released. It was in this new camp when he got arrested for the second time and transferred there. But we seemed to be destined in different camps and transferred between K1 and K2 camps. Although we never crossed our paths, he had also heard about me and Mr. Nguyen Van Bao from Mr. Tran Trong Kim, Reverend Nguyen Van Hiep and Mr. Pham Tran Anh. A few days after Dr. Que entered K2 inmates from K1 sent me a message to try to contact him. I then engaged in jobs like cleaning and pushing the garbage cart to the garbage field near the discipline zone in order to throw in the things that other inmates sent for him. On these occasions he would say: 'Will you send my regards to Venerable Ba and Professor Bao?' I just say

‘Yes’ and immediately pushed my cart away. Thus I had a chance to see his face but he didn’t see mine.

It was a mere chance that during this discipline time, I was sent to the place where he was being jailed. After 4 months in shackles day and night, many times I went on a hunger strike and was reported as a hostile element, I became totally exhausted. A doctor was called in and I was physically examined for many days consecutively. After seeing that I evidently suffered from exhaustion, they opened my feet shackles during the day and put them back at night.

The first day when my feet were unshackled I went to the cell door and looking through the slit I saw Dr. Que walking to and fro. I called for his attention and, to show that I knew him well, I said: ‘Dr. Que, John Kennedy, your Progressive Humanitarian Movement (NBTB) is in the right direction’. He turned around and, looking into my room, asked ‘Who is there?’ I answered ‘I am Venerable Ba’. Dr. Que said ‘Oh! Is that you Venerable Ba?’

After that we talked about many things concerning the political situation. The reason I called him ‘John Kennedy’ was because he got a Human Right award from the US Congress named after the late President Kennedy.

NBTB was the abbreviation for ‘Progressive Humanitarian’ in the Social Humanitarian Movement created by Dr. Que and his brother Dr. Nguyen Quoc Quan. Being on hunger strike for almost a month, I was so weak in walking and could hardly speak properly. Knowing that Dr. Que slipped some sugar lumps and a few tonic pills through the vent on the iron door and that helped me recover quickly. The following was a special story that tied us together for many years to come.

One day Dr. Que received some food from his family. Among it was a veggie dish that looked so much like salted pork. His wife was a vegetarian so she sometimes sent him a few veggie dishes.

Having been jailed for so long, I didn't know the vegetarian cooking art had become so innovative and aesthetic. When I received the food through the vent I thought it was a meat dish so I stood there waiting for him to pass by to return it because there was no way I could dispose of it. When I slipped the food through the vent it ended up on the steps in front of my room. Dr. Que wanted to come to pick it up but on the watch towers several guards were watching and he could not do it and the zone gate would be open in five minutes. Some inmates would come in with a few security guards and police to bring food for the prisoners. It was a critical moment, for if discovered, this trivial incident would be turned into big trial, in front of a gathering of all camp inmates, in which we were accused of 'shameful offence' and disciplined

I saw Dr. Que walking back and forth and glancing at those in the watch tower. He was waiting for the right moment to grab the food on the floor. Sweat welled on his forehead as well as mine. In this critical moment the only thing I could do was to pray to the The Bodhisattva of Great Compassion (Kwan Shih Yin) for help.

Suddenly a strong gust of wind blew the hat of one warden to the ground. He looked down and asked another warden on the ground to pick it up and brought it for him but the later would not do it. With that, the one on guard swore aloud and came down to get it.

Quickly, Dr. Que came and grabbed the food then put it in the pocket of his white shorts. Right at this moment, the door to the disciplined area opened and 4-5 inmates came in with 2 guards bringing the evening meal. My prayer to Kwan Yin was answered. Only when you were saved from a desperate situation and danger that you realized the miraculous power of Buddha. Buddhists *should* take adversity as an opportunity to reinforce their

Adhipateyam pratitya (favourable conditions), to advance their religious practice and consolidate their Bodhi-mind for the illumination and propagation of Buddha's teachings..

Everyday Dr. Que would come near my cell and talk to me. It was reported by those on the watch tower and I was transferred to another cell. In spite of that, for a month, every morning and afternoon, he would come to walk back and forth near my cell and talk about the Philosophy of Progressive Humanitarianism. This lasted until the end of the lunar year. Having a presentiment of some bad thing coming, I told him if he came and called 3 times the next day and I did not answer then I would have been transferred to another place. It turned out exactly as I thought. Later that evening, as he came to my cell, the security who went around to lock the cells and checked on the list of disciplined inmates ordered me transferred to a separate cell with musical composer Captain Nguyen Huu Cau. In the neighbouring cells were Venerable Thich Tri Sieu (Le Minh That), Reverend Pham Minh Tri and later Venerable Thich Nhat Ban, Mr Pham Van Xua aka Nhat Truong. All of them moved here for disciplinary reason. About 3-4 months later Dr Que himself was transferred to this place and shared the cell with Venerable Le Manh That. It was only this time when he actually saw my face. A month later he was released. Though it was a surprise, his sentiment and undaunted spirit would always be in my heart.

CHAPTER 9

Meeting with UN Human Rights Delegation in Charge of Religion

Mr. Le Manh That was released on September 2, 1998 but I was kept in solitary confinement until October 24, 1998 when I was called to 'work' with the Police of Department V26 and the *Camp Supervision Committee*. Venerable Thich Khong Tanh and I were

taken to the Headquarters of Camp Z30A at Xuan loc where we were allowed to meet with the Human Rights Delegation in charge of Religion led by Mr. Abdel Fattah Armor, a special UN rapporteur. With the consent of Hanoi, the delegation came to investigate the real situation of religious repression in Vietnam. It was my first meeting with international visitors after 19 years in the Communist jail. Before we got into the car on the way to the office, each of us was invited to see the Head officer of K2 camp also the Deputy Chief of *the Camp Supervision Committee* at Xuan Loc Camp, named Nguyen Huu Phuoc. Venerable Thich Khong Tanh was taken in first and I was next. On entering the room I noticed a few cups of milk coffee, a pack of 555 cigarettes and a plate of beautiful American grapes. He began by telling me: ‘Today you, Venerable Ba, is going to meet with a few foreign visitors. Would you like to go to France?’

I answered: ‘I know no foreigner visitors and I don’t want or intend to go to France’.

He continued: ‘When you meet with them today, you should only talk about casual matters. I hope you’re not talking about things that will bring bad impression on the camp. Our job here is to manage people in the camp, just like warehouse keepers. When you get orders from above to enter or release things then that’s what you do. You know, you do what you’re paid to do and you are supposed to be loyal to those who hire you for the sake of yourself and your family. Otherwise we will be in big trouble. We have to abide by the policies of the camp that sometimes bring inhuman actions and shortcomings in regulations. I hope you understand and excuse us for those things. I’d be in big trouble if you tell them about those things in the camp’.

For the many years that I was in jail, no one in the governing body had ever called a monk ‘Master’. The reason they used that word to us that day was a blandishment to calm us down. Also on that

day prisoners were fed a 2-course meal with pork. This only happened a few times a year, on national holidays and New Year's occasion. It was just done for the purpose of showing off to the visitors and not out of kindness to the prisoners. One day we were fed like this, the next day the ration would be reduced, or we would be forced to work longer or the production target would be increased in compensation for this expense. A few days before seeing Mr. Phuoc and then the International Delegation I had worked with a few cadres in department V26 namely Pham Van Thanh and Pham Van Duc. I was asked if during my jail time I had contacted anyone overseas – and why overseas organizations would like to see me.

I told them I did not have contact with anyone nor did I want to see anyone from overseas.

A few days later, the two came to see me again and said: 'You will be allowed to meet with some foreigners in a free and comfortable atmosphere without our presence, but you will be responsible for what you say'.

I confirmed with them again that I did not want to meet with those foreigners. Mr. Thanh then said: 'The state intends to give back your freedom but you'll have to make a pledge before being released to your region to abide by the law and not to be a commit the offense again'.

I was then given some paper to write my pledge in which I specified and confirmed my position on 2 main points:

1. Once released to my region, I will fight and continue to fight, and induce others to fight against starvation, ignorance and inner aggression.
2. I will continue to fight and induce others to fight if the state relapses into pre-doi moi (reform) policy.

Three days later, they came back to work with me again. They said: 'When we went back to Hanoi and reviewed your pledge, we

found that the second point will never happen since the Vietnamese Communist Party policy will proceed to a complete reform. There's no point in coming back to the old system of centralisation, subsidies, voluntarism. As for the first point, we'll have to reconsider. President Ho called for fighting starvation, ignorance and foreign aggression but you said 'inner aggression' – you really mean us.'

I told them: 'The inner aggressions are those parasites that embezzle and squeeze money to ruin the society. They are those opportunists who take advantage of the situation, who are arrogant, bureaucratic, those sectarians who ill treated good talented men'.

They answered: 'This is just a way of reasoning. We know well that you want to play on the words inner aggression'.

The game went on for more than a week working with them, until 24 October 1998, when Venerable Thich Khong Tanh and I were to meet with the International Human Rights Committee. It

happened to be on the same day as the UN Organization anniversary. On the way to the meeting, Venerable Thich Khong Tanh briefed me on current Buddhist information and the duties of the shanga in the protection of Buddhist Doctrine and restoration/reactivation of the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation.

On arriving at the office sitting room we saw 4 guests, 2 among them of French nationality and 2 Vietnamese interpreters, a male and a female. They all stood up to greet us and bowed, their hands clasped at their chests. We returned their greeting by bowing while saying Namó Amitabha. The two foreign guests were very courteous and friendly in their attitude. At first I thought they were Americans so I greeted them in my limited English. I said: 'Good afternoon the Human Rights Delegation of the United Nations for Religion. We are honored to meet you'.

At that moment, Colonel Nguyen Dinh Tiem, the camp leader raised from his seat and said: 'Under the guidance of Department

V26, the Police Department agreed to allow the Delegation of the UN for Religion to meet with two of our inmates namely:

1. Phan Ngoc An aka Thich Khong Tanh
2. Huynh Van Ba aka Thich Thien Minh

Today, with the witness of members of Department V26, our ministry invites the two parties to meet. When he finished speaking, the two interpreters from the Police Ministry translated his words into French. Mr. Addelfattah Amor, leader of the Delegation then stood up and answered: ‘My name is Amor, special envoy of the UN for Religion Intolerance. In agreement with the Government of Vietnam, the Foreign Affairs, the National Defense and the Police Department, we are here to meet with two Venerables Thich Khong Tanh and Thich Thien Minh. We are allowed to meet in a free and comfortable atmosphere without the attendance of the local authorities. We would like to request the authorities to leave the room so we can start the meeting. The female interpreter translated his statement into Vietnamese. Mr. Nguyen Huu Phuoc, deputy leader of the Camp Supervision Committee then opened the mineral water bottle and poured it into glasses for the Delegation and us. After that they left the room and sat on a sofa next to the door so they could hear the voice from the inside. Before the meeting they arranged the chairs so that we would sit about 6 meters apart thus we had to talk louder during the conversation so they could listen to it. Seeing that intention, the chief of the Delegation told his members to move their chairs next to ours.

At the beginning, Reverend Thích Không Tánh raised a few concerns by asking bluntly if they were true UN representatives or they were Russians that the Vietnamese government arranged in a plot to spy on us.

The Delegate Chief confirmed that they were indeed UN representatives not Russians and he showed his business card to prove it.

Venerable Thich Khong Tanh told them about an incident back in 1994 when Judge Louis Joinet, President of the UN Delegation against Illegal Arrest came to Vietnam and requested to see Venerable Thich Duc Nhuan, Advisor to the Dharma Development Institute and Venerable Thich Quang Do, Head of the above institute at Palace hotel in District 1. For health reason the two monks in request could not attend the meeting and Venerable Thich Khong Tanh was assigned to come on their behalf and hand deliver to them an Assessment by Venerable Thich Quang Do, head of the Dharma Development Institute to Mr. Joinet. Only one day after the meeting, Venerable Thich Khong Tanh, on his way to distribute relief to flood victims in the Mekong plains, was arrested by the Ho Chi Minh City police and kept at detention camp 3C. Mr. Nguyen Chi Dung, Deputy Chief of Ho Chi Minh City Police Bureau came to see him with a book on his hand and said: ‘Don’t you dream that the Americans are good. They have handed in what you gave them the other day. Let me assure you, as long as I live, the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation has no hope to renew their work!’

Mr. Amor conveyed the apologies from Judge Louis Joinet and hoped that Venerable would understand and forget about it. I sat there listening and let Venerable Thich Khong Tanh have more time to express his concerns with the Delegation. The two sides talked around this matter for more than an hour. Although I supported his view, I was afraid we would not have much more time left with the Delegation. I therefore began to voice my concerns. I was then asked questions concerning the reason why I was put in jail, my sentence, life in prison, the way the Police treated the prisoners, and whether I was put in shackles, beaten up

and had to do forced labor. I noticed that all these questions came right to the point of the ill treatment of prisoners and they even brought out much more than what we told them. Before answering their questions, I was afraid that the conversation was taped by a device under the table and after this meeting, and as a result, I would be tortured or my life would be endangered. Despite those worries I went ahead and told them all the things I witnessed during my jail time. I was trying to bring up those points for the benefit of all prisoners, not for myself only, because this was the only chance that I had been waiting for during my 20 years of imprisonment and I would not let it go for any reason. On top of those, I also told them about my old pagoda as well as the suppression and terror outside and in the prison including the HIV virus that were spreading in the camp as prisoners used the same blade for hair cutting as well as beard shaving. Finally I requested the Delegation as well as other International Human Rights Organizations to bring up the following 4 wishes of the prisoners to the Vietnamese Communist Government:

1. That the Vietnamese Communist Government release unconditionally all political prisoners, prisoners of conscience and religion who are still in custody.
2. That the Vietnamese Government give back properties belonging to those religions and restore total rights and freedom of religion, among which the legal practice of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation.
3. That the Government remove clause 4 in the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and carry out a pluralistic, multi-party regime with equality for all the parties and not only the Communist Party which is the party in power.
4. That the Government organize a free General Election under the surveillance of the UN. All the parties should come together in love, humanity and erase the feud. Only political

prisoners, prisoners of conscience and religion and those victims of the communist regime will have the right to bring up those voices of mediation, generosity in a sensible and legitimate way.

During the meeting between us and the UN Delegation, police from the Department and Ministry continuously entered the room to serve drinking water for the guests with the intention to interrupt the conversation. Many times, they even suggested us to finish it quickly since the security was not guarantee and they had to escort the Delegation back to their place and us to the prison which is rather far. Their interference was indeed a hindrance to the meeting so, after the seventh time, I said: 'Please feel free to come and stay to observe our meeting because we are just telling our guests the truth, no more or less, except for a few missing details of some incidents that we cannot remember. You can sit and listen to us instead of coming back and forth so many times. It is a good intention of you as hosts to bring water for the guests, but too much of it is a nuisance'.

On that, the police left the room until the end of the meeting at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Again we bowed to each other solemnly and finally departed. On the way back to the camp we felt at ease and happy after releasing the burden in our chest. The happiest moment came when other inmates rushed out from their rooms to the fence and asked who we were talking to, what subject and why it took so long. They noticed Venerable Thich Khong Tanh left since early morning and did not come back for the meal. I told them briefly that we were meeting with the UN Delegation and that it was going very well before being rushed away by the police escorting me to my room to accomplish his duty.

From that day on, my jail life got a little bit better. I got material support from Venerable Thich Khong Tanh and also some support from Venerable Thich Tue Dang. Three months later when Venerable Thich Khong Tanh was released back to Lien Tri Pagoda in District 2, Thu Thiem, Saigon, he continued sending me money and parcels every month by post. He used the last name of one of his followers who happened to be the same as mine so I could receive those gifts since it was the rule of the camp that prisoners could only receive gifts from family members. Prisoners who received money and gifts from fellow inmates now released would be called to the office for investigation on the relationship – which was very troublesome.

1. Hard labor after 6 years in solitary confinement.

About a year after our meeting with the UN Delegation, Colonel Nguyen Dinh Tiem, Head of the Supervision Committee retired and was replaced by Colonel Nguyen Trung Binh who was transferred from Camp Z30D Ham Tan, Binh thuan. When he came to inspect the solitary confinement section, I raised a question to him: ‘I have been jailed for over 20 years, from the old centrally planned, bureaucratic, subsidizing period. Now the Communist Party publicly admits that it was a period of error. I fought during that error period therefore I was fighting for the right reason, so why was I jailed until now? Who is responsible for this mistake? The Vietnamese State once proclaimed that France, Japan and the US were colonists, imperialists, our heinous enemies. But when peace was restored especially when the Reform Period began, you opened your arms to welcome them, with the red carpet, gun salute and fireworks, honor guards. Meanwhile, we, your compatriots, prisoners of conscience, political and religious prisoners who fought for justice were badly treated and imprisoned for many years. Don’t you feel ashamed when foreign

organizations raised the voice and criticized you for human rights violation?

Mr. Binh listened and nodded but said nothing. Then he left to visit other rooms.

A few months later I was transferred from the solitary cell to a camp to be with other political and religious prisoners. What a joy to see each other after 6 years of separation. Some had been released, others died from illness and there were some new faces to get acquainted with. I was assigned to group 17 and my job was to grow vegetables, mainly water cress. Others such as gourds, pumpkin were rare. Everyday I had to get and carry 240 buckets of water (40 litres for each bucket) in the morning and 160 in the afternoon to water them. Every morning I got a bowl of plain rice and had to work hard and rush back for the noon break. The afternoon job was shorter in time. There were days that I collapsed on the road from hunger and fatigue. During the rainy season I would toil on the land and hoe up weeds. My clothes were always wet which made it easy to get cold. Every year each prisoner was given 2 sets of outfit (1 shirt and 1 pair of pants) made of cheap material and they sure were not enough. Each labor group were escorted by 3 armed policemen, one of them, group correctional officer wearing a pistol on his hip. The other 2, known as surveillance wardens, armed with rifles, would sit on watch at the 2 ends of the work area. During working hours, every movement in or out had to be allowed by those two. Based on the government regulations and the state law regarding prisoners, the monthly ration for each prisoner consisted of:

1. 15 kg of rice
2. 15 kg of greens (mostly over ripe and mixed with grass)
3. ½ litre of fish sauce (mostly salt water mixed with a little fish sauce for color)

4. 300 grs of meat or 700g of fish
5. 300 grs of brown sugar
6. 200 grs of soap
7. Money for medication (equivalent to the price of 1 kg of rice)
8. 2 sets of outfit (long) for the whole year.
9. 2 underwears (shorts and tank tops), 2 face cloths (later the underwears just disappeared on the list)
10. 1 blanket every 4 years (there was always a shortage)
11. 1 mosquito net every 2 years.
12. A sedge mat a year.

This is just on the official list but for many years I witnessed stealthy take offs by officers. Take my case. During my 26 years in jail I received 3 and a half blankets. The above list was for those ‘ordinary’ prisoners. For the disciplined ones, everything was cut down since they used the empty stomach policy to control prisoners. During visit days, police caused so much trouble for prisoners such as wearing camp clothes with the ‘Re-education’ mark at the back. During the meeting with family members, security officers sat and wrote down the conversation and they could even stop the conversation. When family members came in their cars, they had to park at the camp gate and hired the camp car at an exorbitant price. It was a way to make money from the prisoner’s family members. Goods and foods for the prisoners were strictly checked, torn up especially during the New Year’s visit. Many families sent traditional rice cakes carefully cooked to last longer but once they were cut for checking by police, they would go bad quickly. Looking at those cakes being cut into pieces, many choked with emotion and anger. Also embezzlement, greed and bribery were common in jail just like the beating of prisoners by wardens. There had been no proper investigation so far from the Central Authorities on those vices in jail, a ‘microcosm of the state of law’ of the whole country. Complaints

from prisoners would go into the waste basket followed by beatings and repression on those who dared to raise their voice. There were so many horrifying things happening in the communist jail unraveled until now.

Since the society is on the verge of collapse
Inspectors are bribed with gifts
So when delegations from the Department and Ministry come to inspect
They are all smiling, pointing
Since they have taken the bribery and now thus go along
Nodding and tolerating, covering the vices
Thus there will be some money to take home
For their trouble making the trip

Many ironic slogans out in the society are used in the camp to make fun of those briberies and corruption practices. Especially during the era of market economy many, mostly high ranking and powerful cadres took advantage of the loophole in the law to smuggle, making fake equity, greedily embezzled state funds. Embezzlement that went up to billions of piastres. Even when jailed for that crime those ‘red capitalists would have all the priorities of the rich. Supervision committees at different camps used their influence and diplomacy to bring those rich prisoners to their camp as a way of financial investment for the camp or rather the camp supervision committee and some educational security officers who dealt with them on a regular basis and knew who they could pick and use as golden-egg hens.

In general only those so-called ‘economic prisoners’ would have money for bribery to get their sentence reduced or early release. During the decades of 70-80 most of those in the re-education camps were military officers, non-commissioned officers and servicemen of the old regime. But since the 90’s they were

replaced by military officers, directors of the pre-eminent new regime of Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Those criminals learned their pre-eminent way of corruption, embezzlement from the pre-eminent regime keeping in mind the dictum 'a father's sacrifices will ensure a secured life for the children's, a golden life the grandchildren and a life of opulence for the great grandchildren'.

With plenty of money, those prisoners would not be subject to hard labor. They use their money to buy a good place to stay and an easy life in prison. They got regular family visits, exempted from labor. Some were visited by friends in private cars and were taken to dine outside. They spent money to have a brick house with conveniences such as TV, stereo, fridge, fans, washing machine, rice cookers... just like they were living in a big house outside. Once released, they would leave it for the camp and therefore got the priority in sentence reduction. Some spent time playing chess, gambling on TV soccer games by betting in millions of dong. They shed no sweat but enjoyed all priorities and always got good reviews on their activities. It's money that makes the law. Those with good personal histories, receiving medals for their work during the war, or for having members of the family cited as martyrs or heroes for the revolution would be in the priority category to be considered for sentence reduction or release. Even more favours will be extended to those who redeemed their faults by denouncing others to the police, or working as agents provocateurs. Without the following four conditions, one will certainly stay till the end of the sentence time in a communist jail:

1. Having a lot of money to bribe the Camp Supervision Committee and the wicked educational security officers
2. Pleading guilty on every preliminary or final report.
3. Acting as informant, henchman to denounce others.

4. Having good personal history such as contributions to the Revolution, medals, having members of the family cited as martyrs or heroes for the revolution

Every week, month, and quarter, prisoners were classified into 5 categories: good, fair, average, poor and bad. Those political or religious prisoners who would like to have their jail term reduced for the 1st time, especially those who had a heavy sentence, must attain 'Fair' grade at least 5 times – in 2 and half years through 5 screenings and got 2 months reduction at most. First, the prisoners were to sign and admit that he committed a crime against the Communist Party and the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. These statements would be shown to International Human Rights Organizations to prove that the State of Vietnam did the right thing when arresting those prisoners and that none were victims of injustice. I myself never expected such a redemption since I never pleaded guilty in my self reviews nor would I redeem my fault by denouncing my fellow inmates. I even would feel ashamed as a member of the political group upon hearing about political prisoners having weak, wavering standpoints or acting in mean spirit. As Lieutenant Colonel Le Luu, in charge of 'education' for K3 section said in front of 18 political groups: 'All of you inmates who want to be upgraded from Fair grade must not only abide by the policies and re-education regulations but also try to redeem your faults by achievements in order to attain the standards set by the camp'. After all, it was the same policy that applied in every camp. If I were asked about Communist jail, I would not know where to begin or to end because there are some differences in the two periods. Every phase was composed of 2 periods: the centrally planned, bureaucratic and subsidized period and the new reform period with remnants of the practices in the previous period.

It was just “old wine in new bottles”, the taste is still remained bad. The many prisons in the country were divided into categories such as dangerous, most serious, serious and not so serious sections, etc. Regulations and State laws regarding the execution of punishment came from the Department V26, the Prison Supervision Department, the Ministry of Police, the Government and Parliament and were strictly applied all over the country. However the relative good or bad treatment of prisoners was in the hand of the Head of each Supervision Committee. Also the Correctional officers who directly supervised the camp and those in charge of security, investigation and correction directly controlled the lives of the prisoners and could make it easier or harder for those at their mercy. The Head of each section, concurrently Deputy Supervisor was in direct command of the section. During my 26 years in jail with 10 years of disciplinary and solitary cell, I spent 16 years in forced labor, breaking up stones, digging ponds, carrying miscellaneous items and soil, growing tobacco, vegetables, corn, clearing the forests for corn planting.

As mentioned above, though we were in the new reform period the remaining traces of the old period were still seen. The Supervision Committee as well as the wardens were still the same people. Prejudice, hatred, suppression and harassment toward the inmates had become parts of those people so there was no hope for change! During my first days when I was transferred to the camp, we were allowed to read some Government published magazines and newspapers but this only lasted a short time before they were taken away and stored at the ‘cultural office’ of the camp. I myself suffered a big loss when the books I owned were confiscated and stored away and never given back to me when I was released. The Lieutenant Colonel in charge of correction by the name of Hoa promised that they would be sent to my family by post but nothing has been sent to me since that day. It was worth mentioning that

until now, only the government propaganda newspaper “Nhan Dan” (People’s Daily) was allowed at Xuan Loc camp, and only after being censored by local camp committee. What an utterly ridiculous behavior! Prisoners did not have a chance to read continuously to get information. If prisons in the colonist, fascist and imperialist regimes over 100 years ago had treated prisoners like the eminent regime of Socialist Republic of Vietnam was doing then Lenin would not be able to have books on capitalism or Max’s philosophy to study and Ho Chi Minh would not be able to write his books and Vietnam Communist Regime would not have a chance to materialize their dream to drag the country into the long lasting cold war. It was the excuse for the French to come back for the reoccupation of Vietnam [after World War 2] and for the Americans to use South Vietnam as an anti-communist outpost in South East Asia to prevent the spread of Communism from the North and to protect the security of the American allies in the region. The confrontation between North and South Vietnam resulted in a civil war that lasted 30 years and the people enduring an internecine slaughter, suffering and misery. This was because leaders of Saigon and Hanoi accepted to act as agents for International Communism and International Capitalism. It was the Americans, Russians and Chinese who used Vietnam as a weapon testing ground and trampled on our country. In others words, the Vietnamese people were victims of those two international powers.

It was unfortunate that after the war when peace was restored, the Vietnamese people were still living and suffering under the yoke of foreign ideology. In their mausoleums Lenin and Ho Chi Minh would not be pleased to see their followers using the ridiculous masquerade of “Our Regime, our Party, our State” to make everybody their subjects, just like those communist speakers who clapped their hand right after their speech to make others follow suit. Almost all the Party members from the central to regional

level were corrupted. They were greedy, corrupt, causing a rotten society. On the other hand they treated political and religious prisoners with harsh, mean and cruel measures. It would be better for those prisoners to be executed than left languishing in their long and resentful days in prison. During my time at Xuan Loc camp, I witnessed so much injustice. It was such a paradox that while the Government of Vietnam was claiming that changes had been made in prison, the ill treatment of prisoners was getting worse and worse. The more international treaties on human rights that Vietnam signed, the more violation on human rights were happening in the prisons. Outside, the Labor Act allowed more off work days but inside most prisons, prisoners had to increase their labor by working on Sundays. One of those abuses was the forced labor in picking cashew nuts for export for the benefit of the Supervisory Committee. The prisoners was treated like dirt, just like slaves in the Middle Age. They intended to keep the prisoners ignorant and destitute to turn them into feeble, uninformed and low class people or robots that they could control. Outside, religious leaders were shamelessly repressed, no wonders those in jail had to undergo hardship and miseries due to strict and harsh regulations. No matter how the Vietnamese authorities tried to cover up the truth, witness and prisoners were all around here and their crimes would never be erased in our history.

2.POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS PRISONERS' DEMANDS AT XUAN LOC CAMP.

Since my transfer to Xuan Loc Camp, I had a chance to meet with people from different backgrounds and many political organizations in and outside the Communist Party in the country and overseas. We, people of different political and religious organizations came to each other in a friendly way and we shared concerns and religious faith. We were united in forming fights,

calling fellow inmates to sign petitions to be sent to International Organizations such as the UN, the Human Rights Committee, Amnesty International, the Camp Supervision Committee and the Vietnamese authorities to demand that:

1. Political, religious prisoners and prisoners of conscience be given back freedom.
2. The jail system be improved since the current standards for prisoners was too scanty and was further trimmed by the camp authority.
3. Political and religious prisoners be treated according to international law.
4. The state law concerning jail sentencing be amended, camp library be open with books and newspapers including those in foreign languages so that the prisoners could be informed and improve their knowledge.
5. Job training classes be open for regular prisoners so they would have some ability to work after their release and thus reduce their relapse into crime.

The above petition marked the first requisition by the prisoners at Xuan Loc prison at Dong Nai Province. Following were the names of the members of different religions united in the struggle:

1. Thich Thiên Minh, representative of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation
2. Nguyen Viet Huan (Nguyen Thien Phung), representative of the Catholic Co-Redemptrice Order.
3. Professor Nguyen Van Bao, Representative of Caodaism
4. Mr. Nguyen Van Dau, representative of Hoa Hao Buddhism
5. Huynh Hung Quoc alias Pham Tran Anh, representative of the Organization for the Protection of Vietnamese Political Prisoners.

We all signed a petition to be sent to Mr. Cofi Anan, UN Secretary General and other International Organizations by Thong Luan Magazine in Paris, to denounce the crimes of the Vietnamese Communist regime and to request those International Organizations to intervene with the authorities at Hanoi to have our following urgent claims executed:

Pursuant to:

- ★ The establishment of the UN Organization June 26 and October 24, 1945, and the admission of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as an official member of the organization on September 20, 1977;
- ★ The proclamation the International Human Rights Declaration by Resolution 217A on December 10, 1948;
- ★ Clause 11 at the Human Rights Conference in Asia from March 29 to April 2, 1993 in Bangkok
- ★ The Vienna Convention on International Human Rights in Austria on June 25, 1993
- ★ Clauses 9 and 18 on Civil and Political Rights

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam solemnly undertook and signed those agreements together with other countries and International Organizations.

The Vietnamese authorities had openly violated the Paris Agreement of January 27, 1993 and paid no attention to the International Supervision Committee and thus violated the International convention.

The Vietnamese Communist Government built their regime with bayonets and rifles and governed its citizens with a dictatorial, undemocratic and inhuman policy. It was a government of autocracy and arbitrariness with monopoly on politics, the media, no freedom of speech, of thinking, of religion. They were determined to preserve the monoparty system which was an

obstacle for conciliation between non conforming political forces inside and out of the country that were fighting for freedom, democracy, human rights and freedom of religion by means of peaceful negotiation and national agreement on the equivalent and equal basis.

This was also a fact that hindered the development of the country and detached it from the democratic process in the world.

The nature of the antiquated Vietnamese Communists was bellicose extremism, deception with fiendishly cunning standpoint, inflexible, conservative dogmatism. They always used beautiful words to cram the citizens' heads with false propaganda to cover up the truth and lull their party members as well as the public into inactivity. They aimed at pauperizing and keeping the citizens in ignorance so they became easy to be governed. Some individuals were deified and raised to the equal status or even above Christ and Buddha. Those at the Politburo painted the regime in gold and dazzled the stupid, blind and fanatical minds of their followers with those images.

Marxism – Leninism was a destitute, utopian, backward and obsolete doctrine that was not suited to the Vietnamese tradition nor the current world.

In the first half of the 1950 decade, under the Agrarian Reform, tens of thousands of people were publicly denounced, executed even buried alive. Even those who joined them to fight against the French and those who joined their Communist Party were mercilessly killed.

Over 2 millions people in the North had to abandon their native land, homes to flee to the South for their safety.

In the 1950-60 decade writers and artists in the Humanities Arts Movement were jailed for revealing the true dishonesty and evil nature of the Communist regime.

After April 30, 1975 tens of thousands of South Vietnamese servicemen were taken to 're-education camp', many of them gradually died in concentration camps, others were executed. Together with that, the Industrial and Commercial Reform and the Bourgeoisie Reform allowed the Vietnamese Communist authorities to confiscate and manage the citizen's properties "for the State" but in fact they all went to the unsatiated greediness of those graft-ridden cadres. And that created a new class – the Red Capitalists. Many people were reduced to destitution and some killed themselves or became insane, others fled the country to live in foreign lands. Widows and war invalids were to face the heaping difficulties in their living, orphans wandering on the streets begging for their food. Some children were badly and unequally treated at school due to their family background.

After April 30, 1975 more than 2 millions Vietnamese fled their country, braving the cruel waves of the ocean, piracy, killing, rape – for the hope of coming to another free country. They'd rather die at sea than live in that hell of the cruel, inhuman Vietnamese Communist regime. Many patriotic movements arose, fighting for freedom, human rights, multiparty system. They were arrested and jailed by the authorities and were given life sentences, death sentences (even for pregnant women) or sent to exile.

Many other problems were also mentioned in the above petition. We then, on behalf of all political and religious prisoners as well as prisoners of conscience, proclaimed our peace ideal and the deep longing for a true democracy for the people of Vietnam. The Northerners, for over 75 years and the Southerners, for over 30 years had undergone so much hardship under the rule of the cruel and dictatorial Communist regime. It was now time for every citizen, irrespective of education, age, gender, race, religion to unanimously stand up and demand that the regressive Communists give the power back to the Progressive Communist members to

carry out a complete reform on the society and build up a multi-party democratic regime suitable to the wish of the Vietnamese people and in accordance with the new world trend to create a country where equality and democracy reign for Vietnam in the future

3.SOME PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND HEART RENDING MEMORIES IN JAIL.

a. Besides meeting with fellow political and religious inmates,

I had a chance to get in touch with veterans, cadres, party members who had fought and joined the ranks of other Communist cadres during the war of resistance against the French. Many of them were high ranking cadres with lots of experiences in the bloody war. They were retired or fell into disfavor by the ungrateful authorities who took advantage of them then mistreated them. Some realized their mistakes and reneged, others more progressive and open-minded stood up and demanded a pluralistic democracy. I asked those veterans what the Party was and they told me: ‘It was a piece of clay molded to some kind of figure. Those leaders then gave it a name and worshipped it and ordered others to do the same – to obey without question or face death’. They also said the Vietnamese Communist Party had many wicked tricks that only those who were involved with them knew it. They had been degenerating from top to bottom, just like a house rotting from the roof down. During the decadent and difficult economic time, many opportunists fishing in troubled water got a chance to get rich by usurping other people’s property. In addition, for many years, under the Party’s directive the following classes in the South are subject to lifelong supervision:

1. Primarily, religious groups, in particular the Catholics.

2. Secondly, those Northern Vietnamese who fled to the South in 1954.
3. Thirdly, those Communists who defected to the South Vietnamese Government in the ‘Open Arms Movement’ during the war.
4. Fourthly, those former followers from the South regrouped to the North in 1954 who, upon returning to the South and losing faith in the Party’s leadership, became disillusioned and rebellious renegade. These elements were potential trouble makers and had to be watched carefully.

Those Catholics from the North who fled the South in 1954, according to the Party, are parts of the “Five Congs” namely: cong an (police with the French authority), cong chuc (administrator under the French government), cong no (the debt evaders), cong tu (children of wealthy landowners) and cong giao (Catholic followers). These also had to be strictly supervised.

b. A memorable heart rending incident in jail.

In 1999, on Buddha’s Birthday at Xuan Loc camp, while Buddhist prisoners were gathering in their room to pay tribute to Lord Buddha, I was told a heart rending story by Mr. Le Van Tinh, now 68, a doctrine officer of Hoa Hao Buddhist Congregation, also a Member of Parliament under the Republic of Vietnam.

This was a true story of Major Dang Binh Minh and his wife at Dong Mua Camp. After April 30, 1975 he was sent to a camp in the North. His family was left in destitution and for many years his wife could not come to visit him. His health rapidly declined and he lost half of his usual weight. His fellow inmates could not provide much help as they were hardship ridden themselves. Thus he spent his years in poverty and hardship until one day his wife came all the way South to visit him after a long tiring difficult trip.

It was such a happy reunion for both of them and they talked until late evening. That night, his wife stayed at the visitors' house and got ready to leave for the South next day. As for Major Minh, he came back to his cell and had a tea party for his fellow inmates to mark his happy visit. The next morning, on the way home, the wife was told that her husband suddenly passed away the previous night, probably from too much emotion. She then came back to the camp and waited for her husband to be carried to the cemetery and buried. At the scene she cut her long black hair with a knife and put it on his tomb with the following poem:

The summer scorches Dong Mua

You die in deep grief

Out of love, I cut my hair

And wind it on the tombstone as the mourning veil

She then kneeled down in front of his tomb and said: 'Let me prostrate before you for the last time'. And she thanked his fellow inmates and wished them good health and a quick return to their families. Then she nodded good bye and went to the bus station to go South. His fellow inmates watched her crying as she went and no one could keep their eyes dry.

c. A wrongful accusation at Xuan Loc Camp and a sorrowful story for the family of young guy Nhieu.

One morning while I was waiting in line to be sent to do labor work, a young guy from the row of common criminals came to our side. He was nice looking, about 19-20, though dark skinned, thin and emaciated with scabies on his arms and legs. He asked me if I was Venerable Thich Thien Minh of Vinh Binh temple at Cai Day, Chau Hung, Bac Lieu. When I confirmed it, he said that 3 years before, at one visit, his mother had told him about a monk by that name being jailed here and when the cadre called my name, he recognized me. I asked about his mother's living after her last visit

3 years ago. He said that she was not coming any more due to poverty and hardship at home, that he didn't have a bucket to keep his own water so he could not get water for his cooking or washing after coming back from labor.

On hearing that I promised to buy a 20 litre can so he could save water for himself. Since that day on I sometimes got him some food by asking the guards to buy and give it to him. It took me a lot of careful and clever tactic to get this help from the guard because once it was discovered, he could be dismissed or worse, put in shackle or sent to do hard labor.

Another day, the lad asked me if I could give him some gourd, okra or pepper seeds so he could grow them for his own food supply. I told him I was not in the green vegetable group but I would ask for him. The next day, 2 inmates from my greens group brought those seeds to him. It was discovered and reported to the camp security while I was away at work. When coming back from the afternoon labor, the camp security by the name of Hoa, a big thug, called me to his office. He showed me all those seeds, together with the self confession paper in which the young lad admitted that he had asked me for those and it was me who gave them to him. On that, I assumed that some guys in my greens group overheard the boy asking me for those seeds and they knew that I didn't have them so they did it for him voluntarily. I had no choice but confirming the story, otherwise those 2 guys would be disciplined, reported, put in shackles for 7 days, and deprived of visit from family. I was then disciplined and deprived of visit, receiving mail or parcel or money order for a period of 3 months.

On coming back to my room after signing the report on the interrogation, I was told that the two guys who brought the seeds to the lad were Phan Huu Tri and Le Dong Phuong.

d. Two days before my discipline time was over, my younger brother Huynh Huu Nhieu

unexpectedly came for a visit before the Vietnamese New Year. Due to the hardship in the family, he had not been able to visit me during the past two years, just sending me some parcels or money when he could. Upon his request to see me, the camp Supervision Committee did not grant him the visit and told him I was still under discipline time. Normally during this special occasion of the New Year, they would allow it, but with all prejudice in their mind about me, they flatly refused my brother's request. An inmate without visit would not have money to help other fellows in difficult time and would easily be under control of the camp. When all his pleading was to no avail, my brother sadly came home, wondering how his brother would spend his New Year in the discipline cell. With so much in his mind, a few days later he hit and killed someone in an accident while driving a scooter taxi.

That day he was driving a customer on the right side of a quite large road when an old, slender man over 60 riding a bicycle from a lane rushed headlong into his scooter. The old man then fell on the street and got trauma in the head from hitting the stones on the street. My brother then picked him up and called a cab to take him with his son by his side to Bac Lieu hospital for an emergency treatment where they were told that the hospital did not have means for such treatment. My brother then had to hire a car to bring him to another hospital in Can Tho, 100 km away. On the way, when the old man came back to himself, my brother pleaded him to try to stay alive, because if he died my brother would be in destitution and no one would come to visit his monk brother who had been jailed for over 20 years. The old man said that he would be all right and told his accompanying son that it was his own fault in this accident and that if he died, his son should not make it difficult for my brother. During the trip he kept saying that to his son, but on his way back from the hospital, he died in my brother's

arms. My brother was kept for only few days at the police station but was released after the victim's family withdrew the charge.

On his release, my brother sold his scooter and every valuable thing he got in his house and asked his brother who was a principal at an elementary school to borrow money from his fellow teachers in the school to help with the funeral of the old man. Three of my siblings and their families came to pay respect and asked to be in mourning for the old man like other family members. The widow and her three sons were very moved by this attitude. In front of every family members and guests she said that from that moment on, she would consider my siblings as her own children and no one in her family would mention about the accident.

After that day my brother Nhieu's family got into a lot of difficulties. His eldest daughter had to leave school (she was in grade 11) to work to feed the family. My jail life thus got worsened due to the mishap in my brother's life.

e. Antenna – the name for those prisoners enticed by camp cadres to work for them as henchman.

During my 26 consecutive years through all types of jail, there always were those inmates (including political and conscience prisoners) who were enticed and planted to follow closely all activities and thoughts of other fellow inmates. They were called 'antenna' – those who sold themselves to the enemy for some favor and betrayed their fellow inmates by doing things and trample on their lives in exchange for their own comfort. They seemed to forget that while getting their small favors from the camp police, they had caused a lot of miseries to other fellow inmates and a shameful stain on the honor of those who tried to keep their conscience clear. It also caused the camp police to look down on the political prisoners and do a lot of harm to other prisoners.

These antennas – also called ‘balloons’ were planted in the cells by the Ministry, Department, the Camp Supervision Committee or the re-education security officers. Some of them did their job discretely, others openly. Some did their report on a regular basis, others periodically as a way to redeem their offences. They were allowed to openly say things against the regime. Some got monthly bonus and gifts. During the time we spent together at the camp, I was certain that there were camp antennas who often denounced us to the police. They rarely got visits from their family and met with difficulties so I used to help them just like others in need.

Ironically, they still reported to the camp police that I was helping other inmates without asking permission from the camp police and I was accordingly investigated, put in shackles and refused family visits.

When I faced them and asked why they did so while receiving my help they said if they did not report me then others would and in that case they would be accused of covering up for me. Thus during my long jail terms, I witnessed so many heart rending, shameful things that caused bad reputation for the whole prisoners community and damaged the ideals that we were pursuing. The Police Ministry and Department also planted some clever, cunning common criminals and turned them into political prisoners to penetrate and mingle with the political prisoners community to get their trust in order to do their subtle tricks. This trick existed in every prison all over Vietnam so we always had to be watchful in this world of good and evil. These were the ‘guidelines’ for us to survive in the jail.

A prisoner should be careful to recognize the true fellow inmate and stay away from the antenna. They should not be afraid of facing a camp police but beware of back-stabbing by the very fellow inmates close to them. Revolutionary participants must

accept hardship first and happiness later when success was gained and everyone gets a better life.

f. The ‘like cures like policy at camp Z30A Xuan Loc, Dong Nai.

Under the severe and cruel rule of the wicked, inhuman wardens, political and religious prisoners as well as non-political prisoners were suffering and writhing. The ongoing policy in the Communist prisons was making prisoners punish their fellow prisoners. The supervision committee elected different boards to manage emulation, discipline, self- management and leaders among prisoners. They selected those thugs known for their stormy past to help them in the control of prisoners. Thus a prisoner had to make one of those two choices:

1. To absolutely abide by the internal regulations and the forced hard labor and accept the exploitation of the sweat and tears.
2. To be punished and cruelly beaten by the above inhuman squad leaders, be found guilty of resisting labor, violating the regulations and would be disciplined, cut from family visits and from being reviewed for annual reduction of sentence.

Though, according to the Internal Regulations, prisoners beating up prisoners was strictly forbidden but when it happened by those ‘chosen leaders’, camp police would close their eyes so the former, could do it at their content. Only when it went too far or someone complained about it did the police look at the incident but finally let it pass. A few of those ‘self-management’ persons however were less severe with prisoners and treated them better, knowing that some day the same thing might happen to them. These people got love and respect from prisoners. They understood and concerned themselves with the prisoners’ needs though sometimes got blames from the camp police and would not be left in their position for long.

g.Strange but true incidents in a Communist prison.

During my jail time I witnessed some strange but true incidents happening in the prison. No one would believe them except for those who got involved. Only by witnessing these incidents would bring true sympathy and heart rending feeling for the victims. One of those instances happened at the end of the labor hour. When the clang of the final makeshift gong for the day was heard, prisoners immediately stopped their work. They would immediately leave the hoes on their shoulders and not waste their sweat by completing their hoeing action. The camp got a few cows to pull the carts on which prisoners, with light sentences or were about to be released, would load agricultural products that other prisoners shed their sweat to grow. Those cows also got conditioned to the clang of the gong, thus on hearing the day's end clang for labor, they would automatically stop pulling, turned and went back to the camp by themselves. At times when the keepers were ordered to make only one more trip with the cart, the pair of cows then resisted and tried to kill themselves by hitting their heads against the trees or jumping head-on into the stream just to refuse to do the extra trip. Even cows would not accept those atrocities, let alone prisoners who endured tens of years in that wretched hell.

Other awkward adversities also happened in jail. One fellow inmate got regular visits from his wife for many years. A few days before he was released, his wife came with her new husband with whom she got two kids and told the former that it was with the help of the new husband that she had been able to visit and support him during the past years and raised their children. The former husband, struck with this awkward situation, had no choice but expressing his thanks to the stranger. Thus his release became an anguished split with his own family, and he had no home to come back to and no future to look forward to. But the guy who stole

his wife and let her visit and support him during those long years in jail was not a bad person, especially in the Communist society. It was the only case that I witnessed during my stay at K2, Xuan Loc.

In other cases, some got visits by the wives with a completed application for divorce. They were shocked but had to sign on it. For some others, their wives left for new men after they were jailed for one or two years. I had a sworn-brother inmate, a very nice and generous intellectual. On his seventh year in jail, his wife and son fled the country and later settled in the USA. For many years she sent him money and he used it for himself and to help other fellows in need – myself included. About 2 days before his release, his son came from the US for a visit with a letter from his wife telling him about her decision for separation. He said nothing about this incident but I caught him gazing sadly into the distance, a lit cigarette on his hand. I felt so sorry for him. Besides the ideals of a revolutionist he still had sentimental feelings of an artist.

Without those feelings and ideals he would not sacrifice his life and accept mishaps. I didn't have a chance to ask and console him when he said: 'Don't bother, Venerable Ba. It's life and this is not a big deal'. I asked if he wasn't sad. He said of course he was, being a human being, but he was lucky to have a big love for the country and that small family love was no matter. I myself thought he would come back to a lonely life outside without any future and a burden of sadness to follow. The only motive that brought him back to normal life was his strong will to overcome the mishap of his fate. Though his turns of events were still not good, he waited patiently for his time to come and afterward participated in a big project on the origin of the Vietnamese people. His priceless research deserved great admiration. He was indeed a person who had nothing to be ashamed of, having stuck to his beautiful pure spirit through all events.

Through the above whimsical ironies of fate, I had great respect and bow to those women whose loyal and unyielding hearts to their husbands never changed with time and circumstances. This part of the memoir was also dedicated to those righteous Vietnamese women.

CHAPTER X

The Revolutionary Intention Of Vietnamese Political Prisoners

After the April 30, 1975 event, many political organizations, fronts and political movements were springing up in all three regions of Vietnam – first in the South and Central regions and later joined by the North. The reason being, even Communist Party members of many years could not stand the injustice, let alone those who were so new to the regime and those enticed to join them. Those who opposed the regime could be arrested, prosecuted or even exiled. Prisoners of different educational levels, age, characters, religions, and ethnicity were kept in the same prison. Despite those differences, political prisoners were of an entity under four categories as follows:

A. Those who fought for the national spirit

They dedicated their lives for the country and the freedom and happiness of their compatriots without asking for any benefit in return. They were of 2 groups:

-Those who were in a protracted war of resistance for the country and the people. Their loyalty would not be shaken no matter how long their imprisonment was, and they were always true to their ideals.

-Those who were in a temporary war of resistance. Their standpoints were not changing but if jailed too long, they seemed

to flinch from their fight and were not as ardent as at the beginning though they would not betray their fellow fighters or their ideals.

B. Those who fought out of rancor. They experienced extreme personal loss. Some lost parts of their bodies due to the war, others got parents or sibling killed or disposed secretly by the Communists. They were also parts of the two groups:

-Those who were in a protracted fight. They always nurtured a deep hatred that had to be carried out by bloody revenge. They had no plan to build up a better society and their hatred would never diminish with jail time.

-Those in a short-tern fight. With jail time, their hatred would diminish if the other party (wardens) gave them better treatment. Since hatred originated from feelings being hurt so when they got concern, comfort and understanding from the rulers, their hatred gradually diminished and some could even co-operate with the latter to trample on their fellow inmates. They were easily enticed by the Communists.

C. Those who fought for their own interests. Their fight got nothing to do with the love for their country or countrymen nor the hatred for the enemies but only for their own interest. Their properties and power might have been appropriated or confiscated by the Communists. They then joined the political organization hoping for a good opportunity to recover their loss and even to improve it. Some even thought of getting power and good wealth should the occasion arise. They fell into two sub categories:

-Those in protracted fight for privilege. No matter how long their jail time could be, their wish for recovering wealth and power would not change. Some even suffered from hallucination when their dream did not materialize. If the imprisonment and suffering went on too long they would not be able to control their behavior and got unusual change in their attitude or thinking.

-Those in short term/temporary fight for privileges. If they could not get what they wanted from their fight, they would easily be content themselves with small favors like getting easy visit times, review for reduce lighter labor or early release. Thus they were easily enticed by wardens and would sell out their fellow inmates to get those favors.

D. Those who fought to swim with the tide. They felt uncomfortable and ashamed doing nothing when others joined political organizations to fight for the good of the country. These would join the cause to save their faces and were in one of the two groups:

-Those in protracted fight. Some would be discontented and depressed if the imprisonment was getting too long. But those who could get over it and trained themselves to stand on their own feet could become good “soldiers” with political knowledge in the fight for democracy and human rights for Vietnam.

-Those in the temporary fight. They could hold their sense of purpose and uprightness for only a short period. If imprisonment got too long they were easily roused and enticed to do bad things. These people were not interested in learning, wasting their time in useless things, having no will, standpoint and sometimes doing things that hurt the dignity of the group.

CHAPTER XI

The benefactors that I would never forget

During my 26 years in the Communist jail I have got a taste of all the bittersweets of life. From those incidents, I came up with a way to evaluate a person’s value as in the saying: the real value of a person could only be found in the utmost destitution of his life and

not in normal circumstances. I did not remember how many good deals I have done and people I have helped but I would never forget the least kindness bestowed on me when I was in destitution by fellow inmates from Xuan Phuoc camp to Xuan Loc, Dong Nai camp. Among those were:

1. Mr. Pham Tran Anh. He was one of those who swore brotherhood with me. He

graduated from the National School of Administration and was appointed Deputy District Chief, Assistant Administrator under the Republic of Vietnam Regime. He was a kind hearted and generous man who would help everyone. He was knowledgeable as well as strong-willed and enthusiastic, leading a simple life and close to his fellow inmates, especially those ethnic minority people or those in destitute and sickness. He used to visit and comfort those with little education or in distress in jail He even crossed the fence to join and eat with those inmates having tuberculosis, heedless of being disciplined or catching the disease.

Though nobody was perfect, I always thought each of us was born with a special ability that needed a ground to develop and I hoped that everything would go well for such a good person like him. To me it was a fourfold connection: a sworn brother, a fellow inmate, a Buddhist who had high regard for a monk and a Samaritan who gave me a lot of help during my miserable years in exile.

Through all those long years, his feelings and attitude towards me was always wholesome which I always cherished though he was going through a difficult time with his family after being released from jail. During his jail time, his wife fled to another country and got married to another man. He came back to a lonely and poor life outside without a job to live on and had to prepare for a new life in a society full of prejudice that required patience to endure and bide his time for a better future. His noble and beautiful feelings would always be with me and that was why I put him first among my benefactors in this memoir.

2. Dr. Nguyen Dan Que.

3. Father Tran Dinh Thu, brothers Chuong, Nguyen Viet Huan, Nguyen Van Hiep of the Co-Redemptrice Order.

The Headquarters Chapel of the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix located in Thu Duc. It was charged by Vietnamese Communists for carrying out propaganda against the Socialist regime and undermining International Solidarity. The fact was that those religious leaders realized that many countries in the world, Vietnam included, were still misled and subjugated by the atheist rule of Marx- Leninism, a doctrine that was obsolete, anti-progressive, inhuman, antinationalist, anti-religious. Those priests silently prayed God for a quick eradication of that doctrine so that human beings would have a chance to survive and live with less misery.

In 1986 the Vietnamese Communist authorities arrested 18 catholic priests including Father Tran Dinh Thu who was 90 at the time on the excuse of offending their founding fathers Karl Marx and Lenin. It was in jail where religious leaders had a chance to share the miseries in shackles. I was fortunate enough to get help mentally and materially from those nice, friendly and humble priests that I would always acknowledge and remember. I had so many nice memories to share with the priests of the Co-Redemptrice Order. Though we followed different religions we all had the same idea of serving other fellow human beings.

My first memory was with Brother Nguyen Van Hiep, now assistant to a priest in charge of a diocese. During the days we were in the group and cell, we used to go and ask for buckets of water from the kitchen and brought them down to the end of the row of cells to help old fellow inmates who were sick or having poor sight. Brother Hiep was thin but energetic. He also had to care for Father Tran Dinh Thu who was very old at that time. I myself would care for Abbot Thich Duc Nhuan. On top of that Brother

Hiep and I had to do the assigned camp labor. We developed a close and strong friendship.

And there was Brother Nguyen Viet Huan, alias Nguyen Thien Phung, a priest with high spirit of sacrifice who would help fellow inmates in their difficult times, myself included. During my 26 years in different jails I seldom met priests with such noble sacrifice virtue.

In this memoir I would like to express my sincere thanks to Brothers Huan and Hiep as well as other priests, especially Reverend Father Tran Dinh Thu, the founder of the Co - Redemptrice Order who always fulfilled altruism in their self reliance and getting along with others in a brotherhood spirit. This was a Vietnamese Order founded by Vietnamese priests. They called themselves ‘brothers’ no matter how high the ranks or age.

Next I would like to mention some of my fellow monks who shared with me the misery during our time in jail.

Monk Superior Thich Duc Nhuan, former Secretary General United Buddhist Church of Viet Nam

Though in jail, I considered it a multi-life predestined blessing that I had a chance to be close and cared for him whom I met in 1989 when being transferred from Xuan Phuoc camp to Xuan Loc camp.

When I told him about my long years in exile, he shed tears and said: ‘It is karma. You’ve been at Xuan Phuoc and now Xuan Loc then you’ll be no doubt at Xuan Tho!’⁶ During my time in K2, I had a chance to be close to him and got his love and teaching which benefited me much more than those I had been learning for many years. Although his health was in decline and his age adding up, he was hauntingly worried for the future of the country and of the Congregation with the declining faith of the people in this troubled time when evil was dominating. He was composed,

⁶ Phuoc, Loc, Tho (Happiness, Good Fortune and Longevity) are the benevolent gods in East Asian culture

generous and kind, noble, highly intellectual, profound in Buddhism, marvelous and deep in his words, courteous and subtle in his manners, a highly respected man. He set a good example for younger generations. During his jail time, many inmates, myself included, had so much to learn from him. He gave me good care, physically as well mentally. My long poem ‘A verdict for the regime’ – unfortunately lost – was amended by him. He told me to keep in mind and practice the vow that the late Monk Superior Thich Thien Hoa had taught in the training course for Head monks all over the country.

I am a Buddha’s messenger
Who devotes his life for the Enlightenment Path
To serve the religious codes and all sentient beings
Whenever they need me, I’ll come
Wherever religious code is needed, I’ll go
No matter how harmful or hard it can be.
Nam mô Đại Hạnh Phổ Hiền Bồ Tát
Namo Samantabhadra Bodhisattva
*(Namo Universal Worthy Great Conduct Bodhisattva)*⁷

⁷<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samantabhadra>

« Niệm Danh Hiệu Phật và Bồ Tát » « Recite the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas' Names »

Niệm Danh Hiệu Phật và Bồ Tát - Recite the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas' Names

<http://buddha-dharma.org/?type=files&paths=GDPT/Docs/Tung-Niem/08-Recite-Buddhas-and-Bodhisattvas-Names>

(Nam-mô Bổn Sư Thích-ca-mâu-ni Phật)

Namo Fundamental Teacher Śākyamuni Buddha

(Nam-mô A-di-đà Phật)

Namo Amitābha Buddha

(Nam-mô Đương Lai Hạ Sanh Di-lặc Tôn Phật)

Following was the letter and picture of the Monk Superior after he was released from camp Z30D in Ham Tan. He sent Huynh Manh Hung from Bac Lieu to visit me and gave me his letter. He also asked Nhat Thuong and his wife to send a letter to my brother Huynh Huu Nhieue in Bac Lieu and tell him to come and see him (the Monk Superior) at Giac Minh Temple where my brother was given money to help visit me at the camp. He even told my brother to come every month for some financial aid, but my brother only did it once lest it would be a bother for such an elderly noble man. The kindness that he gave me together with his precious teaching would always be in my mind. During my time at Xuan Loc camp, he asked Mr. Nhat Thuong to send me a book entitled ‘The Quintessence of Buddhism’ so I could have a guide in my research and understanding of the essence in the philosophy of Buddhism. This would help in my preaching and serving other sentient beings after my release. On the cover he wrote me these two lines:

Namo Maitreya Honored Future Buddha

(Nam-mô Đại Trí Văn-thù-sư-lợi Bồ-Tát)

Namo Mañjuśrī Great Wisdom Bodhisattva

(Nam-mô Đại Hạnh Phổ Hiền Bồ-Tát)

Namo Universal Worthy Great Conduct Bodhisattva

(Nam-mô Đại Bi Quán Thế Âm Bồ-Tát)

Namo Avalokiteśvara Great Compassion Bodhisattva

(Nam-mô Đại Nguyện Đệ nhất Tạng Vương Bồ-Tát)

Namo Earth Store King Great Vow Bodhisattva

(Nam-mô Linh Sơn Hội Thượng Phật Bồ-Tát)

Namo Magic Mountain Assembly of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

The Buddha's Path is everlasting, your work lives with the
Congregation

Life is ephemeral, but this dignity lives with fellowmen.
Though due to my long jail time I met with so many suppressive
karma (Upapilaka-kamma), and my secular age is much more than
my religious age⁸ I swore that until the last of my days, I would
always remember his last will and put it in practice. I was ready to
contribute my effort with those of other monks to restore and
reactivate the Unified Buddhist Congregation as he wished. At the
end of the letter to me, he wished we would meet again soon, but
on the day I was released, he had already left this world and I did
not have the pleasure to see my respected teacher. I swore that I
would follow his fine example and worship him until the last of my
days.

The letter that Monk Superior Thich Duc Nhuan sent to me in jail:
1-11-1994 (1996?)

Dear Venerable Thien Minh,

On the visit by Mr. Huynh Manh Hung, I'm sending you some gift
together with 50,000 VND. I've been thinking of you and feeling
bad for you. It has been more than a year since I was released and
I'm doing well. I tried to finish writing the book 'Vietnamese
Buddhism' but was occupied with other trivial things so it is still
not completed but I'll have to do it soon. I hope that you're doing
well and that the day we see one another is not far.

Signed: Thich Duc Nhuan

Following was a letter by Venerable Thich Thiên Hien, a disciple
who cared for the Monk Superior from the day he came back to
Giac Minh Temple in Saigon until the day he passed away at 16:53

hours on 21-01-2002 at the age of 79. After that Venerable Thich Thien Hien fled to Australia. During the time he was caring for the Monk Superior he heard the latter talking about me. When he knew of my return to freedom he sent me the following letter:

Huyen Quang Temple, Australia
Feb. 28, 2005

To Venerable Thich Thien Minh, a person that I've heard of but never met.

I've heard so much of you but have not had a chance to meet with you. I am very glad to learn that you have been released. Among the Buddhist monks in peril, you must be the last one to be in the Communist jail after 30 years. I admire your undaunted spirit as well as your strong will during all that long jail time full of physical as well as mental hardship. I'm writing this in admiration for a compassionate, courageous and thoughtful monk, also a Vietnamese patriot who shared the hardship of life with others in the same circumstances. On behalf of Superior Monk Thich Duc Nhuan, I'd like to express our thanks to you. Those miserable days in jail must leave you with weakness and diseases. Please take care of yourself and find treatment for your illness. The Congregations and Shanga will try to help you, so do not worry too much. I'm sending you \$200 Australian dollars for your treatment. All my respect and friendship to you. Until next time,

Yours respectfully

Thich Thien Hien (Huynh Phu)

The Reincarnation of Bodhisatva Thich Thien Minh

When the name Thich Thien Minh was mentioned, everyone would think of the late Venerable Thich Thien Minh, Chief of the Vietnamese Buddhist Youth Association, Acting Chief of the

Dharma Development Institute and Advisor of the Steering Committee for the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation. He was arrested in 1979, tortured and brutally murdered in jail in Saigon. After 1975 he wrote a ten page declaration claiming democracy, human rights and freedom of religion for the Vietnamese people. On this, he was charged for being CIA agent, arrested and tortured to death (1). In the same year, 1979, a new monk by the same name, age 25, residing at Vinh Binh Temple, later confiscated by the Vietnamese Communists, had bravely fought to keep his temple. He was like a deer among the tigers, fighting lonely against armed police and soldiers and the whole cruel and hostile regime that put in jail anyone who were against them. Under that circumstance, he was convicted to life in prison by the authorities. But this conviction would not deter him or his unyielding and rebellious determination.

(1) This document was filed at office 2 of the Dharma Development Institute and the International Buddhist Information Office.

In 1986 together with 200 inmates, he stood up to claim freedom and dignity for prisoners against the severity and exploitation in jail food and work. He was then given a second life sentence. After that, he got 3 years of solitary confinement, his feet and hands in shackles and he could only sit or lie at one spot. The Vietnamese Communists could have killed him with a death sentence had it not been for the pressure by the International Human Rights Organization and the fight by the Shanga in the Vietnamese Buddhist Unified Congregation for the freedom of the Congregation. Otherwise he could have been killed like the late Venerable Thich Thien Minh.

Only after he was released and interviewed by the International radios when I could hear his strong voice sending his unyielding will. Even out of jail, he still did not have the basic human rights like freedom of residence, moving around, speaking up his mind and practicing his religion. It was like being transferred from one small prison to a bigger one where 80 million of Vietnamese were held, where people were always afraid to be watched and followed by ‘people’s police’ in every move or doing. Many were wakened up at night for a house search or taken to a police station to be interrogated and threatened. And there were other ways to blackmail the citizens. All these pressures drove many to mental crisis, living in this big Communist prison.

During the time he was confined with other monks in the Vietnamese Buddhist Unified Congregation, some of them got life sentences, others 20 or more years of imprisonment at Xuan Loc Camp in Dong Nai Province. It was there when he met Reverend Thich Duc Nhuan, former Secretary of the *Supreme Patriarch Institute* and Advisor to the Steering Committee of the Dharma Development Institute, Abbot at Giac Minh Temple. He also met with Venerables Thich Tue Sy, Thich Tri Sieu, Thich Khong Tanh, Thich Nhat Ban. He therefore got to know about the situation outside and nurtured his strong, fearless will like the monks in the Congregation. I learned those things from him through Monk Superior Thich Duc Nhuan. During his long jail term, the Monk Superior could have died had it not been for Venerable Thich Thien Minh who brought him bowls of congee, medication and washed his clothes. Moved by these deeds, the Monk Superior, after his release, always mentioned his good heart and tried to find ways to help him by way of visits and at the same time canvassing international organizations to intervene and push for his release. The feelings that they had for each other while in jail were much

stronger than outside. When he was released, the old Monk Superior had passed away.

In the mean while, in the big Communist jail there appeared a new kind of people who vied for life and ignored good conscience for fame and wealth. They worked as henchmen for the evil authorities by informing on, denouncing, slandering others including their teachers, friends, parents, spouses. Religious followers did not know who to trust, and who to make friends with. Sometimes closest friends could be the first to be harmed. Even some religious disciples of the same master who had fled the Communist in the North for the South would harm their brothers for fear of prison or loss of personal gains.

Right at this moment, a renown Vietnamese Zen Master who used to be in the shanga with other monks in the Unified Buddhist Congregation came back to Vietnam after 40 years living abroad. It was at the critical time when the U.S. were making pressure on the Communist authorities to give back freedom to religious leaders and the Unified Buddhist Congregation by asking them to make improvement on freedom for religion. He was allowed to come back and preach at his heart's content while his brothers who fought for freedom of religion had been jailed for the past 30 years.

The old faith between friends, teachers and students had totally failed and naturally there was a gap among them. It only took a positive good will -without the interference of the evil authority- for them to meet anywhere to resolve the misunderstanding but nothing happened and now both parties were suffering. They wanted to meet and hug, to cry and tell one another so many things after such a long time but they could not make it. What an awkward situation! Those you disliked were all around while those you would like to see were nowhere to be found. Pressure from outside caused people to lose their faith in the others. Though the late Thich Thien Minh was gone, his reputation was still long admired

and now there was his reincarnation to carry out the mission that the nation and religion had bestowed on him. In 1963, Bodhisatva Thich Quang Duc burned himself to death to require equality for religions from the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. And until now Bodhisatva Thich Quang Do had spent 30 years in the jail of the communist regime. But he was still fighting a non-violent war for freedom, democracy, human rights for Vietnam until the last of his days.

Thich Thien Hien

*Venerable Thich Tue Si (birth name⁹ Pham Van Thuong) During his time in jail, he was leading a humble simple life, eating only one meal at noon time. He was a cheerful and knowledgeable intellect. Though thin and weak, he would never neglect his study, research on Buddhism, meditation, writing poetry and books, translating and practicing calligraphy. During the time we spent together in jail, I had a chance to understand him better and learn to equip myself with ways to behave clearly above the usual norm in life.

He was a very talented man especially in arts and literature and profound in canonical Buddhist books (of prayers). He was released before me and later, when I was given back freedom I had a chance to see him a few times. In this critical time when the survival or demise of the Unified Buddhist Congregation was in peril, I joined the monks in the Congregation in the struggle despite my limited knowledge and ability. It was too bad that he was not by my side in this painfully perseverant fight. Though due to karmic conditions we were could no longer be together, I always cherish the memories of our hard time in jail and for that reason I would like to mention his name in this memoir.

*Venerable Thich Khong Tanh

⁹ Pháp danh: ordination or clerical name - Thế danh: lay name or birth name

Though I'd heard of him before, it was only when we went for the interview with the UN Human Rights Committee that I actually met him. True to his religious name, [Khong tanh 'Śūnyatā', in Buddhism, means emptiness, openness], he had a generous and big heart; and he is a sentimental but liberal monk, cheerful and outspoken in nature. In jail, he got love and respect from fellow inmates. He was urbane in manners and ready to help everyone, myself included, even though he himself was not well off. His sacrifice for others deserved admiration from us all. After the meeting with the above mentioned International Committee, he seemed to recognize my situation, suffering so long in jail for my religion and people, so he sent things or money to help me cope with my miserable days. When I got out of jail, he told me the help I got came mostly from Ms. Doan Trang, Director of 'Que Huong' Radio who offered to assume the finance burden while he only got a tiny part of the contribution, being recently out of prison himself. I would like to express my appreciation to Ms. Doan Trang for this good deed. She was a person with a big heart, a patriot and good Buddhist whose help showed the spirit true to the teachings of Buddha. I had a chance to talk with her on the phone and expressed my gratitude to her and I pray Buddha to help such people to always be on the right path with enlightenment, compassion and kindness.

*Mr. Doan Quoc Si.

He was a man of culture, an educator with profound knowledge, modest, urban and gentle in manners. He was also a knowledgeable Buddhist of great virtue. In Xuan Loc camp where we were jailed together, he gave me a poem he wrote at Chi Hoa jail one night when he saw a chicken picking the grains of rice that inmates spilled on the floor. He took pity for the chicken having to look around for something to eat even though it came from those inmates who, themselves, were hungry. Also in Xuan Loc, he told

me that later when released he would write a book of poems called 'The Rose Garden' in memory of the jail life. He even encouraged me to write a poem for the prologue and this was what I wrote:

As a patriot who is in predicament
I write this poem in jail in an emotional moment
Being in jail is like being in a monastery
Where sticking to one's ideal requires painstaking time and effort
like panning for gold
In an imaginary flower garden, the jail poem is pervaded with the
love for the nation, its people and the oath to the nation
I swear to offer my enthusiastic and loyal heart
To make our forefathers proud of their descendants.

*Professor Nguyen Van Bao

A dignified teacher ready to help and guide fellow inmates in the common cause for struggle. He was also a fervent Cao Dai follower who had strong belief in the national spirit, strong will on the welfare of the people. On behalf of other Cao Dai followers in jail, together with other religious followers, he signed a petition to the UN.

We had a nice time together in the camp where he took me as a friend though I was 16 years his junior and we went together through hard times. Having to do hard forced labor in his old age, he got big problems with his eyes. It was very difficult to do his daily activities since he could not see things well. But he always stuck to his ideals and immutable position until he was released after 20 years in exile. His strong and staunch way was always an inspiration for me.

During the time we shared the same cell he gave me to following poem:

Since the day Vietnam was born
It was blessed with the immense compassionate light
The waves raised the ideology of Dragon and Fairy

And overflowed the nation in it

In the utmost glorification, our past
Is the torch that shines our future
In the immensity of the harmonious source of life
In the universe full of stars!

The sun and moon light embrace humanity love
Heaven and earth tempered the hallowed memory
In the spirit of the wave at Dong Dinh
The Viet race strove to build up a great nation
Distinguished for its cultural genius
And marvelous achievements known over the world
The hallowed memory of our forefathers
Brought indomitable spirit to thousands of generations
Our course of history is full of ups and downs and changing
upheavals
But since the making of our nation
The Viet race always makes their nation proud.

*Mr. Phan Dinh Hien

A hale and hearty old man, healthy and full of life, he liked to collect things, doing research. An unassuming scholar himself, he was not afraid to inquire on things that he didn't know from others no matter how young the person was – a thing that not many people could do. He always kept the righteous conduct and ethics in all circumstances. He was a fervent admirer of Buddhism and had respect for priests, monks and other religious leaders. In my days of hardship in jail I got a lot of comfort and help from him and these lines were to show my gratitude to him. I know the chance of seeing him when I was released was very small due to his old age and I just like to wish him good health in order to see the new good day for Vietnam.

*Monk Superior Thich Hue Dang

A wise and sharp strategist who spent time with me at the camp. He was generous, eloquent in speaking, sharp in argument and strategy. When fellow inmates came and asked for his advices, he was always ready to help with profound reasoning and explanations. He was concerned about my circumstance in jail and always tried to help. On my first day of release it was a big surprise to get his careful gift of clothing for a monk to wear in prayer and at home, a rosary and medications together with books of prayer. I'd like to express my deep gratitude to him in this book.

*Mr. Nguyen Van Chien

A fervent follower, a good believer in Jesus, he was loved and respected by his fellow inmates for his kindness and good personality. During his long jail time he was a benefactor who helped me in my difficult time.

During my time in the Communist jail, these were the people of great help and support that I would like to mention in my memoir. Others who shared good and bad moments with me were all my benefactors during my time of misery. These people were good memories that I would like to keep until the last of my days. I sincerely prayed for their best and peaceful lives.

I. CONTACTS WITH MEMBERS OF VIETNAMESE OVERSEAS ORGANIZATIONS DETAINED IN VIETNAM

As an old saying: When the country is in danger, its countrymen must take responsibility (to save it). Patriotism is a duty, a responsibility of the people toward the country. It's the noble duty for everyone, not some. So all Vietnamese inside or outside the country shared the same origin and forefathers and they all thought alike. For this, during my jail time at Xuan Loc, I had a chance to

meet with a number of members of Vietnamese political groups coming back from abroad for their political activities and were captured. To name a few groups:

1. Hoang Co Minh Organization
2. Mai Van Hanh and Le Quoc Tuy Organization
3. Nguyen Huu Chanh
4. People's Action by Nguyen Si Binh
5. Fighting For Justice Organization by Nguyen Si Binh
6. Red Poinciana Group by Hoang Viet Cuong

These organizations had similar platform and struggle purposes and maybe some different ways of action. Some advocated non-violent struggle, others needed weapons to support their political solution. Even others decided that it would be inefficient to call for the Communists to reconsider their policy because they were clever in talking but cunning and devious in their action. Peace negotiation was only their tactics to bide their time. Through my experiences in jail here was what I came up with.

Assessment

- a. Where there is capitalism, there will be communism
- b. Communists are not afraid of capitalists, they only worried about their own traitors or the rise up of the people.
- c. Communists may win during wartime but they lose in peace time.
- d. The disintegration of the upper components of government of Republic of Vietnam caused the lower components to abandon their posts.
- e. The Vietnamese Communists themselves will collapse themselves on D day due to the infighting among the upper components and the lower components will follow suit

Directions to save the country

To abolish communism, 4 lines of actions must be considered:

1. Rise from distress. The best time to rise and save the country is when the whole country is in a miserable disaster.
2. Set a thief to catch a thief. Use the strength, the characteristics of the Communists and also their own people to fight them. Referring to what are written in their own constitution and international pledge to get rid of those conservative and extremist communists, and build a civil government with a pluralistic democracy.
3. Actions by patriotic groups. Patriotic, political, religious groups all united and rise to fight on the Religion and Human Rights fronts to change clause 4 in the Constitution and step by step to dissolve the Communist regime in Vietnam.
4. Winning without fighting. The struggle should be mostly peaceful and non violent, force is not needed but it must ensure its national and international characteristics. Come “the right time, the right place and the right people”, Vietnam will be saved from danger and all religions will be freed from calamities. Note that some people contradict themselves when they want to fight for a pluralistic, multi-party system but demand eradication of the Communist Party.

II. LEGITIMATE AND PRACTICAL DEMANDS OF POLITICAL PRISONERS IN VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST PRISONS.

The yearning for freedom was an eternal dream of every human being. It was even more so for those imprisoned. Presently in Communist jails, not only political and religious prisoners but also common criminals were suffering both materially and spiritually under inhuman conditions. Being ‘intellectually starved’ is a very brutal punishment particularly in the era information explosion and fast development of electronic devices. During my jail time, I understood the pressing aspirations of the prisoners to be met.

They were:

1. Improve the jail conditions, increase the minimum standards of food, clothing, living for inmates.
2. Amend the ‘Decree concerning the execution of jail sentence’.
 3. Enforce special regulations and policy towards political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in accordance with international law.
 4. Open a library with all kinds of books and newspapers so prisoners could update and upgrade their knowledge.
 5. Improve the method of education.
6. Lower the food price in canteens which the camp got their monopoly and made big profits.
7. Release those sick, old, those political and religious prisoners and those who were jailed too long.
8. Reduce forms of discipline and degrading punishment to prisoners.
9. Grant clemency¹⁰ and amnesty¹¹ for prisoners.
10. Reduce overcrowded cells.
11. Reduce hard labor hours, make Sunday a day off.
12. No beating and demeaning treatment of prisoners.

During my last days of imprisonment I was summoned to work with Department V26, the Camp Administration Department and the Ministry of Police. On February 2, 2005, a week before the Lunar New Year, I was officially given back my freedom. That morning Nguyen Quang Hung, Supervisor and Chief of K3 camp, a cunning and wicked man called Professor Nguyen Dinh Huy and me to his office and announced the special early reprieve by the

¹⁰ **Clemency** means the [forgiveness](#) of a [crime](#) or the cancellation (in whole or in part) of the penalty associated with it. It is a general concept that encompasses several related procedures: pardoning, commutation, remission and reprieves. **Commutation** or **remission** is the lessening of a penalty without forgiveness for the crime; the beneficiary is still considered guilty of the offense. A **reprieve** is the temporary postponement of punishment, often with a view to a pardon or other review of the sentence (such as when the reprieving authority has no power to grant an immediate pardon)

¹¹ **Amnesty** is defined as: "A pardon extended by the government to a group or class of persons, usually for a political offense; the act of a sovereign power officially forgiving certain classes of persons who are subject to trial but have not yet been convicted"

President of the State. Professor Nguyen Dinh Huy ‘worked’ with them [had an interview] for half an hour and then it was my turn. On coming to the room I saw a small pre-set recorder. I expressed my feelings and put forward 4 increases and 4 decreases similar to the above-mentioned common aspirations.

The 4 increases:

1. Increase the volume of books and newspapers in the library.
2. Increase basic standards of foods, living.
3. Increase water for the use in cells.
4. Increase special reprieves for prisoners.

The 4 reduces:

1. Reduce discipline.
2. Reduce the number of inmates in the common prisoner cells which were too crowded.
3. Reduce the labor hours. Prisoners must have Sunday off.
4. Reduce the fleecing price in the canteen.

After the interview, Lieutenant Colonel Hong and another Deputy Supervisor took me to another room where I got a chance to write my impressions before coming to my cell to get my belongings. I only had time to bid a quick farewell to my fellow inmates and receive many ideas to be put forward later about human rights for those left behind especially those who were undergoing hardship day and night. At the gate, I met a correctional officer, Lieutenant Colonel Hoa to show papers for my deposited books and clothing. But he only gave me back my clothing. He told me the officer in charge of the warehouse was away but my books and paper would be sent to my place by post office, but so far, my 9th month after release, nothing had come. After that I was taken to the Headquarter of the Supervision Committee to get the release paper and then to Saigon. On my request they took me to my second sister’s home at 181 Dong Den, ward 11, Tan Binh district. My

brother-in-law Tran Trung Hieu greeted us at the door. Picture was taken and the police took off. I spent that night at my sister's house. At 8:00 a.m. the next morning I came to visit Monk Superior Thich Hue Dang on Bui Vien street, District 1. I was so moved to receive things such as ceremonial gown, in-house clothing, rosary, tuque, medication that he had prepared for my first day out of jail. He knew that the beginning was most difficult. After that I thanked him and went to Lien Tri Temple to visit and thanked Venerable Thich Khong Tanh. It was there that I had a chance to meet with Mr. Vo Van Ai, Director of the International Buddhist Information Center and Miss Doan Trang, Director of Que Huong Radio. I expressed my gratitude for their declarations in my support during the past years. I also had my first interview with Miss Y Lan, reporter of Free Asia Radio. Around 5 in the afternoon I went to Thanh Minh Meditation Center to pay respect to Monk Superior Thich Quang Do, Head of the Dharma Development Institute. After that I went to the bus station to take an overnight ride to Bac Lieu. Everything around me looked so strange. Though I was freed after a long imprisonment, I was aware that I was not totally out of the unfriendly environment. A bigger jail was waiting for me just as it was restraining 80 millions of my countrymen who were writhing under the brutal rule of the dictatorial Communist clique. It was my first day back to my native land after 26 years in exile to begin a new struggle to dismantle the Communist regime and bring back freedom, democracy and happiness to my people.

III. LIST OF POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS PRISONERS REMAINING IN XUAN LOC CAMP (Section 3)

By the time I was released there remained 60 political and religious prisoners belonging to groups 17 and 18 at K3. The number may have changed after I left. I still remember the names of the following 61 fellow inmates:

1. Pham Minh Tri, age 66, Father of the Co-Redemptrice Order
2. Nguyen Viet Huan, age 56, Brother of the Co-Redemptrice Order
3. Ngo Van Ninh, Age 87, President of Buu Son Ky Huong Buddhist Congregation
4. Le Van Chuong, age 42, Monk, of Buu Son Ky Huong Buddhist Congregation
5. Nguyen Van Si, age 42, religious name Thich Thien Tam of Hinayana Sect in Cambodia, member of the People's Action Party by Nguyen Si Binh
6. Le Van Tinh, age 66, former teaching staff of Original Hoa Hao Buddhist Congregation, member of the People's Action Party
7. Nguyen Tuan Nam, aka Bao Giang, age 68, paralysed and having bleeding cough, member of the People's Action Party
8. Nguyen Van Trai, age 70, member of the People's Action Party
9. Lam Kien, age 70, member of the People's Action Party
10. Bui Dang Thuy, age 61, member of the People's Action Party
11. Nguyen Anh Hao, age 61, member of the People's Action Party
12. Tran Cong Minh, age 59, member of the People's Action Party
13. Nguyen Huu Phu, age 51, member of the People's Action Party
14. Do Huu Nam, age 47, member of the People's Action Party
15. Nguyen Van Hau, age 47, member of the People's Action Party
16. Le Dong Phuong, age 46, member of the People's Action Party
17. Vo Van Ngoc, age 46

18. Nguyen Si Bang, age 44, of Red Poinciana Movement
by Hoang Viet Cuong
19. Pham Xuan Than, age 51
20. Truong Van Duy, age 37
21. Le Kim Hung of Free Vietnam Organization
22. Ho Long Duc
23. Nguyen Van Phuong
24. Nguyen Ngoc Phuong
25. Nguyen Hoang Giang
26. Nguyen Van Huong
27. Nguyen Van Nhut
28. Pham Van Muoi
29. Son Nguyen Thanh Dien
30. Nguyen Minh Man
31. Nguyen Van Minh
32. Huynh Buu Chau
33. Huynh Anh Tu
34. Huynh Anh Tri
35. Nguyen Van Than
36. Tran Van Duc
37. Vo Si Cuong
38. Pham Minh Tuan
39. Ngo Thanh Son
40. Tran Van Thai
41. Do Thanh Van (alias Nhan)
42. Dinh Quang Hai
43. Lam Quang Hai
44. Nguyen Anh Hao
45. To Thanh Hong
46. Mai Xuan Khanh of a regional organization
47. Phuong Van Kiem
48. Tran Van Thieng
49. Tran Van Mat

- 50. Vo Van Xuc
- 51. Nguyen Van Xuan
- 52. Phan Quoc Dung
- 53. Phan Van Truoc
- 54. Lai Phu Thuan
- 55. Voong Si Hong
- 56. Nguyen Van Hoa
- 57. Nguyen Van Chung
- 58. Nguyen Sinh Nhat
- 59. Bui Re
- 60. Nguyen Huu Cau, a captain of Army of Republic of Vietnam

(* Among those inmates, Mr. Le Van Tinh and Captain Nguyen Huu Cau had been in solitary confinement at K2 for over 10 years.

List of 8 political prisoners who died within the last 2 years due to sickness, hunger and beating.

- A. People's Action Party:
 - 1. Ly Nhut Thanh
 - 2. Ho Quoc Dung
 - 3. Hoa Van Xuan
- B. Free Vietnam Organization
 - 1. Nguyen Van Binh
 - 2. Son Tam
 - 3. Nguyen Van Ha
- C. Other Organizations
 - 1. Nguyen Van Chien
 - 2. Nguyen Minh Tan

IV. FEELINGS OF SOME CRIMINAL PRISONERS IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENTS

I spent a few times in disciplined cells, having my feet in the same stocks with other common or military prisoners. In the depth of their agony they poured their hearts to me as a confession out of their repentance for not fulfilling their duty of a son, a husband or a father. Back out in the society, they used to be lazy and neglected their families, shirking their responsibilities, wallowing in debauchery. Some were married but left everything to the care of their wives, and when the latter complained or their parents intervened, they would argue and even beat them up. Now in jail they had to do whatever as told or they would be put in shackles, brutally beat up and starved in solitary confinement. They got a chance to compare this life with their previous ways of life and felt deep regret for their behaviors toward their wives and parents, things that came a little too late. Some died of disease a few days after they told me of their regrets, their bodies being opened up for forensic investigation. All I could do at that time was praying for them to find peace with themselves. Most of them would put the blame on circumstances, in the society, their families, poverty. Some would boldly take their responsibilities on their wrong doing but not enough to make them stay away from their old paths. Some had the idea against social injustice but they did not have anyone to show them the right things to do. In short, most of those common inmates were fearless and daring. They were loyal to their gangs and could sacrifice for others if properly developed, but once they got into wrongdoing it was hard to know what they would do. The number of circumstance victims in Vietnam was big. It turned many young people into wrongdoing and that was a serious pain of the present as well as future society that called for the concern of any religions, educators, socialists, psychologists of any authority.

CHAPTER XII

For Conclusion

The Vietnamese Communist authorities have been building a series of prisons all over the country and deliberately arrested, jailed, slandered, making many innocent people victims of injustice. They even admitted to prosecuting many unjust cases, passing wrong verdicts of guilt on people true to their policy 'better wrongful arrest than missing prosecution'. Many more prisons have been built since building a prison is quicker and easier than a school, and prisoners' labor is free labor. Prisoners are forced to do hard labor for their rulers' benefit. If a statistics is made on prisoners in the country then I am sure the majority of prisoners are in their young age, especially at the time the Vietnamese Communist authorities were promoting the movement of birth control. Rumors among the citizens go that the Vietnamese authorities put many young men in jail to implement the family plan and get free labor. On top of that, 'money makes law' is a behavior publicly applied in jail.

During my time in jail I was approached and advised to lower myself and bribe the jail authority to be left alone or to have my jail time reduced. I told them that I did nothing to deserve this punishment and that I'd rather pay a high price for my freedom with my blood to keep my dignity than get on my knees ask for freedom as a favor. So on my last day before I was freed I was proud to talk straight -in the taped interview by Mr. Nguyen Quang Huy, Deputy Chief of the Camp Supervision Committee and the next day, through a long distance phone with Ms. Y Lan, reporter of the Free Asia Radio, Ms. Doan Trang, of Que Huong Radio.

This is what I said during the interview: I am a monk of the Unified Buddhist Congregation who has been jailed for 26 years consecutively in a prison of the Communist regime, more than a quarter of a century. It is not much in the long history of the country but for a human's life it is truly horrible! I'm sure the state of the Vietnamese Communist has to agree that. Mr. Ho Chi Minh

only spent a few months in jail and had quoted an old saying: ‘One day in prison is as long as a thousand years outside’. So how many millennia is my 26 years’ time in jail worth?’ Especially at this moment there are many sensitive problems between this country and the international community and it is just time for the release of political and religious prisoners. So in my opinion this round of release is more due to international pressure than the state’s humanitarian consideration. In other words, I am positive that the authorities of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam were compelled to free these prisoners and certainly it was not their good intention to do so. And if they think they do so on humanitarian ground, especially for a monk having been jailed for 26 years then this humanitarian act came too late if not too severe and inhuman.

Because of what I said, although I was given back my freedom, when I came back to my place of residence, I was still put under strict surveillance and treated with prejudice. It was like being transferred from a small jail to a bigger one with different means of confinement. So long as Vietnam doesn’t have true freedom and democracy, myself and other 80 million compatriots are still living silently in fear, doubt and thousands of difficulties and worries.

Being a member of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation, I do not expect nor accept any high rank consecrated by the Congregation although I was nominated by many members for a promotion. I just want to be an ordinary member, as usual. I think one has to suit one’s work to one’s strength – knowing one’s strength as well as others’. I am not a person of talent and virtue and will not be able to take on a task above my ability. I just have a heart but it is not enough. The Congregation needs smart collaborators, talented intellects, monks with superior intelligence who have a thorough grasp of the old and the new world and a deep knowledge of Buddhism, scholars of high proficiencies. What I can do is to preserve my loyalty and

determination in the defense of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation, now being in a dangerous upheaval. Especially during this evil time I am proud and honored to know that the Congregation still has top ranking monks like Monk Superior Thich Huyen Quang, the Fourth Supreme Patriarch, Monk Superior Thich Quang Do, Head of the Dharma Development Institute of the Congregation. They are big pillars, great men of talent and virtue to guide and defend the Congregation in the big storm where evil forces threaten to bring down the works of their forefathers. They are men of virtue and fairness, whose impartiality make the religious world shine and whose big hearts save our people and religion.

Since 1975 up to now, for over 30 years, the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation has been undergoing obstacles and danger, suppression, terror, harassment and innumerable numbers of difficulties. When the country is in calamity and religion in danger of being wiped out, its members – from central to regional level can be forced to die unjustifiably at any moment. The Congregation is always on its guard to face with dangers caused by evil forces, members of the brutal regime who are ready to slander, harm, distract, and entice its followers in order to destroy them. Under the Communist regime almost any religion is bearing the same fate and has to confront many adverse circumstances in the propagation of their ideology. Most of the loyal members of the Buddhist Congregation stand firmly behind its viewpoints and keep in their hearts the teaching of the second Supreme Patriarch, Monk Thich Giac Nhien given during the 2520th anniversary of the Birth of Buddha 25 years ago. In his message, he firmly affirmed the policy of the Unified Buddhist Congregation as follows:
‘Our current Congregation is the heir of the previous Congregation s dated from the past thousands of years. The constitution of the Congregation lies in its history and its position

in the hearts of the people. Its course of action is to serve the nation and human beings. Therefore, no matter where and under any circumstances, the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation will be the same and will always belong to the people of Vietnam. In fact, from the past until now and in the future the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation has always been in the mind and heart of the Vietnamese people and therefore it will never be erased or gone and no one can destroy it. If it is the intention of the Communists to wipe it out then they should reconsider and forget it. They should recall the history and past lesson of the benighted and corrupt King Le Long Dinh who was cruel, brutal and discriminating against Buddhism and had been condemned and considered a tyrant by the Vietnamese people.’

Along its history, the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation has never competed for any worldly power. It inherits the mission of enlightenment and self-liberation taught by Buddha and previous leaders. Through many atrocities, the country has seen so much sacrifice by monks for their religion and other religious leaders as well as Buddhists. Buddha taught us to use compassion as our base, *trí dũng* (*Intelligence and bravery*) as guideline. Buddhists have always been loyal to the country and fellow countrymen and stand by them in good and bad, dangerous time. During many years in the past I have fought for freedom, democracy, human rights as well as freedom for religions and especially for the reactivation of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation. In that sense I am both a political and religious prisoner. To me, patriotism is an inborn feeling among the citizens of any country. It is also their duty and obligation. Having the sense of responsibility toward the country, every citizen has the right to think, talk and act politically, that is to join in the political life of the country. In fact when a citizen knows to exercise his citizen rights and use his vote properly to elect a good representative or the leader of the country, he is participating in the political life. Religious leaders are citizens

themselves, and they can also use their votes to elect a good representative to serve the country. In other words they are responsible for their choice of their representatives. For a person leading a religious life, joining political life does not mean competing for power or position nor to run for election or forming a party.

According to Monk Superior Thich Quang Do, Head of the Dharma Development Institution of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation, ‘Political Attitude’ is purely rational and I totally agree with that idea and consider it a directive from the leaders of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation to the rank and file. To me it means you have to get to know the objective, policy and activities of politicians to support or criticize and check on their actions. That way one can build up a democratic society – otherwise you are nurturing a dictatorial regime. What I want to emphasize here is that fighting foreign aggressors or expelling them from the country doesn’t mean total independence for the country, freedom for the citizens or happiness for everyone. An independence that relies on foreign doctrine is like kicking one aggressor out just to bring another worse one in with even more vicious ideology. In Vietnam now foreign doctrine is not imposed from outside rather it is deliberately retained by the Politbureau, through Article 4, in the constitution to serve as a noose around the neck of the Vietnamese people. The Communist Party Politbureau’s absolute loyalty to that foreign, obsolete doctrine, a doctrine totally contrary to Vietnamese traditions, is an insult to our national pride.

In the conclusion of this memoir I’d like to express a few words of thank to Ms. Quang Binh, reporter of the program ‘The Christian Voice of Conscience’. She gave me a short interview to show solidarity, friendliness and harmony.

I don't know what precise word to use to call this part of writing in my memoir. It is neither 'an appendix', 'an annex' nor 'a supplement' because I am not a professional writer. I just want to speak up what I heard and experienced as a witness of history in this memoir. I realize there are shortcomings in my writing with lengthy, wordy style and incoherent presentation. Also I was asked why I often got contact with 'Que Huong' Radio, a Catholic radio ran by Ms. Doan Trang. To this I want to bring out 3 points:

1. In the miseries that we had to undergo in the Communist jail, no difference is made between Christian and Buddhist or any other religion's followers who shared the harsh fate. We bear the common suffering where there's no place for conflict of ideology, racial contradiction or language, religion discrimination. It can be a long solitary confinement, an exile or life imprisonment under the Communist regime. From those most miserable circumstances people come to understand and accept each other like family members. For many long years I lived with leaders, officials of other religions in the same cell, sharing the same shackle. We developed a brotherly love and shared everything, materially as well as spiritually, from a bowl of rice or pieces of clothing, to good and bad experience. This beautiful friendship may never happen outside and there's no way to express that noble feelings and experiences. I wish in this society, all religions have love and respect for each other just like the last words from Father Nguyen Luan of Phan Rang City who told me of his deep longing before he passed away. He said: 'If we are released from prison, we should improve the relationship among our religions in a modern way. There will a temple next to a church. Buddhists will go to the church and pray to Jesus while Catholics will go to the temple to revere Buddha. These two great holy masters always advocate love when people are usually unforgiving to

the point of prejudice. Once the mind is in concord, the substance then can be coordinated to make a powerful mass to lead other social organizations. Religions and human rights will be the force that transforms this cruel regime.

2. Thousands of Vietnamese fled the country in small boats to seek freedom and new places to live, risking their lives at the mercy of the ocean. People of different religions, beliefs, races gathered in the same boat. They were lucky to reach a strange shore without any incidents like pirates, failed engines, big waves, otherwise they would meet equal fates of being carried away by high waves or turning into food for the fish.

3. In the tsunami of December 26, 2004, countries like Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand underwent innumerable death and grieves which shook and touched the whole world community. Among those deaths were people of different religions: Muslims, Buddhists, Brahmanist, Christians... All equally affected by the disaster and all shared the belief that the good one would leave this world for a better world. But for now their bodies were buried in land or lay on the ocean floor. And recently hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc in the U.S. causing that country big human and financial loss. Natural disasters bring destruction and diseases to people in many parts of the world, irrespective of their race or religion. The period of ideological conflict has caused tragic plight, misery to many people and, in Vietnam, this conflict has made innumerable innocent people into miserable victims. In those very painful circumstances, the people of Vietnam must realize the true nature of the problem caused by alien doctrine and put the national interest and the future of the country as the paramount objectives.

After the devastating disaster

People learn to love each other
What is freedom or Communism?

Better come back to the Vietnamese national spirit!

I would also like to express my aspiration to different religions inside the country and overseas: Though we cannot bring ourselves to a closely connected entity we should never fall prey to the vicious plot and trap of those evil people. That is my big concern right now because, as the saying goes, “The stork and the clam fight each other, the fisherman is the winner”. Organizations and religions must stay united otherwise they will be oppressed by the

Communists and will not have a chance to dismantle the Communist regime to bring true freedom and democracy, welfare and happiness to over our 80 millions Vietnamese people. Finally, during my 26 years in jail I noticed that the worst mistake that the Vietnamese Communists have made was to accuse all political organizations of ‘working for the American’ in order to detain them. On that accusation, political prisoners got death sentences or imprisonment and exile and many of them died in the jungle or camp. And now any religions that are not in agreement with them are labeled ‘Political instruments of the Americans’ though they all know too well that these religions just want to promote their teachings and not to engage in politics. But the Vietnamese Communist authorities are afraid that someone will take advantage of religion for their own interest just like what the Communists did in the past, using the cloak of religion to get support for their sordid conspiracy. Therefore what worries them most is that if religions are allowed to practice freely and to reinforce their organizations they will get very strong, out of control of the Party, especially during the time when oppositions are growing day by day. And it will be a danger for them if political groups are supported by those religious organizations.

I want to conclude this memoir with this simple assessment. This end is also the beginning of a new journey. I do not want to

mention too much about the hardship in jail here because I am looking forward to a brighter, better future and forget about those images that remind me of a somber past. And I pray to Buddha to enlighten those dyed-in-the-wool minds in the Vietnamese Communist Party so they can soon be free of their cocoon of bondage, get rid of their bad karma, realize their mistakes and come back to the good path to take the country to a developed and better one.

This is a record of events of my life. Shortcomings are unavoidable and I would appreciate comments from valuable readers.

Thich Thien Minh

CHAPTER XIII

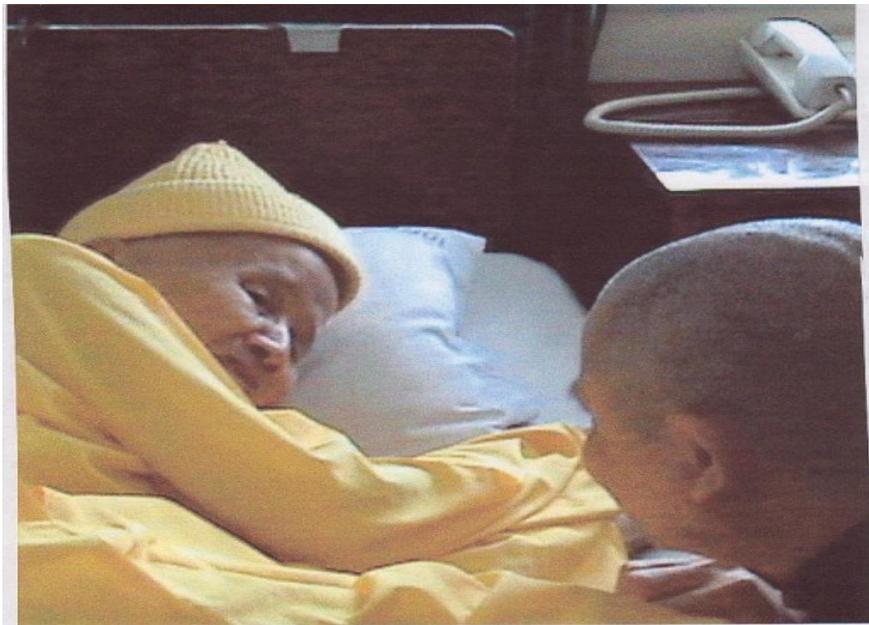
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pp.248: The Supreme Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and Superior Monk Thich Quang Do, Head of the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation.



pp.249:Paying respect to the Supreme Patriarch of the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation.



pp.250: Paying respect to the Supreme

Patriarch of the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation Thich Huyen Quang.



pp.251: Paying respect to Superior Monk Thich Quang Do, Head of the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation.



From left to right Thich Thien Minh, Thich Không Tanh, Superior Monk Thich Quang Do and Thich Vien Dinh



pp. 252: Getting relief for flood victims in Central and Southern cities in Vietnam.



pp. 253: Ven. Thich Thien Minh handed gifts by Vietnamese overseas to flood victims in Central Vietnam in 2007.



pp.254: having frugal meals in his small house.



pp.255: Ven. Thich Thien Minh, Superior Monk Hue Dang, Historian Pham Tran Anh, President of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Defending Committee Tran Huu Duyen, Ven. Thich Chon Tam during the meeting to form the Association for Friends of Political and Religious Prisoners.



PP.256: Ven. Thich Thien Minh plant vegetables

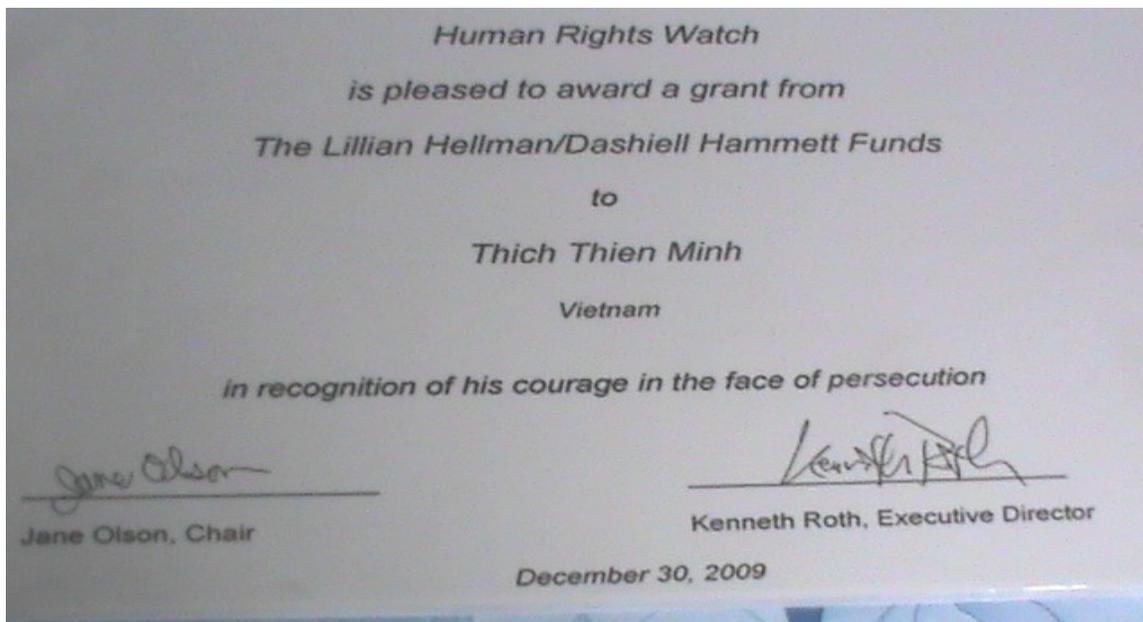


PP.257: Ven. Thich Thien Minh Thich photographed with the masters Buddhist Church of Vietnam Unified funeral Patriarch Venerable Thich Huyen Quang





PP.258: Ven.Thich Thien Minh receives human rights Network award



PP.259: Ven.Thich Thien Minh receives Human Rights award Hellman / Hammett



PP.260:Ven.Thich Thien Minh receives award of supporting movement for Freedom, religion and human rights in Vietnam



PP.261:Ven.Thich Thien Minh souvenir photograph with Hoa Hao Buddhist Believers



PP.262:Ven.Thich Thien Minh photograph with Committee of International Religion of USA(USCIRF)

PP.263: SOME POEMS AND WRITING

The Freedom leaf nurtures the world of hope
The Freedom tree keeps Vietnam surviving and prosperous
The Free Vietnamese people get their eternal good name
From the blood they shed to keep their freedom
Blood has shed all over the country
Thousands of hands push the sun up
Hatred by thousands comes to one solid bloc
That can push away the mountain and turn the earth around

TRAN THUC VU

Only at the near end of an existence that one can experience the meaning and value of Freedom. Also only at the depth of misery, starvation and death that one can realize the true value of life and dignity of human beings. From the bottom of my heart I want to say that in the fragile moment between life and death, I have met those courageous and fearless people, true heroes like Father Nguyen Luan, a Cao Dai Scholar Phan Duc Trong, Venerable Thich Thien Minh and many more. Those heroes are opening a new history for the Vietnamese people.

PHAM TRAN ANH

At the very end of life
To Venerable Thich Thien Minh
More than a quarter of a century in jail
Yet the monk's heart is still like a blooming flower
No resentment, no hatred
Just pain for the ups and downs
Of his people and country

More than a quarter of a century in jail,

Going through history together with his countrymen
He is always in bright spirit
Ready to fight for the innocent people
For who can ignore freedom and democracy?

More than a quarter of a century in jail
Who gives back his freedom at this moment?
He never feels discouraged
His enlightened heart will never succumb
To fame, greed, power, circumstances

More than a quarter of a century in jail
The spirit of the nation has become his breath
And helped him through hardship
He, who is determined to save all his heart and life
For the survival of his religion and the freedom of his country

TUE NGUYEN

The National Disaster Day

April 30, 1975 is the National Disaster Day
The frightful day ignored by the world
The day when the Communists occupied the South
The day when the citizens started to live in darkness and misery
The day when the Communist dictators ruled the country
The day when the poor, honest citizens lived in worries and
sadness
The day of no happiness or welfare
The day of no independence, freedom, human rights
The day citizens fled to other countries
The day when absurd laws were applied
The day when the citizen's dream was crushed
The day when they lost their faith in Ho Chi Minh
The day when hatred built up

The day when many people tumbled from their positions
The day when life was full of hardship
The day when people from all walks of life went to jail
The day when the wicked Communists imposed a reign of terror
The day when everywhere blood and bodies were strewn for
revenge
The day when happiness was shattered
The day when children had to leave school
The day when men and wives, children and parents, siblings were
separated
The day when people had to leave their homes to break wasteland
in the wild economic zone
The day when many people died, being victims of gross injustice
The day when many lost their jobs and went to live in rural areas
The day when there was no compromise on religion
The day when many longed for a quiet life while others scrambled
for power and money
The day when cadres squandered public money
The corrupted ones got light sentence, getting protection from their
big bosses.
The day when partisans compete with each other
The day when degrees can be bought
The day when corrupt people enjoy their grafts and, if caught, led a
luxurious life in jail.
The day when reality is exposed to the public and history will
judge those Marxist-Leninist followers who betray their own
people
The day that brings national disaster and the nation is in mourning
The day when prisoners are taken to far away places and their
loved ones live, missing them, in bitterness
The day when the ruling cliques reveal their faces of devil
The day when hundreds of jails are built to 're-educate' thousands
of soldiers where many of them were killed

The day when people's properties and money are confiscated,
churches, pagodas are seized, religions suppressed, monks,
priests, nuns sent to prisons

The day when people suffer from cruel rulers who are getting
richer and richer while the citizens poorer and poorer

The day when the Party gets all benefits while saying it works for
the welfare of the citizens

The day when the citizens want to close their eyes so they don't
have to look at the harsh reality

The day when things move backward and downward and almost
the whole regime is virtually paralyzed

The day when freedom is paid in blood and human rights are
brutally violated

The day when the Paris Agreements are trodden on and
international law taken lightly

The day when democracy and people's welfare are ignored and
social atrocity is everywhere

The day when Karl Marx, Lenin and Ho Chi Minh are revered and
people become collective sacrificial lambs

The day when atheism is taught at school and the inhuman
characteristics of those rulers are laid bare

The day when spies and police are everywhere to terrorize and
unjustly arrest people

The day when innocent people are arrested and accused of all sorts
of crimes

The day when terror leads to increasing opposition everywhere

The day when cruel punishment is applied and prisoners are put in
chain and shackles day and night

The day when more prisoners are crammed in dark cells and very
few released

The day when wicked wardens beat up prisoners ruthlessly

The day when prisoners must labor Sundays and have no time to
rest

The day when prisoners' strength are mercilessly exploited
The day when young men are conscripted to serve in far away
frontiers and many die young
The day when the army invade Cambodia where many soldiers die
in that foreign country
The day when the cost of living rises so high that people have to
live on potatoes and banana corms
The day when many starve to death
The day when beggars are seen everywhere in town
The day when orphanages are forsaken and nursing homes left
unattended
The day when war invalids are left with their own hardship
The day when many go insane and many die on their way to seek
freedom
The day when justice is gagged because the Communist law of the
jungle prevails
The day when couples are divided and many wives turn widows
The day when the call for revolt is heard all over the country
The day when all religions join the cause and monks temporarily
leave their pagodas
The day when internal conflicts begin and all citizens boldly join
the struggle
The day when reforms must be done immediately and human
rights returned to everyone
The day when political prisoners and prisoners of conscience are to
be released
The day when the world' eyes are on Vietnam and the Communists
get mired in their own sink in their own wrongdoing
The day when Vietnamese overseas voice their concern and
citizens from all regions rise
The day when multi-party and pluralistic society is demanded
The day when democracy, human rights and freedom are fought
for

The day when the Communist's 'unity' farce is despised
The day when the citizens do not get trapped in that phony appeal
The day when the Communist ruses do not materialize
The day when narcotics quickly spreads in the country
The day when drug addicts, robbery, prostitute, HIV, gambling
increase
The day when the society falls into a state of loose security and
moral deterioration
The day when economy is floating uncontrollably
The day when the Communists show helplessness
The day when they come to the South to seize property of
conquered victims
The day when they throw away their rags and wallowed in their
newly usurped wealth
The day when bad omen shows that Communists are on the fall
The day when citizens from all over the country join the call for
revolting to save the country from Communism
The day when people prepare to rebuild the country
The day when a new page is open to our history
The day when everyone is waiting for the liberation
The day when joy is everywhere and we prepare for the day of
victory

Thich Thien Minh



**PP.264: Ven. Thich Thien Minh Receives Tran Van Ba
Spiritual Award**

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Venerable Thich Thien Minh, secular name Huynh Van Ba, is of Bac Lieu origin. Between 1979 and 1986, he was imposed 2 life sentences by the Communist Government of Vietnam due to his fighting for Freedom of Religion, Human rights and the Reactivation of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation.

In 1995, at Z30A Detention Camp at Xuan Loc, he and other prisoners of conscience fought for the improvement of living conditions in prison and human treatment of prisoners. He also demanded that the properties confiscated from the Buddhist

Congregations to be returned. Among others are the abolishment of Clause 4 in the Constitution, the acceptance of multi-party and free election supervised by an International Committee. For this, he was put in shackles in a solitary cell and badly beaten and tortured during many years.

This incident was condemned by the UN in 1997. And in 2004, a UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, Mr. Abdelfattah Amor, came to the camp for a visit and interview with him. Under pressure from the UN and other Vietnamese overseas, the Hanoi Regime reduced his sentence to 20 years. Finally, he was released during the Lunar New Year of the Rooster (2005).

After 26 years in exile with 2 life sentences, Ven. Thich Thien Minh is considered one of the fighters who spent the longest jail time in Vietnam. He was in jail at age 26 and out of it at age 52.

Since his release, he has continuously been fighting for Democracy and Human Rights for Vietnam and particularly asking the Hanoi Regime to release the Prisoners of Conscience and Religion who are still imprisoned by the Communist Vietnam.

After many years of networking, in December 2006, Ven. Thich Thien Minh, together with other former prisoners of Religion and Conscience formed the Vietnamese Political and Religious Prisoners Friendship Association

END

