



Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

Poems by the Most Venerable Tuệ Sĩ
Translated and explained by Terry Lee

Terry Lee

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Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

To my children, and to those who have yet to discover the richness of our Vietnamese culture, and its painful history.

Terry Lee

一朝撒手懸崖下
始把真空對壁紅

*Nhất triều tán thủ huyền nhai hạ
Thủy bả chân không đối trụy hồng*

Tuệ Sĩ

Một sáng thông tay nơi vách núi,
Nhật cánh hồng rơi giữa cõi không

Holding the emptiness while on a cliff one morning,
I picked up a falling rose petal amidst the sky of the void.

translated by Terry Lee

Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

辅迟矜昨悉溪
稜至翺鹤埒術黄昏

*Năm chầy đá ngủ lòng khe,
Lung trời cánh hạc đi về hoàng hôn.*

Tuệ Sĩ

Deep in the crevice, a stone slumbers through the year,
Against the vast sky, a crane sails towards the sunset.

translated by Terry Lee

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The life of the Most Venerable Tuệ Sỹ

A scholar, a poet, a prisoner of conscience, a champion of religious freedom – the Most Venerable Tuệ Sỹ was born Phạm Văn Thương on February 15, 1945, in Pakse, Laos.

He began his monastic life at the age of 7, returned to Vietnam at 15, graduated from Vạn Hạnh University with a degree in Buddhist Studies at 20, and received full ordination at 28. At 25, he was appointed as a full professor at Vạn Hạnh University and editor-in-chief of the journal Tư Tưởng (Thought), thanks to his numerous renowned research works and philosophical essays.

But his scholarly pursuits were soon disrupted. As Saigon fell and a new era of oppression dawned, he retreated to the fringes of the Vạn Giã forest, but his sanctuary was short-lived. Accused of “illegal residence”, when he returned to Saigon, he was imprisoned for three years. This was but the first trial in a long battle against a regime determined to crush religious freedom.

In 1984, he was arrested again, alongside Venerable Trí Siêu and 17 other monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists. They were the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam’s (UBCV) last bastion of resistance against the government’s relentless campaign to dismantle it. A sham trial ensued, culminating in a death sentence for the two Venerables. International outcry forced the regime to commute the sentence to 20 years, but their ordeal was far from over.

Thầy Tuệ Sỹ, ever defiant, refused to be broken. When offered a pardon in 1998, he responded with the searing words, “As I do not recognize the value of the trial or the legal validity of the judgment and as you have no right to detain me, neither do you have the right to pardon me”. He embarked on a hunger strike, as his body growing weaker with each passing day, his spirit remaining unyielding. After 10 days, on the brink of death, he was released.

Despite the hardships he endured, Thầy never wavered in his dedication to his faith and his pursuit of knowledge. Fluent in seven languages, including Pali, and Sanskrit, he authored numerous essays, monographs, and translations, enriching the world of Buddhist scholarship with his profound insights. His works, including *Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams*, *Somniloquies in prison*, and *Dreams on the peak of Trùng Sơn*, stand as testaments to his intellectual brilliance and unwavering spirit. His meticulous translations, such as *Essays in Zen Buddhism* and the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, revealed his deep understanding of Buddhist texts and his commitment to accuracy.

In his twilight years, the UBCV looked to him for leadership. Nominated as the head of the Sangha Council in 2019, he humbly requested to serve only temporarily, prioritizing unity and transparency within the Church.

His passing on November 24, 2023, at Phật Ân pagoda in Đồng Nai province, Vietnam, left a void in the hearts of countless followers. More than a monk, Tuệ Sỹ was a beacon of hope, a symbol of resilience, and a voice for the voiceless. His legacy lives on, inspiring all who seek truth, justice, and religious freedom.

Prologue

In this second edition of my book *Dreams on the peak of the Mountain*, I've changed the title to *Dreams on the peaks of the mountains*.

The Mountain, in the title of the first edition of my book, refers to the Trùng Sơn mountain range, where Thầy Tuệ Sỹ confided his dreams during his lifetime, but I believe, his dreams should have materialized as clouds, dispersing over every mountain in Vietnam, as he wished in his will. The grandeur and uniqueness of Trùng Sơn should have become a symbol of aspiration and possibility for all the mountains of Vietnam, echoing the boundless spirit of Thầy's vision.

Through the translation of his poems, I've been touched by the profound impact he had on both Vietnamese culture and Zen Buddhism. He wove Zen principles into his verses, drawing inspiration from the simplicity of a stream, the ordinariness of a mustard seed, and even the delicate traces of moss lingering on eyelids.

This book presents his poems in both their original Vietnamese and in English translation, offering readers a window into his rich inner world. For the volume *Somniloquies in prison*, I also add a poetic translation into Vietnamese, attempting to capture the nuances of his style.

To illuminate the meaning of these poems, I've gathered a selection of Thầy's essays and translations, alongside insightful commentaries from respected critics, poets, and

writers. This collection reflects the breadth of his legacy, which extends far beyond his poetry.

For these essays and commentaries, original English text and my translations are visually distinguished by different left border markings: a double line for the original and a single line for my translated text.

I divide this book into 7 volumes:

Volume 1: *Celestial realms of distant dreams*: 9 poems, written before April 30, 1975 (1969–April 30th, 1975).

Volume 2: *Dreams on the peak of Trường Sơn*: 34 poems, mostly written in Vạn Giã forest (April 30th, 1975–1978).

Volume 3: *Somniloquies in prison*: 18 poems, written during his first imprisonment (1978–1981).

Volume 4: *Meditation*: 9 poems, mostly written during his second imprisonment (1984–2000).

Volume 5: *Meditation room*: 32 poems, filled with Zen principles while in seclusion (2000–2001).

Volume 6: *Refrains for piano*: 23 poems, to which he attached musical notes (2006).

Volume 7: *A thousand-mile solitary journey*: 13 poems, about a solitary Zen master's long journey (2011–2012).

Finally, I want to thank my wife for her unwavering and invaluable support throughout this project, and express my gratitude to my friends Phê Xuân Bạch and Huân Cung for their help in proofreading the first edition of this book. I would also like to thank the many online communities who offered insightful commentaries to Thầy's work as well as to my translation. They are essential in shaping this book.

Terry Lee

Volume 1

**Những phương trời
viễn mộng**

**| Celestial realms of
distant dreams**

Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

This volume contains 9 poems

Time of composition: 1969–April 30th,1975

1. Cánh chim trời

*Một ước hẹn đã chôn vùi tang tóc
Cánh chim trời xa mãi giữa lòng sâu
Nghe một nỗi hao mòn trong thoáng chốc
Một mùa thu một vạn tiếng kêu gào*

*Khuya còn lạnh sương mù và gió lốc
Thở hơi dài cát bụi cuốn chiêm bao.
Bên cửa sổ bên kia đồi sao mọc
Một lần đi là vĩnh viễn con tàu*

*Đi để nhớ những chiều pha tóc trắng
Mắt lưng chừng trông giọt máu phiêu lưu.*

A sky bird

A promise buried, shrouded in deep grief,
A lone sky bird takes flight, lost in the vast sky,
In a fleeting moment, a feeling of erosion,
A thousand wails echo in the autumn wind.

The night, still chilling with fog and gale,
Sweeps away my dreams in a long sigh.
By the window, beyond the distant hill, stars arise,
On this side, a one-way endless journey,
Embark to cherish those afternoons that whiten my hair,
Eyes half-closed, I watch a drop of blood drifting away.

Explanation

The poem seems to express a deep sense of grief and regret over a lost love or a missed opportunity. The author is haunted by memories of the past and is struggling to come

to terms with the loss. What was his loss? He explained in the last verse: *Mắt lưng chùng trông giọt máu phiêu lưu* (Eyes half-closed, I watch a drop of blood drifting away). He wants to embark on a one-way endless journey.

The tone of the poem is melancholic and reflective. The images of the sky bird, the autumn season, and the stars all contribute to the overall feeling of longing and isolation.

Dr. Đỗ Hồng Ngọc ¹, in his essay *Chén trà lão Triệu mà chung hoa ngàn* (Old Zhao's ² teacup but filled with forest

¹ In this book, the names of Vietnamese people are presented in the standard Vietnamese order: Surname, Middle name (if applicable), Given name. Therefore, Dr. Đỗ Hồng Ngọc appears as such, rather than the standard Western order Dr. Ngọc Hong Do. However, if only one name is used, the Surname is employed, such as Dr. Đỗ, instead of Dr. Ngọc, as commonly referred to by Vietnamese acquaintances.

² Old Zhao is Zen Master Zhaozhou Congshen (778–897) who was often touted as the greatest Zen Master of the Tang Dynasty.

At the age of 18, he met Zen Master Nanquan Puyuan (748–835), and received the way (dharma) from him.

The fortuitous encounter that led to his enlightenment is recorded in *The Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Joshua*, compiled by Chaochou, Chanshih and Yulu, translated to English by James Green, Alta Mira published in 1998:

- What is the Way? Zhaozhou asked Nanquan Puyuan.
- Ordinary mind is the way, Nanquan replied.
- Can one seek to attain it?
- To seek is to deviate it.
- If one doesn't seek, how can one understand it?

flowers), seeks to clarify Thầy's viewpoint of how to integrate poetry and Zen practices to attain the highest level of poetic expression. He has managed to draw upon a specific quotation from Thầy's book *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams) to support his point:

To reach the supreme realm of poetry is like a Zen practitioner attaining the state of nothingness. It's both difficult and easy. Practicing Zen for thirty years, torturing body and mind for thirty years, yet without success. Feeling resentful, I gave up; suddenly seeing a flower falling, the state of nothingness was suddenly revealed. This miraculous state is difficult to explain. For a poem to be truly wonderful, it must not be forced, it must be both nothing and still. Stillness to absorb all distractions. Nothingness to encompass all phenomena. Looking at the world, wandering through life, yet feeling like one is on top of a cloud. Having experienced all the flavors, bitter and sweet; within that, there is a wonderful taste. Poetry and the dharma do not contradict each other and do not harm each other.

Therefore, to understand why some of his poems appear so romantic, despite being penned by a Zen monk, it's crucial to recall his abovementioned assertion that "To reach the

- The Way does not belong to understanding or not understanding. Understanding is delusion, not understanding is ignorance. When you have really reached the true Way beyond all doubt you will find it as vast and boundless as outer space. How can it be talked about on a level of right or wrong?

Upon hearing these words, Zhaozhou immediately realized the profound meaning of the way, i.e., dharma.

supreme realm of poetry is like a Zen practitioner attaining the state of nothingness where poetry and dharma do not contradict each other and do not harm each other”.

And Dr. Đỗ comments:

The realm of poetry has its comings and goings, but leaves no trace, like a swallow or an eagle beyond the ten thousand miles of sky.

I think that this “traceless” realm of poetry has “saved” Tuệ Sĩ, a swallow or an eagle beyond the ten thousand miles of sky, so that he could return to his familiar thatched hut and “raise Old Zhao’ s teacup”.

This poem was written while he was a professor at Vạn Hạnh University. Professors Thích Trí Siêu and Thầy were hailed as two of the most promising young scholars and Buddhist monks in Vietnam. At the age of 26, Thầy published the book *Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams*. In this work, he meticulously explored every aspect of Su Dongpo’s life, revealing Su’s secret emotions and distant dreams. So, what was the source of the sorrow portrayed in this poem? Why did Dr. Đỗ think that Thầy’s home is the thatched hut in the forest, rather than the university lecture theater? The answer lies hidden within his poems.

The teacup in the title of Dr. Đỗ’s essay *Old Zhao’s teacup but filled with wildflowers* refers to the following anecdote.

One day, Zen Master Zhaozhou asked a new monk:

- Have you been here before?

- Yes, I have.

- Have some tea! Zhaozhou said.

Later, Zhaozhou asked another new monk:

- Have you been here before?

- No, I haven't.

- Have some tea! Zhaozhou said.

The Abbot asked Zhaozhou:

- Why did you tell both the one who has been here and the one who hasn't been here to have tea?

- Abbot! Zhaozhou called out.

- Yes?

- You have some tea too!

The question *Have you been here?* might sound simple, but it's a koan. Huairang took eight years to answer Huineng's question: *Where do you come from?* (page 465).

What is a koan? Koan is a paradoxical statement or question used as a meditation practice in Zen Buddhism. It serves as a tool for seekers of enlightenment to challenge their understanding of the true dharma. The seeker is encouraged to contemplate the koan continuously, not just during formal meditation but also in daily life, such as while eating or cleaning. The koan is not meant to be solved through logical reasoning, as true enlightenment transcends the limitations of words and language.

To enjoy Zhaozhou's cup of tea, you must set your mind empty and immerse yourself deeply in his koan, days and nights. Only when illusory concepts and delusive thoughts are dispelled, and inner and outer realms converge spontaneously, you will become a new person who is able to sit face to face with Zhaozhou to enjoy his cup of tea.

To fully grasp Thầy's profound insights in his poems, it may be helpful to familiarize yourself with these key Buddhist concepts you'll encounter in this book:

- Arhat (A-la-hán, in Vietnamese): one who has attained nirvana. This spiritual attainment is a central goal in Hīnayāna (small vehicle), a faction of Buddhism, known for its adherence to the original teachings of the Buddha.

- Bodhisattva (Bồ-tát): one who has vowed to attain Buddhahood and dedicate their enlightenment to the liberation of all sentient beings. This concept is central to Mahāyāna (great vehicle). Buddhism has two factions: Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. Zen is a school of Mahāyāna.

- Dharma (Đạo pháp): the underlying laws of nature, or the teachings of the Buddha, also called the Way. Further explanation can be found in the footnote No. 2 on page 24.

- Nirvana (Niết-bàn): a state of enlightenment, free from suffering and samsāra.

- Samsāra (Luân hồi): the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

- Śūnyatā (tánh Không): the fundamental core belief of Zen Buddhism, often translated as nothingness. Explanations are on pages 183, 191, 223, 228, 248–250 and 295.

2. Cung trời cũ

*Đôi mắt ướt tuổi vàng cung trời hội cũ,
Áo màu xanh không xanh mãi trên đồi hoang,
Phút vội vã bỗng thấy mình du thủ,
Thắp đèn khuya ngồi kể chuyện trăng tàn.*

*Từ núi lạnh đến biển im muôn thuở,
Đỉnh đá này và hạt muối đó chưa tan,
Cười với nắng một ngày sao chóng thối,
Nay mùa đông mai mùa hạ buồn chẳng.*

*Đếm tóc bạc tuổi đời chưa đủ,
Bụi đường dài gót mỏi đi quanh,
Giờ ngó lại bốn vách tường ử rữ,
Suối rừng xa ngược nước xuôi ngàn.*

Celestial realm of a previous lifetime

Eyes wet with golden memories of our gathering in the
celestial realm of a previous lifetime,
The green shirt is no longer green on the barren hill,
In a hasty moment, I suddenly feel like a wanderer,
Lighting a lamp late at night, sitting and telling stories to
the waning moon.

From the cold mountains to the ever-silent sea,
This rock peak and that grain of salt remain undissolved.
Laughing with the sunlight in a day, how quickly it
passes.
Winter today, summer tomorrow, is there room for
sadness?

Counting gray hairs, not enough to be called old,

Dusty long roads, tired feet from walking around,
Now, I look back at these four gloomy walls,
The distant forest streams, their waters flowing endlessly,
upstream and downstream.

Explanation

The poem is a quest for the memory of a celestial gathering from a previous lifetime. *Áo màu xanh không xanh mãi* (The green shirt is no longer green) signifies the passage of time, while *ngồi kể chuyện trăng tàn* (sitting and telling the stories to the waning moon) indicates the author's solitude in the celestial realm. The stories that the author tells under the soft glow of the waning moon possess a Zen-like beauty. His comparison of a rock atop a cold mountain and a grain of salt at the sea's depths, both unchanged for millennia, is particularly striking. Strange to us, not to him, these vast stretches of time are akin to a single day spent laughing with the sunlight. Through these stories, Thầy conveys a nostalgic longing for earthly experiences.

The poem is a poignant meditation on the human condition, exploring themes of loss, longing, and the search for the memory of the last gathering in the celestial realm of his previous lifetime. The imagery is evocative and the language is beautifully crafted, making this a powerful and moving piece of poetry. Despite its melancholic tone, the poem also extols the Buddhist concept of nothingness (*Śūnyatā*), when he compares the thousands of years of the lives of the rock peak and the salt grain to the laugh with the sunlight in a day of his life; the gray hairs with the tired feet; and finally, the four glooming walls (of his small meditation room or the larger Vạn Hạnh University lecture

theater?) with the forest streams that are flowing upstream and downstream.

The following is poet Bùi Giáng's critique, excerpted from his book *Đi vào cõi thơ* (Entering the realm of poetry), Ca Dao published in 1969:

Just hearing the first four lines, I felt a chill run through my soul, a numbing coldness in my heart. ...

*Đôi mắt ướt
tuổi vàng
cung trời hội cũ*

Eyes wet
with golden memories of our gathering
in the celestial realm of a previous lifetime

Let me write down these words so casually. Surely you will see the extraordinary solemnity of nostalgia. Nostalgia for what? – The celestial realm of a previous lifetime, the last gathering. A spring outing? An exciting gathering? – The excitement of a youthful time?

Eyes wet with golden memories of our gathering in the celestial realm of a previous lifetime. ...

From the opening words, the poetry flows directly into the center of a contemplative dream. It has all the vast elements: a vast, brilliant celestial realm of a previous lifetime, an exciting gathering, a glittering golden memory. ...

A pair of eyes, wet with sorrow in the present. But the poetic flow is underground. A subtle rhythm guides it.

The poet doesn't need any descriptive words, yet still says everything that needs to be said to everyone who wants to hear, and to himself without caring about what is said.

Outstanding poets often have this extraordinary demeanor. They say very little but say a lot. They say a lot but ultimately, it seems like they say nothing at all. They speak for themselves, but it's as if they speak for everyone. They speak for everyone but hardly care whether people listen or not. Their joys and sorrows seem to be nothing like ours. ...

*Đôi mắt ướt
tuổi vàng
cung trời hội cũ*

Eyes wet
with golden memories
of our gathering in the celestial realm of a previous
lifetime

Eyes wet? Whose eyes? Why are they wet? Because of tears, or because they are glittering? The poet doesn't say. That's leaving a silent, empty space for the poetry.

We can freely think in two or three ways. Perhaps the poet's eyes are wet in the present because of longing for an old gathering.

Or perhaps it's the eyes of a beautiful woman, as glistening and gentle as a flowing stream, reflecting an immortal old gathering that I have lost today?

Phút vội vã bỗng thấy mình du thủ,

In a hasty moment, I suddenly feel like a wanderer?

He is a bodhisattva, year-round chanting sūtras and fasting, so why in a sudden moment does he dare to be a wanderer? Dare to abandon the sūtras? Dare to light a lamp in the night and sit telling stories to the moon?

One must see the austere, devout face of Tuệ Sỹ, to be terrified by these deep, simple words. The words seem to resonate from the depths of the soul's previous lifetime, from a homeland in the upper reaches, vast with forests, mountains, wind, dew, and the moon trembling in the cold night. ...

A love spread out across the silent, cold sea and mountains. A grain of salt that has not yet dissolved. A hidden crease in my heart, wandering and unwashed.

*Từ núi lạnh đến biển im muôn thuở,
Đỉnh đá này và hạt muối đó chưa tan*

From the cold mountains to the ever-silent sea,
This rock peak and that grain of salt remain undissolved.

I think I can hear the tragic grandeur of Orion (TN – translator's note: In Greek mythology, Orion was a giant huntsman and a son of Poseidon. He was killed by his lover Artemis in a tragic accident), Nerval (TN: Gerard de Nerval, French poet, who composed some of his best works during his dire financial and emotional straits. He took his own life by hanging himself), the deepest silence in the scale of Nietzsche (TN: Friedrich

Nietzsche, German philosopher, who declared that God is dead. His aim was to free human beings from their false consciousness about morality).

How many times has the poet sat looking at the fading moon? Sitting on a stone peak? Surrounded by vast sacred forests, with the blue moonlight reaching to the distant horizon of the great sea?

The stone peak and the grain of salt are two places where the crystals of the mountain and sea converge. The stone peak gathers all the scents, colors of the sky, clouds, forests, and howling winds. The grain of salt contains the ocean's salty essence. It's the eternity of a heart standing tall amidst the drifting snow and moon. ...

*Giờ ngó lại bốn vách tường ủ rũ,
Suối rừng xa
ngược nước
xuôi ngàn.*

Now looking back at the four gloomy walls,
Missing the distant forest streams,
flowing endlessly,
upstream and downstream.

The poem ends. The endless aftertaste lingers in the night of wandering, confined within four pale, dreary, prison-like walls.

With just one poem, Tuệ Sỹ has covered everything from the old and new horizons of Tang poetry in China to Western Surrealism.

This is more of an impression than an analysis, because the poet Bùi Giáng (1926–1998) *reads* the poem with his own emotions.

It is known that when Thầy showed this poem to Bùi Giáng, he exclaimed: “Master, you should stop writing prose. And write more poetry. Otherwise, Vietnamese poetry will lose a great genius”.

This poem, *Cung trời cũ*, has two other more popular names: *Không đê* and *Khung trời cũ*.

Không đê (Untitled) is the original name of the poem when Thầy showed it to Bùi Giáng.

Khung trời cũ (Old sky frame) is probably due to a miscopy. Below are three reasons I believe the term “Khung” is incorrect.

(1) *Cung trời* is used in the first line of the poem: “đôi mắt ướn tuổi vàng *cung trời* hội cũ”.

(2) *Khung trời* (sky frame) is much smaller than and incompatible with *Cung trời* (celestial realm). If the title was *Khung trời cũ* then *cũ* means old and probably rusty, so, its English translation is an old and rusty sky frame.

The scene Thầy conjured in this poem must be so immense to have given poet Bùi Giáng a chill through his soul, a numbing coldness in his heart, as he claimed. Our great poet Bùi Giáng would not have chilled to the core if the poem only refers to an old sky frame.

(3) *Cung trời* (celestial realm) appears frequently in several Vietnamese Buddhist scriptures, e.g., *cung trời Đâu Suất*

(Tusita deva), *cung trời Đao Lợi* (Tavatimsa deva or Trayastrimsa deva), etc. According to the Ksitigarbha Sūtra, there are 33 celestial realms, which are divided into three worlds (Trailokya), from the lowest to the highest: the Desire world with its nine celestial realms, the Form world with its twenty celestial realms, and the Formless world with its four celestial realms.

Given his profound knowledge of Buddhism, Thầy had undoubtedly delved into the intricate details of these celestial realms. It's even conceivable that he was born into one of these thirty-three celestial realms in his previous lifetime, before incarnating in this human realm. Therefore, this poem could be about a recollection of his gathering in that celestial realm.

Poet Trần Trung Đạo, in his book *Ra đi để lại nụ cười* (Departing, leaving behind a smile) concurs with this view of mine:

The reading accumulated a few years before the age of twenty did not make a professor Tuệ Sỹ. When coming to this world, he already had a treasure trove of knowledge brought from many previous lifetimes.

He also shared this idea in his letter introducing my book:

A few years of studying during the teenage years did not make him a university professor. The knowledge Thầy brought from many prior lives was already a treasure trove when he came to this world. Thầy's poetry is a condensed contemplation from the highest level of consciousness: the level of enlightenment. Not only did he write poetry, but he also used it to express his

profound thoughts. They are verses. They are koans also. They are like drops of water falling from the infinite space into the ceaseless cycle of creation and destruction. They are like orchids blooming in the deep forest. The endless stream of compassion.

Going back to this poem's title, *Cung trời cũ*, *cũ* implies a connection to the past, indicating that the celestial realm referred to is one from a previous lifetime.

Therefore, *Cung trời cũ* literally means a celestial realm of a previous lifetime, and it should be the title of this poem.

Thầy Sĩ

Đã một đợt trời vắng cũng trời, đá ở
cố miền lành không lành, đá thể đá, hoang
đốt ở, về không thấy, mình ở, núi
đây, đây, đây, đây, đây, đây, đây, đây

hồ nước lạnh đến biển, im, nước, nước
đỉnh đá, này, và, hạt, nước, đá, đá, đá, đá
càng, với, này, một, ngày, sao, không, đá
này, đây, này, này, này, này, này, này

đỉnh, đá, này, này, này, này, này, này
đỉnh, đá, này, này, này, này, này, này
đỉnh, đá, này, này, này, này, này, này
đỉnh, đá, này, này, này, này, này, này

Thầy Sĩ

Không đề (Untitled), commonly believed to be penned by
Most Venerable Tuệ Sỹ

Cung đường
Phụng chủ ngọc tu phan
Cung đường tối thảng tồn
Thế gian tuồng huyết hận
Bình bát lệ vô ngôn

However, comparing the different handwriting styles in the above two poems, I suspect that the first poem is not Thầy's original handwritten work.

Besides, the writing in the first poem has two spelling errors ("đỉnh" đá and gót "môi", instead of đỉnh đá and gót môi), so, definitely not his work.

3. Hận thu cao

*Quy xuống đó nghe hương trời cát bụi
Đôi chân trần xuôi ảo ảnh về đâu
Tay níu lại những làn khăn chìm nổi
Hận thu cao mây trắng bỗng thay màu*

*Ta sẽ rủ gió lùa trên tóc rối
Giọng ân tình nấn nỉ bước đi mau
Còi rộn rã bởi hoang đường đã đổi
Bởi phiêu lưu ngày tháng vẫn con tàu*

*Vẫn lăn lóc với đá mòn dứt nổi
Đá mòn ơi cười một thuở chiêm bao
Quy xuống nữa ngủ vùi trong cát bụi
Nửa chừng say quán trọ khóc lao xao*

*Tay níu nữa gốc thông già trơ trọi
Đứng bên đường nghe mối hận lên cao*

Nha Trang 1973

Rising autumnal wrath

Kneel there, breathe the celestial scent and hear the whisper
of sand and dust,
Barefoot, where can I go to chase your illusions,
While clutching at hesitant, rising and falling moments,
As white clouds abruptly change colors in rising autumnal
wrath?

I'll beckon the wind to tousle my tangled hair,
While a pleading voice urges me to hurry on.

The horn has rung out, the uncharted course has turned,
For the train to journey on, through days of adventure.

But I'm still grappling with the same old burdens, on and
off,

O, you, my old burdens, laugh at my dreaming lifetime.
Kneel down again, then slumber in the sand and dust,
Half-drunk in a roadside inn, sobbing uncontrollably.

Clutching to the old, bare pine stump,
Stand by the roadside, sensing the rising wrath.

Explanation

In the poem, the recurring images of dust, illusion, and bare feet suggest a sense of isolation and detachment from the world. The individual is depicted as a solitary figure, wandering through a vast and indifferent universe. Imagery such as clouds abruptly changing color, worn-out stones (metaphorically representing old burdens), and an old, bare pine stump (symbolizing the hesitant, rising and falling moments he mentioned in the first stanza, hence, he uses *níu* (clutching) in both stanzas) underscore the transitory nature of life and the unpredictable adventure-filled days ahead. I also wonder whether the inn in the last verse is the same as the inn in *Kết từ* (In conclusion), page 54.

This poem is the voice of Thầy speaking to himself, inviting him on a journey characterized by a profound sense of loss, longing, solitude, and disappointment.

This poem was written in 1973, when he was a professor at Vạn Hạnh University. Why did he leave his university post to go to Nha Trang to vent his wrath?

I couldn't fathom the source of Thầy's wrath in this poem until I read his essay *Thuyền ngược bến không* (The boat drifting against the empty wharf)³ that he composed in the winter of 2004, after a death sentence and more than 17 years of imprisonment, narrowly escaping death on multiple occasions.

War, hatred, and somewhere, deep within the yearning, love and death are obsessions, and like material for the consciousness of survival. There exists a separate realm of poetry for such sensitive souls. Gazing at a dying bird

³ The title *Thuyền ngược bến không* (The boat drifting against the empty wharf) of Thầy's essay is derived from the last line of the poem No. 3 in the poetry collection of 171 poems entitled *Thủy Mộ Quan* (The underwater graveyard gate) by poet Viên Linh:

*Nằm mộng đêm nay vào hỏa ngục
Trời mây vẫn vũ thủy mang mang
Dưới hiên mưa vắng, hồn khuấy nước
Thả chiếc thuyền con ngược bến không.*

I dreamed of descending into hell tonight,
The sky clouds were swirling, the water boundless.
Beneath the porch, in the quiet rain, a soul disturbs the water,
Letting down a small boat to drift against the empty wharf.

Here is another poem (poem No. 78) in this collection that Thầy also found notable:

*Sinh ở đâu mà giạt bốn phương
Trăm con cười nói tiếng trăm giòng
Ngày mai nếu trở về quê cũ
Hy vọng ta còn tiếng khóc chung*

Where were we born that now we're drifted across the four corners
of the earth?
A hundred children, a hundred tongues.
If tomorrow we return to our old homeland,
Let's hope our cries still sound the same.

in a painting, one becomes dazed and bewildered. Yet, its language transforms. Love, disappointment, passion, like fervent waves on the water's surface, but what lies hidden deep below, who knows?

*Nước xa cuồn cuộn ra khơi
Sâu trong tâm thể có đôi giọt gần
(Đu tập, Thủy mộ quan, thơ Viên Linh)*

The distant water surges out to sea
Deep within the body, there are a few close drops
(Leftover collection, The underwater graveyard gate,
poetry by Viên Linh)

Such verses are rare for a busy life. How could one not be busy, when one's peers are constantly leaving.

Some cross rivers and enter forests, their hearts burning with heroism, leaving behind the city as in the song *Người đã đi, đi trên non cao* (They have gone, gone to the mountains) ⁴.

⁴ From the song *Người về thành phố* (Urban homecoming), written by songwriter Phạm Thế Mỹ, a North Vietnamese spy, assigned to South Vietnam to work with student activists.

In this song, he praises and encourages students to go up the mountains to join the communist military forces. It wasn't until the fall of Saigon that his true identity as a spy was unveiled.

An undercover communist agent within the South Vietnamese regime, yet he achieved immense fame in South Vietnam thanks to the freedom of speech and freedom of the press. After the fall of Saigon, he was merely assigned a role as a cultural information officer in District 4, Saigon, and later passed away in hardship and obscurity.

Others leave, leaving behind choked, frenzied cries of the young widows: *Ngày mai đi nhận xác chồng, say đi để thấy mình không là mình* (Tomorrow I'll go to claim my husband's body. Get drunk so I don't feel like myself) ⁵.

⁵ From the song *Tưởng như còn người yêu* (Feeling like my lover is still here), commonly known as *Ngày mai đi nhận xác chồng* (Tomorrow I'll go to claim my husband's body), written by songwriter Phạm Duy.

He set the poet Lê Thị Ý's poem *Love Song No. 1* to music. The song's raw emotion and vivid imagery, depicting a widow's journey to claim her husband's body after he was killed in war, make it a truly unforgettable work. This song, filled with deep sorrow and longing, became one of the most popular during the 70s war era.

The poem's final lines resonate with me deeply, as I've witnessed many widows, including my own half-sister, grieving at their husbands' grave sites:

*Chao ơi thềm nụi hôn quen
Đêm đêm hẹn sẽ chong đèn chờ nhau
Chiếc quan tài phủ cờ màu
Hằn lên ba vạch đỏ au phũ phàng
Em không thấy được xác chàng
Ai thêm lon giữa hai hàng nến trong?
Mùi hương cứ tưởng hơi chồng
Nghĩa trang mà ngỡ như phòng riêng ta*

Oh, I crave our familiar kiss
Night after night, we promised to wait for each other
Your coffin is draped in a colored flag
Etched with three cruel, bloody red stripes
Why can't I see your body?
Who has had a higher rank between the two lines of candles?
The candlelight's scent reminds me of your breath
Inside the graveyard, but I feel like we are in our private room.

In the song, the songwriter Phạm Duy drops the line:

| Love and hate become dialectical contradictions.

So, we may surmise that as reflecting on the impact of war on individuals and society, Thầy's wrath was born out of his deep-seated anxieties for his homeland. War wrought a terrible toll on the populace, yet the dialectics also ignited a fervent zeal for slaughter.

As he was struggling to calm his mind on the impact of the war, I believe the *đá mòn* (worn-out stones) mentioned in this poem metaphorically represents his burdens, therefore, I translate the first verse of the third stanza, *vẫn lăn lóc với đá mòn dút nôi*, to *still grappling with the same old burdens, on and off*.

Hằn lên ba vạch đỏ au phũ phàng

Etched with three cruel, bloody red stripes.

The three red stripes in the poem allude to the flag of the Republic of Vietnam, which features three red stripes on a yellow background.

He also changes the last line:

Nghĩa trang mà ngỡ như phòng riêng ta

Inside the graveyard, but I feel like we are in our private room

into:

Ôm mộ cứ tưởng ôm vòng người yêu

Hugging the grave, I feel like I am hugging my lover.

In essence, both lines express deep grief, loss, a sense of surreal detachment and a profound emotional connection to the deceased. The poem's verse uses a metaphorical image of a private room to convey a sense of intimacy and belonging, while the song's verse uses an image of grave hugging to express a longing for physical closeness.

4. Hoài niệm

*Một đêm thôi mắt trằm sâu đáy biển
Hai bàn tay vén lại tóc xa xưa
Miền đất đỏ trắng đã gầy vĩnh viễn
Từ vu vơ bên giấc ngủ mơ hồ.*

*Một lần định như sao ngàn đã định
Lại một lần nông nổi vết sa cơ.
Trời vẫn vậy vẫn mây chiều gió tĩnh
Vẫn một đời nghe kể chuyện không như
Vẫn sống chết với điều tàn vờ vĩnh
Để mắt mù nhìn lại cõi không hư.
Một lần ngại trước thông già cung kính
Chẳng một lần nhàm lẫn không ư?*

*Ngày mai nhé ta chờ mi một chuyến
Hai bàn tay vén lại tóc xa xưa.*

Nostalgia

Just for one night, let my eyes plunge to the ocean floor,
With my two hands, I weave her hair back into time, as it
once was.

In her realm, the moon has eternally waned,
Lost in an aimless, hazy slumber.

Once resolved, I thought it fixed as the stars,
Yet again, rashness brought me down.
The sky remains, with evening clouds and a gentle wind,
Still a lifetime listening to frivolous tales,
Still living and dying in a perpetual pretense,
Blinded from reality by fabricated legends.

Once I stood in awe before an ancient, sacred pine,
Surely, I've stumbled more than once.

Tomorrow, I anticipate a journey,
With my two hands, I'll weave her hair back into time, as
it once was.

Explanation

In the poem's opening, the author closes his eyes and, thinking about his lover, he envisions reaching out to weave her hair back into time, as it once was. In the realm where she resides, the moon has perpetually waned.

In the second section, the author admits to having made many mistakes, by not keeping his promises and by spending his lifetime listening to frivolous tales, believing in perpetual pretense and letting fabricated legends blind his eyes. These frivolous tales, perpetual pretenses, and fabricated legends could be interpreted as representing the misinformation and manipulated narratives that are often used by communist regimes to maintain control or influence public opinion. This interpretation aligns with the idea that the girl in the poem represents Thây's homeland and her hair the people, as they could be seen as being subjected to these misleading narratives.

In regards to the verse *một lần ngại trước thông già cung kính*, that I translate as “once I stood in awe before an ancient, sacred pine”, Vietnamese folklore is rich with stories of spirits and ghosts living on old trees. Children are taught to respect them, as they are believed to be guardians of the trees and the surrounding environment, so disturbing them could bring bad luck or ill health.

In the final section, the author makes a promise that, come tomorrow, he will return to rebuild his homeland and, ultimately, reach out to weave her hair back into time, as it once was.

The line *hai bàn tay vén lại tóc xa xưa* occurs twice in the poem. They are identical in Vietnamese due to the absence of verb tenses. In English, however, the tense shifts to reflect the present during the dream sequence, therefore, its translation is *with my two hands, I weave her hair back into time, as it once was* and the future when promising a future encounter, *with my two hands, I'll weave her hair back into time, as it once was*.

This poem is analyzed by Professor Phạm Công Thiện in his essay *Một buổi sáng đọc thơ Tuệ Sỹ* (A morning reading Tuệ Sỹ's poetry), written in 1988, as follows:

Perhaps the first characteristic of Tuệ Sỹ's poetry is the lack of personality. Contrary to the common critical habit of finding the personality of each poet, I think that demonstrating the lack of personality in poetry is the most difficult thing for a poet. ...

*Một đêm thôi mắt trằm sâu đáy biển
Hai bàn tay vén lại tóc xa xưa.*

Just for one night, let my eyes plunge to the ocean floor,
With my two hands, I weave her hair back into time, as
it once was.

Of course, I must pause in surprise: I have never seen
Tuệ Sỹ with hair. ...

The last line repeats the second line like a decisive chorus:

*Ngày mai nhé ta chờ mi một chuyến
Hai bàn tay vén lại tóc xa xưa.*

Tomorrow, I anticipate a journey,
With my two hands, I'll weave her hair back into time,
as it once was.

The word *xa xưa* (past) can also be understood, opposite of our ordinary concept, as the “past of the future”, because the word *ngày mai* (tomorrow), in combination with the word *xa xưa* (past), has expanded the horizon like a seaport, or hidden the horizon and expanded time like a forest glen. ...

Now, rereading the entire poem (consisting of 14 lines, each with 8 characters), we wonder what the poet wants to say? When reading poetry and feeling that the author wants to express something clearly, it is no longer poetry.

I have a different opinion. I think it's more enjoyable to read poetry when you understand what the author is trying to say, especially when you can empathize with them.

In my opinion, this poem is the confession of a person who has spent his life chasing after vague dreams, allowing him to listen to frivolous tales, believe in perpetual pretense and let fabricated legends blind his eyes, neglecting his loved one for a long time, perhaps too long, due to the word “eternal” in this verse, in a homeland where the moon has eternally waned. Now, after a night of deep meditation, he

regrets his actions and yearns for his loved one, wanting to reach out and weave her hair back into time, as it once was. So, he decides to embark on a journey back home tomorrow, hoping to restore his homeland and make the moon full again. Then, he can reach out to her and his two hands will finally weave her hair back into time, as it once was.

Thầy uses personification throughout his poetry to give life and deeper meaning to inanimate objects and abstract concepts. By recognizing the pattern of personification in his work, for example, with her hair representing his homeland in this poem, the streets in *Nhớ con đường thom ngọt môi em* (Longing for the streets where her lips tasted sweet and fragrant), page 150, a mustard seed in *Nghìn năm trước lên núi* (A thousand years ago I climbed that mountain), page 349, a stream in *Anh đi để trống cụm rừng* (You leave behind a ravaged forest), page 386 and many more that we will find in this book, we'll gain a valuable key to unlocking the hidden layers of meaning within his poems.

Let's continue reading the professor's critique.

Perhaps the second characteristic of Tuệ Sỹ's poetry is the abstraction of the concrete and the abstraction of personality. I use the word "abstraction" here in its most beautiful and poetic sense ... The poetic style of the Tang and Song dynasties is also subtly hidden in Tuệ Sỹ's poetry, although Tuệ Sỹ had proven that he memorized the entire poetry world of Tang and Song dynasties. To say that Tuệ Sỹ's poetry is good or bad is ridiculous. We can only say that Tuệ Sỹ's poetry

deserves to be read and re-read many times, and to be pondered over or felt intuitively. At least there is one poet worth reading amidst the “feigned ruins”.

The concepts of a lack of personality (Thầy’s first characteristic, according to professor Phạm) and the abstraction of personality (Thầy’s second characteristic, also according to professor Phạm) in poetry are often intertwined and can be difficult to distinguish. However, they represent distinct approaches to characterization and the portrayal of human experience. A lack of personality in a poem refers to the absence of a defined or individualized character, while abstraction of personality in a poem occurs when the character is presented in a more symbolic or conceptual way, using metaphors, similes, etc.

Professor Phạm continues:

The third and final characteristic of Tuệ Sỹ’s poetry is the changing voice of a bird from the ancient realm of infinite lifetimes deep within the soul of the Homeland.

This third characteristic was derived from the poem *Ngồi giữa bãi tha ma* (Sitting in the middle of a graveyard), page 142:

*Một buổi sáng nghe chim trời đổi giọng
Người thấy ta xô dạt bóng thiên thần*

One morning, the birdsong shifted,
I felt adrift, free from angelic illusions.

5. Hương ngày cũ

*Màu nắng xế ôi màu hương tóc cũ
Chiều trơ vơ chiều dạt mấy hồn tôi
Trời viễn mộng đọa đày đi mấy thuở
Mộng kiêu hùng hay muối mặn giữa trùng khơi*

Scent of old days

The fading sunlight, oh, the scent of her hair, a fragrance of days gone by,
Desolate afternoons have drifted my soul astray.
For many times, I've been tormented by dreams of distant lands,
Were they dreams of heroism, or merely grains of salt dissolving in the vast ocean?

Explanation

The images of the slanting sunlight, the fragrance of the hair, and many lonely afternoons evoke feelings of nostalgia, melancholy, and the passage of time. In these dreams of distant lands, he kept asking himself whether they were dreams of heroism, or merely grains of salt lost in the vast ocean? The comparison of dreams of heroism to grains of salt in the vast ocean suggests the smallness and insignificance of human aspirations against the backdrop of a vast and indifferent universe, or perhaps against the backdrop of the ongoing war that has caused immense pain, loss, and destruction over a period of two decades in the author's country, without seeing the end of the tunnel, given that this poem was written before the war ended.

In my translation, I added a question mark to the end of Thầy's final verse. Unexpectedly, Thầy included a question mark there as well in his own book, *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams).

Below is an excerpt from his book that proves that the last two lines of this poem exist in it and also end with a question mark:

In the realm of poetry, the moon is as heroic as a thousand miles of wind sweeping over mountain peaks. From that perspective, looking at the moon as if it were an eyebrow arched over a melancholy, thoughtful eye; a solitary sliver of moon on a bare parasol tree: is poetry a metaphor or not a metaphor? It is both a metaphor and not a metaphor:

*Trời viễn mộng đọa đày đi mấy thuở
Mộng kêu hùng hay muối mặn giữa trùng khơi?*

For many times, I've been tormented by dreams of distant lands,
Were they dreams of heroism, or merely grains of salt dissolving in the vast ocean?

The question mark added to the end of this verse, I believe, reflects the dialectical contradictions explored in his poem *Hận thu cao* (Rising autumnal wrath) that we have seen on page 39.

The book continues to explore how Su Dongpo's heroic dreams were shattered by the harsh realities of life, much like grains of salt dissolving in the vast ocean. Was this a

reflection of Su Dongpo's personal torment, or did Thây's own experiences resonate with Su's struggles?

From the realm of simple dreams to the realm of tormented distant dreams, there is an abyss, utterly dark and bottomless. The two sides are connected by a precarious, single-log bridge. How can one cross it, and recross it, with the heavy feet of ordinary mortals? Such a journey must endure countless hardships, even if the destination is only a thought away. Is that what tormented distant dreams are? But is it correct to call it tormented distant dreams? Perhaps that term only began to resonate when an old minister, accompanied by a weary spouse, humbly endured exile to the farthest reaches of South China, or ventured into the deepest, most secluded mountains of life and death? Lost in a foreign land, both the sorrow of homesickness and the longing of being a stranger are intense. Yet, how can one's homeland not be one's homeland, and where is there a place that is not a foreign land? Standing on one side, gazing toward the other, the eyes grow weary with longing. This is mental anguish; this is physical torment. In the gilded halls, the dream of a lifetime has reached its peak. ... And yet, the gilded halls echo with the cries of heartbreak. A startled eagle takes flight. Where is home, and where is foreign land, for the eagle to alight?
...

A foreign land that has eighteen terrifying rapids and waterfalls. But that land tortures the body, not the distant dreams. It is the homeland, with its deep affections, that truly tortures the distant dreams.

6. Kết từ

*Ngược xuôi nhớ nửa cung đàn
Ai đem quán trọ mà ngăn nẻo về?*

In conclusion

Back and forth I wander, remembering half a melody.
Who placed this inn here, obstructing my way home?

Explanation

Buddhists believe in reincarnation. Life is merely a short journey. After death, it continues in another life, whether as a human or not, depending on one's karma.

Therefore, life is like an inn. Some people wander around seeking fame and fortune. But Thầy wanders back and forth, remembering half of a melody. Which half?

Either Thầy has already played half of the melody, and now longs for the other half, metaphorically, an unfulfilled desire. Or half of the melody he already played keeps playing back in his thoughts, as he wanders back and forth. The image of a half melody, therefore, evokes a sense of incomplete music, mirroring his incomplete journey and longing for a lost love.

The inn, on the other hand, can be seen as a metaphor for obstacles or setbacks that prevent Thầy from reaching his way home.

In his 1973 book *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams),

Thầy introduces the section *The true face of Lushan* with these two verses. Excerpted from this book,

*Ngược xuôi nhớ nửa cung đàn
Ai đem quán trọ mà ngăn ngõ về*

Back and forth I wander, remembering half a melody.
Who placed this inn here, obstructing my way home?

Lushan is an extraordinary and magnificent natural wonder. With its majestic mountains, somber scenery, and year-round clouds and mist, this place has been the hidden abode of enlightened sages for countless generations. To seek out Lushan and gaze upon its true face is to resolutely sever all attachments, distractions, and entanglements from countless past lifetimes. To see that place is to see the Mind of Zen. But the Mind of Zen is silent and speaks not. Once one raises a razor to cut off one's hair and renounce the mundane world, the realm of poetry will lose a shining star to guide ordinary mortals who are still engrossed in poetry. A poet with a great bodhisattva vow takes upon themselves countless sufferings and heartbreaks. That vow will illuminate the truth of Difference and Sameness. Difference and Sameness are divergent paths; but upon reaching the profound koan of life and death, the truth of Difference and Sameness is obliterated. That is where the self and others, subject and object, all become silent nothingness. From there, the poet makes an appointment with Zen, opens the northern gate, and looks up at the thirty-six green mountain peaks.

The “long-winded, rambling words” (Thầy’s own words) above are his elaboration from this poem of Su Dongpo:

*Vị văn Lô nhạc đa chân ẩn
Cố tựu cao nhân đoạn túc phan
Dĩ hỉ thiên tâm vô biệt ngữ
Thương hiềm thế phát hữu thi ban
Dị đồng mặc vấn nghi Tam ngữ
Vật ngã chung đờng phó Bát hoàn
Đáo hậu dữ quân khai bắc hộ
Cử đầu tam thập lục thanh sơn*

which he translates as follows:

I heard that there are many true hermits on Lushan. Therefore, I sought out a master to sever the lingering attachments of many lifetimes. I was happy that Zen language is no different from ordinary language. But I still fear that even after shaving my head, the love for poetry might remain. Oh well, whether the way of Zen and poetry are the same or different, one should not doubt or question. Let's forget the distinctions between Self and Other. Finally, you and I opened the north door, and looked up at the thirty-six green mountain peaks.

In another passage:

Huangzhou, Quzhou, Huizhou, and countless other zhous ⁶; these were all paths of exile and days of suffering. His life was like a boat adrift, letting the current carry it away. But what about his poetry? Was it suffering? Wandering? Torment? A distant dream?

⁶ Translated from Thầy's strange original "Hoàng châu, Quế châu, Huệ châu, vân vân châu". Literally it means "Huangzhou, Quzhou, Huizhou, and etcetera zhous".

What is the true nature, the true form, the true heart? The true face of Lushan is not easy to see.

From Thầy's explanation, we can conclude that *quán trọ* (inn) represents one's life, and *nửa cung đàn* (half-melody) symbolizes the long and often arduous journey of suffering and torment one endures throughout their lifetime. The melody remains incomplete because we never fully comprehend the totality of our lived experiences until death, as expressed in this Su Dongpo's famous poem 題西林壁 (*Đề Tây Lâm bích*, Inscription on the wall of the West Grove pagoda) ⁷:

⁷ Su Dongpo had two famous poems written about Lushan. 題西林壁 (*Đề Tây Lâm bích*, Inscription on the wall of the West Grove pagoda) is one. The second one is as follows:

廬山湮鎖浙江潮
未到生平恨不消
到得還來無別事
廬山湮鎖浙江潮

Lô Sơn yên tỏa Triết Giang triều
Vị đáo bình sinh hận bất tiêu
Đáo đắc hoàn lai vô biệt sự
Lô Sơn yên tỏa Triết Giang triều.

Lushan shrouded in mist and Zhejiang tides
Before arriving, a lifetime of sorrows cannot be dispelled
Upon arrival and return, there is nothing else
Lushan shrouded in mist and Zhejiang tides.

Venerable Mật Thế (1912–1961) translated to Vietnamese:

Mù tỏa Lô Sơn sóng Triết Giang
Khi chưa đến đó hận muôn vàn
Đến rồi về lại không gì lạ
Mù tỏa Lô Sơn sóng Triết Giang.

橫看成嶺側成峰
遠近高低各不同
不識廬山真面目
只緣身在此山中

*Hoành khan thành lãnh trắc thành phong
Viễn cận cao đê các bất đồng
Bất thức Lô Sơn chân diện mục,
Chỉ duyên thân tại thử sơn trung.*

Seen from the side, it's a ridge; seen from the front, it's a peak,
From afar and near, high and low, each is different.
You cannot know the true face of Lushan,
Because you are in the middle of the mountain.

In his book, Thầy also compared Su Dongpo's evocative half-melodies to the tragic fate of Kiều, the protagonist of

This is a poem that carries a distinct Zen flavor. The majestic mountains, only partially visible through the floating mist, become a mere point of emphasis against the vast expanse of the sky. Below, the river tide ebbs and flows.

What makes this poem particularly interesting is the first and last lines, which are identical in words but carry different meanings.

The first line is simply a description of the scenery, as if heard from someone else. The last line is a personal expression after witnessing Lushan and Zhejiang firsthand. It reflects a personal experience.

The theme of this poem is in accord to this saying of Zen Master Qingyuan Weixin (9th century): "Before a man studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are mountains and waters are waters".

Some Chinese critics claim that the poem on page 350 is the third's Zen-flavored poem Su Dongpo wrote about Lushan.

Nguyễn Du's (1766–1820) epic poem *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều) ⁸.

Thầy highlighted the similarities between their fates with the following verses from *The Tale of Kiều*:

*Mỗi tình đòi đoạn vò tơ
Giác hương quan lúống lằn mơ canh dài
Song sa vò võ phương trời
Nay hoàng hôn đã lại mai hôn hoàng.*

All her emotions tangled like sleeve silk,
As dreams of home kept stirring sleep till dawn.
From her gauze-curtained window, at heaven's edge,
Alone, forlorn, she'd watch dusk follow dusk.
(translated by Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông, quoted from his bilingual book *The Tale of Kiều*)

⁸ *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều), original title *Đoạn trường tân thanh* (A new cry from a broken heart), is an epic poem by Nguyễn Du, consisting of 3254 verses in Nôm script, written by alternating lines of six and eight syllables in the lục bát (six eight) style.

It tells the tragic story of Kiều, a beautiful and talented young woman who is forced to sacrifice herself to save her family.

Nguyễn Du's masterful use of language, classical Chinese allusions and references, vivid imagery, and deep psychological insight, capturing human emotion and exploring themes of love and loss, elevates the poem to a work of art and a masterpiece of Vietnamese literature.

Nôm is a logographic writing system, based on Chinese characters, formerly used to write the Vietnamese language. For an example of Nôm writing, see the footnote on pages 298–299.

In the 16th century, European missionaries, for the purpose of their mission, introduced the Romanized Vietnamese script, which gradually became today's official writing system.

Most Venerable Nguyễn Siêu connects the poem's "half-melody" to the life of Tuệ Sỹ, particularly after the fall of Saigon, as described in his essay *Tuệ Sỹ – Người gầy trên quê hương* (Tuệ Sỹ – The gaunt figure on his homeland). He argues that even though this poem predates the fall of Saigon, the image of the "half-melody" resonated with Thầy and represented a sense of incompleteness that he carried throughout his life.

Some people strive and struggle to seize power and wealth, even if it means crawling on their bellies. They do anything to fulfill their wicked ambitions, to acquire unjust wealth and high positions, even if it means selling their country to foreign powers, all for the sake of filling their pockets with money and their homes with gold and jewels, to cushion their seats and enjoy life on the blood and bones of the common people. But here, there is someone who "strives" only to remember half a melody that has not yet been fully played. How simple! How content! ...

That half-melody is like the long, lingering sound of a stringed instrument that is suddenly cut short. Like the history of our homeland, plummeting into a deep, dark, and hopeless abyss. Life is like an inn, and people come and go. Birth and death are endless, vast, and profound. People become so immersed in this inn that they create all sorts of distractions to block the path to their distant dreams. Thus, being blocked and unable to return, he turned back to live with himself. He closed his doors, avoid the outside world, and fast. Sometimes he fainted at his desk from hunger.

7. **Mộng trường sinh**

*Đá mòn phơi nỏ tà dương
Năm nghe nước lũ khóc chùng cuộc chơi
Ngàn năm vang một nỗi đời
Gió đưa cuộc lữ lên lời viễn phương*

*Đan sa rã mộng phi thường
Đào tiên trụi lá bên đường tử sinh
Đồng hoang mục tử chung tình
Đăm chiêu dư ảnh nóc đình hạc khô.*

Eternal life's dream

Worn stones bathed in the setting sun,
Listening to the floodwaters mourn lifelong dreams.
A thousand years echo a timeless hope,
As wind carries tales of futile journeys to distant lands.

Cinnabar's allure shatters dreams of grandeur,
By the path of life and death, immortal peach trees stand bare.
On the desolate plain, a lone, faithful shepherd stands,
Contemplating the fading image of the weathered crane atop the temple roof.

Explanation

This poem was taken from his book *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams). Here's the original passage:

| The nostalgic sentiment of the traveler is undoubtedly a sincere aspiration awakened by journeys against the

wind. The path of history, like a river flowing downstream, or rushing like a flood, sweeps away all lifelong dreams. This is the history of birth, death, and long dreams. In that dreamlike realm, on the traveler's journey against the wind, the fading sunlight casts a melancholy, contemplative hue over the ruins, decay, and corruption; it is the ultimate end of everything in passionate destruction. Breath fades away; the person has completely wasted their essence, leaving nature to express its indifferent affection, like a pebble by the roadside exposed to the sun and wind. The sun rises with signs of wear and tear and collapse. The wind carries with it the echoes of eternal wishes beyond the vast and silent universe. Dreams of grandeur are entrusted to cinnabar, a symbol of immortality; yet, the path of life and death within the vast and silent universe never stops to let travelers' dwell there. Life and death remain like an illusory dream, as noisy as a game. In the vast, empty expanse, the shepherd gazes thoughtfully at the silhouette of a thin crane, pondering the ways of the world and history; then he asks himself: "Where is the realm of Eternal Dreams?"

His poem is inspired by this poem by Su Dongpo:

門前古碣臥斜陽
閱世如流事可傷
長有幽人悲晉惠
強修遺廟學秦皇
丹砂久窳井水赤
白朮誰燒廚灶香
聞道神仙亦相過
只疑田叟是庚桑

*Môn tiên cổ kiệt ngọa tà dương
Duyệt thế như lưu sự khả thương
Trường hữu u nhân bi Tấn Huệ
Cường tu di miếu học Tần Hoàng
Đan sa cửu diếu tỉnh thủy xích
Bạch truyệt thùy triêu trừ táo hương
Văn đạo thần tiên diệc tương quá
Chỉ nghi điền tẩu thị Canh Tang*

In front of the inn, a stone lies exposed to the afternoon sun,
Viewing the world like flowing water, passing by and disappearing, matters can be painful.
Even today, there are still foolish people who mourn for Emperor Hui of Jin,
There are also those who still imitate Qin Shi Huang, trying to repair the ruined temple.
Cinnabar, once a key ingredient in the pursuit of eternal life, is now abandoned and submerged in a well, turning the water red,
Atractylodes root, used in the past for alchemist purposes, is now seen being used as incense in the kitchen.
I hear that immortals often interact with mortals,
Perhaps that old farmer is actually the immortal Gengsang Chu.

The search for an elixir of immortality, or a substance that could extend their life, has been a recurring theme in Chinese culture and history for centuries. This quest was often driven by a desire for power, wealth, and longevity, and it was believed that such a potion could be found through alchemy.

The poem by Su Dongpo mentions three persons: Qin Shi Huang, Hui of Jin and Gengsang Chu.

Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BC) was obsessed with finding the elixir of immortality and sent numerous expeditions to search for it. Unfortunately, his efforts were unsuccessful, and he died at a relatively young age.

Hui of Jin (259–307), like many of his predecessors, was captivated by the idea of eternal life and sought to prolong his reign through the consumption of elixirs. Unfortunately, his pursuit of immortality had tragic consequences. He ingested a toxic elixir that ultimately led to his demise.

Gengsang Chu was a disciple of the semi-legendary ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi (6th century BC), who is generally considered the founder of Taoism. When Gengsang Chu took up his residence in the north at the hill of Wei Lei, his servants left him and his concubines distanced themselves from him, too. But by embracing solitude and dedicating himself to self-cultivation, he ultimately gained the respect and reverence of the people, achieving a form of immortality through their memory and the prosperity he brought to the land.

8. Mưa cao nguyên

1

*Một con én một đoạn đường lầy lất
Một đêm dài nghe thác đổ trên cao
Ta bước vội qua dòng sông biên biệt
Đợi mưa dầm trong cánh bướm xôn xao*

2

*Bóng ma gọi tên người mỗi sáng
Từng ngày qua từng tiếng vu vơ
Mưa xanh lên tóc huyền sương nặng
Trong giấc mơ lá dạt xa bờ*

3

*Người đứng mãi giữa lòng sông nhuộm nắng
Kể chuyện gì nơi ngày cũ xa xưa
Con bướm nhỏ đi về trong cánh mỏng
Nhưng về đâu một chiếc lá xa mùa*

4

*Năm tháng vẫn như nụ cười trong mộng
Người mãi đi như nước chảy xa nguồn
Bờ bến lạ chút tự tình với bóng
Mây lạc loài ôi tóc cũ ngàn năm*

Highland rain

1

Like a swallow struggling on a stretch of a road,
A long night spent listening to the waterfall,
I hurry across the desolate river,
Awaiting the drenching rain amidst the bustling butterfly
wings.

2

A ghost calls your name each dawn, do you not hear?
Each passing day, each imperceptible sound.
Green rain falls on your black hair, heavy with dew,
In my dreams, leaves are swept far from the shore.

3

Standing forever in the sun-drenched riverbed,
I recount tales of bygone days.
The small butterfly flutters to and fro on fragile wings,
But where can I, an out-of-season leaf, find my way?

4

Days turn to months; time slips by like a smile in a dream,
While you, like a river, flow ever onward,
You confide in your shadow, on distant shores.
Oh, those stray clouds! You were my hair a thousand
years ago.

Explanation

This first stanza paints a picture of solitude and waiting. The swallow's flight, the desolate river, and the persistent rain all contribute to a sense of isolation. The bustling butterfly's wings, despite their activity, seem to offer no solace. The author is waiting for the pouring rain, perhaps it is a change or a resolution.

The theme of longing and loss deepens in the second stanza. The ghost calling the person's name suggests a haunting presence from the past. The "green rain" and "black hair" create a dreamlike, ethereal atmosphere, while the image of leaves drifting away symbolizes the impermanence of life and love.

In the third stanza, the word "người" in the first line could represent the author or a lost love. The image of the person standing in the river suggests a timeless quality, as if they are trapped in the past.

The final stanza reinforces the themes of time, memory, and loss.

The following verse,

Năm tháng vẫn như nụ cười trong mộng

Days turn to months; time slips by like a smile in a dream suggests Thầy's serene acceptance in the face of all storms, by considering the passage of the time inside as well as outside of the prison just like a smile in his dream.

This is the smile of a Bodhisattva!

However, the poem will resonate deeper with you, if you envision the first and third stanzas spoken by a wanderer and the second and fourth by his beloved. If you'd agree, then the poem becomes:

The wanderer whispers to his lover:

*Like a lone swallow lingering on a stretch of a road,
A long night spent listening to the waterfall's cascade,
I hasten across the river on a long voyage,
Awaiting the downpour amidst the bustling butterflies.*

His lover whispers back:

*A ghost calls your name each dawn, do you not hear?
Each passing day, each imperceptible sound.
Green rain falls on your black hair, heavy with dew,
In my dreams, leaves are swept far from the shore.*

The wanderer confides in his lover:

*Standing forever in the sun-drenched riverbed,
I recount tales of bygone days.
The small butterfly flutters to and fro on fragile wings,
But where can I, an out-of-season leaf, find my way?*

His lover whispers back, but mainly to herself:

*Days turn to months; time slips by like a smile worn in a dream,
While you, like a river, flow ever onward,
You confide in your shadow, on distant shores.
Oh, those stray clouds! You were my hair a thousand years ago.*

You may notice the following three points that will make the poem resonate deeper with you:

(1) In the second stanza, when the girl says,

Trong giấc mơ lá dạt xa bờ,

In my dreams, leaves are swept far from the shore,

then she means that he, her lover, not the lost leaves, drifts far away from her or their home.

(2) In the first line of the last stanza,

Năm tháng vẫn như nụ cười trong mộng,

Days turn to months; time slips by like a smile worn in a dream.

I've changed "a smile in a dream" to "a smile *worn* in a dream" to suggest a strained smile on his lover. In her dreams, she would always put on a smiling, brave face for him, even though she sadly yearned for a real-life encounter.

(3) Finally, the last line,

Mây lạc loài ôi tóc cũ ngàn năm,

Oh, those stray clouds! You were my hair a thousand years ago,

becomes her silent cry as the stray clouds were not the wanderer's hair, but her own hair, a thousand years ago.

Poet Viên Linh ⁹ pointed out that this poem was originally featured on the front page of the weekly magazine *Khởi Hành* (Departure), issue 108, published in Saigon in June 1971.

In *Tuệ Sỹ, tù đày và quê nhà* (Tuệ Sỹ, prison and homeland), poet Viên Linh describes Thầy's poetry as below:

To speak of Tuệ Sỹ's poetry is to speak endlessly of a vast, celestial source, where words are imbued with a serene aura and meaning is deeply intertwined with the human experience...

Tuệ Sỹ didn't speak, didn't use the conversational language of speech, but instead described with gentle imagery and colors, creating a unique rhythm for the poem.

⁹ Poet Viên Linh (1938–2024) was the Editor-in-Chief of the weekly magazine *Khởi Hành* (Departure) of the Republic of Vietnam's Military Artists Association from its first issue on May 1, 1969, until the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

Having resettled in the United States, he founded the overseas monthly magazine *Khởi Hành* in November 1996 and served as its Editor-in-Chief and Managing Editor until it was discontinued in April 2018, due to his ill health.

9. Tóc huyền

*Tang thương một dải tóc huyền
Bãi dâu ngàn suối mấy miền hoang vu
Gờ thân gió cuốn xa mù
Áo xanh cát trắng trời thu muôn màng*

*Chênh vênh hoa đỏ nắng vàng
Gót xiêu dốc núi vai mang mây chiều
Tóc huyền loạn cả nguyên tiêu
Lãng du ai ngỡ cô liêu bạc đầu.*

Raven hair

A strand of raven hair, a trail of sorrow,
Across mulberry fields and myriad streams, a desolate
expanse.
Entrusting her fate to the wind, she vanishes into the mist,
Beneath a somber, late autumn sky, green robes and white
sands.

Precariously, red flowers bloom under a golden sun,
Her feet teetered on the mountain's edge; her shoulders
burdened by twilight clouds.
Her raven hair hangs in disarray even during the lantern
festival,
Who could have imagined that this wanderer destined for
such a solitary life until old age?

Explanation

Is this poem about the Vietnamese women who were forced to work or marry abroad, following the tragic fall of Saigon in April 1975? No, it's not. The poem was composed

before 1975, therefore, it's reasonable to argue that Thầy was giving voice to the country's suffering during the war. Alternatively, we may argue that this was his prediction for our Vietnamese women's fate after the war.

In *Tuệ Sĩ, tù đày và quê nhà* (Tuệ Sĩ, prison and homeland), poet Viên Linh comments:

The human figure in Tuệ Sĩ's poetry isn't defined by physical attributes like stature, appearance, lips, eyes, laughter, or voice. In Tuệ Sĩ's poetry, the human is merely a strand of hair. But what does this hair represent? Is it a maiden? A beauty? I cannot answer these questions. All I know is that the hair in Tuệ Sĩ's poetry may or may not be real, yet it is; it may or may not be absent, yet it remains. Perhaps this hair is a distant dream, a noble fantasy of a courtier who delights in gazing upon red earth, green robes, yellow grass, dark nights, pink buds, and hair. Undoubtedly, this hair represents a person, but who? Or perhaps it represents no one at all, but rather the transformations of a journey, from the green rain to the summer sun, from primordial chaos to the fading of paradise?

The poem alludes to *nguyên tiêu* (元宵, also called *thượng nguyên* or *hội hoa đăng*, lantern festival). This is a traditional Chinese festival celebrated on the fifteenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar.

Volume 2

Giấc mơ Trường Sơn | Dreams on the peak of Trường Sơn

Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

This volume contains 34 poems, mostly written during the time of his retreat in Vạn Giã forest.

Time of composition: April 30, 1975–1978

1. Ác mộng

*Lại ác mộng bởi rừng khuya tàn bạo đày,
Thịt xương người vung vãi lối anh đi.
Nhưng đày mắt không căm thù đỏ cháy,
Vì yêu em trên lá đọng sương mai.*

*Anh chiến đấu nhọc nhằn như cỏ dại,
Thoảng trông em tà áo mỏng vai gầy,
Ôi hạnh phúc, anh thấy mình nhỏ bé,
Chép tình yêu trên trang giấy thơ ngây.*

*Đời khách lữ biết bao giờ yên nghỉ,
Giữa rừng khuya nằm đợi bóng sao mai.
Để một thoáng giấc mơ tàn kinh dị,
Dáng em buồn bên suối nhỏ mây bay*

Nightmares

Haunted again by nightmares of brutal forest fires,
Where the bones and flesh scattered in my path.
Yet, the depths of my eyes hold no burning hatred,
For I love her, like dewdrops clinging to leaves at dawn.

I fight, relentlessly like a wild weed,
Catching glimpses of her slender shoulders, draped in a
thin dress.

Oh, happiness, I feel so humbled,
Scribbling my love on innocent pages.

When will this weary traveler find rest,
In the midnight forest, waiting for the morning star?
In a moment's respite from a terrifying dream,
By a stream, beneath drifting clouds, her sorrowful form.

Explanation

In this poem, when Thầy asserted that there was no burning hatred in the depths of his eyes, the pronoun “em” (her) in *vì yêu em trên lá đọng sương mai* (for I love her, like dewdrops clinging to leaves at dawn) symbolized Thầy’s homeland, personified as a suffering entity under the oppressive regime. He yearned for his homeland’s liberation, yet harbored no hatred towards the oppressive regime. Thầy’s love for his homeland was as pure as dewdrops glistening on leaves. Seeing human bones and flesh scattered across his path, Thầy believed this is a war he must fight tirelessly, like a weed, persistent but always undervalued, fighting for survival and to liberate the country from the Communists. He was ready to sacrifice himself because he felt himself so small compared to his love for his country.

The poem masterfully juxtaposes images of violence and tenderness, creating a stark contrast that highlights the emotional turmoil of the speaker. The gruesome scenes of “bones and flesh scattered” are set against the delicate image of “dewdrops clinging to leaves”, and the “terrifying dream” is countered by the peaceful vision of “her sorrowful form” by the stream. This juxtaposition creates a sense of tension and complexity, reflecting the inner conflict of the speaker.

The poem also employs powerful symbols to convey its message. The “wild weed” symbolizes the speaker’s resilience and determination to survive, while the “innocent pages” represent hope and the enduring power of love. The “morning star” can be interpreted as a symbol of

hope and redemption, while the “sorrowful form” of the beloved suggests the enduring pain of loss and longing.

The peaceful setting of the small stream and drifting clouds offers a contrast to the nightmares. It might represent his desire for peace and tranquility, or perhaps a sense of fear of the unknown that is going to happen to “em” (his country), represented by the transience of the clouds. Waken up from his horrifying nightmare to see her sorrowful form by the stream beneath drifting clouds, Thầy’s anxieties are heightened, revealing a deep concern for her well-being.

Overall, this poem is a moving testament to the human capacity for love and resilience in the face of adversity. It is deeply emotional and expresses a range of feelings, from the horror of war to the tenderness of love, from despair to hope.

The poet and poetic commentator Châu Thạch, in his analysis of this poem, *Đọc ‘Ác mộng’ thơ Tuệ Sỹ* (Reading Tuệ Sỹ’s poem ‘Nightmares’), writes:

A writer (TN: Vĩnh Hảo, quoted from his essay *Thơ tình Tuệ Sỹ* (Tuệ Sỹ’s Romantic poetry)) once said of Tuệ Sỹ:

“Among the works of Zen Master Thích Tuệ Sỹ, a large number were composed during the year he retreated to live in solitude, farming in the Vạn Giã forest from 1976 to 1977. These poems were collected in the volume *Giấc mơ Trường Sơn* (Dreams on the peak of Trường Sơn). Besides poems about mountains, forests, the universe, and the human condition, there are also quite a few about

love, which are very passionate and evocative, a rather surprising fact considering the author is a Zen master. He has a deep understanding of human psychology to be able to convincingly describe the romantic paths of love, the secret thoughts of the human heart, without necessarily expressing his own personal feelings. On the other hand, in poems about love, we think of romantic love between men and women, but in fact, it could be an expression in poetry of a broader love, that of humanity”.

These observations are indeed very accurate. Tuệ Sỹ is truly a scholar in the Eastern tradition. Zen Master Thích Tuệ Sỹ demonstrated the spirit of *uy vũ bất năng khuất* (Chinese philosopher Mencius' quotation, which means a righteous person does not submit to those with power), the spirit of unyielding integrity of a scholar not only through his actions but also through his works. Through his writing, he created his work through self-sacrificing devotion, to share the suffering with his homeland. One such poem is *Nightmares* which he wrote in the Vạn Giã forest in 1976, in a thatched hut that he built himself, where at night, there was nothing but a flickering oil lamp in the thatched hut and the endless darkness of the mountains.

Now, I invite you to approach the poem *Nightmares* with two different perspectives. Only then can we understand some of the profound meaning in his poem. First, let's bring the perspective of romantic love to appreciate the passionate love poem, then, depending on each person, let's try bringing a little or a lot of the perspective of a

monk, a person who has distanced themselves from the mundane world, to feel the mystery in Tuệ Sỹ's poetry.

Let's step into the first stanza:

*Lại ác mộng bởi rừng khuya tàn bạo đày,
Thịt xương người vung vãi lối anh đi.
Nhưng đáy mắt không căm thù đỏ cháy,
Vì yêu em trên lá đọng sương mai.*

Haunted again by nightmares of brutal forest fires,
Where the bones and flesh scattered in my path.
Yet, the depths of my eyes hold no burning hatred,
For I love her, like dewdrops clinging to leaves at dawn.

Reading the first two lines, we immediately see the poet dreaming a horrifying dream in the forest. The poet has seen human remains scattered along his path. The author's phrase "haunted again by nightmares" means there have been many nightmares in that forest. The author further states that these forest fires are "cruel". So, in the first line of the poem, the author directly points to the subject that causes the nightmares as the cruel forest fires. What is the subject? A subject is an individual, an organization that exists, and is identifiable through actions. The forest cannot be a subject. Thus, the forest in the poem is used to allude to a subject that has caused a nightmare for the author.

Through the next two lines,

*Nhưng đáy mắt không căm thù đỏ cháy,
Vì yêu em trên lá đọng sương mai,*

Yet, the depths of my eyes hold no burning hatred,
For I love her, like dewdrops clinging to leaves at dawn,
it's a picture of leaves in the Vạn Giã forest. ...

Through the first stanza, we can see that although the poet writes about a nightmare, it's not a dream while sleeping but a nightmare while awake, because he still clearly sees the red leaves with dew on them in front of him.

In summary, the first stanza of Tuệ Sĩ's poem depicts a nightmare induced by society. He witnesses widespread suffering and encounters a marginalized class as innocent as leaves, devoid of hatred. Their souls are as pure as the morning dew on those leaves, which he cherishes. Thus, the leaves symbolize the oppressed, whom the poet personifies as "her," and the "morning dew" represents their pure hearts.

Now, continue reading the second stanza:

*Anh chiến đấu nhọc nhằn như cỏ dại,
Thoảng trông em tà áo mỏng vai gầy,
Ôi hạnh phúc, anh thấy mình nhỏ bé,
Chép tình yêu trên trang giấy thơ ngây.*

I fight, relentlessly like a wild weed,
Catching glimpses of her slender shoulders, draped in a
thin dress.

Oh, happiness, I feel so humbled,
Scribbling my love on innocent pages.

The first line, “I fight, relentlessly like a wild weed” refers to Tuệ Sĩ’s power and his will.

The poet’s power is as weak as a weed, but his will is always strong and fighting. Faced with violence, Tuệ Sĩ is like a weed, but a weed still fights. Who does he fight for, and why? The answer is very clear, fighting for “her slender shoulders, draped in a thin dress” meaning fighting for the weak and poor class. Understanding this, we see that “her” here is not any girl, but “her” here refers to the oppressed classes.

The next two lines talk about the poet’s satisfaction in love and how the poet expresses his love. Of course, we already know that this love is not romantic love, but a higher love for others, for the weak, for those who suffer from injustice and oppression:

*Ôi hạnh phúc, anh thấy mình nhỏ bé,
Chép tình yêu trên trang giấy thơ ngây*

Oh, happiness, I feel so humbled,
Scribbling my love on innocent pages.

“Oh, happiness, I feel so humbled”: Tuệ Sĩ is happy in his humility, because it is precisely that humility that makes him an eternal and undeniable monument in the conscience of the times.

Scribbling my love on innocent pages. Indeed. Today, although Tuệ Sĩ has passed away, his poetry, his prose, his scriptures are unparalleled love left forever on paper, very naïve but extremely valuable, a fragrant draft for literary history, the teachings of a respected Zen master

in Buddhism, and the writings of a wise man for Vietnamese history.

Now, let's read the final stanza of the poem:

*Đời khách lữ biết bao giờ yên nghỉ,
Giữa rừng khuya nằm đợi bóng sao mai.
Để một thoáng giấc mơ tàn kinh dị,
Dáng em buồn bên suối nhỏ mây bay*

When will this weary traveler find rest,
In the midnight forest, waiting for the morning star?
In a moment's respite from a terrifying dream,
By a stream, beneath drifting clouds, her sorrowful form.

This stanza is filled with hope and aspiration. Buddhism views human life as a journey of a wanderer through countless lifetimes.

Life is already sorrowful, but Tuệ Sỹ feels even more sorrowful as he lives this life in a dark forest, uncertain when dawn will break. Yet, the poet still harbors great hope, waiting for the morning star to signal the sunrise and the coming of light. At that moment, his horrific dream ends, and he sees “a sorrowful form by a stream, beneath drifting clouds” meaning she stands in a peaceful scene. Of course, her figure is still sad because he hasn't yet realized that this day has come.

As we have discussed earlier, Tuệ Sỹ's “her” is not a woman. In his poetry, “her” represents a class of people who suffer the consequences of life, those who endure hardship and pain, those who are oppressed and suffer

injustice, or perhaps he views “her” as all those who are still far from Buddhism, the path he is cultivating.

Tuệ Sĩ’s poetry is not only like a flower blooming before our eyes but also like a twinkling star in the sky. Like a flower blooming before our eyes, it is because of its beautiful colors and sweet fragrance that we can immediately perceive. Like a twinkling star in the sky, it is because of its sublime ideas and extraordinary concepts that we can also see, depending on each person’s perspective.

2. Anh sẽ về thăm phố cũ

*Mười năm sau anh sẽ về thăm phố cũ
Màu Trường sơn pha nắng rực trưa hè
Anh vẫn nhớ những con đường bụi đỏ
Và tình yêu trong ánh mắt rã rời.*

I'll return to this old town

Ten years from now, I'll return to visit this old town,
Where Trường Sơn's colors mingle with the fierce
midday sun.
I will always remember those dusty, red streets,
And the love that lingered in her languid eyes.

Explanation

This is the promise of a person leaving to pursue his dream. He promises that in ten years, he will return when the old streets are tinged with the colors of Trường Sơn under the blazing summer sun. He also pledges that in those ten years, he will always remember every dusty crimson road and the tearful, expectant eyes of his “lover”.

Trường Sơn is a mountain range, extending 1100 km through Laos, Vietnam and a small area in northeast Cambodia.

During the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese army successfully constructed the Hồ Chí Minh trail along the Trường Sơn mountain range, serving as a vital supply route for troops, provisions, and weaponry to the Southern front.

Initially, this route was merely an extension of the roads built during the French colonial period, so the initial transportation method relied on porters carrying supplies on their backs and traveling on foot.

In 2002, the United States National Security Agency (NSA) released a 500-page report titled *Spartans in darkness*, which revealed secrets about the Indochina war from 1954 to 1975. The report states,

The Ho Chi Minh trail was more than a simple pathway from North to South Vietnam. It was a military engineering project that the North Vietnamese continually expanded and improved until it had become a vast network which included, by 1974, all-weather surfaced roads, footpaths, and a network of gasoline pipelines that, over a period of about fifteen years, allowed the movement south of as many as one million soldiers and political cadre – almost a third of them to their deaths – as well as supplies for the combat units fighting the South Vietnamese and the Americans. In this sense, the Ho Chi Minh Trail is one of the great achievements in military engineering of the 20th century.

However, the Ho Chi Minh trail was more than a supply route cut through the heart of Indochina; it was, in essence, the heart of the Vietnamese communist war effort, encompassing the entire supply and reinforcement network running from points in North Vietnam down to a system of routes, trails, paths and supply-heads in South Vietnam. It took on an existence of its own and consumed the efforts of an enormous

number of people to keep it running, especially in the face of the Allied air offensive determined to shut it down.

According to the above report, one million soldiers have been sent to South Vietnam via this trail, but the true figure should be three or four times more. The report also says a third of one million soldiers was estimated to be killed on the Hồ Chí Minh trail. We now know that many of them are “youth volunteer” girls and boys as young as 15 years old. Some locations on the trail were named *Cửa tử thân* (Death’s gate), *Đèo lò lửa* (Blazing furnace pass), *Ngã tư thịt chó* (Dog meat crossroads), *Đồi thịt băm* (Hamburger hill) and *Thung lũng oan hồn* (Valley of lost souls), served as grim reminders of the dangers and hardships encountered by these former soldiers and youth volunteers.

Could Trường Sơn become a catalyst for a different path? Perhaps Thầy envisioned a future where the mountain range would not only unify the nation geographically but also spiritually, liberating the people from the oppressive communist regime and fostering a democratic society that upholds the fundamental human rights enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

While the path to liberating a nation from communism is complex and multifaceted, it’s worth recalling the historical example of King Lê Lợi, who, from his base at Mount Chí Linh, the northernmost peak of the Trường Sơn mountain range, waged a ten-year resistance against the Ming invaders. His eventual victory in 1428 restored Vietnam’s independence, offering a testament to the power of perseverance and strategic leadership.

3. Bài ca cô gái Trường Sơn

*Nàng lớn lên giữa quê hương đổ nát
Tay mẹ gầy mà đất sống hoang khô
Đàn em nhỏ áo chăn không sưởi ấm
Tuổi trắng tròn quanh má đọng sương thu*

*Những đêm lạnh tóc nàng hương khói nhạt
Bóng cha già thăm thẳm tận u linh
Tuổi hai mươi mà đêm dài sương phủ
Ngọn đèn tàn tang trắng phủ mệnh mông.*

*Suốt mùa đông nàng ngồi may áo cưới
Đẹp duyên người mình vẫn phận rong rêu
Màu hoa đỏ tay ai nâng cánh bướm
Mà chân mình nghe cát bụi đều hiu.*

*Vào buổi sớm sao mai mờ khói hận.
Nghe quanh mình lang sói gọi bình minh
Đàn trẻ nhỏ dắt nhau tìm xó chợ
Tìm tương lai tìm rác rưởi mưu sinh*

*Từ những ngày Thái Bình Dương dậy sóng.
Quê hương mình khô quạnh máu thù chung
Nàng không mơ buổi chiều phơi áo lụa
Mơ Trường Sơn vời vợi bóng anh hùng*

*Từ tuổi ấy nghe tim mình rộn rã
Nàng yêu người dâng trọn khối tình chung
Không áo cưới mà âm thầm chinh phụ
Không chờ mong mà ước nguyện muôn trùng.*

*Rời từ đó tóc thề cao ước nguyện
Nên bàn chân mòn đá sỏi Trường Sơn*

*Thân bé bỏng dập dùi theo nước lũ
Suối rừng sâu ánh mắt vọng hoa ngồn.*

*Trường Sơn ơi bóng tùng quân ngạo nghễ
Phận sản bìm lây lắt với hoàng hôn
Quê hương ơi mấy nghìn năm máu lệ
Đôi vai gầy dằng trợn cả mùa xuân.*

A song of the Trường Sơn girl

She grew up in a ravaged land,
Her mother's hands, bony and weary, worked the barren
land,
Her younger siblings, with threadbare clothes and
blankets, shivered in the cold,
At fifteen, autumn dew stagnated on her cheeks.

On cold nights, her hair carried the scent of smoke.
Her father's spirit, a distant shadow.
At twenty, her nights stretched long and drenched,
widow-like,
The fading lamp cast a pale, mourning shroud.

All winter, she sewed wedding gowns,
Crafting joy for others, while her own fate lay desolate as
moss.
While other girls' hands held red-flowered, butterfly
wings,
Her own feet knew only sand and dust.

One morning, in the early hours, the morning star dimmed
by the smoke of hate,
She heard wolves howling around her, heralding a new
dawn,

Groups of children, hand in hand, searched flea market
corners,
Foraging from the garbage, seeking a future.

Since the days when the Pacific Ocean raged,
Her homeland parched, sharing the blood of common
foes.
She stopped dreaming of afternoons drying silk robes,
Her dreams now filled with heroic, awe-inspiring Trùng
Son stories.

From that time, her heart beat with a fervent rhythm,
She loved the Trùng Son heroes with all her heart.
Though without a wedding gown, she considered herself a
warrior's wife.
Not waiting passively, she harbored thousands of hopes.

With a vow, she cut her hair short,
Her feet wore down the stony paths of Trùng Son,
Her small body, tossed and turned by the surging floods,
Her eyes, a reflection of the wildflowers in the deep forest
streams.

“Oh, Trùng Son, how majestic and proud you stand!
While the fate of these cassava vines lingers in the sunset.
Oh, homeland, for thousands of years, your tears have
been nothing but blood,
My slender shoulders readily bear the weight of
springtime.”

Explanation

The poem presents a sorrowful image of the poet's
homeland.

Let's reread and slowly savor the fourth stanza of the poem:

*Vào buổi sớm sao mai mờ khói hận.
Nghe quanh mình lang sói gọi bình minh
Đàn trẻ nhỏ dắt nhau tìm xó chợ
Tìm tương lai tìm rác rưởi mưu sinh*

One morning, in the early hours, the morning star dimmed
by the smoke of hate,
She heard wolves howling around her, heralding a new
dawn,
Groups of children, hand in hand, searched flea market
corners,
Foraging from the garbage, seeking a future.

Indeed, the first thing the new government did in the aftermath of their victory was not to foster reconciliation to heal the wound caused by the 20-year long war, but to rev up their propaganda machine to herald what they called “a new dawn”, and relentlessly denounce the “reactionary” culture through daily broadcast and widespread book burning on the streets. Books published before 1975 are publicly incinerated and prisons were sprouting up like mushrooms everywhere throughout the country, hence, Thầy employs phrases *khói hận* (smoke of hate) and *lang sói* (wolves).

Just a casual reading does not fully grasp the depth of Thầy's emotions in this poem. Although this is a poem about a girl living on Trường Sơn, it should be noted that Trường Sơn here is not just a mountain, but the dreams and struggles of the Vietnamese people. The poem emphasizes the sufferings of the poor, represented by the children searching for their future by foraging from the garbage,

from the day the country fell to the communist rulers and the glimmer of hope for a better future.

The last stanza is the girl's promise, so I place it in quotation marks. By addressing Trường Sơn as *tùng quân* (which evokes the imagery of a pine tree and an old bamboo to symbolize a strong, resilient person who can protect others), the girl elevates it to a symbolic figure, like a husband or a protector.

In *Tuệ Sỹ Đạo sư – Thơ và phương trời mộng* (Zen Master Tuệ Sỹ – Poetry and Celestial realms of dreams), Volume No. 1, Most Venerable Thích Nguyên Siêu writes about this poem as follows:

Trường Sơn, since the founding of our nation, has nurtured countless talented individuals and heroes. Countless brave sons and daughters of our race have risen and rebelled from Trường Sơn.

The wind howls, the trees bend in the storm, Trường Sơn is enraged. Violent storms rage. The trails, forced upon us by a bloodthirsty mob, have exploited countless precious resources of our homeland, leading to countless troops “born in the North, died in the South”!

Trường Sơn has become an unwilling host to the bodies and blood of our nation's youth, sacrificed for the insane ideologies from the North.

That Trường Sơn, once so majestic and awe-inspiring, is now merely a burial ground for the future of our nation, all for the sake of an alien fanaticism.

That Trường Sơn is now nothing more than prisons by those who harbor hatred for an unrealistic belief.

That Trường Sơn, now burdened with more injustice and wrongs.

That Trường Sơn, now bows its head in shame.

The prisoner author rekindles the fading flame, hoping for a brighter future for Trường Sơn and the Vietnamese people.

Just as Lushan was Su Dongpo's confided dream haven then Trường Sơn could be seen as where Thầy confided his dreams and aspirations, too.

*Quê nhà trên đỉnh Trường Sơn
Cho ta gửi một nỗi hờn thiên thu
(Tự tình, Self-reflection, page 193)*

My homeland on the peak of Trường Sơn
Let me confide in you my thousand-year-long resentment.

4. Bếp lửa giữa rừng khuya

*Ai biết mình tóc trắng
Vì yêu ngọn nến tàn
Rừng khuya bên bếp lạnh
Ngồi đợi gió sang canh.*

Forest stove at night

Who knows my hair turns white,
For love of dying candlelight?
In the deep forest, by the cold hearth,
I wait for the wind to change.

Explanation

Vì yêu ngọn nến tàn (for love of dying candlelight) signifies Thây's deep dedication to his work, so much so that he loses track of time and the changing environment around him. The candle has burned out, the hearth is cold, yet he remains steadfast.

The last word *canh* is a unit of nighttime, lasting two hours. The first *canh*, 7 PM to 9 PM, is the hour of the Dog, followed by the Pig, Rat, Ox, and Tiger. In ancient Vietnam, and indeed in many cultures around the world, the passage of time, especially at night, was often marked by the rhythmic beating of drums. This wasn't just a way to keep track of the hours; it was a way to communicate with the community, providing a sense of order and security in the darkness. *Đợi gió sang canh* (waiting for the wind to change) means waiting for the wind to carry the sound of the drum announcing the next hour.

The poem's message is one of unwavering commitment and hope. Thầy's actions reveal a profound belief in the eventual triumph of democracy and justice.

Thầy's use of the word *canh* reminds me of a very popular couplet in Vietnamese poetry:

*Gió đưa cành trúc la đà
Tiếng chuông Thiên Mụ, canh gà Thọ Xương.*

A gentle breeze sways the bamboo branches,
The bell of *Thiên Mụ* temple, the rooster's crow at *Thọ Xương* village.

Thiên Mụ is the name of a temple in Huế, constructed in 1601 by Lord Nguyễn Hoàng during his southward migration, while *Thọ Xương* is the land opposite the mountain where the temple was erected. The verse signifies that the harmonious rhythm of the *Thiên Mụ*'s bell and the *Thọ Xương* rooster's crow served as a gentle morning alarm, signaling the start of a new day for the people of Huế.

5. Bóng cha già

*Mười lăm năm một bước đường
Đau lòng lữ thứ đoạn trường Cha ơi
Đêm dài tưởng tượng Cha ngồi
Gối cao tóc trắng rã rời thân con
Phù sinh một kiếp chưa tròn
Chiêm bao hạc trắng hãi hùng thiên cơ
Tuần trăng cũ nước tình cò
Lạc loài du tử mắt mờ viễn phương
Tàn canh mộng đỏ vô thường
Bơ vơ quán trọ khói sương đọa đày*

Picturing my elderly father

Fifteen years, a journey of immense length,
Oh, father, how this traveler's heart aches on this journey!
Through the long night, I imagine you, sitting,
With pillow held high, hair white and disheveled, my
body falls apart.
Your life, a cycle incomplete,
A white crane in my last dream, a foreboding omen,
Beneath a moonlit sky, a fateful turn of tide,
A lost wanderer, my vision is blurred by the distance
between us.
The night watch ends, dreams of impermanence fade,
Lost and alone in an inn, tormented by mists of sorrow.

Explanation

This poem conveys a deep sense of longing, regret, and the hardships of a life lived far from home. The author expresses his sorrow at being separated from his father.

In Vietnamese culture, the white crane is revered as a symbol of longevity, nobility, and spirituality. However, its appearance in dreams can be interpreted as an omen for the elderly of approaching end of life.

In the poem *Tống biệt* (Farewell) by poet Tản Đà (1889–1939), these verses:

*Đá mòn, rêu nhạt, nước chảy, hoa trôi,
Cái hạc bay lên vút tận trời,*

Stones worn, moss faded, water flowed, flowers drifted,
The crane soars up into the sky,

imply that the deceased rides a crane to live in the heavenly realm.

In a single line, the poet Tản Đà metaphorically described both the aging process, via the worn stones and faded moss, and the impermanence of human life, via the flowed water and drifted flowers ¹⁰.

¹⁰ Vietnamese history has an intriguing literary anecdote.

During a diplomatic mission to China, which coincided with the passing of the Yuan Emperor's consort, our head envoy was handed a pre-written eulogy to read. When he opened the paper, he found only four characters “Nhất” (meaning “one”). It only took him a few seconds to deliver the following eulogy:

*Thanh thiên nhất đoá vân
Hồng lô nhất điểm tuyết
Thượng uyển nhất chi hoa
Đao trì nhất phiến nguyệt
Y! Vân tán, tuyết tiêu, hoa tàn, nguyệt khuyết.*

6. Buổi sáng tập viết chữ thảo

*Sương mai lịm khói trà
Gió lạnh vượt tờ hoa
Nhẹ nhẹ tay nâng bút
Nghe lòng rộn âm ba*

Practicing cursive style in the morning

Morning dew blends with the tea's aromas.
Cold wind strikes the floral paper.
As my hand gently lifts the brush,
My heart resonates the pounding melody with my soul.

Explanation

The poem captures the moment of inspiration and the quiet focus required for writing. The imagery of the morning dew, the wind, and the floral paper suggests a deep connection between the writer and the natural world. The overall tone of the poem is one of peace and tranquility, offering a beautiful and evocative description of the writing

In the blue sky, one cloud,
In the red brazier, one snowflake,
In the imperial garden, one flower,
In the Jade Lake, one sliver of moon.
Alas! The cloud disperses, the snow melts, the flower wilts, the moon wanes.

This unique eulogy deeply moved the Yuan Emperor and awakened him to the impermanence of life as taught in Buddhism – that everything is subject to change and decay, sparing no one.

Note: While Mạc Đĩnh Chi (1272–1346) is often credited as the author of this eulogy, confirming this attribution is challenging.

process. Thầy seems to be in deep concentration and inner calm.

This last line is the heart of the poem. It suggests that the act of writing is deeply connected to the artist's emotions and inner spirit. The *âm ba* (pounding melody) represents the passion and energy that fuels the creative process.

However, the scholar in this poem did not practice writing Chinese, as he was proficient in seven foreign languages, including Chinese, Sanskrit and Pali, therefore, perhaps he practiced writing Wang Xizhi-style ¹¹ cursive script.

His lecture on Western Philosophy at Vạn Hạnh University, recorded by his student Most Venerable Thích Nguyên Siêu, in *Thượng tọa Tuệ Sỹ, Trí Siêu, những thiên tài lỗi lạc* (Most Venerables Tuệ Sỹ and Trí Siêu, outstanding geniuses), as follows:

In his first philosophy class, he introduced us to Western philosophy through the thoughts of Henry Miller, Jean Paul Sartre, Engel, Plato, etc. It was incredibly difficult to understand, but there was something unique and captivating about his teaching style. He didn't need any textbooks; he simply talked and talked. He talked like a waterfall cascading from above, because the source of the waterfall is full of water, endlessly replenished.

¹¹ Wang Xizhi (circa 303–361) was a Chinese writer from the Jin dynasty. He was recognized by his contemporaries and posterity as one of the most renowned calligraphers in China and was bestowed the title of 書聖 (Thu thánh, Sage of Calligraphy), a title that is still used to describe him in the present day.

This poem reminds me of the well-known Vietnamese poem *Ông đồ* (The calligrapher) ¹² by Vũ Đình Liên.

*Mỗi năm hoa đào nở
Lại thấy ông đồ già
Bày mực Tàu, giấy đỏ
Bên phố đông người qua ...*

*Năm nay đào lại nở
Không thấy ông đồ xưa
Những người muôn năm cũ
Hồn ở đâu bây giờ?*

Every year the peach blossoms bloom
Again, I see the aged calligrapher
Displaying Chinese ink and red paper
Beside the bustling street ...

This year the peach blossoms bloom again
But the old calligrapher is nowhere to be seen
Those people of the past thousand years
Where are their souls now?

Both poems evoke nostalgia for a lost aspect of our historical heritage.

¹² *Ông đồ* was a term used for traditional Chinese character teachers in Vietnam's past, when Chinese and the Nôm script were the primary writing systems.

During the Lunar New Year, many people would commission *ông đồ* to write Chinese characters such as 福 (Happiness), 祿 (Wealth) or 壽 (Longevity), or couplets on red papers to adorn their homes. This practice was seen as a way to invoke blessings and good fortune for the coming year.

7. Cây khô

*Em xõa tóc cho cây khô sâu mộng
Để cây khô mạch suối khóc thương nhau
Ta cúi xuống trên nụ cười chín mộng
Cũng mơ màng như phố thị nhớ rừng sâu.*

Withered tree

She loosens her hair, praying for the withered tree,
So the hidden stream might weep with the tree in grief,
I lower my head, a ripe smile blooming on my lips,
My feeling is akin to that of a bustling city longing for a
tranquil forest.

Explanation

The poem has two parts: The first two lines represent a girl's wish for the tree to come back to life by loosening her hair, while the last two lines represent Thầy's no-self state. The image of *ta cúi xuống trên nụ cười chín mộng*, (I lower my head, a ripe smile blooming on my lips) creates a vivid picture of Thầy's contentment and joy. This is the smile of a Bodhisattva as it resonates with Nanquan's teaching: *Ordinary mind is the Way*, on page 24. To have an ordinary mind is to be in harmony with the universe.

What is the significance of the girl loosening her hair? This is a common Vietnamese practice: loosening one's hair or shearing it for parental bereavement or supplication.

A city was once a forest years ago. The comparison of the author's feeling to that of a bustling city longing for a

tranquil forest is a powerful metaphor that conveys the depth of the author's desire for peace and tranquility.

In the eyes of ordinary people, a withered tree is dead, a stream is alive, and hills, pits, thorns, rocks and mountains are all dirty.

The following excerpt is taken, with minor modifications, from Burton Watson's *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, published by Columbia University Press in 1997.

At that time Śāriputra thought to himself:

- If the mind of the bodhisattva is pure, then his Buddha land will be pure. Now when our World-Honored One first determined to become a bodhisattva, surely his intentions were pure. Why then is this Buddha land so filled with impurities?

The Buddha, knowing his thought, said to him:

- What do you think? Are the sun and moon impure? Is that why the blind man fails to see them?

- No, World-Honored One. That is the fault of the blind man. The sun and moon are not to blame.

- Śāriputra, it is the failings of living beings that prevent them from seeing the purity of the Buddha land.

At that time, the heavenly being Lokeśvara said to him:

- Do not think that this Śākyamuni's Buddha land is impure. Because to my eyes, it is as pure and spotless as the palace of the heavenly being Great Freedom.

- I see this land full of hills, pits, thorns, rocks and mountains, which are all dirty.

- It is because your mind has highs and lows, and does not rest on Buddha wisdom. Therefore, you see this land as impure. Śāriputra, the bodhisattva treats all things and beings with perfect equality. His mind is pure, and because it rests on Buddha wisdom, it can see the purity of this Buddha land.

The Buddha then pressed his toe against the earth. Immediately the thousand-millionfold world was adorned with hundreds and thousands of rare jewels, as majestic as the Pure Land of the Buddha of Splendid Adornment. All the members of the great assembly sighed in wonder at what they had never seen before, and all saw that they themselves were seated on jeweled lotuses.

The Buddha said to Śāriputra:

- Observe the purity and majesty of this Buddha land.

- Yes, World-Honored One, these are things I have never seen or heard of before.

- My Buddha land is always pure like this. But it manifests countless impurities and defilements to guide those who are lowly and inferior. It is like the heavenly beings all eating from the same jeweled bowl, but the color of the food differs, according to their merits and virtues. Therefore, Śāriputra, those with pure minds will see the wonderful blessings that adorn this land.

8. Cho ta chép nốt bài thơ ấy

*Ôi nhớ làm sao, em nhỏ ơi!
Tùng đêm ngục tối mộng em cười
Ta hôn tay áo thay làn tóc
Nghe đặng môi hồng lạnh tím người*

*Đừng ghét mùa mưa, em nhỏ ơi!
Nằm ru vách đá chuyện lưu đày
Cho ta chút nắng bên song cửa
Để vẽ hình em theo bóng mây*

*Cho đến bao giờ, em nhỏ ơi!
Trường rêu chi chút động phương trời
Cho ta chép nốt bài thơ ấy
Để giết tình yêu cả mộng đời*

Let me finish writing that poem on the walls

Oh, how I miss you, my little one!
Each night, within this darkened cell, I dream of your
smile,
I kiss my sleeve, thinking of your hair,
A bitter coldness grips my heart.

Don't despise the rainy season, my little one!
When rain falls, I can lie and tell stories of exile to the
stony walls.
Grant me a sliver of sunlight through the window,
So I may sketch your image upon the clouds.

Until when will these moss-stained walls, my little one!
Be filled with prisoners' wishes from four corners of the
earth,

Let me finish writing that poem on the walls,
To extinguish the love that haunts my sleep.

Explanation

The moss-stained prison walls become a canvas in the prisoners' minds, a place where they inscribe their deepest yearnings. These are invisible words, etched with hope and longing, visible only to those who share the confines of this prison. When those walls are filled with countless dreams from every corner of the earth, Thày wants to add his final verse, the poem he has already begun.

He hopes this is his last poem. He won't write anymore, and perhaps then, the prisoners won't need to either. Perhaps then, the walls themselves will crumble, and prisoners will all be free.

The poem is a poignant expression of longing, isolation, and the hope for freedom. The rainy cell, the moss-stained walls, and the imaginary writing of prisoners on the walls create a powerful atmosphere of despair but resilience.

9. Cỏ dại ven bờ

*Không vì đời quẩn bức
Nhưng vì yêu rừng sâu
Bước đường vẫn tủi nhục
Biết mình đi về đâu*

*Ta muốn đi làm thuê
Đời không thuê sức yếu
Ta mộng phương trời xa
Trời buồn mây nặng trĩu*

*Ven bờ thân cỏ dại
Sức sống thẹn vai gầy
Tóc trắng mờ biên ải
Nỗi hờn mây không bay*

*Mây không trôi về Bắc
Người mơ về Trường sơn
Nắng chiều rung tủi nhục
Người trông trời viễn phương.*

Wild grass by the riverbank

Not driven by life's burdens,
But drawn by my deep forest's love,
My path remains humiliating,
My future is uncertain.

I want to work for hire,
But life does not employ the weak,
I dream of distant lands,
The sky is gray, the clouds heavy.

Along the shore, wild grass stands tall,
An embarrassing contrast to my frail form.
My white hair blurs the distant horizon,
My resentment holds the clouds captive.

Captive, the clouds don't drift to the northern sky,
Where dreams of Trường Sơn's miracles fill the air.
The evening sun casts a humiliating glow,
As everyone longs for a faraway land.

Explanation

After April 30, 1975, Thầy chose a simpler life, farming in Vạn Giã forest, drawn by his love for nature, yet he felt trapped by his circumstances.

Overall, this stanza conveys a powerful sense of melancholy and introspection. The author's isolation, coupled with his deep connection to nature, creates a poignant image of a person struggling to find his place in the world.

In his essay *Thơ Tuệ Sỹ – tiếng gọi của những đêm dài heo hút* (Tuệ Sỹ's poetry – the call of long and desolate nights), Most Venerable Phước An shared:

Every one or two weeks, I would travel from Nha Trang to Vạn Giã to visit him. The road to his farm was winding and bumpy, making it very difficult to navigate, especially during the rainy season when it became slippery. Sometimes, I would stay overnight with him in the thatched hut he had built himself. During these nights, I was even more impressed by his endurance. There was nothing there at night except a flickering oil

lamp in the hut and the endless darkness of the vast mountains and forests.

Let's compare Thầy's experiences in exile in 1976 to those of Su Dongpo, as described in his 1973 book, *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams).

During the winter solstice, his grandson Anjie came to visit. He has been exiled to Hoàng Châu for nearly two years now. The feelings of nostalgia for his hometown and the bitterness of being a stranger in a strange land are both intense. He was almost 46 years old at the time, and his hair was already turning white. In autumn, with white hair, the sounds of loneliness echoed everywhere. An old man and a young boy, in the remote mountains, life seemed like the endless waves of the Yangtze River; September marked the beginning of the flood season; and in late winter, the fog rolled in thick and heavy. Where does the intense passion of the soul end? Hungry rats scavenge in the quiet nights. Although nature is indifferent, as the years pass and the clouds drift, even on these steep mountains, one can sometimes hear the faint echoes of the long, lonely nights.

When Su Dongpo was 59 years old, he was exiled again, this time to Hainan.

It was a difficult and dangerous journey. Along the way, his poetry echoed with strange reverberations. Extreme pain mingled with an extraordinary spirit; yet it was inspired with sincere and distant hopes.

The journey to Hainan passed through Congzhou; the Cong River flowed through 18 rapids. On the 7th day of the 8th lunar month of that year, he entered Congzhou and passed by a raging waterfall, known as Huangkung (Terrifying) Waterfall. The name itself was enough to suggest its turbulent power. Amidst the terror of that foreign land, his poetry yearned for his hometown. In his hometown, there was a marketplace called Xihuan (Joyful). Xihuan and Huangkung, the emotions were the same, but the scenes were different. On one side were the wild and fierce features of a foreign land; on the other side was the deep affection of his homeland.

山憶喜歡勞遠夢
地名惶恐泣孤臣

*Sơn ức Hỉ hoan lao viễn mộng
Địa danh Hoàng khủng khắp cô thân*

Remembering Joyful Mountain Pass, I was burdened by distant dreams,
In the land of Terrifying Waterfall, the heavens and earth wept for this lonesome and helpless public servant.

I translate into Vietnamese poetry:

*Núi Hỉ Hoan, mộng đọa đày,
Thác cao Hoàng Khủng, trời mây khóc người.*

These two excerpts draw a parallel between Thầy's experiences while living in exile in Vạn Giã and those of the famous Chinese poet Su Dongpo. Both experienced feelings of loneliness, nostalgia, and a deep connection to nature.

10. Cuối năm

*Lận đận năm chầy¹³ nữa
Sinh nhai ngọn gió rừng
Hàng cà phơi nắng lụa
Ngân ngại tiếng tha phương.*

End of year

Another long year of hardship passing by,
Eking out a living amidst the forest winds,
Rows of eggplant bask in the golden sunlight,
I hesitate to call this life living in exile.

Explanation

This is the heartfelt confession of a person who, as the year ends, is struck by the question: Am I truly living in exile?

At the end of the year of the water tiger 1062, Su Dongpo wrote three poems to his brother, Su Zhe: 饋歲 (*Kuìsui*, qǔ tué, gifting the year, i.e., giving gifts at the year's end), 別歲 (*Biésui*, bié tué, sending off the year, i.e., inviting others to feast together on the year's end), and 守歲 (*Shǒusui*, thǔ tué, waiting for the year, i.e., staying awake through the

¹³ Although *chầy* means late, *năm chầy* means a slowly passing year, because it's uneventful or filled with hardship, e.g., in *Truyện Kiều*:

*Thương nhau xin nhớ lời nhau,
Năm chầy cũng chẳng đi đâu mà chầy*

If you love me, remember what we've said:
Even if the years crawl by, there's no need to rush, never too late.

night of the eve). Such are the customs in Western Shu, Su's homeland.

Below is the last verse of Su Dongpo's *Kuisui*:

亦欲舉鄉風; 獨倡無人和

Diệc dục cử hương phong; Độc xướng vô nhân họa

I too want to raise a cup in celebration of our hometown's customs; But drinking alone, there's no one to harmonize.

However, in his book, Thầy chooses to share his personal feelings with Su Dongpo by translating it as:

Quê cũ tình sâu đượm; Tình riêng nói với ai?

Though hometown love runs deep; To whom can I confide my heart?

And Thầy comments:

The old year is about to pass away, like a snake crawling into a hole. How can we catch it? Grasping its tail is useless. Days pass like a crawling snake; the longing there is truly cruel and harmful.

The crawling snake Thầy mentioned above is the very snake depicted in Su Dongpo's poem *Shǒusui*¹⁴.

¹⁴ 欲知垂盡歲，有似赴壑蛇
修鱗半已沒，去意誰能遮

Dục tri thùy tận tuế, Hữu tự phó hác xà
Tu lân bán dĩ một, Khứ ý thùy năng già

11. Dạ khúc

*Tiếng ai khóc trong đêm trường uất hận,
Lời ai ru trào máu lệ bi thương,
Hồn ai đó đôi tay gầy sò soạng,
Là hồn tôi tìm dấu cũ quê hương.*

*Ai tóc trắng đầu hiu trên đỉnh tuyết
Bước chập chờn heo hút giữa màn sương
Viên đá cuội mấy nghìn năm cô quạnh
Hồn tôi đâu trong dấu tích hoang đường?*

Serenade

Whose voice weeps in the long night, filled with bitter
resentment?

Whose words lull, filled with sorrowful tears?

Whose soul wanders, gaunt hands fumbling?

It is my soul, seeking traces of my lost homeland.

Whose white hair gleams, forlorn on the snowy peak,

With staggering steps, lost amidst the swirling mist?

A boulder, thousands of years alone, wonders,

Where is my soul, in this lost and desolate land?

Explanation

This poem explores themes of loss, longing, and isolation.

To know where the year's end lies? It's like a white snake slithering
into its hole.

Half its silvery scales have already disappeared inside, who could
possibly pull it back?

In the first stanza, Thày's voice is filled with a deep sense of sorrow and resentment, particularly toward the loss of his homeland. The imagery is powerful, evoking a sense of desolation and despair. The long night filled with bitterness suggests a prolonged period of mourning and anguish. The third line *whose soul wanders, gaunt hands fumbling* conveys a sense of aimlessness and confusion.

In the second stanza, Thày continues to explore the sorrow and resentment of his lost and desolate homeland, but this time through the lens of a boulder. The image of the white-haired figure standing on the snowy peak and staggering in the swirling mist is particularly poignant. This figure represents Thày, while his snowy and swirling background symbolizes his lost homeland.

Could the millennia of solitude endured by this ancient boulder mirror the four-thousand-year history of its homeland? If so, it stands as a silent sentinel, a stone witness to the nation's rise and fall. Why, then, does this once-proud land now lie lost and desolate? The boulder's enduring presence poses a poignant question, a silent cry echoing through the ages.

The poem's overall tone is one of melancholy and despair. However, there is also a sense of hope and yearning, as Thày continues to search for traces of his lost homeland. The poem's final question of the boulder, *where is my soul, in this lost and desolate land?* suggests a longing for connection and belonging to his homeland.

12. Đêm dài

*Canh khuya tiếng trùng rủ rĩ
Đêm dài để vọng huyền thiên
Tôi yêu bàn tay quỷ dị
Ẩn sâu trên nỗi ưu phiền*

*Bàn tay ửng hồng nỗi chết
Áo cơm rữa nát tinh thần
Tan đi hình hài cát bụi
Tan đi khổ nhục sinh tồn*

Long night

In the dead of night, the crickets whisper,
Their mournful song echoes through the long hours.
I love this ghostly hand,
That presses deeply on my sorrows.

This demonic hand flushed with the color of death,
Clothes and food corrode my soul,
If my body crumbles, dissolving into dust,
The pain of living would fade away.

Explanation

The images of the dead of night and the long hours emphasize the author's isolation. The crickets, often associated with loneliness, underscore this theme. The ghostly hand and the color of death suggest a deep-seated despair and a morbid fascination with mortality. The lines about clothes and food corroding his soul convey a sense of physical and emotional exhaustion. The final lines seem

to express a longing for an end to suffering and a morbid fascination with death as a form of escape.

Given Thầy's esteemed status as a Zen master and Bodhisattva, the aforementioned observation may be a misinterpretation. Perhaps a deeper understanding of his philosophical outlook on life and death might be gleaned from excerpts of these two essays, both written by him: the first written before the tumultuous year of 1975, and the second written in its aftermath:

(1) *Sau lưng ngôn ngữ của thi ca* (Behind the language of poetry), excerpted from the *Khởi Hành* (Departure) magazine, No. 104, 1971:

Two familiar images evoke the idea of transformation: the flowing river and the fire blazing on a mountaintop. Each image suggests a contrasting meaning: creation and destruction. Heaven and earth seem to speak for humanity, expressing the ultimate meaning of life in a unique language: the language of silence, or the voice of stillness.

(2) *Ngày mai tìm bóng tử thần mà yêu* (Seeking the shadow of death to love tomorrow), excerpted from the Overseas *Khởi Hành* magazine, No. 46, August 2000.

Haunted by darkness, involuntarily, one suddenly sees the void taking shape through the summon of life and death. It is necessary to die once within that summon, to look up and see a bare hand outstretched. Is it the hand of love, or the hand of death itself? And then, unexpectedly out of nowhere, one lives again and sees a world filled with the sound of singing.

Through these excerpts, Thầy believes that although each transformation image suggests a contrasting meaning: creation and destruction, at the end, nature rejuvenates, rebirth arrives and new life emerges. This is similar to a very concise and profound saying that comes from the Book of Changes (I-Ching): When it reaches an impasse, it transforms; when it transforms, it flows freely.

Also, in *Huyền thoại Duy-ma-cật* (Legends of Vimalakīrti), Thầy explains:

Even in suffering lies enlightenment, and even in the terrifying dangers of birth and death lies the peaceful nirvana. The rope that is mistaken for a snake is not destroyed to eliminate the illusion that causes fear. Beyond what is impermanent, perceived by our five senses, there exists no other realm of eternal truth, great bliss, or great self. This is the ultimate non-dual reality.

Therefore, in these verses,

Tan đi hình hài cát bụi
Tan đi khổ nhọc sinh tồn,

If my body crumbles, dissolving into dust,
The pain of living would fade away,

if we view this solely as a yearning for the dissolution of the physical self as an end to suffering, we may overlook the deeper philosophical and emotional complexities the speaker is expressing.

13. Đòi nô lệ

*Núi rừng những giấc mộng đen
Tóc em xõa thanh xuân còn bé bỏng
Trên đỉnh đá mây trời tơ lụa mỏng
Ta làm thân nô lệ nhọc nhằn*

Servitude

Mountains and forests slumber in dark dreams,
Her hair, a once-youthful cascade,
Now fades and tangles in sunlit streams.
On the peak, where clouds drift like silken thread,
Beneath a heavy yoke I toil, a weary slave.

Explanation

Most Venerable Thích Phước An revealed that this poem was composed by Most Venerable Tuệ Sỹ in the mountainous region of Vạn Giã, while gazing at the white clouds drifting across the rocks and mountain peaks.

The second verse, *her hair, a once-youthful cascade*, hints at a sense of isolation or a longing for something more than just the cascading hair of a girl in her youth. Could it be the image of his country that Thầy has personified in this poem? I add *now fades and tangles in sunlit streams* as I believe it is.

The poem seems to contrast the past beauty of his country with the present dark dreams. The dark dreams and the thin silk clouds on the peak of the Trường Sơn mountain range could suggest his spiritual or philosophical journeys.

14. Hạ sơn

*Ngày mai sư xuống núi
Áo mỏng sờn đôi vai
Chuỗi hạt mòn năm tháng
Hương trầm lỡ cuộc say*

*Bình minh sư xuống núi
Tóc trắng hờn sinh nhai
Phương đông mặt trời đỏ
Mùa hạ không mây bay*

*Ngày mai sư xuống núi
Phố thị bước đường cùng
Sư ho trong bóng tối
Điện Phật trầm mộng lung*

*Bình minh sư xuống núi
Khóe mắt còn rung rung
Vì sư yêu bóng tối
Ác mộng giữa đường rừng*

Mountain descending

Tomorrow, the monk will descend the mountain,
His worn-out robe frayed at the shoulders,
And his prayer beads bearing the marks of time.
Incense smoke will miss a rendezvous.

At dawn, the monk will descend the mountain,
With sulky gray hair, a life relinquished.
The eastern sky ablaze, a fiery red,
With no stray clouds marring the summer's sky.

Tomorrow, the monk will descend the mountain,
The city, his final hurdle.
As he coughs in the darkness,
Temple smoke drifts aimlessly.

At dawn, the monk descends the mountain,
With tears in the corners of his eyes,
Because he loves the darkness of the forests,
Where nightmares await him on his path.

Explanation

The monk's internal struggle is evident in the first three stanzas. He descends the mountain only in the last stanza.

In the first stanza, incense smoke will miss a rendezvous because the monk will miss his morning ritual, failing to light incense and recite scripture.

In the second stanza, the red sun in the east and the cloudless summer sky are signs of the challenges the monk will face when he descends the mountain.

In the third stanza, the incense smoke drifting aimlessly means an uncertain future will greet the monk.

In the fourth stanza, despite loving the darkness and the forest path, the monk still descends the mountain.

The repetition of the first verse in the first and the third stanzas, *Ngày mai sư xuống núi* (Tomorrow, the monk will descend the mountain), demonstrates that the monk is torn between the peace at his mountain retreat and the challenges of the world. Ultimately, his decision to descend

the mountain demonstrates a willingness to engage with life on a deeper level, even if it means facing uncertainty and hardship.

Therefore, the repetition of the first verse in the second and the fourth stanzas, *Bình minh sư xuống núi*, although identical in Vietnamese, conveys different meanings in English: In the second stanza, *at dawn, the monk will descend the mountain* and in the final stanza, *at dawn, the monk descends the mountain*.

This metaphor embodies the concept of *Engaged Monks*, exemplified by these two monks: Khuông Việt, advisor to King Đinh Tiên Hoàng (reign 968–979) and Vạn Hạnh, teacher of King Lý Thái Tổ (reign 1009–1028).

The monk in the poem, with tears in his eyes, descends the mountain, knowing nightmares await. He is Thầy himself.

In 1977, Thầy left his Vạn Giã retreat to descend the mountain. His voice against the Communist party's attempt to force the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam to join the Vietnamese Fatherland Front led to his arrest and being sent to re-education camp (a disguised form of prison) until 1981.

From 1981, he taught at Quảng Hương Già Lam monastery school in Saigon, but the school was forced to close down and he was arrested again in 1984. In a kangaroo court held in September 1988, he was sentenced to death. Due to international pressure, Hanoi commuted his sentence to 20 years of hard labor. Read more on pages 256 and 354.

15. Hoa rừng

*Em trải áo trên hoa rừng man dại
Để hoa rừng nước cuộn biết yêu nhau
Nhưng nước cuộn xóa đời ta trên bãi
Để hoa rừng phong nhụy với ngàn lau.*

Forest flower

She lays her dress upon the untamed forest flowers,
That the flowers and swirling waters might find love.
But swirling waters wash away my traces from the sands,
So that the forest flowers live in harmony with the reeds.

Explanation

The last verse has an unpopular word *phong nhụy* (*phong* = close, *nhụy* = stigma), which literally translates to close the stigma. Stigma is the part of a flower that receives the pollen. So, *phong nhụy* means to close the female part of the flower, preventing pollination.

Similar to the poem *Cây khô* (Withered tree), page 100, this poem also has two parts: The first two lines represent the action of a girl who wants to arrange nature's way into her own way, *để hoa rừng nước cuộn biết yêu nhau* (that the flowers and swirling waters might find love); while the last two lines represent Thầy's state of no-self, i.e., a state of profound peace and contentment, reminiscent of the Buddhist concept of nirvana, where the illusion of self is transcended (his traces are washed away) and interconnectedness with all things, organized in nature's way, *để hoa rừng phong nhụy với ngàn lau* (so that the

forest flowers live in harmony the reeds, as cross-pollination between different species is unnatural), is realized.

The word *phong nhụy* can be used to refer to a woman's virginity. In *The Tale of Kiều*, when Kiều laments about her loss of purity, she feels her purity has been compromised and can never be restored:

*Nghĩ rằng trong đạo vợ chồng,
Hoa thơm phong nhụy, trăng vò tròn gương.*

I believe that to her man,
A bride should bring the scent of a close bud, the shape of
a full moon.

(translated by Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông, quoted from
his bilingual book *The Tale of Kiều*)

Poet Bùi Giáng also had a poem employing the word *phong nhụy*. It was the poem *Impressions*, which he wrote in the appendix of the novel *La porte étroite* (The narrow gate) by André Gide, a work that he translated into Vietnamese as *Khung cửa hẹp*. Below are two verses of this poem:

*Em về rủ¹⁵ áo mù sa
Trút quần phong nhụy cho tà huy bay.*

She returns, disrobing in the misty rain,
Shedding her skirt, letting her stigma fly in the setting
sun.

¹⁵ While other versions utilize the word *rủ* (to fall limp or to drop dead) and *giũ* (to shake), Thầy Tuệ Sỹ uniquely employs *rủ* (to gently drop down) to convey a sense of deliberate and gentle descent.

16. Luống cải chân đồi

*Vác cuốc xuống chân đồi
Nắng mai hồng đôi môi
Nghêng vai hờn tuổi trẻ
Máu đỏ rợn bên trời*

*Sức yếu lòng đất cứng
Sinh nhai tủi nhục nhiều
Thân gầy tay cuốc nặng
Mắt lệ nóng tình yêu*

*Thầy tóc trắng bơ vơ
Con mắt xanh đợi chờ
Đèn khuya cùng lẻ bóng
Khúc ruột rời đường tơ*

*Tuổi Thầy trông cánh hạc
Cánh hạc vẫn chốc mòn
Mắt con mờ ráng đỏ
Ráng đỏ lệ lưng tròn*

*Chân đồi xanh luống cải
Đời ta xanh viễn phương
Sống chết một câu hỏi
Sinh nhai lỡ độ đường.*

Vegetable beds at the foothill

With hoe upon my shoulders, I descend the hill,
The morning sun paints my lips a fiery red.
My shoulders slump, longing for my youthful days,
The sky bleeds crimson, a stark contrast overhead.

Weak arms struggle against the earth's hard soil,
My livelihood, a bitter struggle.
The slender body dwarfed by the hoe's heavy weight,
Yet the love for this land warms my tear-filled eyes.

Father, with white hair, lost in thought,
Child, with bloodshot eyes, waiting in vain.
Midnight lamp, casting a solitary shadow,
Our broken hearts were tangled by twisted threads.

Father, lonely in his golden years,
Like a forgotten sack on the shelf.
My eyes grow dim, reflecting the red sunset's glow,
The sunset's red bleeds into my tears.

The foothill now adorned with vibrant green vegetable
beds,
But my life stretches far beyond this field,
My struggle for survival has overshadowed,
The weighty question of life and death.

Explanation

Thầy wrote this poem in late 1975, probably while he was in Vạn Giã. Therefore, the context of this poem's creation is very likely a gentle voice for the fate of our country after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Those who remained in Vietnam at that time also had thin bodies and heavy hoes in the New Economic Zones (NEZ), while their elderly parents had white hair and were left alone in the city, clinging to life there, ironically, to support those who were living in exile at these NEZ.

Understanding it this way, this poem is not written by Thầy to lament about his own circumstances, but rather for us, those whose voices were silenced after 1975, those who were sent to the NEZ, leaving their elderly parents behind.

In the third stanza, my heart was broken by these verses:

*Thầy, tóc trắng bơ vơ
Con, mắt xanh đợi chờ*

I translate, keeping their mirrored chiasmic structure,

Father, with white hair, lost in thought
Child, with bloodshot eyes, waiting in vain.

In the fourth stanza:

*Tuổi Thầy trông cánh hạc
Cánh hạc vẫn chốc mòn,*

the word *cánh hạc* is used to refer to elderly people ¹⁶.

¹⁶ In an essay titled *Tuổi hạc* (The golden age) published on the website of poet Du Tử Lê, writer Duy Lam delves into the reasons why a human's old age is often likened to the crane.

Interestingly, cranes are not the longest-living birds. Compared to the four sacred animals (TN: dragon, unicorn, turtle and phoenix), the crane's lifespan is relatively short. Turtles have been scientifically documented to live nearly two centuries. But it wouldn't sound pleasant or poetic to compare a person's lifespan to that of a turtle. Cranes, with their various species and graceful appearance, have captured the imagination of ancient people. Their ability to soar high in the sky, their long necks and legs, and their clear calls have made them symbols of elegance and freedom ... Perhaps, because humans are often confined to small spaces and

The word *tuổi hạc* was also used by poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822–1888) in his famous work *Lục Vân Tiên*:

*Thương cha tuổi hạc đã cao
E khi ấm lạnh buổi nào biết đâu.*

Loving my father, in his golden age,
I fear the cold and warmth, not knowing what the days
will bring.

And the word *chốc mòn* (*chốc* = impetiginous, *mòn* = eye pouches) refers to sore, red eyes, implying waiting in vain for a long time.

The word *chốc mòn* also appears in *The Tale of Kiều*:

*Nước non cách mấy buổi buông thêu
Những là trộm nhớ thâm yêu chốc mòn.*

But, as if hills and streams had barred the way,
He had long sighed and dreamt of them, in vain.
(translated by Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông in *The Tale of Kiều*)

dream of soaring to great heights, they have projected their aspirations onto the crane.

Despite this, the direct connection between the crane and human's old age remains unclear ... Perhaps the association between cranes and old age stems from the white feathers on the heads of some crane species, which may have reminded people of elderly individuals with white hair. This image, combined with the crane's ability to fly high, may have led to the idea of elderly people ascending to heaven on the backs of cranes. This poetic image was often used to depict the peaceful passing of the elderly, who were highly respected in ancient societies for their wisdom.

In these two verses, Nguyễn Du painted a picture of Kim Trọng's secret but enduring and ceaseless love for the two Kiều sisters that even the distance separating him from them could not extinguish it.

To translate *chốc mòng*, I choose the English idiom "on the shelf", which *Cambridge* defines as "not noticed or not used".

The African American poet Maya Angelou, who was invited by President Clinton to read her poetry at his inauguration in 1993, in her poem *On Aging*, writes *like a sack left on the shelf*¹⁷ to refer to lonely, forgotten elderly people.

¹⁷ *On Aging*, by Maya Angelou:

*When you see me sitting quietly
Like a sack left on the shelf,
Don't think I need your chattering.
I'm listening to myself.
Hold! Stop! Don't pity me!
Hold! Stop your sympathy!
Understanding if you got it,
Otherwise, I'll do without it!
When my bones are stiff and aching,
And my feet won't climb the stair,
I will only ask one favor:
Don't bring me no rocking chair.
When you see me walking, stumbling,
Don't study and get it wrong.
'Cause tired don't mean lazy
And every goodbye ain't gone.
I'm the same person I was back then,
A little less hair, a little less chin,
A lot less lungs and much less wind.
But ain't I lucky I can still breathe in.*

Going back to these two verses in Thầy's poem:

*Tuổi Thầy trông cánh hạc
Cánh hạc vẫn chốc mòn,*

I translate as follows,

Father, lonely in his golden years,
Like a forgotten sack on the shelf.

But in *Dreaming the Mountain*, professor Nguyễn Bá Chung and poet Martha Collins translate these verses as:

My father dreams a crane's wings
The crane is dreaming too.

Crane's wings for *cánh hạc* and dreaming for *chốc mòn*,
it's like they translated with a potato!

17. Một bóng trăng gầy

*Nằm ôm một bóng trăng gầy
Vai nghiêng túi nhục hờn lay mộng tàn
Rừng sâu mấy nhịp Trường sơn
Biển đông mấy độ triều dâng ráng hồng*

*Khóc tràn cuộc lữ long đong
Người đi còn một tấm lòng đơn sơ?
Máu người pha đỏ sắc cờ
Phương trời xẻ nửa giấc mơ dị thường*

*Quân hành đạp nát tà dương
Khúc ca du tử bã bàng trên môi
Tình chung không trả thù người
Khuất thân cho trọn một đời luân lưu*

A slender moonbeam

I lie embracing a slender moonbeam,
Shoulders slumped, grief and resentment slay my dreams.
Deep forests roar with Trường Sơn's thunderous beat,
Countless crimson tidal waves rise in the Eastern Sea.

While blood stains the flag a gruesome red,
And the dream of a distant realm is irrevocably severed,
As tears flood my long and lonely journey,
Can this traveler still possess a simple heart?

As the setting sun is crushed by the marching armies,
The wanderer's song dies on my lips.
Unrequited love seeks no vengeance,
I'll retreat away, to complete a life of endless wandering.

Explanation

The poem evokes a powerful sense of loss and disillusionment while simultaneously exploring the enduring human capacity for hope and resilience. It raises profound questions about the nature of war and its impact on individuals. However, the flow of the poem's themes of grief is clearer by re-arranging the verses in the second stanza this way:

*Máu người pha đỏ sắc cờ
Phương trời xẻ nửa giấc mơ dị thường
Khóc tràn cuộc lữ long đong
Người đi còn một tấm lòng đơn sơ?*

While blood stains the flag a gruesome red,
And the dream of a distant realm is irrevocably severed,
As tears flood my long and lonely journey,
Can this traveler still possess a simple heart?

In the essay *Tuệ Sỹ, thái độ của nhà sư nhập thế* (Tuệ Sỹ, the attitude of an engaged monk), Most Venerable Thích Nguyên Siêu writes:

Spiritual practice seeks liberation, but this liberation does not mean abandoning the world. Spiritual practice begins in the world, and it is also from the world that one attains enlightenment. Thầy spreads the spirit of enlightenment, nourishing and brightening the world.

This engaged attitude permeates all of Thầy's poetry and writings, as well as his daily life. He lived a simple life in a small room, surrounded by bookshelves, spending his days translating and writing. At night, he slept on his

work chair, without a bed or hammock, not concerned with material comforts. This was because he saw the suffering and hardship of the impoverished people, and he saw the poverty and backwardness of the country, realizing that he too was living in this impoverished and backward homeland.

But when the dream of the Trường Sơn failed, Thầy retreated away, focusing on translating scriptures, placing his hopes in future generations.

Most Venerable Thích Nguyên Siêu continued:

He translated the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (kinh A-hàm, in Vietnamese), which shows us that the Buddha's teachings build a life of true happiness in families, nations, and societies. This is considered a positive engaged spirit. It's about the happy life of Buddhist lay people in the present and future. A very humanistic and progressive view based on compassion for fellow human beings, and the interconnectedness of individuals and the human community worldwide. It's about the good relationships between parents and children, teachers and students, friends and neighbors, employers and employees. ...

The second engaged spirit is his translations of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* and *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra*. These two sūtras exemplify the lay Bodhisattva practices of *Vimalakīrti* and *Śrīmālā* *Siṃhanāda*. Here, the engaged spirit is expanded, completely selfless, breaking away from delusions and attachments, to directly advance to the realm of the Buddha nature.

18. Một thoáng chiêm bao

*Em mắt biếc ngậy thơ ngày hội lớn
Khỏe môi cười nắng quái cũng gây hao
Như cò trắng giữa đồng xanh bất tận
Ta yêu người vì khoảnh khắc chiêm bao*

A dreamlike moment

Your innocent green eyes, so captivating at the grand festival,
Your smiling lips, soothing the summer's blistering heat,
You were like a white egret amidst a vast green field.
I fell in love with you because of that dream-like fleeting moment.

Explanation

In the essay *Đọc thơ Tuệ Sỹ* (Reading Tuệ Sỹ's poems), the poet Vĩnh Hảo comments on this poem:

Describing a beautiful woman with just a few words. Bright eyes: the window to the soul. Naive: the soul. Just by looking at the window, one can see what lies deep within. The bright green window, as green as jade, reveals a pure and innocent soul. Moreover, the naive quality is further defined by the surrounding scene, by the bustling crowd of a grand day; through this, the poet sees “you” as strangely naive amidst the crowded festivities. What kind of festival is it? It must be a great festival at a pagoda for the bright eyes to connect with the poet's gaze. The Lantern Festival? Vesak? No. These festivals are very joyful. The weather is warm, and

people are excited and happy. It's not suitable for one's heart to suddenly feel a vague sadness or to suddenly love someone so deeply.

It must be the Ullambana Festival ¹⁸ (TN: Ullambana is a Sanskrit word. Yulan in Chinese or Vu-Lan in

¹⁸ The Ullambana Festival, in essence, originated from the story of Maudgalyāyana, a devout Buddhist monk who sought to rescue his mother from hell.

According to the Ullambana Sūtra, also known as the Yulanpen Sūtra or kinh Vu Lan Bòn in Vietnamese, during the time of the Buddha Śākyamuni, Maudgalyāyana, one of the ten great disciples of the Buddha, discovered through his meditative powers that his mother, who had committed severe bad karma, had been reborn in hell, enduring hunger and thirst. When he learnt that her spirit was being subjected to hunger and misery, he decided to go to the netherworld to relieve her of her suffering.

Once he went there, Maudgalyāyana offered her a bowl of rice. Due to her greed, she was so afraid that others would steal her food that she covered the bowl with her hand, preventing others from seeing it, while using her other hand to scoop up the rice. However, the rice turned to pieces of smoldering charcoal that she couldn't eat.

Maudgalyāyana was distressed. He returned to the Buddha and sought his advice. The Buddha told him that his mother's offences were deep-rooted and that he alone would not be able to ease her sufferings. He should wait until the 15th day of the seventh lunar month, when the monks complete their retreat, to seek the power of the monks and their prayers.

Following the Buddha's teachings, on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month, Maudgalyāyana prepared offerings and food to present to the monks and people in the ten directions, i.e., all the eight cardinal and ordinal (N, S, E, W, NE, SE, NW, SW) directions plus the upward (heavenly realms) and the downward (underworld realms) directions. Not only did he help his mother escape from suffering, but many others on that day were also freed from hell.

Vietnamese, it's a significant Buddhist holiday, celebrated on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month). Autumn. The wind is cool. It's a bit sad. Although it's also a big festival, it's not as lively and joyful as spring or Vesak. On that day, children who are far from home will miss their parents more; monks will feel more sentimental.

In the temple courtyard, the sounds of drums, bells, and wooden clappers mingled with the rhythmic chanting of the monks, as thousands of people gathered around the altar, waiting for the moment to scramble for the food offerings to hungry ghosts. And amidst this bustling festival, you stood out with your surprised eyes, curiously observing the scene. And then, suddenly, you caught sight of the poet-monk.

Khóe môi cười nắng quái cũng gầy hao

Your smiling lips, soothing the summer's blistering heat.

The corners of your mouth curved into a mischievous smile, softening the harsh sunlight. The sun no longer felt as intense. The sunlight suddenly softened. Softened not because of the autumn sun, but because of a smiling corner of a mouth. The smiling corner made the harsh sunlight grow thin and less intense. In other words, the scorching sun suddenly became gentle when you smiled.

The day on which Maudgalyāyana performed the act of compassionate filial conduct and brought salvation to his foreparents was celebrated as Ullambana. It is observed on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month.

What kind of smile was that? Were you smiling at someone? At friends? At family? Or at the poet-monk? Perhaps you were smiling at the monk. You smiled as a greeting. But how could your smile make the harsh sunlight grow thin? How could your smile make the poet's heart feel so wistful and gentle that he couldn't help but sing?

*Em mắt biếc ngây thơ ngày hội lớn
Khóe môi cười nắng quái cũng gầy hao*

Your innocent blue eyes, so captivating at the grand festival,
Your smiling lips, soothing the summer's blistering heat.

It wasn't over. At that very moment, in the midst of that bustling festival, you suddenly transformed into a white egret in a green field. Clearly, you were standing among a crowd of people, yet the poet saw you differently. He saw you stand out, not like a white egret among a flock of black crows, nor like a white egret among a flock of chickens and ducks, but standing in a vast green field. All the people around you seemed to disappear, to become non-existent. Only you, in your white dress, innocent and with bright eyes, stood in the vast expanse of heaven and earth.

Như cò trắng giữa đồng xanh bát tậ

You were like a white egret amidst a vast green field.

With bright eyes, naive, in a white áo dài (another white dress!), she stood silently, offering a smile amidst the

bustling crowd. Oh, so beautiful, how could one's heart not be filled with longing and excitement; how could this not become a poem? Therefore:

Ta yêu người

I fell in love with you.

Don't rush, let's stop there, just pause. Let's not read the last few words. Let's leave the poem unfinished. Let's linger here for a moment. And let's borrow the poet's words to express our ordinary way of loving:

*Em mắt biếc ngây thơ ngày hội lớn
Khóe môi cười nắng quai cũng gây hao
Như cò trắng giữa đồng xanh bát tạn
Ta yêu người.*

Your innocent blue eyes, so captivating at the grand festival,

Your smiling lips, soothing the summer's blistering heat,

You were like a white egret amidst a vast green field.

I fell in love with you.

I fell in love with you. Full stop. Then we begin the journey of conquest, of possession. Each person's journey is unique, there's no need to say it. Just: I love you, and that's it.

The sequence of love for ordinary people would end like that. Seeing you with bright eyes, pure, gentle, smiling so charmingly, standing out among the other ordinary people, ... we must fall in love. Yes, I love you, I love

her, he loves you. It must be like that. Our poem, no matter the rhyme or form, we wouldn't want to cut it off there, it would be too abrupt; but in real life, we cut it off abruptly, there's no need to think about it anymore. Beautiful, charming like that, then ... love! The poem ends with a very realistic, very common, very human conclusion.

But the poet-monk's poem continues:

Ta yêu người vì khoảnh khắc chiêm bao

I fell in love with you because of that dream-like fleeting moment.

It's still love, but the love has been elevated. From the ordinary love of an artist for beauty, it transforms into the love of a sage for the true nature of humanity and a suffering world.

The reason for loving her is affirmed. It's not because of her beauty, her innocent purity, or the graceful slenderness of a white-clad angel, but rather because of the fragile, easily broken nature of that white color. All beauty is merely illusory and transient. Yet, it is precisely because of this illusory transience that everything becomes beautiful.

It's all contained within a dreamlike moment. This very dreamlike moment upends everything that seemed so identical to the worldly experiences that preceded it. The first three lines describe the beauty of a muse in a white dress. Exceedingly lovely. It perfectly aligns with our emotions.

But in the fourth line, the poet suddenly changes tone and speaks with the awakened voice of a sage. This sage doesn't say "I love you" like we do, but says "I love people". It's the pronunciation of someone who stands outside, above, looking down on the temporary, illusory world. In the first line, the sweet endearment "you" is used in the style of a poet, but suddenly it changes to the solemn, lofty tone of a master, a practitioner on the precipice of life and death, addressing people as "people"! And "people" here doesn't necessarily refer solely to "you." It could refer to all suffering beings in the world. In this way, by looking at "you," he sees everything. You are the embodiment of all sentient beings, of dreams and illusions. Changing the pronoun, changing the address, is to reverse one's perspective and stance towards the object of their existence.

A moment of passion, a glittering moment of overflowing poetic love ... suddenly turns into a dream. Love is also a dream. Beauty is also a dream. Even the most poetic, dreamlike moment is a dream. ...

Therefore, don't say that sages are heartless. Without a heart, how can they save people, save the world? They love and strive to elevate that love. They perceive beauty not only through concrete forms but also perceive the eternal beauty within each momentary dream. No one can love and express it in such beautiful words and songs as poets, but no one can love and perceive the object of their love as deeply and fundamentally as sages. This love is as fleeting as a dream but also immortal, because it is awakened by a moment and fully experienced within that very moment.

The poem is unexpectedly beautiful. If you don't know love, you can't write such a beautiful poem.

Poet Vĩnh Hảo believes that the grand festival Thầy mentioned in this poem is the Ullambana festival, but Doctor Đỗ Hồng Ngọc wonders whether it is the day the Buddha attained enlightenment?

In his essay *Chén trà lão Triệu mà chưng hoa ngàn* (Old Zhao's teacup but filled with forest flowers), Doctor Đỗ writes:

Reading Tuệ Sỹ's poetry, I often ponder why his poems frequently mention the great gathering day, namely the grand festival in this poem and the gathering in the celestial realm in the poem *Cung trời cũ* (Celestial realm of a previous lifetime), page 29?

*Đôi mắt ướt tuổi vàng cung trời hội cũ,
Áo màu xanh không xanh mãi trên đồi hoang*

Eyes wet with golden memories of our gathering in the celestial realm of a previous lifetime,
The green shirt is no longer green on the barren hill.

And in the poem *Một thoáng chiêm bao* (A dreamlike moment)

*Em mắt biếc ngây thơ ngày hội lớn
Khóe môi cười nắng quái cũng gây hao*

Your innocent green eyes, so captivating at the grand festival,
Your smiling lips, soothing the summer's blistering heat,

Where is that grand festival? Where is that gathering in the celestial realm? It sounds so familiar!

Ah, could it be that day, under the Bodhi tree where the Buddha attained enlightenment at the First Assembly of the Avataṃsaka (TN: *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* or *Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra*, kinh Hoa Nghiêm in Vietnamese, has been described by the translator Thomas Cleary as “the most grandiose, the most comprehensive, and the most beautifully arrayed of the Buddhist scriptures”. The Avataṃsaka Sūtra describes a cosmos of infinite realms upon realms filled with an immeasurable number of Buddhas), a vast flower world opened up, the Tathāgata appeared as an innocent Buddha with blue eyes, smiling faintly ... like when he was a 7 or 8-year-old boy watching the Royal Ploughing Ceremony (TN: an ancient royal rite held in many Asian countries to mark the traditional beginning of the rice growing season) and entered a meditative state without realizing it? And that gathering in the celestial realm perhaps is the ninth assembly in the Jeda forest ¹⁹, when

¹⁹ According to the Great Master Zhiyi (538–597), after attaining the supreme enlightenment of Buddhahood, Śākyamuni Buddha entered the great meditative state of Śāgāramudrāsamādhi (the Ocean-seal meditative state), where the Buddha’s mind is free from all arising thoughts.

Śāgāramudrā literally means ocean-seal, which is a metaphorical term used to describe the image of a perfectly still and peaceful ocean with no waves or wind and expounded the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* in his first 9 assemblies.

In the Buddha’s ninth assembly, which took place in the Jeda forest, Sudhana recalled his long quest to enlightenment. His final encounter is with Bodhisattva Samant Bhadra who instructs Sudhana that the

people entered the dharma realm, embarked on a journey, to see the dharma realm's substantial nature and casually entered the marketplace?

Reflecting on *Buổi chiều nắng hạ đọc thơ Tuệ Sỹ* (A summer afternoon spent reading Tuệ Sỹ's poetry), professor Phạm Công Thiện believes that the dreamlike moment suggests a Buddhist concept of the impermanent nature of existence and this awakening leads to a selfless desire to help others. It's selfless, because love and compassion are seen as intrinsic and pure, unaffected by the transitory nature of existence.

Love is truly love, and human compassion is truly human compassion, because of the direct realization that all is but a dreamlike moment. Each time one directly perceives that they themselves are also a dreamlike moment, a sudden and complete awakening arises. From that moment, Tuệ Sỹ rises and throws himself into the pure action of a Bodhisattva to liberate people from all the turmoil of life. Tuệ Sỹ was ready to go to prison to transform his consciousness, potentially shattering all the prisons of human existence.

When introducing his book *Khoảnh khắc chiêm bao* (A moment of dream), Nguyễn Giác (poet Phan Tấn Hải) comments about this poem as follows:

only purpose of wisdom is that it should be practiced and shared for the benefit of all sentient beings. The ultimate meaning of enlightenment is not to seek enlightenment for himself, but to share it with others, to make other people's lives more meaningful. His story appears in chapter 39, *Entering the Dharma Realm*, of the Sūtra.

The past doesn't exist, for it's only a memory in the mind. The future doesn't exist, for it's only a projection of the mind. The present doesn't exist, for it's only a moment between two non-existent times, and also because no one can grasp it. But pain has manifested in this realm, regardless of the true nature being selfless. These words are written from those moments of dream.

However, some argue that the grand festival in this poem refers to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. This date marks Victory Day for millions of Vietnamese people. This interpretation is supported by the fleeting, short-lived, dream-like moment of the poet's love affair.

Ta yêu người vì khoảnh khắc chiêm bao.

I fell in love with you because of that dream-like fleeting moment.

This ephemeral quality mirrors the quickly fading hopes for a unified, independent, free, and happy Vietnam under communist rule as symbolized by the white egret, often associated with hope and freedom.

19. Ngồi giữa bãi tha ma

I

*Lửa đã tắt từ buổi đầu sáng thế
Một kiếp người ray rứt bụi tro bay
Tôi ngồi mãi giữa tha ma mộ địa
Lạnh trắng ngà lụa trắng trải ngàn cây
Khuya lành lạnh gió vào run bóng quỷ
Quỷ run run hôn mãi đóng xương gầy
Khóc năn nỉ sao hình hài chưa rã
Để hồn tan theo đầu lửa ma trôi
Khi tâm tư chưa là gỗ mục
Lòng đất đen còn giọt máu xanh ngồi.*

II

*Ta làm kẻ rong chơi từ hỗn độn
Treo gót hài trên mái tóc vào thu
Ngồi đếm mộng đi qua từng đợt lá
Rủ mi dài trên bến cỏ sương khô
Vì lâu lỏng mười năm dài gối mộng
Ôm tình già quên băng tuôi hoàng hôn
Một buổi sáng nghe chim trời đổi giọng
Người thấy ta xô dạt bóng thiên thân
Đất đỏ thắm nên lòng người hăm hở
Đá chưa mòn nên lòng dạ trơ vơ
Thành phố nọ bởi mưa phùn nắng quái
Nên mười năm quên hết mộng đợi chờ.*

III

*Cầm lòng lại dấu chân ngày biệt xứ,
Cuộc buồn vui đâu hẹn giữa vô cùng.*

*Bờ bến lạ biết đâu mòn cuộc lữ
Để ta về uống cạn nét thu phong
Như cánh hải âu cuối trời biển lộng
Bồng bênh bay theo cánh mỏng ngàn đời
Chạnh nhớ người xưa miền nguyệt ẩn
Thôi một lần thương gửi giữa mênh mông
Chiều lắng đọng thên thang ghềnh đá dựng
Những nỗi buồn nhân thế cũng phôi pha,
Mầu nhiệm nào đằng sau bao hủy diệt
Mà nụ hồng vừa nở thắm ven khe.
Khấp cả chốn đâu chẳng là tịnh độ,
Vô sự một đời trắc trở gì đâu,
Không phiền trước mong cầu chi giải thoát,
Cứ thong dong như nước chảy qua cầu.
Tì độ biết buồn câu sinh tử,
Bỏ nhà đi một thoáng riêng mình,
Mẹ già thôi khóc cho thân phụ,
Lại khóc cho đời ta phiêu linh.
Nhớ mẹ một lần trong muôn một,
Thương em biết vậy chẳng gì hơn,
Suối trắng về tắm bên đồi lạ,
Chiều thu sang hải đảo xanh rờn.*

IV

*Một kiếp sống, một đoạn đường lây lát
Một đêm dài nghe thác đổ trên cao
Ta bước vội qua dòng sông biển biệt
Đợi mưa dầm trong cánh bướm xôn xao
Một buổi sáng mắt bỗng đầy quá khứ
Đường âm u nối lại mấy tiền thân
Ta đứng mãi trên suối ngàn vĩnh viễn
Mộng vô thường máu đỏ giữa hoàng hôn.*

Sitting in the middle of a graveyard

I

The primal flame has long been extinguished,
A human life, a lifetime of torment, turns to ashes.
I sit forever amidst the ghosts and graves,
Cold, ivory moonlight shrouds the forest.

The night wind shivers, trembling the ghosts,
Who endlessly kiss piles of thin bones.
They cry and plead for their bodies to disintegrate,
So that their souls can dissipate into will-of-the-wisps.

When the heart is not yet rotten wood,
A drop of green blood still gleams in the black earth.

II

I've been a wanderer since the dawn of time,
Hanging my shoes over my silvered head,
Sitting and counting my dreams among autumn leaves,
Drooping my long lashes on frosted grass.

For ten long years, I've wandered aimlessly,
Embracing past loves, forgetting my twilight years.
One morning, the birdsong shifted,
I felt adrift, free from angelic illusions.

Crimson earth stirs restless hearts,
Unworn stone, a mirror to empty souls.
This city of fickle rain and fading sun,
Has forgotten ten long years of yearning.

III

I've kept my emotions since leaving home,
My joys and sorrows, endless and uncharted.
On foreign shores, who knows when the journey ends,
To return and savor the essence of autumn?

Like seagulls soaring on the ocean's breast,
Floating on thin wings into eternity.
I suddenly remember my forgotten lovers in moonless
lands,
Stop! No more of that wistful boundless yearning.

As evening settles on the rugged shore,
Earthly sorrows begin to fade.
What miracles lie hidden in destruction's wake,
As roses bloom anew on the creek?

As every place can be a Pure Land,
A worry-free life knows no crisis.
Why seek Enlightenment, when worry-free?
Just drift along like water flowing beneath the bridge.

Since I knew the sorrow of life and death,
I left my home to find my way.
My aging mother once wept for my father's loss,
Now weeps for her wandering child.
Though far away, I still miss her,
And my sister, too, both hold a deep place in my heart.

I bathe in the moonlit stream by a foreign hill at night,
A green island beckons in the autumn light.

IV

A lifetime struggling on a stretch of road,
A long night spent listening to the waterfall,
I hurry across the desolate river,
Awaiting the drenching rain amidst the bustling butterfly
wings.

One morning, my eyes are flooded with memories of the
past,
Shadows of former lives linger on hidden paths.
I stand forever by the eternal forest stream.
Impermanent dreams, stained with red blood at nightfall.

Explanation

In the context of the 50th anniversary of Tuệ Sỹ's birthday, reflecting on *Buổi chiều nắng hạ đọc thơ Tuệ Sỹ* (A summer afternoon spent reading Tuệ Sỹ's poetry), professor Phạm Công Thiện writes about the first stanza:

Even in the face of immense suffering and deprivation in prison, the brilliant Zen master Tuệ Sỹ remained unwavering. His spirit soared as high and mighty as the Trường Sơn mountains, a symbol of unwavering hope that the poet Tuệ Sỹ had always revered. Through his heroic efforts, he paved the way for the liberation of his homeland from the communist regime, a regime he aptly described as a graveyard of ghosts.

Let us now listen to Tuệ Sỹ's poem *Ngồi giữa bãi tha ma* (Sitting in the middle of a graveyard):

Lửa đã tắt từ buổi đầu sáng thế

*Một kiếp người ray rút bụi tro bay
Tôi ngồi mãi giữa tha ma mộ địa
Lạnh trắng ngà lụa trắng trải ngàn cây*

The primal flame has long been extinguished,
A human life, a lifetime of torment, turns to ashes.
I sit forever amidst the ghosts and graves,
Cold, ivory moonlight shrouds the forest.

These next four lines encapsulate the desolate world of contemporary Communist Vietnam:

*Khuya lành lạnh gió vào run bóng quỷ
Quỷ run run hôn mãi đống xương gầy
Khóc năn nỉ sao hình hài chưa rã
Để hồn tan theo đầu lửa ma trôi*

The night wind shivers, trembling the ghosts,
Who endlessly kiss piles of thin bones.
They cry and plead for their bodies to disintegrate,
So that their souls can dissipate into will-of-the-wisps.

The final two lines reveal an unwavering will, a fiery determination to burn away the rot of a degenerate consciousness.

*Khi tâm tư chưa là gỗ mục
Lòng đất đen còn giọt máu xanh ngời*

When the heart is not yet rotten wood,
A drop of green blood still gleams in the black earth.

I believe that in these two aforementioned lines, regardless of what he had been through, Thầy did not give up his hope for a free and democratic Vietnam.

In analyzing this poem, I find that it seems to explore themes of existentialism, the fleeting nature of life, and the human search for meaning and purpose. There is a strong emphasis on isolation, loss, and the passage of time.

In the first stanza, Thầy seems to be haunted by the past and the futility of existence. The imagery of the graveyard and the crying ghosts is particularly evocative.

In the second stanza, the contrast between the crimson earth and the unworn stone suggests a disconnect between the natural world and human emotions. I wonder what message Thầy has hidden in these verses:

*Thành phố nọ bởi mưa phùn nắng quai
Nên mười năm quên hết mộng đợi chờ*

This city of fickle rain and fading sun,
Has forgotten ten long years of yearning.

In the third stanza, Thầy's experiences as an expatriate and the longing for home are explored. The imagery of the raging ocean and the floating clouds conveys a sense of uncertainty and the passage of time.

In the final stanza, Thầy reflects on a lifetime of wandering and the interconnectedness of past lives. The imagery of the eternal forest stream and the red blood suggests a cyclical nature to existence.

Overall, this poem explores themes of isolation, loss, and the search for meaning in a world that is often chaotic and unpredictable.

In terms of Zen concepts contained in this poem, the following two lines:

*Không phiền trước mong cầu chi giải thoát,
Cứ thong dong như nước chảy qua cầu*

Why seek Enlightenment, when worry-free?
Just drift along like water flowing beneath the bridge.

also agree with Zen Masters Baizhang Huaihai and Zhaozhou Congshen's instructions ²⁰.

²⁰ His disciples asked Master Baizhang Huaihai (720–814):

- How does one attain great nirvana?
- Don't create the karma of birth and death, replied the Master.
- What creates the karma of birth and death?
- Seeking great nirvana, eliminating defilements, achieving purity, believing in attainment and realization, not escaping conceptual limitations, this is creating the karma of birth and death.
- How can one be liberated?
- If one is initially free from afflictions, what is there to seek liberation from? Following one's desires, going with one's preferences, without any mixed thoughts, this is the supreme path.

Zen Master Zhaozhou Congshen (778–897) also taught: "Bodhi and nirvana are all like tight-fitting garments. They can also be considered afflictions".

20. Nhớ con đường thơm ngọt môi em

*Tóc em tung bay sương chiều khói biếc
Đệt tơ trời thành khúc hát băng khuâng
Tình hay mộng khi Trường Sơn xa hút
Đến bao giờ mây trắng gửi tin sang*

*Hồn tôi đi trong rừng lang thang
Vọng lời ru từ ánh trăng tàn
Mắt em nhỏ ngại ngừng song cửa
Nghe tình ca trên giọt sương tan*

*Bóng tôi xa đêm dài phố thị
Nhớ con đường thơm ngọt môi em
Ơi là máu, tui hồn nô lệ
Bóng tôi mờ suối nhỏ đêm đêm*

*Gót chân em nắng vàng xua viễn phố
Những ngón hồng ngơ ngác giữa đường chim
Ơi ta nhớ như đêm dài thương cổ
Sợi tóc mềm lơ nhịp hát trong tim*

Longing for the streets where her lips tasted sweet and fragrant

Her hair, fluttering in afternoon mist and blue smoke,
Weaving heavenly threads into a pensive song,
As Trường Sơn is far away, is she awake or dreaming,
To receive the news brought in by the white cloud?

My soul wanders lost in the forest's expanse,
Echoing lullabies from the fading moon's glow,

Her shy eyes peering through the windowpane,
Hearing love's melody on melting dewdrops.

While my shadow fades in the city's long night,
Longing for the streets where her lips tasted sweet and
fragrant,
Oh! now on these streets, blood, suffering, and slavery
bind,
My shadow fades away in the stream night after night.

As the yellow sunlight chased her heels to a distant place,
Her rosy toes, once innocent, now lost in the birds' path.
Oh, I will never forget those immemorial long nights,
Her soft hair slowed the lingering melody in my heart.

Explanation

In *Thơ tình Tuệ Sĩ* (Tuệ Sĩ's love poems), poet Vĩnh Đào expresses his deep impressions about this poem:

Like other love poems in the collection *Giấc mơ Trường Sơn* (Dreams on the peak of Trường Sơn), this poem expresses the sentiments of an author who lived in the forest, specifically the Trường Sơn mountains, for a reason. He confides his feelings to a woman in a city or town. The unnamed woman is likely his lover or someone he admires.

In the poem, the author talks about himself, his circumstances, and his surroundings, a remote and desolate forest ...

Regarding the man, in five lines, the author describes his location and the surrounding landscape, a desolate forest

in a remote place: *hồn tôi đi trong rừng lang thang* (my soul wanders, lost in the forest's expanse) and *bóng tôi xa đêm dài phố thị* (my shadow fades in the city's long night).

Amidst this setting, there are poetic elements: *vọng lời ru từ ánh trăng tàn* (echoing lullabies from the fading moon's glow).

However, more importantly, there are sad, tragic, and somber tones, although the author does not elaborate on the reasons.

*Ơi là máu, tội hờn nô lệ
Bóng tôi mờ suối nhỏ đêm đêm*

Oh! now on these streets, blood, suffering, and slavery bind,
My shadow fades away in the stream night after night.

Let's imagine a gloomy, mysterious, and uncertain scene. Despite the faint moonlight above, the ground is shrouded in darkness, beneath thick leaves. A stream flows through a desolate forest, and a solitary figure stands there. The reader knows nothing more about this character's actions, and it seems he has no clear purpose, for *hồn tôi đi trong rừng lang thang* (my soul wanders, lost in the forest's expanse).

In short, we don't know much about the man in the forest, only that he is haunted day and night by the image of a woman in the city. Regarding the young woman, the author begins the poem with two lines that evoke

memories of the distant woman. The first image of the woman in the poet's memory is her hair:

*Tóc em tung bay sương chiều khói biếc
Dệt tơ trời thành khúc hát băng khuâng*

Her hair, fluttering in afternoon mist and blue smoke,
Weaving threads of heaven into a pensive song.

The scene is painted with romantic colors: evening mist, blue smoke. The image is not new, but it still holds a high degree of suggestiveness. A departure, a farewell that takes place on a misty evening always adds to the sadness or tragedy of a parting, depending on the circumstances.

Besides the evening mist, there is also blue smoke which adds a sense of endless sorrow to the scene, as we recall that the image of smoke and waves on the river at dusk in classical works always evokes a pensive feeling.

Next is a very new image: her hair weaves heavenly threads into a pensive song. The author presents here a surreal image, a very new technique in poetry. Don't look for logical explanations in this image. Because surreal poetry forces us to view reality from a completely new angle, different from what our senses perceive under normal conditions. But it's not that you can write anything to create a surreal image. We know that the material of poetry is language. For surreal poetry, this is even more important. A surreal image is first and foremost a harmonious combination of language, creating a chain of attractive sounds that gains the reader's approval. This is not easy at all. Here we can

see the mark of a talented poet. In the hands of an amateur, we would only have clumsy, naïve combinations. ...

After revealing about himself and painting a portrait of the girl in his mind, the poet expresses his deep longing in the following verses. Right from the beginning, the author indicates the setting of his yearning:

*Tỉnh hay mộng khi Trường Sơn xa hút
Đến bao giờ mây trắng gửi tin sang*

As Trường Sơn is far away, is she awake or dreaming,
To receive the news brought in by the white cloud?

The poet and his muse are separated by a vast distance, with no means of communication. If people in the past relied on carrier pigeons, the poet can only look to the clouds for a sign, but the clouds cannot carry messages, and watching them only deepens his longing.

Nhớ con đường thơm ngọt môi em

*Longing for the streets where her lips tasted sweet and
fragrant.*

This is a typical way of expressing oneself in poetry. In reality, no path can retain the sweet scent of a lover's lips. The poet can only remember the path of their memories, the old path she walked, and from there imagine her image and recall the sweet scent of her lips. The words are very concise, allowing the reader's emotions and imagination to fill in the gaps with their own memories.

*Ôi ta nhớ như đêm dài thượng cổ
Sợi tóc mềm lơì nhịp hát trong tim*

Oh, I will never forget those ancient, immemorial long nights,

Her soft hair slowed the lingering melody in my heart.

The poem ends with two lines expressing endless longing. The poem ends, but the longing continues endlessly. The word *thượng cổ* (ancient, immemorial) here is not to be understood literally but with all its implications. Antiquity is a long, primitive, and dark period in human history. Immemorial refers to a time no one can remember. The longing is also long, wild, and primitive, originating from the deepest parts of the heart.

The poem began with a surreal image of hair and a song: *dệt tơ trời thành khúc hát băng khuâng* (weaving heavenly threads into a pensive song) and now it ends with a surreal image with the same elements, hair and a song: *sợi tóc mềm lơì nhịp hát trong tim* (her soft hair slowed the lingering melody in my heart). The author's thought returns to the starting point, forming a closed circle. If we divide the number of lines equally between what the author says about himself, about the distant woman, and about his feelings of longing, we see that what the author reveals about himself is very little, very concise, and the author has dedicated the most evocative and poetic images to the distant lover and his feelings of longing.

Impressive commentaries!

But poet Vĩnh Đào has only looked at the romantic side of the poem. Indeed, in the two lines:

*Nhớ con đường thơm ngọt môi em
Ơi là máu, tủi hờn nô lệ*

Longing for the streets where her lips tasted sweet and fragrant,
Oh! now on these streets, blood, suffering, and slavery bind,

by understanding that “her lips” is our homeland, I believe Thầy refers to the streets of his homeland, once sweet and fragrant, but now filled with blood, suffering and slavery bind. He was a great poet, but he was also a resilient great fighter for a cause.

And in the final part:

*Gót chân em nắng vàng xưa viễn phố
Những ngón hồng ngơ ngác giữa đường chim*

As the yellow sunlight chased her heels to a distant place,
Her rosy toes, once innocent, now lost in the birds’ path.

I believe that *gót chân em nắng vàng xưa viễn phố* (the yellow sunlight chased her heels to a distant place) refers to those who were sent to the New Economic Zones after 1975, causing their once rosy toes to become withered and lost in the birds’ path.

21. Những năm anh đi

*Ngọn gió đưa anh đi mười năm phiêu lãng,
Nhìn quê hương qua chứng tích điêu tàn,
Triều Đông hải vẫn thì thầm cát trắng,
Truyện tình người và nhịp thở Trường Sơn.*

*Mười năm nữa anh vẫn làm lì phó thị,
Yêu rừng sâu nên khóe mắt rưng rưng,
Tay anh vói trời cao chim chiều rủ rỉ,
Đời lính đên thu cánh nhỏ bên đường.*

*Mười năm sau anh băng rừng vượt suối,
Tìm quê hương trên vết máu đồng hoang,
Chiều khói nhạt như hồn ai còn hận tủi,
Từng con sông từng huyết lệ lan tràn.*

*Mười năm đó anh quên mình sậy yếu,
Đôi vai gầy từ thuở dựng quê hương,
Anh cúi xuống nghe núi rừng hợp tấu,
Bản tình ca vô tận của Đông phương.*

*Và ngày ấy anh trở về phố cũ,
Giữa con đường còn rợp khói tang thương,
Trong mắt biếc mang nỗi hờn thiên cổ,
Vẫn chân tình như mưa lũ biên cương.*

The long away years

The wind carried him away for ten years of wandering,
He saw his homeland in ruins, desolate and bare,
The Eastern Sea's tide still whispered to the white sand,
Tales of love and the Trường Sơn's breath.

For the next ten years, he lingered in the city,
Missing the deep forest, his eyes welled up with tears,
He reached for the sky, where birds chirped in grace,
Their small wings, tired of wandering, found solace in the streets.

For ten more years, he crossed forests, traversed rivers,
Seeking his homeland on the barren, blood-stained land
Evening smoke drifted, like the sighs of suffering souls,
Each river, each flowed with blood and tears.

Through those ten years, he forgot his reed-like frailty,
His slender shoulders, bearing the weight of his dream,
He crouched down to listen to the symphony played by our mountains and forests,
The Eastern World's endless love song.

At long last, that day arrived,
He returned to his old town,
Amidst streets still shrouded in mourning smoke,
In his blue eyes, the grief's ancient wound,
As real and heartfelt as the monsoon in our borderland.

Explanation

This poem has two lines that I've read in many commentaries on Thây's poetry:

*Anh cúi xuống nghe núi rừng hợp tấu,
Bản tình ca vô tận của Đông phương.*

I pondered for a long time searching for words to translate these lines. Translating *cúi xuống* as bending down is grammatically correct, but it doesn't convey the demeanor

of the main character. And the main character in this poem is probably Thầy because it fits him very well. In the end, I decided to use crouch instead of bend. Crouch is a position where the knees are bent and the upper body is brought forward and down (*Oxford dictionary*). This is the posture of a tiger ready to fight.

Therefore, here is my translation of these two lines:

*Anh cúi xuống nghe núi rừng hợp tấu,
Bản tình ca vô tận của Đông phương*

He crouched down to listen to the symphony played by our mountains and forests,
The Eastern World's endless love song.

The war must end and unfortunately it ended in tragedy, but Thầy hopes that we will reclaim our homeland and all that we have lost, and that we will rebuild our homeland into a prosperous, thriving, and democratic nation because we have the *Eastern World's endless love song*.

In short, our homeland endures as long as the *Eastern World's endless love song* endures.

But the third stanza really moves me:

*Mười năm sau anh băng rừng vượt suối,
Tìm quê hương trên vết máu đồng hoang,
Chiều khói nhạt như hồn ai còn hận tủi,
Từng cơn sông từng huyết lệ lan tràn*

For ten more years, he crossed forests, traversed rivers,
Seeking his homeland on the barren, blood-stained land
Evening smoke drifted, like the sighs of suffering souls,

Each river, each flowed with blood and tears.

The imagery in this stanza is powerful and evocative. The *barren, blood-stained* land is a stark contrast to the implied beauty and abundance of our homeland. The *evening smoke drifted, like the sighs of suffering souls* is a particularly striking metaphor, suggesting the collective grief and anger of a people. The repetition of *each river, each flowed with blood and tears* emphasizes the overwhelming nature of the devastation. What a display of collective resilience and suffering! Above all, what a profound loss and longing for our homeland!

On October 28, 2003, in an open letter to young postulant monks in Thừa Thiên - Huế, Thầy reminded them of his past:

My generation, the youth of my age, were nurtured to be sent to the battlefield of the ideological war, educated to know class hatred. But fortunately, the Buddhist Compassion stream continued to flow silently, to soothe the pain and loss, to heal the broken and ruined of the nation.

And Thầy encouraged them to be resilient:

Living or dying, honor or disgrace, do not disturb the minds of those who know how to live and die worthily of human dignity, and who are not ashamed of the noble virtues of an ordained.

The last stanza paints a vivid picture of a return, marked by deep-seated resentment and unwavering patriotism.

Và ngày ấy anh trở về phố cũ,
Giữa con đường còn rợp khói tang thương,
Trong mắt biếc mang nỗi hờn thiên cổ,
Vẫn chân tình như mưa lũ biên cương.

At long last, that day arrived,
He returned to his old town,
Amidst streets still shrouded in mourning smoke,
In his blue eyes, the grief's ancient wound,
As real and heartfelt as the monsoon in our borderland.

Most Venerable Nguyễn Hiền (pen name Nhất Thanh) writes about Thầy in his essay *Giấc mơ Trường Sơn hay những phương trời viễn mộng* (Dreams on the peak of Trường Sơn or realms of distant dreams), saying:

Reading many of his works, be it translations like *Thiền luận* (Essays in Zen Buddhism), commentaries like *Thập mục ngư đồ* (Ten ox-herding pictures), philosophical treatises like *Triết học về tánh Không* (Philosophy of Nothingness), *Thắng Man giảng luận* (Śrīmālā discourse), or simply introductions like those to *Vô Môn Quan* (Wumen Guan) and *Duy-ma-cật sở thuyết* (Vimalakīrti Sūtra), all exude an extraordinary talent for poetry, deep and profound, like a hidden waterfall at the bottom of the ocean. Only those who know how to live and dare to live can compose for the world a silent melody with the breath of heaven and earth, and the breath of their own being. But literature is merely ripples on the calm surface of the river of consciousness. Only poetry is the true voice of silent tones. And *Giấc mơ Trường Sơn* (Dreams on the peak

of Trùng Sơn) became perfect silent voices, a foundation for a whole generation of poetry.

Similarly, Most Venerable Phước An writes in *Thơ Tuệ Sỹ – tiếng gọi của những đêm dài heo hút* (Tuệ Sỹ's poetry – the call of long and desolate nights), saying:

At times of national turmoil and suffering, the most beloved children of the nation always review the glorious and shameful chapters of their nation's history. From this, they can draw historical lessons for tomorrow, a tomorrow in which they firmly believe their nation must be brighter.

Tuệ Sỹ is a scholar in the Eastern tradition. For over twenty years, Tuệ Sỹ has demonstrated the spirit of *uy vũ bất năng khuất* (Chinese philosopher Mencius' quotation, which means a righteous person does not submit to those with power) of a scholar, not through written works, but he has written his work through self-sacrifice, to share the suffering with his homeland.

22. Những phím dương cầm

*Tự hôm nào suối tóc ngọt lời ca
Tay em run trên những phím lụa ngà
Thôi huyền tượng xô người theo cát bụi*

*Vùng đất đỏ bàn chân ai bối rối
Đạp cung đàn sương ứa đọng vành môi
Đường xanh xanh phơn phớt nụ ai cười
Như tơ liễu ngại ngừng lau nắng nhạt.*

*Lời tiễn biệt nói gì sau tiếng hát
Hỏi phương nào cho nguyện ước Trường Sơn
Lời em ca phong kín nhụy hoa hờn
Anh trữu nặng núi rừng trong đáy mắt.*

*Mơ phố thị những chiều hôn suối tóc
Bóng ai ngồi so phím lụa đàn xưa.*

The piano keys

Her hair, a cascade of sweet melodies,
Her trembling fingers dancing across ivory piano keys,
My illusions shattered, swept away by sand and dust.

In this crimson land, whose footsteps faltered,
Bewilderingly pressing the piano pedals, dewdrops clung
to her lips?

Whose smile, framed by verdant blossoms,
Like silken willows, shyly held back the pale sunset?

What words remain when the song fades?
Where to go to fulfill my Trường Sơn's yearning desire?

Her singing concealed the bud of resentment,
My eyes, heavily laden with mountains and forests.

Missing the afternoons I kissed her flowing hair,
Whose silhouette sits here now, playing the old ivory
keys?

Explanation

In regards to the excessive romanticism in this poem, in *Chén trà lão Triệu mà chung hoa ngàn* (Old Zhao's teacup but filled with forest flowers), Dr. Đỗ Hồng Ngọc recalled that when he told Thầy that this was too lyrical and sentimental a poem, Thầy replied, “Don't doubt, don't question”.

Zen meditation has no language different from ordinary language. But I worry that when one has shaved their head, poetic feelings still remain. So, whether the path of Zen and poetry are the same or different, let us not doubt and question. Perhaps this poem is a very lyrical and sentimental poem, with her trembling fingers on ivory piano keys and mountains and forests weighing heavy on his eyes, but he has already said, “Don't doubt, don't question”.

In *Phương nào cõi tịnh?* (Which direction is the pure realm?), Thầy recites the story of a musician of the heavenly king Indra who fell in love with a celestial maiden, so he sought out the Buddha and sang “A love song to the Buddha”, with a passionate description: “I love her as an Arhat loves the dharma”. Perhaps there is no more sincere description of faithful love. The lyrics were strange to the ears of those who read the Buddhist

scriptures, and the Buddha's answer was also strange and difficult to understand: "Very good, the music harmonizes with the words, and the words harmonize with the music; within it there is desire and also nirvana". Desire is love that is attached to sensuality, and nirvana is the state of being free from desire. Does this mean that from desire, one can see nirvana, and from nirvana, one can clearly see the nature of desire? More simply, can one find a lotus flower in the stinking mud?

And Thầy gifted the doctor a two-line poem:

*Nhà tranh mái cũ quen chùng
Chén trà lão Triệu mà chưng hoa ngàn.*

Ancient house with thatched roof is familiar
(But what is not familiar is) Old Zhao's teacup but filled
with wildflowers.

In *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, the first series, page 265, Dr. Daisetz Suzuki explains the difference between our "ordinary" way and the Zen way of tea drinking.

You and I sip a cup of tea. The act is apparently alike, but who can tell what a wide gap there is subjectively between you and me? In your drinking there may be no Zen while mine is brimful of it. The reason is, the one moves in the logical circle and the other is out of it; that is to say, in one case rigid rules of intellection so called are asserting themselves, and the actor even when acting is unable to unfetter himself from these intellectual bonds; while in the other case the subject has struck a new path and is not at all conscious of the duality of his act, in him life is not split into object and subject or into

acting and acted. The drinking at the moment to him means the whole fact, the whole world. Zen lives and is therefore free, whereas our “ordinary” life is in bondage; satori (awakening, in Japanese) is the first step to freedom.

We are supposedly living in the same world, but who can tell the thing we popularly call a stone lying before this window is the same thing to all of us? According to the way we look at it, to some the stone ceases to be a stone, while to others it forever remains a worthless specimen of geological product. And this initial divergence of views calls forth an endless series of divergences later in our moral and spiritual lives. Just a little twisting as it were in our modes of thinking and yet what a world of difference will grow up eventually between one another! So, with Zen, satori is this twisting or rather screwing, not in the wrong way, but in a deeper and fuller sense, and the result is the revelation of a world of entirely new values. ...

The subjective revolution that brings out this state of things cannot be called abnormal. When life becomes more enjoyable and its expanse is as broad as the universe itself, there must be something in satori quite healthy and worth one's striving after its attainment.

23. Phố trưa

*Phố trưa nắng đỏ cờ hồng
Người yêu cát bụi đời không tự tình
Sầu trên thế kỷ điêu linh
Giấc mơ hoang đảo thu hình tịch liêu*

*Hận thù sôi giữa ráng chiều
Sông tràn núi lở nước triều mênh mông
Khói mù lấp kín trời đông
Trời ơi, tóc trắng rũ lòng quê cha*

*Con đi xào xạc tiếng gà
Đêm đêm trông bóng thiên hà buồn tênh.
Đời không cát bụi chung tình
Người yêu cát bụi quê mình là đâu?*

Midday streets

Midday streets, red sun, crimson flags,
Lovers of sand and dust find no solace in this life.
Sorrow hangs over the crumbling century,
Dreams of desolate islands, a solitary retreat.

Hatred boils amidst the evening glow,
Overflowing rivers, crumbled mountains and vast tides.
Smoke is obscuring the eastern sky,
Oh heavens, my hair grows white with longing for my
homeland.

Since I left at the crackle of roosters,
Night after night, I gaze with sorrow at the vast galaxy.
In this life, what is such devotion as the sand and dust?
Where are those who love my homeland's sand and dust?

Explanation

The poem is imbued with a pervasive sense of transience, loss, and the futility of human existence. Images of dust, crumble and isolation underscore the ephemeral nature of life and the inevitability of suffering for the people of his homeland. Thầy's lament over the destruction of his homeland creates a melancholic tone that lingers throughout the poem.

Beneath the surface of personal loss, there seems to be a deeper layer of social and political commentary. The references to hatred, overflowing rivers, crumbled mountains, immense tides and smoke obscuring the eastern sky suggest a world in turmoil.

Red sun and crimson flags in this poem remind me of these lines from the famous poem *Nhất định thắng* (Victory Certainty) by Trần Dần ²¹. This is his most representative poem, written in 1955, depicted the state of starvation and suppression, as the new government took control of Hanoi,

²¹ Trần Dần (1926–1997) was barely twenty years old when he joined the Việt Minh force in 1946. Eight years later, he fell out of favor with the party. In 1956, he was sentenced for 3 months for “losing his class standpoint”.

On leaving prison, he joined *Nhân văn - Giai phẩm* affair, which took its name from two journals respectively titled *Nhân văn* (Humanity) and *Giai phẩm* (Masterpieces). This affair and the journals that lent their names to it were led by a group of intellectuals and artists, many of them Communist party sympathizers, who sought to condemn the corruption and dogmatism of communist officialdom and advocate for greater degree of intellectual and artistic freedom. While the journals were completely shut down by December 1956, the affair continued for several years with intensification of official crackdown and condemnation, culminating in a landmark trial by 1960.

following the 1954 Geneva agreement. This poem led to a campaign of criticism against the author, causing him to attempt suicide by cutting his throat:

*Tôi bước đi
không thấy phố
không thấy nhà
Chỉ thấy mưa sa
trên màu cờ đỏ.*

I was walking,
seeing no shops,
no houses,
Only rain falling
on the red flags.

His poem refers to red flag which is the national flag of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (in 1955), and the current Socialist Republic of Vietnam. It has a small yellow star in the middle of a dazzling red background.

Both poets were struck by the pervasive display of red flags, which house owners were compelled to hang in front of their homes.

The final two lines,

*Đời không cát bụi chung tình
Người yêu cát bụi quê mình là đâu?*

In this life, what is such devotion as the sand and dust?
Where are those who love my homeland's sand and dust?

raise existential questions about the meaning of life and the nature of love. The emphasis on *who are those who love my homeland's sand and dust* adds a touch of poignant symbolism. It suggests a connection to the homeland, to the

reality of daily life, and perhaps a sense of resilience or resistance in the face of adversity.

Critic Nguyễn Mạnh Trinh, in *Tuệ Sỹ, viễn mộng mấy khung trời* (Tuệ Sỹ, heavenly firmaments of distant dreams) connects the poem to the fate of the nation:

The poem was written in April 1975 in Nha Trang, at a time when the country was in turmoil. The poem is like a marker for the unforgettable days in the hearts of the Vietnamese people. ...

Cát bụi (sand and dust) is repeated deliberately. Sand and dust represent an image of chaos, of drifting days. The poem expresses the feelings of a person lost in the turmoil of time. ... Days of April 1975 cannot be forgotten. Even a monk trying to keep a calm mind, still feels the overwhelming emotions.

24. Quán trọ của ngàn sao

*Mắt em quán trọ của ngàn sao
Ngọt ngát hoang sơ ánh rượu đào
Pha loãng nắng tà dâng cát bụi
Ấm lòng khách lữ bước lao đao.*

*Mắt huyền thăm thẳm mượt đêm nhung
Mưa hạt long lanh rọi nền hồng
Sương lạnh đưa người xanh khói biển
Bình minh quán trọ nắng rung rung.*

A starry inn

Her eyes, a starry inn,
Sweet and wild, like peach wine,
Diluting the setting sun, diffusing the dust,
Warming weary travelers' hearts.

Her deep, mysterious eyes, like velvet night,
Sparkling raindrops illuminating rosy candlelight,
A solace for people in cold mist and stormy seas.
At dawn, the inn is bathed in shimmering sunlight.

Explanation

In this poem, Thầy compares her eyes to a starry inn, where weary travelers can blissfully drink sweet peach wine after a long day under the scorching sun. Her eyes can also provide comfort to the bride on her wedding night, and solace to those adrift in cold mist and stormy seas.

I'm unable to determine what *her eyes* represent in Thầy's personification within this poem.

Could it be the true dharma?

Thầy frequently personified our country and its people in his poetry. In *Ác mộng* (Nightmares), page 75, “em” in the verse “vì yêu em trên lá đọng sương mai” (For I love her as pure as droplets of morning dew clinging to leaves) is identified as his homeland. In *Nhớ con đường thom ngọt môi em* (Longing for the streets where her lips tasted sweet and fragrant), page 150, “em” in the verse “gót chân em nắng vàng xưa viễn phố” (As the yellow sunlight chased her heels to a distant place) likely represents the people being sent away to the distant New Economic Zones.

However, these rich and powerfully evocative lyrics are particularly striking when considered in the context of the prison setting, as he wrote this poem while being detained in Phan Đăng Lưu prison. By describing the eyes as a source of comfort and a gateway to transport people to a different world, the poem evokes a desire to escape.

In *Tuệ Sĩ, viễn mộng mấy khung trời* (Tuệ Sĩ, heavenly firmaments of distant dreams), critic Nguyễn Mạnh Trinh comments:

To write about a starry inn while confined in Phan Đăng Lưu prison, perhaps only Tuệ Sĩ could have done so. Such an imagination is like a sail carrying a ship out to sea, toward a boundless horizon that only poets, with their far-reaching souls, can reach. Poetry, fearless and carefree. Poetry, as if climbing over the hill of reality to reach a vast expanse.

25. Ta biết

*Ta biết mi bọ rùa
Gặm nhấm tàn dẫy bí
Ta vì đời thiệt hơn
Khổ nhọc mòn tâm trí*

*Ta biết mi là dế
Cắn đứt chân cà non
Ta vì đời đồ lệ
Nên phong kín nôi hờn*

*Ta biết mi là giun
Chui dưới tầng đất thẳm
Ta vì đời thiệt hơn
Đêm nằm mơ tóc trắng.*

I know

You, squash bug,
Nibbling on my row of pumpkins.
Bearing life's burdens,
My mind is worn out by hardship.

You, cricket,
Gnawing on my baby eggplants.
For life's burdens, I shed tears,
To keep my resentment hidden.

You, earthworm,
Burrowing under the deep earth.
Bearing life's burdens,
My hair grays out in my night dreams.

Explanation

The poem uses vivid imagery of insects to symbolize human suffering. The squash bug, cricket, and earthworm represent different aspects of the natural world, and the author compares their lives to his own.

Thầy's worn-out mind, of course, is not because of his row of pumpkins being nibbled on, and Thầy's shedding tears, of course, is not because of his baby eggplants being gnawed. The remaining question is, whom does Thầy imply in this poem has caused him to wear out his mind and shed tears? He didn't say it, but perhaps he didn't need to. And I don't need to say it, either.

The repeated lines *Ta vì đời thiệt hơn* (Bearing life's burdens) and *Ta vì đời đổ lệ* (For life's burdens, I shed tears) emphasize the author's sense of voluntary hardship, and the final image of him waking up with gray hair suggests the weight of his suffering.

26. Tiếng gà gáy trưa

*Gà xao xác gọi hồn ta từ quá khứ
Về nơi đây cùng khôn với điêu linh
Hương trái đắng mùa thu buồn bụi cỏ
Ôi ngọt ngào đâu mái tóc em xinh*

*Từng tiếng lẻ loi buồn thống thiết
Nghe rộn ràng từ vết lỗ con tim
Từ nơi đó ta ghi lời vĩnh biệt
Nắng buồn ơi là đôi mắt ân tình*

*Còi xa vắng giữa trưa nào lạc lõng
Môi em hồng ta ước một vì sao
Trưa dài lắm nhưng lòng tay bé bỏng
Để vươn dài trên vầng trán em cao.*

The afternoon rooster's crow

The rooster's crow awakens my soul from the past,
To return here, sharing the misery of the ruins.
The bitter scent of autumn fruits saddens the withering
grass,
Oh, the sweetness of her flowing hair!

Each lonely sound echoes with sorrow,
Resounding from the wounds of my heart.
From these sounds, I record my farewell.
The sorrowful sun casts a gaze full of affection.

A distant whistle pierces the stillness of noon,
Remembering her rosy lips, I wish upon a star.
The day drags on, its noon's long stretch,
My small hand yearns to caress her forehead.

27. Tiếng nhạc vọng

*Ta nhớ mãi ngày đông tràn rượu ngọt
Ngày hội mùa ma quỷ khóc chơi vơi
Trưa phố thị nhạc buồn loang nắng nhạt
Chìm hư vô đáy mắt đọng ngàn khơi*

*Đây khúc nhạc đưa hồn lên máu đỏ
Bước luân hồi chen chúc cọng lau xanh
Xô đầy mãi sóng vàng không bến đỗ
Trôi lênh đênh ma quỷ rắc tro tàn.*

*Vẫn khúc điệu tự ngàn xưa ám khói
Ép thời gian thành rượu máu trong xanh
Rượu không nhạt mà thiên tài thêm cát bụi
Thì ân tình ngậy ngát cõi mong manh*

*Ôi tiết nhịp thiên tài hay quỷ mị
Xô hồn ta lão đảo giữa tường cao
Trưa dài lắm ta luân hồi vô thủy
Đổi hình hài con mắt vẫn đầy sao.*

The resonant sound of music

A winter day brimming with sweet wine,
The festival of demons, their cries echoing in the void.
Melancholy music in pale light of noon spilled through
the city streets,
The vast ocean sank into the abyss of my eyes.

This music elevated my soul to red blood,
Jostling among the green reeds, through samsāra.
Pushing the golden waves, with no dock in sight,
Floating adrift, as demons sprinkle their ashes.

The same tune, mothballed since eternity,
Compressed time into clear, blood-red wine,
The wine, not bland, but by genius demons infused with
dust,
It became an intoxicating love in this ephemeral realm.

Oh, the rhythm of genius or illusion,
Swaying my soul amidst towering walls.
Through endless noon, trapped in the cycle of samsāra,
Though forms may have changed, my eyes gleamed with
starlight.

Explanation

The line *festival of demons, their cries echoing in the void* suggests a celebration with a dark undercurrent, potentially alluding to the mass mobilizations and propaganda campaigns often associated with communist regimes, while their *melancholy music* could represent the somber and oppressive atmosphere of a society under communist rule. The idea of *intoxicating love in the ephemeral realm* could be seen as a metaphor for the seductive allure of communist ideology, which promises a utopian future but ultimately leads to disillusionment and suffering.

If so, the *demons' dust*, which the genius demons add to their wine for added potency, refers to the Vietnamese Communist party's tactics used in the North to lure millions of people to their deaths, such as their claims of "liberation of the South" and "national unification".

In the last two lines,

*Trưa dài lắm ta luân hồi vô thủy
Đôi hình hài con mắt vẫn đầy sao,*

Through endless noon, trapped in the cycle of samsāra,
Though forms may have changed, my eyes gleamed with
starlight,

the phrase *endless noon* implies a timeless state, and *my eyes gleamed with starlight* indicates that despite the changing forms and the passage of time, Thầy's soul and consciousness remains intact.

Why? Thầy explains that a monk must cultivate bodhicitta, the bodhisattva vow, to shoulder the sufferings and sorrows of the world, as expressed in the following excerpt from his book *Thăng Man giảng luận* (Śrīmālā discourse):

Bodhicitta is the burning aspiration of a being who recognizes their own existence in the darkness of suffering and seeks a path of light, not only to liberate oneself from oppression and threats but also to liberate all those who share the same plight.

Bodhicitta is the unwavering, indomitable will of a person bound by the flames of passion, crushed under the cruel forces of our own and others' insatiable desires.

Without this determination, the Bodhisattva path is an impossible, and mythical dream, and the Mahāyāna is no more than only empty words of a daydreamer.

28. Tìm em trong giấc chiêm bao

*Ta tìm em trong giấc chiêm bao
Nỗi buồn thu nhỏ hàng cây cao
Cháy đỏ mùa đông ta vẫn lạnh
Bóng tối vương đầy đôi mắt sâu*

*Yêu em dâng cả ráng chiều thu
Em đốt tình yêu bằng hận thù
Cháy đỏ mùa đông ta vẫn lạnh
Giấc mơ không kín dãy song tù.*

Searching for you in my dreams

While searching for you in my dreams,
My sorrow dwarfs the tallest trees.
This blazing winter chills me to the bone,
As darkness fills up the depths of my eyes.

I offer you the burning hues of autumn twilight,
But you ignite a flame of hate, burning my love.
This blazing winter chills me to the bone,
But no prison bars can confine my dream.

Explanation

Thầy wrote this poem in the X4 prison in 1979. I believe that “em” in this poem represents the people of his country. Therefore, translating “em” as “you”, instead of “her” as in previous poems, establishes a direct communication between the poet and the people of his country.

The theme of the poem is Thầy’s sorrow upon witnessing the people of his country replacing love with hatred.

29. Tĩnh tọa

*Ôi nỗi buồn từ ngày ta lạc bước
Cố quên mình là thân phận thần tiên*

Meditation

Oh sadness, since the day I lost my way,
I've striven to forget my divine identity.

Explanation

In *Tuệ Sỹ trên ngõ về im lặng* (Tuệ Sỹ on the quiet path home), critic Tâm Nhiên writes:

Having witnessed countless grievances, cruelties, and sufferings, the poet has deeply felt a timeless sorrow, a profound compassion. A poet's spirit is naturally free, wild, and soaring, a celestial being of grandeur and majesty. But he had to suppress these qualities, for the demonic Asuras of greed, anger, and delusion had taken human shape. With savage brutality, they unleashed a torrent of greed, hatred, and obsession, inflicting terrible calamities in a whirlwind of madness.

When did Thầy get lost? He gave the answer himself in his essay *Thuyền ngược bến không* (The boat drifting against the empty wharf):

Sitting on the hilltop of Trại Thủy in Nha Trang, looking down at the village below, I watch a group of elementary school children march out, chanting slogans in support of the revolution and denouncing reactionary and decadent culture. I know I am being rejected.

But I believe that not only Thầy but millions of South Vietnamese people were rejected, too. Slogans in support of the so-called “revolution” and denouncing the “reactionary” culture were broadcast daily throughout the streets. Books were publicly incinerated. The relentless hunt for “reactionary forces” amidst a deteriorating economy led to a wave of house searching (without warrant) and arrest. A network of thousands of prisons, many masquerading as “re-education” facilities, sprouted up like mushrooms.

The boat drifts upstream, leaving the wharf behind. And as the nation heals, the people rise from the ashes of war, transforming hatred into love. But it is also a time when a generation of writers is rejected. For they cannot accept a love defined by dialectics, a love that can only blossom from hatred and destruction, a love that must grow on human blood.

Most Venerable Thích Nguyên Siêu, in *Tuệ Sỹ – người gầy trên quê hương* (Tuệ Sỹ – The gaunt figure on his homeland), agrees:

Indeed, Tuệ Sỹ was a lost soul. For the past forty years, he has lived among the grass, the mist, and the sunlight ... in the deep, quiet forests of Trùng Sơn, nourishing a frail body. Lost, he has lulled himself through the nightmarish dreams of his homeland. Through the suffering and misery of his people. For he has stumbled into a desolate scene that has stirred the collective pain of humanity. The resentment of the grass, the stones, and the lives swept away by the dust of dark times.

30. Tôi vẫn đợi

*Tôi vẫn đợi những đêm dài khắc khoải,
Màu xanh xao trong tiếng khóc ven rừng,
Trong bóng tối hận thù, tha thiết mãi,
Một vì sao bên khóm miêng rung rung.*

*Tôi vẫn đợi những đêm đen lặng gió,
Màu đen tuyền ánh mắt tự ngàn xưa,
Nhìn hun hút cho dài thêm lịch sử,
Dài con sông tràn máu lệ quê cha.*

*Tôi vẫn đợi suốt đời quên sóng vỗ,
Quên những người xuôi ngược Thái Bình Dương,
Người ở lại giữa lòng tay bạo chúa,
Cọng lau gầy trĩu nặng ánh tà dương.*

*Rồi trước mắt ngục tù thân bé bỏng,
Ngón tay nào gõ nhịp xuống tường rêu,
Rồi nhắm mắt ta đi vào cõi mộng,
Như sương mai, như ánh chớp, mây chiều.*

I've been waiting

Through endless nights of restless sleep, I've been waiting,
For a pale cry from the forest's edge,
In the darkness of ceaseless hatred,
For a star to appear at my tearful mouth's corner.

In silent, windless nights, I've been waiting,
For two black eyes from our ancient times,
To pierce the depths of our history,

Where rivers of our fatherland overflowed with blood and tears.

I've waited all my life to forget the crashing waves,
To forget those who crossed the Pacific Ocean,
And those left behind in the hands of cruel tyrants.
I am a slender reed, weighed down by sunset rays.

Facing the truth that I'm a little prisoner,
My finger unconsciously taps a rhythm on the mossy wall,
Closing my eyes, I dream to become,
A morning dew, a lightning flash, or some afternoon clouds.

Explanation

In the third stanza, when Thầy said he waited to forget, it does not mean that Thầy wants to forget them. They are those who crossed the border, crossed the sea, both those who lived and those who died, and also those who were left behind at home, living under the tyrant's rule. The fact that these memories still linger highlights his deep empathy and compassion for the suffering of others.

In the last line of the above poem, Thầy referred to these four lines in the *Diamond Sūtra* (TN: kinh Kim Cương, in Vietnamese. This is a foundational text in Mahāyāna Buddhism and emphasizes the nothingness of all phenomena):

*Nhất thiết hữu vi pháp,
Như mộng ảo bào ảnh,*

*Như lộ diệc như điển,
Ứng tác như thị quán.*

All conditioned dharmas
Are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows,
Like dew drops and a lightning flash:
Contemplate them thus.

The Sūtra states that to attain Enlightenment, one must contemplate that all conditioned dharmas (i.e., dharmas arising from causes and conditions) are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows, dew drops, and lightning flashes, i.e., unreal or impermanent. However, in this poem, interestingly while Thầy acknowledges the impermanence of all conditioned dharmas as dew drops, lightning flashes, or clouds, he yearns to become a dew drop, a lightning flash, or afternoon clouds himself.

Writer Nguyễn Mộng Giác criticizes this poem in *Văn Học* (Literature) newspaper, issue 65, July 1991 as follows:

The first sentence speaks of the color of night. The second sentence further explains a metaphor (a colorless cry in the forest). This metaphor is seemingly explained again in the third sentence (in the darkness of ceaseless hatred) but it's not. This is merely a false connection... These last two lines soar to another universe, taking flight from the worldly entanglements, the petty disputes and hatred, to reach a higher, more sublime realm, symbolized by a star, a smile. The four lines move vertically, from the low level of petty, painful disputes to the high level of awakening and enlightenment.

The second stanza inherits the essence of the first, so the transformation is simpler, not as convoluted or struggling to rise up as the first stanza. This stanza

moves horizontally and also begins with a color: the color of the dark night. ...

From the deep darkness of night, the poet does not evoke the gloomy darkness of birth, old age, sickness, and death, but rather the darkness of an eye. That's right, all life begins with a glance, a way of looking. There are gazes that are drowned and lost in the transient world, and there are gazes that see through to the truth of existence. The poem moves horizontally through time, looking out at the unfolding of life from ancient times, seeing the essence of all historical changes, and understanding the reasons behind the mountains of bones and rivers of blood in our beloved homeland. The eyes of a condemned prisoner do not dwell on petty resentments and vulgar desires. Those eyes transcend everything, beyond all bars and prison walls, even the bars and prison walls of delusion.

The transformative power of poetry, the sublimation of thought to the end. The eighth line has thus reached its peak. Ideally, after the eighth line, Tuệ Sĩ could have stopped without needing to write anything more. In prison, the poet lives with the pale color of the little light that filters through the prison door and the vast darkness, from which the raw materials of creation and thought are born. But let us not forget that the condemned prisoner can still feel the life of the world through the sounds outside. The next two stanzas of Tuệ Sĩ are a different journey, beginning not with color but with sound.

I have just written down the words “different journey” Actually, writing it like that is not quite right, because Tuệ Sĩ is not creating a different poem but simply changing the way he uses images in the poem. Therefore, the grammatical structure of the third stanza

remains the same as that of the previous two stanzas, while the poetic meaning also receives the sublimation of the upper part to express a desire that, upon first reading, we might think is paradoxical: the desire to forget, to forget everything. Forget the crashing waves of the stormy life outside, the violent waves that forced the poet to roll up his brown sleeves and try to set sail, leading to the current imprisonment and shackles. Forget the pitiful fate of millions who have had to risk their lives to cross the sea in search of freedom. Forget even the thin reeds that bear the weight of the tyranny for over seventy million people who remain.

Tuê Sỹ explains all these seemingly paradoxical things in the last stanza with a very representative image and sound: the gentle tapping of a finger on the cold mossy wall of the prison. It is representative because it is a quiet sound, completely opposite to the raging roar of the waves on the other side of the prison wall. The thin, weak finger of a frail condemned prisoner tapping on a mossy wall certainly cannot create a great resounding sound. Not for his fellow prisoners in the same solitary confinement. Not for the jailers. Much less for those who are not in prison. It is not a sound for the ears, but a sound for perception, for wisdom. That sound, that rhythmic tapping, is not due to the strength of muscles, of violence aimed at knocking down the mossy wall and destroying the prison, but it has a great spiritual power to lift people above all prisons: the power of enlightenment, of awareness.

31. Tống biệt hành

*Một bước đường thôi nhưng núi cao
Trời ơi mây trắng đọng phương nào
Đò ngang neo bến đầy sương sớm
Cạn hết ân tình, nước lạnh sao?*

*Một bước đường xa, xa biển khơi
Mấy trùng sương mỏng nhuộm tơ trời
Thuyền chưa ra bến bình minh đỏ
Nhưng mấy nghìn năm tống biệt rồi.*

*Cho hết đêm hè trông bóng ma
Tàn thu khói mộng trắng Ngân hà
Trời không ngưng gió chờ sương đọng
Nhưng mấy nghìn sau ố nhạt nhòa*

*Cho hết mùa thu biệt lữ hành
Rừng thu mưa máu dạt lều tranh
Ta so phấn nhụy trên màu úa
Trên phím dương cầm, hay máu xanh*

Farewell

Just one step, yet the mountain stands high,
Oh heavens, where do the white clouds stagnate?
Boats lie anchored, laden with morning fog,
Is the water icy cold, affection dried up?

A long journey, far from the open sea,
Layers of thin mist paint the sky's silk,
The boat hasn't left the dock, but the dawn sky starts to
bleed,
Thousands of years have passed since the last farewell.

Let the summer night be spent in watching ghostly shadows,
Late autumn's dream smoke whitens the Milky Way,
While restless wind does not wait for the mist to gather,
After thousands of years, only faded stains remain.

An autumn has passed since the traveler's farewell,
Blood-soaked autumn rain lashes against my thatched hut,
Should I compare the pollen on the dying blooms,
With the piano keys or the green blood?

Explanation

Just one step, yet the mountain stands high in the way, the boats are laden with fog, the water is icy cold.

Just one step, but the open sea is a lifetime away.

Just one step, but for many Vietnamese people in those years, 1975–1981, it was a desperate gamble, a flight from death across mountains and oceans. After Saigon fell, escape was the only thought – across borders, across the sea. They said even electric poles would flee if they had legs. Crossing the ocean in those tiny boats was a near impossible feat. Hundreds of thousands – no one knows the true number, but according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, between 200,000 and 600,000 boat people died at sea – perished in those waters, swallowed by the sea. A tragedy beyond measure! ²²

²² On a sorrowful personal note, my youngest brother was one of these unfortunates. His tragic death devastated my mother, who passed away a few months later, unable to bear the grief.

The fourth stanza reveals that an autumn has passed since the traveler departed his thatched hut. But during that autumn, his thatched hut in the forest was destroyed by the blood-soaked rain.

In the last two verses,

*Ta so phấn nhụy trên màu úa
Trên phím dương cầm, hay máu xanh*

Should I compare the pollen on the dying blooms,
With the piano keys or the green blood?

he wants to know whether he should draw a parallel between the dying flowers' pollen to the piano keys, pondering the contrast between black and white, i.e., between good and evil, light and darkness, or to the enduring nature of hope in the green blood.

The green blood described in this poem represents his hope for a better future for his homeland.

The staggering number of lives lost meant little to the communist dictators. Mao Zedong himself, while in Moscow, infamously declared his willingness to sacrifice over 300 million Chinese lives for the cause of revolution. Yet, when his own son perished in the Korean War, his callous facade cracked. As he received the news, he sat motionless, his gaze fixed on a pack of cigarettes on the tea table. He slowly picked up the pack and tried to take out a cigarette but he couldn't do it; he tried again, and again he failed. (Michael Lynch, Mao, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004)

32. Trầm mặc

*Anh ôm chồng sách cũ
Trầm mặc những đêm dài
Xót xa đời lữ khách
Mệnh yếu thế mà hay*

Contemplation

He embraces a pile of old books,
Lost in thought through long, contemplative nights.
Grieving for the traveler's fate,
So brief a life, yet better so.

Explanation

The old books symbolize accumulated wisdom and experiences, perhaps prompting the subject to ponder life's deeper questions. The image of a solitary figure surrounded by old books creates a mood of quiet contemplation and introspection. The long, contemplative nights suggest a prolonged period of introspection. Through several contemplative nights, the scholar feels *grieving for the traveler's fate*. Given that the traveler's life could be metaphorical, referring to the journey of life itself, this line hints at a sense of empathy for the transient nature of human existence.

The final line suggests a paradoxical thought: life is incredibly fragile, yet it's better so. There seems to be a certain kind of both meaninglessness and absurdity in this verse; meaninglessness like life itself and absurdity like such a thought itself. But this is Nāgārjuna's viewing of

life: A sense of vagueness and impossibility pervades, a vagueness as broad as life and an impossibility as deep as thought.

In *Triết học về tánh Không* (Philosophy of Nothingness), Thầy writes:

There seems to be a certain kind of floating and impossibility; floating like life itself and impossible like thought itself. Nāgārjuna emerges from the mist of dawn and late afternoon sunlight, then disappears into the mist of dawn and late afternoon sunlight. Like sunlight, like a dream, like a city in the desert: all arising, existing, and ceasing are like this...

Since the advent of Nāgārjuna in South India, eighteen centuries have passed. Throughout three-quarters of Asia, the philosophy of nothingness (Śūnyatā) has become an exceedingly sharp weapon, equipped for a philosophy specialized in destruction. For its opponents, destruction is destruction. But its proponents say that destruction is actually construction. For both, destruction is something to be feared and avoided. In truth, what truth was Nāgārjuna intentionally defending with the weapon of nothingness? People have long thought that nothingness itself was that truth. For, with very solid textual evidence, one can find that Nāgārjuna himself considered means and ends to be one. In other words, the truth of nothingness itself protects itself, defends itself.

33. Từ rừng sâu

*Rừng sâu nọ vẫn mơ màng phố thị,
Tình yêu xa như khói thuốc trưa hè.
Trong quăng vắng khúc nhạc sầu tư lự,
Chợt cảm thù dồn dập đuổi anh đi.
Em đứng đó hận Trường Sơn mưa lũ,
Một phương trời mây trắng nhuộm quanh đê*

From deep forests

The deep forest dreams of the city's bustle,
Its love is as distant as midsummer' smoke.
A sorrowful tune fills the empty forest corner.
It suddenly shifts sharply, a hate-filled force, driving him
away.
She stands there, resentful of the Trường Sơn's rains and
floods,
The sky, blanketed in white clouds, surrounds the dike.

Explanation

This poem is a query, questioning why when he (probably Thầy) is chased away from his forest, but his lover (probably his homeland's people) only stands there, resentful of the Trường Sơn's rains and floods, instead of actively seeking a solution.

The final image of *the sky, blanketed in white clouds, surrounds the dike* provides a serene backdrop to the emotional turmoil, creating a sense of contrast and irony.

34. Tự tình

*Còn nghe được tiếng ve sầu
Còn yêu đốm lửa đêm sâu bập bùng
Quê nhà trên đỉnh Trường Sơn
Cho ta gửi một nỗi hờn thiên thu.*

Self-reflection

Still hearing the cicadas' chants,
Still loving the flickering flames of the night,
My homeland on the peak of Trường Sơn,
To you, I confide my thousand-year-long resentment.

Explanation

Thầy's sorrow still lingers on the peak of Trường Sơn. Yet, he sowed the belief that the day our country will break free from the shackles of Communism will come.

The distinguished scholar Phạm Quỳnh ²³ had the immortal but controversial saying:

*Truyện Kiều còn, tiếng ta còn;
Tiếng ta còn, nước ta còn.*

²³ Phạm Quỳnh (1892–1945) was a cultural scholar, journalist, writer, and high-ranking official in the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945, although beginning in 1883, Vietnam gradually became a French colony). He served as the longtime editor of *Nam Phong* (Southern Wind) magazine, where he aimed to promote East-West cultural exchange, and to enrich the Vietnamese language. He was a pioneer in promoting the use of the Romanized Vietnamese language, in lieu of the Nôm script. He was killed by the Communists in 1945.

Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

As long as *The Tale of Kiều* endures, our language endures.
As long as our language endures, our nation endures.

Thầy Tuệ Sỹ conveyed a similar concept but in a more poetic sentiment:

*Còn nghe được tiếng ve sầu
Còn yêu đóm lửa đêm sâu bập bùng.*

Still hearing the cicadas' chants,
Still loving the flickering flames of the night.

Or, in an attempt to remind us of our heroic anthem: the Eastern World's endless love song.

*Anh cúi xuống nghe núi rừng hợp tấu,
Bản tình ca vô tận của Đông phương*

He crouched down to listen to the symphony played by our mountains and forests
The Eastern World's endless love song.

Volume 3

Ngục trung mị ngữ | Somniloquies in prison

Ngục trung mị ngữ (Những lời nói mê sáng trong tù, Somniloquies in prison) is a collection of 18 poems, part of a larger collection of 50 poems written during his first imprisonment from 1978 to 1981. Unfortunately, the remaining 32 poems have been lost. The Most Venerable wrote these poems in Chinese characters with Vietnamese phonetic transcriptions. I translate them into Vietnamese poetry and English.

Time of composition: 1981–1984.

Reference: *Ngục trung mị ngữ*, published by Quảng Hương từng thư in 1988.

1. Trách lung

窄籠

窄籠猶自在
散步若閑遊
笑話獨影響
空消永日囚

Trách lung

*Trách lung do tự tại
Tán bộ nhược nhàn du
Tiếu thoại độc ảnh hưởng
Không tiêu vĩnh nhật tù.*

Lồng hẹp

Thanh thần tự tại thông dong
Nhàn nhã tản bộ bên trong nhà tù
Một mình cười nói vô tư
Ngày trong lồng hẹp nhẹ như bên ngoài.

Narrow cage

Finding serenity in this narrow cage,
I paced a leisurely stroll.
Smiling and whispering to myself,
I transcended endless prison days.

Explanation

In the book *Ngục trung mị ngữ* (Somniloquies in prison) published by Quảng Hương Tùng Thư in 1988, the last

character in the poem, in the Chinese character section, Thầy writes 囚, meaning *tù* (imprisonment). However, in the Vietnamese phonetic section, Thầy writes *sầu*, meaning sadness. The Chinese character for *sầu* is 愁.

Based on the Chinese character in the original text and considering his state of mind, *nhật tù* (daily imprisonment) might be a possible reading ²⁴.

Reading this poem, regardless of whether the last word is *sầu* or *tù*, I don't perceive any fear by the prisoner Tuệ Sỹ, and strangely, I also don't detect any resentment towards those who imprisoned him.

The poem explores themes of confinement, freedom, and the human spirit. Thầy is able to find peace and contentment even within the confines of a “narrow cage”, suggesting a deep inner strength and a capacity for resilience.

His message is one of compassion, resilience, inner peace, and the power of humor, but beneath it, I sense an undercurrent, “when the opportunity arises, laughter and shouts will erupt, turning everyday life upside down”, as clearly as expressed in the Introduction section Thầy writes for the book *Vô Môn Quan* (Wumen Guan, often known as The Gateless Gate) translated to Vietnamese by Professor

²⁴ This book *Ngục trung mị ngữ* (Somniloquies in prison) published in 1988 by Quảng Hương Tùng Thư includes 18 poems of *Ngục trung mị ngữ* and 31 poems of the volume *Giấc mơ Trường Sơn* (Dreams on the peak of Trường Sơn). All of these poems are handwritten by Thầy, rendering it an invaluable treasure.

Trần Tuân Mẫn. This book was originally compiled by Zen Master Wumen Huikai, and published in 1228²⁵.

Below is the moving *Introduction* by Thầy to Professor Trần Tuân Mẫn's book *Wumen Guan*:

Once upon a time, in the halls of Zen monasteries, one could hear the resounding sounds of laughter and shouts. Countless intricate arguments were cast aside like grains of sand on the vast Asian deserts, where countless souls had endured arduous journeys in their quest for the absolute. Here, the desert remained eternally solitary, swept by the blistering winds of nothingness. The meaning of life and death continued to drift aimlessly in the void. Hearts burned with fervent passion, yet could not consume the terrifying dreams of nothingness and annihilation. And then, one day, when the time was right, laughter and shouts would erupt, turning everyday life upside down...

One morning, a visitor came to the temple and gave me a Vietnamese manuscript of the book *Vô Môn Quan* (Wumen Guan). It was as if a tiny ember, buried in the

²⁵ *Wumen Guan* (Vô Môn Quan) is a collection of 48 Zen koans, each accompanied by a commentary and a verse by Wumen Huikai (1183–1260).

In Chinese, *Wumen* (無門) literally means no gate, and *Guan* (關) means the checkpoint at the border, therefore, the title *Wumen Guan* is more accurately translated as “The Gateless Barrier” or “The Gateless Checkpoint”, rather than the popular name “The Gateless Gate”. However, this paradoxical title seems fit to reflect the Zen Buddhist idea that enlightenment cannot be attained through conventional means or by seeking a specific entrance.

cold ashes of the hearth, was rekindled. This happened amidst the heavy weight of old age and the irreversible decline of health, yet it was not enough to fully thaw the frost within me. I hastily write these words to express my gratitude to all beings for this accidental encounter in a rare lifetime. And I am grateful for the drops of Caoxi ²⁶ blood that flow in the rich and strange melody of the Vietnamese language, a gift brought to me as if from a thousand generations.

*Đá mòn nhưng dạ chẳng mòn
Tào Khê nước chảy vẫn còn trơ trơ.*

Though stones wear away, the heart does not
The water of Caoxi river still flows on.
(Vietnamese folk poem)

To provide a glimpse into the book's worth, here's an excerpt from the fifth koan:

Xiangyan said:

- It is like a man over a precipice one thousand feet high, he is hanging himself there with a branch of a tree between his teeth, the feet are far off the ground, and his hands are not taking hold of anything. Suppose another man coming to him to propose a question, "What is the meaning of the First Patriarch Bodhidharma's coming from the west?" If this man would open the mouth to

²⁶ Caoxi (Tào Khê) is the name of a small river located in Guangdong Province, China. It's home to the ancient Paolin Temple, which was once the major spiritual center of Master Huineng (638–713), the sixth patriarch of Chinese Zen Buddhism.

answer, he is sure to fall and lose his life; but if he makes no answer, he must be said to ignore the inquirer. At this critical moment what should he do?”

Wumen commented:

Even if your eloquence flows like a river, it is of no use. Even if you can expound the whole body of the sūtras, it is of no avail. If you can respond to it fittingly, you will give life to those who have been dead, and put to death those who have been alive. If, however, you are unable to do this, wait for Maitreya (TN: the future Buddha of this world, commonly believed to be the direct successor of Śākyamuni Buddha) to come and ask him.

Wumen’s verse:

*Xiangyan is really outrageous,
His perversity knows no limits;
He silences the monk,
Turning his entire body into the glaring eyes of a demon.*

(Excerpted with minor modification from *The Story of Zen*, by Richard Bryan McDaniel, published by The Sumeru Press, 2019)

This koan refers to Xiangyan’s quote or koan, but his journey to enlightenment is extraordinarily noteworthy.

Xiangyan Zhixian (?–898) and Guishan Lingyou (771–853) were both students of Baizhang Huaihai (720–814).

Before coming to Baizhang, Xiangyan had devoted himself to the study of the Chinese classics as well as the traditional Buddhist scriptures, and he acquired a reputation for

scholarship. He kept copious notes on his studies and was known to have a ready answer to every question he was asked.

After Baizhang died, Xiangyan presented himself to Guishan, who had been declared the master's dharma successor, and, even though they were about the same age, Xiangyan asked to be accepted as a disciple. Guishan, however, was reluctant to grant the request.

“When we were both disciples of our late master”, Guishan said, “you were said to be able to give ten answers to a single question. This, however, isn't the way of Zen. Such intellectual attainments only result in an abstract or analytical comprehension, which really isn't of much use. Still, perhaps you do have some insight into the truth of Zen. So, tell me: what is your true self, your original self before your mother gave birth to you, before you came to know east from west?”

Xiangyan was unsure how to reply to this question but ventured a number of attempts, each of which Guishan dismissed. Finally, he said, “Please, then, teach me. Show me this original self.”

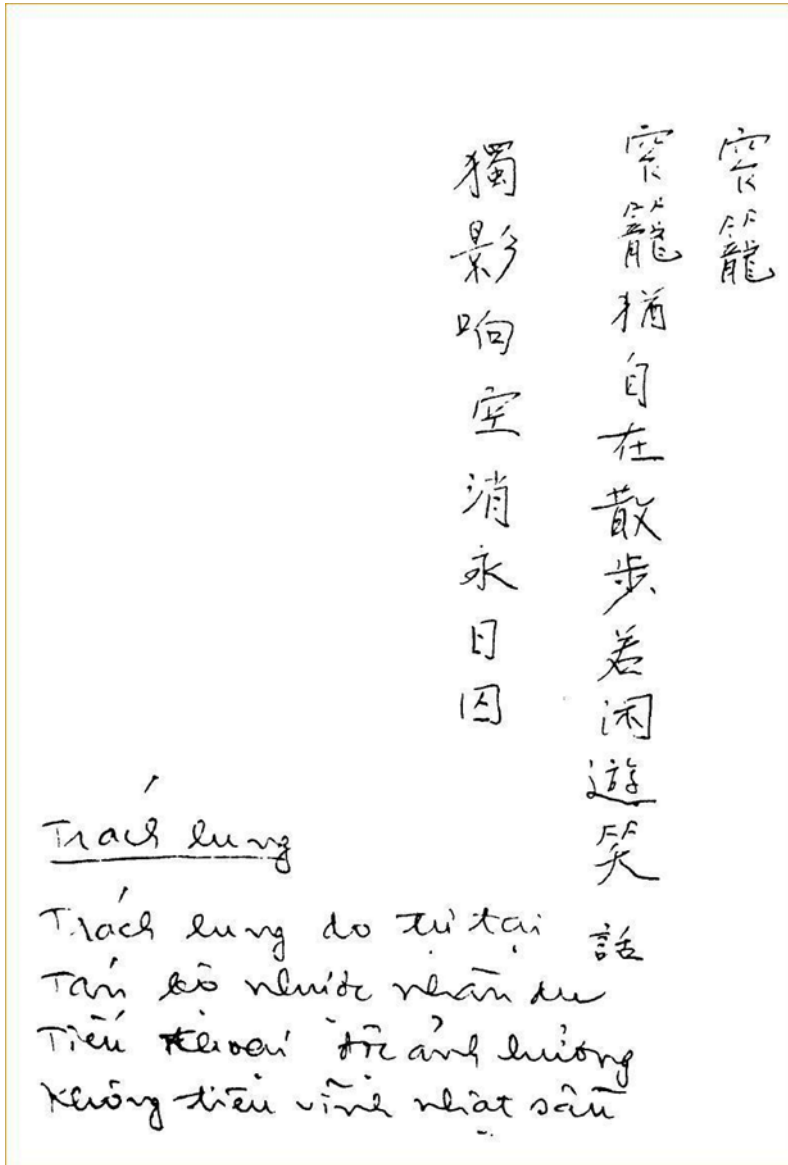
“I've nothing to give you,” Guishan told him. “Even if I tried to instruct you, that would only provide you an opportunity to ridicule me later on. After all, whatever I have is my own and can never be yours. How can that be of any help to you?”

Xiangyan retired to his quarters, where he searched through the books and notes he had collected over the years, but nothing he found in them helped him understand what

Guishan was asking for when he demanded him to “show” his original self.

“A picture of rice cakes will never satisfy hunger”, he admitted to himself. Then he gathered all his papers together, took them outside, and set fire to them. “What’s the use of studying Buddhism, so difficult to comprehend and too subtle to receive instruction from another?” he said to himself. “I’ll become a simple monk, abiding by the precepts, with no desire to try to master things too deep for thought”.

He left Baizhang’s temple that day and traveled to a mountain, where he built a grass hut to live in. One day, as he was sweeping the grounds with a broom, a stone he cleared away struck a bamboo stalk. The sound, sharp and hollow, was clear in his attention, and the moment he heard it, he came to a deep awakening. He was speechless for a moment, then broke out laughing. He bowed in the direction of Guishan’s temple. Then he traveled to see the man who had refused to teach him. “Your kindness to me was greater than even that of my parents,” Xiangyan told Guishan. “Had you tried to explain this truth to me in words, I would never be where I am now”.



The handwriting of Thầy Tuệ Sỹ, copied from the book *Ngục trung mị ngữ*, published by Quảng Hương Tùng Thư in 1988, reveals that the final character in the Chinese section is 囚, meaning imprisonment, whereas in the Vietnamese section, it is sâu, meaning sadness.

2. Tảo thượng tẩy tịnh

早上洗净

早起出洗净
從容立片蔘
自有神仙態
何須山水為

Tảo thượng tẩy tịnh

Tảo khởi xuất tẩy tịnh
Thung dung lập phiến thỉ
Tư hữu thần tiên thái
Hà tu sơn thủy vi

Sáng sớm rửa mặt

Sáng sớm dậy ra ngoài rửa mặt,
Chút thời gian khoảnh khắc thanh nhàn.
Núi cao, biển rộng chẳng màng,
Thần tiên tự tại cao sang nơi này.

Face washing in the early morning

Washing my face in the early morning,
Such a peaceful moment!
It made me feel like a celestial being.
Who needs high mountains or vast seas?

Explanation

We often assume that only gods and spirits dwell in mountains or oceans, yet the history of Zen is filled with stories of monks who retreated to these remote places for their practice.

The Sixth Patriarch, Huineng, lived in seclusion in the forest with a group of hunters after leaving Huangmei. He lived in obscurity, unknown to anyone, for fifteen years.

The State Preceptor, Nanyue Huizhong, spent ten years in seclusion. Word of his retreat spread far and wide, reaching the ears of the king, who sent urgent envoys to invite him back. Only then did he descend from the mountain.

Guishan Lingyou (refer to pages 201–203, 379 and 382–383), a disciple of Baizhang Huaihai at age 23 and the abbot of Baizhang’s temple at age 28 after his master’s death, left Baizhang’s temple at age 34 to go on a spiritual journey in a remote wilderness with monkeys and deer. But eventually, his fame spread, people came seeking him out, grand monasteries sprang up around him, and he became a great master leading a sangha of 1,500 monks.

In the third series of *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, pages 277–279, Professor Daisetz Suzuki explains the purpose of spiritual practice, whether it’s done in the mountains or not.

|| The Bodhisattva’s desire is to benefit the world, to give happiness to the world, to stir within himself a compassionate heart for the world. Therefore, when he realizes in himself the supreme enlightenment, he vows to become the world’s great benefactor, protector,

refuge, dwelling-house, ultimate path, isle of retreat, illumination, leader, and passage-way.

Thus, the Bodhisattva is no retiring, negative soul always wishing to flee from the world for his own perfection and enlightenment: but he is a most aggressive rescuer of the world; he positively works upon it to yield the result he wishes from his active contact with it. ...

In the feeling of fellow-love there is no thought of superiority, no thought of separation or of exclusiveness, which keeps one from another as distinct in some fundamental and irreconcilable manner.

The following dialogue between Purnamitrayasputra and Śāriputra, quoted from the *Mahaprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, (Bát Nhã Ba-la-mật-đa Tâm kinh, but commonly known as Tâm kinh in Vietnamese), gives us an idea as to the reason why the Bodhisattva feels compassionate towards his fellow-beings who are not fully enlightened.

Purnamitrayasputra asked Śāriputra: “Should the Bodhisattva pay respect only to other Bodhisattvas and not to all beings generally?”

Śāriputra replied: “The Bodhisattva should respect all beings just as much as he does the Tathāgata.

The Bodhisattva is to think in this wise: When I attain enlightenment, I will instruct all sentient beings in the essence of the dharma in order to make them cut off their evil passions and realize nirvana, or attain enlightenment and rest in peace and happiness, or

become fully emancipated from the pain of the evil paths.

The Bodhisattva should thus awaken a great compassionate feeling towards all beings and keep his mind completely free from arrogance and self-conceit, and let him feel in this wise: I will practice all the skillful means in order to make all sentient beings realize that which is the foremost in themselves, i.e., their Buddha-nature”.

A Zen master may retreat to the mountains for spiritual practice, but they must eventually descend and engage with the world. They cannot evade their responsibility to the world. They must engage with a compassionate heart for all beings, free from arrogance, ego, and dogmatism.

This attitude of responsibility guided Thầy’s actions a few days before April 1st, 1975. As Nha Trang was abandoned, he went to the General Hospital with his monastic students. They cared for the remaining patients since no doctors or nurses were on duty. When someone suggested evacuation amidst the chaos, Thầy resolutely said: “Our homeland and our country need us more than ever. We cannot flee when our nation and our religion are in such a state of ruin.”

Critic Nguyễn Giác (poet Phan Tấn Hải), in his work *Khoảnh khắc chiêm bao* (A dreamlike moment), positively evaluates Thầy’s actions as follows:

This is the moment that marks Thầy’s firm decision to stay on in his homeland. The nation and the dharma still need Thầy’s presence. As long as the nation is suffering and the homeland is in distress, there will always be

hands and minds like Thầy's to till the soil, sow seeds of love, to lessen hatred, to show that on the homeland there are still beautiful flowers blooming, adding fragrance and color to the barren fields and withered reeds. Thầy is the embodiment of the flower of love, vowing to stay and share the suffering with the suffering of the nation, vowing to enter the place of misery, of storms and tempests, to bring the boat of the dharma to a peaceful shore. Thầy's staying has many meanings of a Taoist, a poet, a scholar, and the heartfelt sentiment of a Vietnamese citizen. It is the key, the golden highlight of the historical journey of the nation and the dharma. Thầy stayed because there are still millions of people staying. ...

That is the vow of a Bodhisattva: to enter hell with sentient beings.

3. Cúng dường

供養

奉此獄囚飯
供養最勝尊
世間長血恨
秉鉢淚無言

Cúng dường

*Phụng thử ngục tù phạn
Cúng dường tối thắng tôn
Thế gian trường huyết hận
Binh bát lệ vô ngôn.*

Cúng dường

Hai tay nâng bát cao lương
Cúi đầu kính cẩn cúng dường Thế tôn
Thế gian máu hận thành sông
Ôm bát mà khóc nghẹn không ra lời.

Note: As Vietnam entered a new chapter in 1975, there was no rice, only sorghum. But the new government deceptively called it “cao lương” (高粱), which was a term Southerners used for delicious and rare delicacies.

Offerings

Lifting a bowl of prison rice,
I made an offering to the Enlightened One.
The world, awash in hatred, burdened my heart,
I choked back tears as I held the bowl.

Explanation

Critic Huỳnh Kim Quang, in *Độc thơ tù chữ Hán của Thầy Tuệ Sỹ* (Reading the Chinese prison poems by Thầy Tuệ Sỹ), *Chân Nguyên* magazine, No. 30, writes:

This poem describes a sacred and moving image: a monk in prison, at lunchtime, meticulously performing the ritual of receiving his meal. He raises his bowl of rice with both hands to make an offering to the Buddha before eating. As he lifts the bowl, he contemplates the suffering of all beings and his nation, feeling deep compassion and sorrow. The monk's own suffering will only cease when the suffering of all beings ends. This embodies the Bodhisattva's spirit of compassion.

Critic Nguyễn Giác (poet Phan Tấn Hải) adds the following comment,

This isn't merely a poem; it surpasses the limits of human language. It's like heavenly flowers raining onto a prison, allowing a monk to gather words and offer them to the Buddha. It's not words but tears, the pain of a body holding a bowl of rice, and the compassion felt when witnessing a world steeped in hatred. This monk then expresses gratitude to the Tathāgata.

What is the meaning and purpose of offerings in Buddhism? According to the Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Centre,

Offerings are the formal religious expression of the fundamental Buddhist virtue of giving. The perfection of giving, *dana-paramita* in Sanskrit, is the first of the six or

ten perfections ²⁷. It encompasses every kind of generosity, whether it involves a gift to those higher than ourselves, such as deities in the merit field, or the poor and needy, who are worse off than we are. ...

Whether the physical offerings benefit the recipient or not, from a Buddhist practitioner's point of view as a donor, they are essential means of reducing our attachment to the physical world. Attachment reinforces our notion of ourselves as real, independent selves to be satisfied by obtaining or clinging onto objects we desire. Making offerings accustoms the mind to giving and letting go of desirable objects. It serves to loosen our conception of a real and independent self. In this way, it contributes to our acquiring the essential wisdom realizing that all phenomena as empty of intrinsic existence. Without such realization we will not attain Buddhahood.

While the excerpt above describes various physical offerings, the Buddha emphasized that the most profound and beneficial offering is to the dharma itself. The Buddha explained to heavenly king Lokeśvara, "O heavenly king, know this: if a person were to hear this inconceivable Sūtra, believe in it, uphold it, recite it, and practice accordingly, his or her merit would surpass that of the former. To believe, uphold, recite, and practice is to offer the dharma. Heavenly king, understand this: offering the dharma is the

²⁷ The six perfections in Mahāyāna tradition are (1) generosity, (2) morality, (3) patience, (4) diligence, (5) concentration, and (6) wisdom, and the ten perfections in the Theravāda tradition are (1) generosity, (2) morality, (3) renunciation, (4) insight, (5) energy, (6) patience, (7) truthfulness, (8) resolution, (9) kindness, and (10) equanimity

supreme, most honorable, and incomparable of all offerings. Therefore, offer the dharma to the Buddhas.”

The Sūtra praised by the Buddha in the above paragraph is the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. Who was Vimalakīrti?

The passage from the Sūtra describes Vimalakīrti as follows:

In the city of Vaishali, there was a layman named Vimalakīrti, who had offered to countless Buddhas and planted deep roots of goodness, attained the unconditioned state, had the ability to debate without hindrance, displayed miraculous powers, mastered all the concentrations, and achieved fearlessness; he subdued all enemies and disturbances of Mara, had entered the profound dharma gate, was skillful in wisdom, proficient in various means, and had completed his great vows. He knew well the tendencies of beings' minds, and could distinguish between sharp and dull roots. For a long time, his mind had matured in the Buddha's path, and he had decided on the Mahāyāna. All his actions were based on correct thinking. Residing in the majesty of the Buddha, his mind was as vast as the ocean. He was praised by the Buddhas; the gods Indra and Brahma, and the world rulers all respected him.

With his endless wealth, he protected the suffering. With his pure precepts, he protected those who violated precepts. With the softness of patience, he protected those who were angry and fierce. With great diligence, he protected the lazy. With one-pointedness, meditation, and tranquility, he protected those with scattered minds. With immaculate wisdom, he protected the ignorant.

Although a layman, he followed all the pure rules of the Śramaṇa (TN: one who renounces worldly possessions and practices austerity). Although a white-robed (TN: layman), he was free and unattached to the three realms. Although he had a wife and children, he always lived a pure life.

Chapter 5 of the sūtra tells the story of when the Manjusri was sent by the Buddha to visit the sick Vimalakīrti, after other great disciples such as Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, Mahākāśyapa and Ananda refused to go because they all were overwhelmed by Vimalakīrti's spiritual stature.

Manjusri replied, “Lord, it is not easy to converse with such a superior person. For he has deeply penetrated the true nature of things, skillfully expounds the essential meanings of the dharma. His debating skills are flawless, his wisdom is unimpeded. He knows all the practices of bodhisattvas; he has entered the mysterious treasury of the Buddhas; he subdues all Mara with miraculous powers; his wisdom and means are perfectly accomplished. Nevertheless, I will obey your command and visit him.”

At that time, among the assembly, the bodhisattvas, the great disciples of the Buddha, all thought to themselves, “Now that the two great beings, Manjusri and Vimalakīrti, are meeting, they will surely speak profound dharma”. Therefore, they all wished to follow Manjusri.

In chapter 9 of the sūtra, Vimalakīrti asked the 32 present Bodhisattvas to present their understanding of non-duality.

I encourage my readers to read the following dichotomy of all of these 32 Bodhisattvas as each offers a unique

perspective of their understanding and realizing on the non-duality, based on their personal experience and insight, emphasizing different aspects of realization.

1. Śikṣasamuccaya said: “Birth and death are two. To comprehend that dharma is unborn, therefore, it cannot die, is to enter the non-duality.”

2. Śrīgupta said: “Self and possessions are two. If there is no self, there are no possessions. That is to enter the non-duality.”

3. Animisa said: “Perception and non-perception are two. If one does not perceive phenomena, then there is nothing to be gained. That is to enter the non-duality.”

4. Śrīkuṭa said: “Defilement and purity are two. Seeing the nature of defilement, there is no longer the appearance of purity. That is to enter the non-duality.”

5. Sunakṣatra said: “Movement and thought are two. Without movement, there is no thought. To reach this point is to enter the non-duality.”

6. Sunetra said: “Form and formlessness are two. To not cling to formlessness but to abide in equality is to enter the non-duality.”

7. Subāhu said: “The Bodhisattva mind and the Shravaka (TN: not endowed with bodhicitta) mind are two. To understand that there is no such thing as a Bodhisattva mind or a Shravaka mind is to enter the non-duality.”

8. Pusya said: “Good and evil are two. If one does not give rise to good or evil, one enters the non-duality.”

9. Siṃha said: “Sin and virtue are two. Understanding the nature of sin as not different from the nature of virtue, is to enter the non-duality.”

10. Siṃhamati said: “Defilement and purity are two. If one does not give rise to thoughts of defilement or purity, one enters the non-duality.”

11. Sukhādhimukta said: “Form and formlessness are two. If one leaves behind all distinctions, the mind is like empty space; that is to enter the non-duality.”

12. Narayana said: “The world and the transcendent are two, but understanding that the nature of the world and the transcendent is empty is to enter the non-duality.”

13. Dāntamati said: “Birth and death are two. To understand the nature of birth and death is to enter the non-duality.”

14. Pratyakṣadarśī said: “Limited and unlimited are two. In ultimate reality, both limited and unlimited are ultimately formless. In formlessness, there is no limited or unlimited. To enter this is to enter the non-duality.”

15. Samantagupta said: “Self and non-self are two. Seeing the true nature of self, dualistic thinking does not arise. That is to enter the non-duality.”

16. Vidyudeva said: “Enlightenment and ignorance are two. But the true nature of ignorance is enlightenment. Abiding in this equality is to enter the non-duality.”

17. Priyadarāno said: “Form and formlessness are two. Form itself is emptiness, because the nature of form is

emptiness itself. To understand this is to enter the non-duality.”

18. Prabhāketu said: “The four elements (TN: fire, water, earth and air) and the absence of elements are two. The nature of the four elements is the absence of elements. To penetrate this nature of the four elements is to enter the non-duality.”

19. Sumati said: “The eye and form are two. Likewise, the ear and sound, the nose and smell, the tongue and taste, the body and touch, and the mind and mental objects are two. If one knows the true nature of the mind, there is no arising of greed, hatred, or delusion. To abide in this is to enter the non-duality.”

20. Akṣayamati said: “Alms and dedicating all good deeds to the attainment of omniscience are two. But the nature of alms is itself the dedication to omniscience. To penetrate this single reality is to enter the non-duality.”

21. Gambīrabuddhi said: “Emptiness and actionlessness are two. But understanding that emptiness and actionlessness are without mind, without thought, and without consciousness is to enter the non-duality.”

22. Śāntendriya said: “The Buddha is the dharma. The dharma is the sangha. These three jewels, Buddha, dharma, and sangha, are formless, and so are all phenomena. To penetrate this is to enter the non-duality.”

23. Apraticakṣu said: “The body and the body’s cessation are two. When one penetrates the true nature of the body, there is no longer any arising of the concept of the body or

the cessation of the body. To abide in this without fear is to enter the non-duality.”

24. Suvinīta said: “The nature of body, speech, and mind is actionlessness. The actionlessness of these three actions is the actionlessness of all phenomena. If one can abide in such actionless wisdom, one enters the non-duality.”

25. Puṇyakṣetra said: “The true nature of virtuous actions, unvirtuous actions, and actions that are neither virtuous nor unvirtuous is emptiness. To not give rise to these three actions is to enter the non-duality.”

26. Padmavyūha said: “Duality arises from the self. When one sees the true nature of the self, this duality does not arise. When there is nothing to be cognized, one enters the non-duality.”

27. Śrīgarbha said: “The nature of that which is obtained is dualistic. If there is nothing to be obtained, then there is neither grasping nor letting go. To not grasp and not let go is to enter the non-duality.”

28. Candrottara said: “Darkness and light are two. When one enters the cessation of feelings, perceptions, and volitions, there is no more darkness or light. To abide in this equality is to enter the non-duality.”

29. Ratnamudrāhasta said: “The joy of nirvana and the lack of joy in the world are two. Without binding and without release, there is neither liking nor disliking; that is to enter the non-duality.”

30. Maṅikūṭarāja said: “The right path and the wrong path are two. One who abides in the right path does not differentiate between the right and the wrong. To leave behind these two extremes is to enter the non-duality.”

31. Satyanand said: “Truth and falsehood are two. One who sees the truth does not even consider it to be true, much less that is false. Why? It is something that the physical eye cannot see, only the eye of wisdom can perceive. But when the eye of wisdom does not see, nor does it not see, that is to enter the non-duality.”

32. Manjusri said: “In my view, regarding all phenomena, there is no speaking, no explaining, no pointing out, and no cognizing; it transcends questioning. That is to enter the non-duality.”

Then Manjusri asked Vimalakīrti, “We have each spoken. Please, Sir, tell us what it is like for a Bodhisattva to enter the non-duality?”

At that time, Vimalakīrti remained silent.

Manjusri praised, “Well said, well said! When there are no more words or speech, that is truly to enter the non-duality.”

This is referred to as Vimalakīrti’s “thunderous silence”.

4. Biệt cấm phòng

別禁房

我居空處一重天
我界虛無真個禪
無物無人無甚事
坐觀天女散花綿

Biệt cấm phòng

*Ngã cư không xứ nhất trùng thiên
Ngã giới hư vô chân cá thiền
Vô vật vô nhân vô thậm sự
Tọa quan thiên nữ tán hoa miên.*

Phòng biệt giam

Ta nhập thiền cõi trời cao
Chân thiền: cảnh giới không vào, không ra
Không người, không vật, không ta
Ngồi xem thiên nữ rắc hoa chúc mừng.

Solitary confinement cell

In this celestial realm, I reside.
My world is the void, the true essence of Zen,
Where objects, human beings, and essence are all but
empty.
I sit in stillness, watching celestial maidens scatter
flowers.

Explanation

This poem paints a vivid picture of a bodhisattva's mental fortitude and detachment from worldly suffering. Even in the confines of a solitary prison cell, a bodhisattva can find inner peace and tranquility. The image of celestial maidens scattering flowers symbolizes divine blessings or spiritual enlightenment, which the bodhisattva is able to appreciate regardless of their circumstances.

This is the hallmark of a Bodhisattva. How could one be incarcerated and still find peace?

According to the shorter version, only 280 words including the title, of the *Heart Sūtra* (Prajñā-pāramitā Sūtra in Sanskrit, Bát-nhã Ba-la-mật-đa tâm kinh in Vietnamese),

Avalokiteshvara bodhisattva, when practicing deeply the Prajñā-pāramitā, perceived that all five skandhas are not real, therefore, was saved from all sufferings²⁸.

How can we perceive that all five skandhas (form, feeling, perception, concept, and consciousness) are not real, just illusions? Quoted from chapter 2 of the full version of the sūtra:

At that time, the heavenly kings thought to themselves: “Who can understand what Subhuti is saying?”

²⁸ In Vietnamese, Quán Tự Tại Bồ Tát hành thâm Bát nhã Ba la mật đa thời, chiếu kiến ngũ uẩn giai không, độ nhứt thiết khổ ách; Bồ-tát Quán Tự Tại khi thực hành thâm sâu Bát-nhã Ba-la-mật-đa, soi thấy năm uẩn đều là không, do đó thoát khỏi mọi khổ đau ách nạn.

Subhuti, knowing their thoughts, said to them: “Those who see all dharmas as not real can understand what I am saying; the hearing itself is also not real, and the attainment is also not real”.

The heavenly kings thought: “If the hearers are like illusions, then sentient beings are also like illusions. From the stage of stream-entry ²⁹ up to the unsurpassed Buddhahood, all are like illusions”.

Subhuti, knowing their thoughts, said to them: “I say that sentient beings are like illusions, like dreams: The stages of stream-entry, once-returner, non-returner, arhat, and even unsurpassed Buddhahood are also like illusions, like dreams. Nirvana is also like an illusion, like a dream”.

The heavenly kings said: “Great Subhuti, are you saying that the Buddha dharma is also like an illusion, like a

²⁹ Four stages of awakening, according to Theravāda Buddhism:

- Stream-entry (Srotāpanna in Sanskrit, Tu-đà-hoàn in Vietnamese): this person is free to be reborn in the lower realms.

- Once-returner (Sakadāgāmi in Sanskrit, Tu-đà-hàm in Vietnamese): this person will be reborn once more to the human realm.

- Non-returner (Anāgāmi in Sanskrit, A-na-hàm in Vietnamese): this person is not reborn into the human realm, but into the celestial realms.

- Arhat (Arhat in Sanskrit, A-la-hán in Vietnamese): this person has attained nirvana, thereby free from saṃsāra, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

dream, and nirvana is also like an illusion, like a dream?”

Subhuti said: “O heavenly kings, even if there were a dharma higher than nirvana, I would still say it is like an illusion, like a dream. O heavenly kings, illusions and nirvana are not two, not different”.

What do we see in this passage when Subhuti explains that the hearing itself is not real, and the attainment is also not real? Are we surprised to read that Subhuti defines sentient beings as illusions, like dreams, that all stages of enlightenment are like illusions, like dreams, and even nirvana is like an illusion, like a dream? Yet, Subhuti goes even further by asserting that if there were a dharma higher than nirvana, it would also be like an illusion, like a dream.

700 years later, Nāgārjuna ³⁰ also said, “There is no difference between saṃsāra and nirvana”.

In the book *Triết học về tánh Không* (Philosophy of Nothingness), Thầy Tuệ Sỹ explains:

The *Middle Way* states: “If one does not rely on conventional truth, one cannot attain ultimate truth. If one does not attain ultimate truth, one cannot understand the dharma”. Within the realm of logic, conventional truth here refers to language. The value of language does

³⁰ Nāgārjuna (circa 150–250) was the 14th Patriarch of Indian Buddhism. He developed the doctrine of the *Middle Way* (Mādhyamakārikā), defeating all philosophical arguments of Buddhism at that time. His contributions significantly developed Buddhist thought, especially Zen Buddhism.

not lie in its success, but in its failure to express the absolute. It is precisely due to this failure that language gives rise to the Middle Way. The non-verbal philosophy of the Middle Way cannot be superficially understood as a desire to move towards the absolute by completely eliminating all forms of language.

Logicians, when seeking the success of language to create a correspondence between the process of symbols and the process of absolute reality, are essentially adopting a naive realist attitude, overly trusting in obvious experience.

Distinguishing between names and reality, on the basis of both difference and non-difference, is the entry point into the philosophy of the Middle Way. Because reality only exists through conventional names, Nāgārjuna often says that phenomena are like dreams or illusions.

So, what is nothingness after all?

When Jayatilleke, in his book *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, used the tetralemma (*A is B, A is not B, A is both B and not B, A is neither B nor not B*) to try to answer the question of what nothingness is, Thây said he was off track from the start.

This is how Thây beautifully addressed the question of what nothingness is. He uses language in such a way that the reader must leave language to understand:

Nothingness is when a summer butterfly lands on a flower, folds its wings, and sways with the wind of the grass and forest flowers.

What a wonderful answer!

The following article, written by Professor Maria Montenegro, brilliantly explains this famous statement of Nāgārjuna that “If one does not rely on conventional truth, one cannot attain ultimate truth”, excerpted from the book *The Joy of Living*, Yale University published in 2009.

Suppose in the dream you're driving along when suddenly another car smashes into you. The front of your car is completely ruined and you've broken one of your legs. In the dream, your mood would probably shift immediately from happiness to despair. Your car's been ruined, and your broken leg is causing tremendous pain. You might even begin to cry in the dream, and when you wake up your pillow might be wet with tears.

Now I'm going to ask a question, but not a difficult one: Is the car in the dream real or not?

The answer, of course, is that it is not. No engineers designed the car, and no factory built it. It isn't made of the various parts that constitute an actual car, or of the molecules and atoms that make up each of the different parts of a car. Yet, while dreaming, you experience the car as something quite real. In fact, you relate to everything in your dreams as real, and you respond to your experiences with very real thoughts and emotions. But, no matter how real your dream experiences may seem, they can't be said to exist inherently, can they? When you wake up, the dream ceases and everything you perceived in the dream dissolves into emptiness: the infinite possibility for anything to occur.

The Buddha taught that, in the same way, every form of experience is an appearance arising from the infinite possibility of emptiness. As stated in the *Heart Sūtra*, one of the most famous of the Buddha's teachings:

Form is emptiness.

Emptiness is form.

Emptiness is nothing other than form.

Form is nothing other than emptiness.

In modern terms, you might say:

A dream car is a not-inherently-real car.

A not-inherently-real car is a dream car.

A dream car is nothing other than a not-inherently-real car.

A not-inherently-real car is nothing other than a dream car.

Of course, it may be argued that the things you experience in waking life and the events you experience in a dream can't logically be compared. After all, when you wake from a dream, you don't really have a broken leg or a wrecked car in the driveway. If you got into an accident in waking life, though, you might find yourself in the hospital and facing thousands of dollars' worth of damage to your car.

Nevertheless, the basis of your experience is the same in dreams and in waking life: thoughts, feelings, and sensations that vary according to changing conditions. If you bear this comparison in mind, whatever you experience in waking life begins to lose its power to affect you. Thoughts are just thoughts. Feelings are just

feelings. Sensations are just sensations. They come and go in waking life as quickly and easily as they do in dreams.

Everything you experience is subject to change according to changing conditions. If even a single condition is changed, the form of your experience will change. Without a dreamer, there would be no dream. Without the mind of the dreamer, there would be no dream. If the dreamer were not sleeping, there would be no dream. All these circumstances have to come together in order for a dream to occur.

The concept of emptiness mentioned in the above article is brilliantly explained by Most Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–2022) in his book *Awakening of the Heart: Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries*, quoted below.

If I am holding a cup of water and I ask you, “Is this cup empty?”, you will say, “No, it is full of water.” But if I pour out the water and ask you again, you may say, “Yes, it is empty.” But empty of what? Empty means empty of something. The cup cannot be empty of nothing. “Empty” doesn’t mean anything unless you know “empty of what?” My cup is empty of water, but it is not empty of air. To be empty is to be empty of something. This is quite a discovery. When Avalokita (TN: also known as heavenly king Lokeśvara) says that the five skandhas (TN: form, feeling, perception, mental formations or concept, and consciousness) are equally empty, to help him be precise we must ask, “Mr. Avalokita, empty of what?”

The five skandhas, which may be translated into English as five heaps, or five aggregates, are the five elements that comprise a human being. These five elements flow like a river in every one of us. In fact, these are really five rivers flowing together in us: the river of form, which means our bodies; the river of feelings; the river of perceptions; the river of mental formations; and the river of consciousness. They are always flowing in us. So according to Avalokita, when he looked deeply into the nature of these five rivers, he suddenly saw that all five are empty.

If we ask, “empty of what?” he has to answer. And this is what he said: “They are empty of a separate self.” That means none of these five rivers can exist by itself alone. Each of the five rivers has to be made by the other four. It has to coexist; it has to inter-be with all the others...

Form is the wave and emptiness is the water. To understand this, we have to think differently than many of us who were raised in the West were trained to think. In the West, when we draw a circle, we consider it to be zero, nothingness. But in India and many other Asian countries, a circle means totality, wholeness. The meaning is the opposite. So “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form” is like wave is water, water is wave. “Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness,” because these contain each other. Because one exists, everything exists.

In the Vietnamese literary canon, there are two lines of poetry by a twelfth-century Zen master of the Lý dynasty that say:

If the cosmos exists, then the smallest speck of dust exists.

If the smallest speck of dust doesn't exist, then the whole cosmos doesn't exist. ³¹

The poet means that the notions of existence and nonexistence are just created by our minds. He also said that “the entire cosmos can be put on the tip of a hair,”

³¹ It's the poem 有空 (*Hữu Không*, Existence and Non-existence) by Vietnamese Zen Master Từ Đạo Hạnh (1072–1116):

作有塵沙有
為空一切空
有空如水月
勿著有空空

*Tác hữu trần sa hữu,
Vi không nhất thiết không.
Hữu, không như thủy nguyệt,
Vật trước hữu không không*

If one sees that there is existence, then even dust and sand have existence

If one sees that there is non-existence, then everything is non-existent

Existence and non-existence are like the moon's reflection in water
Do not cling to existence nor non-existence.

Translated into Vietnamese poem by Zen Master Huyền Quang (1254–1334), the third patriarch of the Trúc Lâm Zen sect:

*Có thì có tụi mây may
Không thì cả thế gian này cũng không
Kìa xem bóng nguyệt lòng sông
Ai hay không có, có không là gì*

and “the sun and the moon can be seen in a mustard seed”. These images show us that one contains everything, and everything is just one.

Because form is emptiness, form is possible. In form, we find everything else – feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Emptiness means empty of a separate self. But it is full of everything, full of life.

In short, *emptiness* is the ground from which all phenomena arise. A flower, for example, is a flower because we perceive it as such in relation to its stem, petals, and most importantly, our concept of “flower”.

Nothingness, while often used interchangeably with emptiness, implies a complete void or absence of anything. Explanations are on pages 183, 191, 223, 228, 248–250 and 295.

Illusions refer to our misinterpretations of reality based on the mistaken belief in inherent existence. In Zen Buddhism, there are illusion of Self (pages 295–298), illusion of Inherent Existence (refer to the footnote on page 229), illusion of duality (pages 214–219) and illusion of Permanence. When Vimalakīrti was asked by Manjusri “How should a bodhisattva view the world?”, page 252, he replied: “A bodhisattva views the world like a magician views an illusion or a phantom that he has created”.

Dreams are used as a metaphor to illustrate the illusory nature of reality. Just as dreams appear real while we’re in them, but vanish upon waking, our waking life is also impermanent and dreamlike.

5. Tác thi sự

作詩事

自心自境自成章
自对悲欢亦自赏
他日颜回坐葬偶
蠹丝割断散苍苍

Tác thi sự

*Tự tâm tự cảnh tự thành chương
Tự đối bi hoan diệc tự thưởng
Tha nhật Nhan Hồi tọa táng ngẫu
Tàm ty cắt đoạn tán thương thương.*

Việc làm thơ

Thơ từ tâm, cảnh mà sinh,
Tự mình thưởng thức, tự mình buồn vui.
Có yếu mệnh như Nhan Hồi,
Tơ tằm cắt vụn mây trôi khắp trời.

About poem writing

Poetry: an interaction of heart and environment;
Sad or happy, regardless, I enjoy writing them myself.
Should I die suddenly, like Yan Hui of old ³²

³² Yan Hui (513–481 BC) was one of the four outstanding disciples of Confucius (the other three were Zengzi, Mengzi, and Confucius' grandson, Zisi).

I'll sever these silken threads, letting them scatter across
the boundless sky.

Explanation

Yan Hui died very young, at the age of 32. However, there are also many documents stating that he was born in 521 BC, so he died at the age of 40, which could also be considered a young death.

Thầy wrote this article while imprisoned for the first time (1978–1981). Thầy was born in 1945, so at that time, he was about 33-36 years old.

In the third verse, he compares himself to Yan Hui because Yan Hui was a talented scholar but died young. Perhaps at that time, he thought he would be killed in the re-education camp.

I haven't found any documents stating that Yan Hui died sitting down. Therefore, in the third verse, 坐葬 (*tọa táng*, sitting burial) can only mean that Thầy is implying he would have done so if he had died young like Yan Hui. This is because, in Zen history, many enlightened people died in a seated position.

For example, Pang Yun (740–808), who was compared to Vimalakīrti in his lifetime. He was an outstanding disciple

Once, Confucius asked his disciples about their goals in studying. Yan Hui replied: "I want to teach the people the rules of propriety and music, so that there will be no war, no worries about war, no widows, and swords can be turned into farming tools and livestock can be used in the fields." Confucius praised: "Your virtue is truly admirable".

of Shitou Xiqian and Mazu Daoyi. When he was preparing to die, he instructed his daughter Lingzhao to check if the midday sun had passed overhead. She went to check and, upon returning, falsely claimed there was a solar eclipse. Believing her, he left his seat to see for himself. Lingzhao immediately took his place and passed away. Upon discovering this, he exclaimed, “Oh that girl! She was always ahead of me!” He then had to wait another seven days before passing away himself. Later, his wife informed their son, who was working in the fields, of his father’s death. Upon hearing the news, the son leaned on his hoe and passed away. Witnessing this, his mother silently sat down and also passed away. Amazingly, this entire family, all laypeople, attained enlightenment.³³

This is a very special point of Buddhism: not only monks can attain enlightenment. Laypeople who attained enlightenment while the Buddha was still alive include Vimalakīrti (page 213) and Śrīmālā Sīmhanāda (page 469), and later there were the Sixth Patriarch Huineng (page 343), Pang Yun and his family (see above), Tuệ Trung Thụ Sī (pages 242 and 271) and many others.

³³ Enlightened people such as non-returners and Arhats fear not death. After death, non-returners will be born to a heavenly realm, while Arhats, having attained nirvana, thereby are free from saṃsāra (cycle of birth, death and rebirth). Hīnayāna explains that nirvana is not a place, like heavens, but rather a state of perfect peace, tranquility, and freedom from all desires and attachments; while Mahāyāna suggests that they may choose to remain in a subtle form of existence to help others.

Refer to the footnote on page 222 for explanations of the four stages of awakening.

In the last verse, *Thầy* wants to sever these silken threads, letting them scatter across the boundless sky. Silken threads are drawn from the gut of a silkworm, and I believe they allude to *Thầy*'s poetic legacy. While silken threads can be physically cut, how can one cut poetry, especially when it's not merely words on paper? *Thầy* desires to fragment his poetic legacy, scattering its essence across the vast sky. But how can one shred the intangible essence of poetry and scatter it across the blue sky?

Let's recall his will: "Cremate my body and scatter the ashes in the Pacific Ocean, so they may dissolve and become part of the clouds that wander the vast expanse of the void".

He wrote the following verse when he was about 35 years old:

蠶絲割斷散蒼蒼

Tằm ty cắt đoạn tán thương thương

I'll sever these silken threads, letting them scatter across the boundless sky.

Unexpectedly, he still remembered it 45 years later!

6. Thạch bích

石壁

石壁崢嶸遮暮雲
籠中難見日西沈
幽人空對幽光裏
千古文章在地心

Thạch bích

*Thạch bích tranh vanh già mộ vân
Lung trung nan kiến nhật tây trầm
U nhân không đối u quang lý
Thiên cổ văn chương thiên địa tâm.*

Vách đá

Trong lòng khó thấy mặt trời lặn
Mây chiều núp vách đá chênh vênh
Bóng người u uẩn trong u tối,
Văn chương tự cổ gốc tự tâm.

Stone walls

Towering stone walls, a stark barrier against the blushing evening clouds,
Inside the cage, the sun's setting is veiled from sight.
A somber soul dwells in somber light,
Ancient literature has always been the heart of the universe.

Explanation

In this poem, in the penultimate line, Thầy repeats the word 幽 (*u*, somber) twice and, symmetrically, in the last line, he also repeats the word 千 (*thiên*, thousand as in 千古 and heaven as in 天地) twice. This repetition is important in Tang poetry, as it creates a certain rhythm and emphasis.

幽人空对幽光裏
千古文章千地心

*U nhân không đối u quang lý
Thiên cổ văn chương thiên địa tâm*

I maintain this repetitive rhythm in my translations:

Bóng người u uẩn trong u tối,
Văn chương tự cổ gốc tự tâm.

A somber soul dwells in somber light,
Ancient literature has always been the heart of the
universe.

The words 千古文章 (*Thiên cổ văn chương*, ancient literature) in the last verse of this poem remind me of two poems, one by Nguyễn Du, and one by Du Fu ³⁴.

³⁴ Du Fu (712–770) was a Chinese poet and politician during the Tang dynasty. Together with his elder contemporary and friend Li Bai (701–762), they were two of the most prominent figures in the flourishing of Chinese poetry under the Tang dynasty, and are considered the greatest Chinese poet duo. Du Fu is called 詩聖 (Shisheng, Thi Thánh, Poet Saint) and Li Bai is called 詩仙 (Shixian, Thi Tiên, Poet God) by Chinese critics.

During his diplomatic mission to China in February, 1813, Nguyễn Du visited Du Fu's tomb and composed two poems, titled 耒陽杜少陵墓 (*Lôi Dương Đổ Thiếu Lăng mộ*, visiting the tomb of Du Fu at Leiyang).

Below is the first poem:

天古文章天古師
平生佩服未常離
耒陽松柏不知處
秋浦魚龍有所思
異代相憐空灑淚
一窮至此豈工詩
掉頭舊症醫痊未
地下無令鬼輩嗤

*Thiên cổ văn chương thiên cổ si,
Bình sinh bội phục vị thường ly
Lôi Dương tùng bách bất tri xứ,
Thu phổ ngư long hữu sở tư.
Dị đại tương liên không sái lệ,
Nhất cùng chí thử khởi công thi
Trạo đầu cựu chứng y thuyên vị?
Địa hạ vô linh quỷ bối xi*

For ancient literature, you are an ancient master.

All my life, I have admired you immensely and never left your poetry.

The pine and cypress trees of Leiyang are now nowhere to be found (because Du Fu's tomb was originally buried in Leiyang County, Hunan province, but when Nguyễn Du visited, the tomb had been moved to Henan).

Even in the midst of autumn, there is still a place for fish and dragons to remember each other (meaning although I cannot see his tomb, I still have a place to remember him). Living in different times, we can only express our affection through tears.

You suffered so much in your life simply because your poetry was so good.

Has your old habit of shaking your head been cured? (In his old age, Du Fu was deaf, so he would shake his head whenever anyone asked him something),

Don't let the underground ghosts laugh at you.

Poet Quách Tấn translates into Vietnamese:

Thơ thiên cổ cũng thầy thiên cổ,
Vốn một lòng ngưỡng mộ bấy nay.
Lỗi Dương tòng bá đầu đây?
Cá rồng thu lạnh sông đầy nhớ thương,
Há vẫn chơng luy người đến thế?
Chạnh nghìn xưa dòng lệ khôn ngăn,
Lắc đầu bệnh cũ còn chẳng?
Suối vàng chớ để mấy thằng quỷ trêu.

While the great poet Nguyễn Du and Thầy Tuệ Sỹ both incorporate the words 天古文章 (*Thiên cổ văn chương*, ancient literature) in their poems, Du Fu invokes the words 文章千古 (*Văn chương thiên cổ*, ancient literature) in his poem 感作 (*Cảm tác*, susceptibility).

感作

文章千古事
得失寸心知

作者皆殊列
聲名豈浪垂

Cảm tác

*Văn chương thiên cổ sự,
Đắc thất thốn tâm tri.
Tác giả giai thù liệt,
Thanh danh khởi lãg thù.*

Susceptibility

Literature is a matter of being passed down for eternity,
Success or failure, only one's heart knows.
Each author has their own rank,
Reputation begins from the tip of the wave.

Below is my Vietnamese translation of this poem:

*Văn chương: chuyện của muôn đời
Dở hay tự biết riêng nơi đáy lòng
Mỗi tác giả, một văn phong
Thanh danh: đầu sóng nơi dòng sông sâu.*

The last line, 聲名豈浪垂 (*Thanh danh khởi lãg thù*, reputation begins from the tip of the wave) is a metaphor that suggests the fragility of a writer's reputation. It implies that a single mistake or misstep can have a significant impact on the writer's career.

7. Triết nhân tưởng

哲人想

哲人遯世隱巖中
我也逃生坐底籠
籠裏煙花無路處
巖前依旧水浮空

Triết nhân tưởng

*Triết nhân độn thế ẩn nham trung
Ngã dã đào sinh tọa đế lung
Lung lý yên hoa vô lộ xứ
Nham tiền y cựu thủy phù không.*

Suy nghĩ của triết gia

Triết gia hộc đá ẩn tu,
Còn ta ẩn chốn lao tù không ra.
Trong tù không khói, không hoa,
Trước hang, dòng nước vẫn sa lung trời.

A philosopher's pondering

Philosophers seek solace from life in grottoes,
I, too, find refuge at the bottom of this cage,
No rising smoke, nor sprinkled flowers,
Just the rhythmic drip of water, in front of the stone cave.

Explanation

This quatrain expresses a sense of deep isolation and confinement. The imagery of the philosopher withdrawing to a secluded place contrasts with Thầy's more restrictive confinement in a cage. The final two lines evoke a sense of Nothingness in Zen Buddhism.

These 18 poems in this volume *Ngục trung mị ngữ* (Somniloquies in prison) are taken from the book of the same name, published by Quảng Hương Tùng thư in 1988. They are the handwritten poems that Thầy secretly brought out of prison. Later, he revealed that he had written and sent out 50 poems, but unfortunately 32 of them were lost.

In this book, this poem only has the Vietnamese phonetic transcription and lacks the original Chinese characters. It appears that this part has been lost. Based on the Vietnamese phonetic transcription provided by Thầy, I transcribe it into Chinese characters.

At the age of 26, Thầy analyzed Western philosophical views on the Buddhist doctrine of nothingness in his research paper *Sự hủy diệt của một trào lưu tư tưởng* (The destruction of a philosophical trend), published in the journal *Tư tưởng* (Thoughts) of Vạn Hạnh University in 1971, stating:

Since Europeans began studying Buddhism with scientific and rigorous methods in the early 20th century, after a hundred years, they have expressed bewilderment and disappointment with a subject of study that seems neither philosophy nor religion. Despite expressing their deep sympathy, like Fyodor

Stcherbatsky (TN: 1866–1942, a Russian Indologist who was responsible for laying the foundations in the Western world for the study of Buddhism), or maintaining the rigorous objectivity of a scholar, their conclusions are truly heartbreaking.

Louis de la Vallée-Poussin, French scholar, facing the strange theories of Mādhyamaka (Middle Way), regardless of violations of the law of non-contradiction (TN: Nothing can be both true and false in the same time) or the law of excluded middle (TN: For any proposition, either that proposition is true or its negation is true; There is no third option), said in his 1917 work *The Way to Nirvana*: “We are disappointed”. In 1927, Stcherbatsky responding to Poussin’s interpretation of nirvana from the Mādhyamaka perspective, also began his work with the words: “Although a hundred years have passed since the scientific study of Buddhism began in Europe, we are still in the dark about the fundamental doctrines of this religion and its philosophy”.

Most Venerable Nguyễn Siêu, in his essay *Tuệ Sỹ - Thơ và con đường Trung đạo* (Tuệ Sỹ, Poetry, and the Middle Path), asserts that the Middle Way doctrine is an essential method to save one’s homeland and people, as follows:

In the past, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ³⁵, while living an ordinary life in the secular world with an appearance like

³⁵ Tuệ Trung (1230–1291), birth name Trần Tung, was a prominent figure in Vietnamese history. Alongside his younger brother Hưng Đạo Vương, he led the Vietnamese forces in two successful campaigns against the Mongol invasions. After the wars, he retired

everyone else, possessed a transcendent Zen mind. His heart was unattached to worldly dust, calm and at ease, as carefree as clouds in the sky, without distinctions or grievances.

The path of cultivation is the journey from the ordinary to the sacred. One's mind should not be biased towards the sacred or the ordinary but should stride freely along the Middle Way, avoiding attachment at the end of enlightenment. Tuệ Trung entered the world to elevate the lives of his people and nation. He walked the path of self-existence, independence, and firmly maintained the connection between the Way and the world. He did not leave his homeland because of a desire for cultivation, nor did he neglect cultivation and liberation due to the afflictions of his country. He opened up a vast and mysterious horizon of living for the sake of values: "The Ordinary Mind is the Way" or "The Profound is

from official duties and became a follower of the Zen Master Tiêu Dao, though he did not become a monk.

The following verses demonstrate Tuệ Trung's rejection of attachment to concepts:

"Sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc"

Tam thế Như Lai phương tiện lực

Không bản vô sắc, sắc vô không

Thể tính minh minh phi thất đắc.

"Form is nothingness, nothingness is form"

The Buddhas throughout the three cosmic ages made it up as strategically skillful means

Originally, nothingness is formless, form is nothingless

The nature is clear and bright, neither gained nor lost.

simultaneously Profound”. This is the fragrance of a lotus flower burning brightly in a red furnace.

Tuệ Trung emphasized serving sentient beings in his own homeland. He fully entered the world, bringing the aspirations of a scholar to pacify the nation and save the world, dedicating all his efforts to serving the country and its mountains and rivers, and using Zen to transcend ordinary minds. He was deeply imbued with the true reality while living in the world of conventional reality, transcending the world while living in the world. Therefore, every place is the Buddha-land, and the path of the Bodhisattva is the path of conduct.

No true Zen master, seeing their homeland and people in suffering, would fail to lend a helping hand or to live and die for their ancestors. The Middle Way is the philosophy of self-liberation and liberating others, of self-awakening and awakening others. It is a miraculous way initiated with a heart dedicated to protecting the country and ensuring peace for the people.

Most Venerable Khuông Việt expanded the Middle Way to save the nation. He put aside his robes and bowl to become a ferryman, welcoming an envoy from China ³⁶. Relying on this opportunity, he turned misfortune into good fortune and defeat into victory, bringing peace and

³⁶ In the year 987, the Song dynasty sent an envoy to Vietnam. King Lê Đại Hành, in a display of clever diplomacy, had the monks Pháp Thuận and Khuông Việt disguise themselves as ferrymen to welcome the envoy. When the envoy was about to depart, Khuông Việt also composed a piece of music to see them off.

prosperity to the country. Perhaps this is the practice in the midst of suffering and enlightenment in one's homeland, the miraculous nature of the Middle Way.

Under Tuệ Trung's guidance, his nephew King Trần Nhân Tông abdicated the throne to enter the monastic life, practicing the rigorous 13 dhūtaguṇas austerities ³⁷, and later became the first patriarch of the Vietnamese Zen sect Trúc Lâm.

³⁷ The 13 dhūtaguṇas austerities are:

1. Pamsukūlikāṅga: Wearing robes made from discarded cloth
2. Traicīvarikāṅga: Wearing only three robes
3. Piṇḍapātikāṅga: Eating only alms food
4. Sapadānikāṅga: Not omitting any house on the alms round
5. Ekāsanikāṅga: Eating only in one sitting
6. Pattapiṇḍikāṅga: Eating only food in the alms bowl
7. Kalu-pacchā-bhattikāṅga: Refusing more food after meal
8. Āraṇṇikāṅga: Dwelling in the forest
9. Rukkhamūlikāṅga: Dwelling at the root of a tree
10. Abbhokāsikāṅga: Dwelling in the open air
11. Śmāśānikāṅga: Dwelling in a graveyard
12. Yathāsaṃsthatikāṅga: Detaching from material comforts
13. Naiṣadyikāṅga: Sleeping only in a sitting position

Although Mahākāśyapa is often considered a model for ascetic practices, according to the Vipassana Research Institute, there isn't a definite record confirming that he was the first Buddha's disciple to practice the dhūtaguṇas austerities.

8. Ẩn giả tưởng

隱者想

小隱高山非可奇
大居鬧市也兮希
絕塵籠裏真甚事
無物無人無所為

Ẩn giả tưởng

*Tiểu ẩn cao sơn phi khả kỳ
Đại cư náo thị dã hề hy
Tuyệt trần lung lý chân thậm sự
Vô vật vô nhân vô sở vi.*

Nghĩ về kẻ ở ẩn

Tiểu ẩn núi cao, chưa là lạ
Đại ẩn chợ đông, vẫn thường tình
Tuyệt trần là chốn ngục hình
Không vật, không mình, không vương mắc chi.

About the recluse

Secluding oneself in the forest is too easy;
Secluding oneself in the markets seems ordinary;
True seclusion from the world is in prison,
Nothing arises, nothing is not empty.

Explanation

The words 小隱 (*tiểu ẩn*) and 大隱 (*đại ẩn*) in the first two lines come from these two lines of the poem 反思隱詩

(Phản chiêu ân thi), written by 王康居 (Vương Khang Cư), who lived in the politically fragmented Eastern Jin dynasty.

小隱隱陵藪
大隱隱朝市

Tiểu ẩn ẩn lăng tẩu
Đại ẩn ẩn triều thị

Ordinary people hide in the wild mountains
Great hermits hide in the royal court or the marketplace

In the third line, 絕塵 (*tuyệt trần*) has two meanings:
(1) transcendence; to transcend the mortal world,
(2) perfection; the best, most beautiful in the mortal world;
showing that even in prison, Thầy did not lose his sense of humor.

In the last line, I use a statement from Nāgārjuna's *Mādhyamaka Śāstra* (Treatise on the Middle Way): “Nothing arises, nothing is not empty” to translate it.

In the *Mādhyamaka Śāstra*, Nāgārjuna presented the theory of the *Eight Negations* that Kumārajīva (344–413) translated to Chinese as:

不生亦不滅; 不常亦不斷; 不一亦不異; 不來亦不出

Neither born nor died; Neither eternal nor temporary;
Neither one nor different; Neither coming nor going.

According to his student Phê Xuân Bạch, Thầy Tuệ Sỹ said he did not understand why Kumārajīva, when translating into Chinese, inverted the text, differing from the original Sanskrit meaning. Could it be that he intentionally

translated in such a way for the Chinese people to understand more easily, or perhaps he didn't understand the doctrine of Dependent Origination as propounded by Nāgārjuna, thus causing a distortion of the entire Mādhyamaka philosophy?

Thầy discovered the original Sanskrit text as follows:

*Anirodham anutpādam; anucchedam aśāsvataṃ;
anekārtham anānārtham; anāgamam anirgamam*

Neither ceasing nor arising; Neither annihilation nor eternal; Neither one nor many; Neither coming nor going.

From this standpoint, Nāgārjuna raised his argument to a higher level by affirming “There is no difference between saṃsāra and nirvana”.

In his book *Triết học về tánh Không* (Philosophy on Nothingness), Thầy writes about Nāgārjuna as follows:

Great geniuses all appear in a state of fury. Heraclitus, in the dawn of Greece, with fury like raging flames, wanted to kick Homer out of the common games because Homer prayed for the cessation of discord between the gods and mankind. Zarathustra descended from the mountain, along with the appearance of the Superman, after being furious with the sun. The worms sleep all winter, waiting for the first thunders of the beginning of spring. But, “once born, they want to live and then endure death, or to seek rest. And they leave behind descendants to share the same fate” (Heraclitus). The worms only turn in their eternal sleep, and must wait until the grass cracks after the thunders and rains of the

beginning of spring before rising to “the time of profound interconnectedness and cosmic harmony”.

This is according to I-Ching’s *Thunder-Water Hexagram* (TN: This is I-Ching Hexagram No. 40, Liberation, out of 64 hexagrams): “Thunder and rain are a way for nature to release built-up tension and restore balance. After the cleansing process, nature rejuvenates and new life emerges. It is the time of profound interconnectedness and cosmic harmony”.

Nāgārjuna appeared like a fierce elephant in the tradition of Buddhist and Indian philosophy. At that time, for Indian philosophers, Nāgārjuna was ranked among the most outstanding Buddhist thinkers. But even within this rank, Nāgārjuna was revered as a terrible destroyer. The first person to be afraid was probably his senior disciple, Aryadeva. Even in the name, there is a contradiction. The name Nāgārjuna refers to a fierce serpent. Because Naga means a fierce serpent. But Aryadeva implies a holy angel. These two teachers, a dinosaur and an angel, are perhaps two folds of thought: mysterious but real? Many legends have been created to prove that there have been many miracles to reduce Nāgārjuna’s arrogance, when he decided to leave the mountains, the forests, and the mainland to live in the sea with the serpents. Thus, people had enough reason to confirm that he was indeed a mainstream Buddhist thinker - because mainstream also implies obedience, when he followed the advice of the serpent king and returned to the mainland. He was indeed a mainstream Buddhist thinker, although his behavior sometimes seemed arrogant. ...

If there is absolutely nothingness, then there is no birth and death. If so, what is cessation and what is annihilation that is called nirvana? Only the conditioned arising, that is, the nature of nothingness, can express a notion of nirvana without confining nirvana to any definition, as the Middle Way continues: “There is neither enlightenment nor attainment, neither cessation nor permanence, neither birth nor annihilation. That is nirvana”. ...

Nothingness is a form of negation, but its meaning, as we have seen above, is very special. It is not only related to the language used to negate, but also to the object of negation. ...

This issue was raised by Nāgārjuna himself in *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (TN: translated into English by Professor Jan Westerhoff as *The Dispeller of Disputes*, published by Oxford University in 2010) as follows: “If things do not have inherent existence, language will have no object to negate. If there is no existence as an object that language can negate, then there is no negation”. This statement means that the premise “All things are nothing” is not intended to negate anything, because everything should not have an object to negate. Such negation is no different from saying: fire is not cold; water is not hard. Although these propositions are true, they do not interfere with the obvious fact. That is, even if the Mādhyamaka premise is established correctly, it is redundant.

9. Lãn tiên xứ

懶仙處

神仙到此煉金丹
無酒無花丹不成
推却紅爐我睡罷
此身非有豈曾生

Lãn tiên xứ

*Thần tiên đảo thử luyện kim đan
Vô tửu vô hoa đan bất thành
Suy khước hồng lô ngã thụy bãi
Thử thân phi hữu khởi tăng sanh.*

Xứ tiên lười

Thần tiên đến luyện kim đan
Thiếu hoa, thiếu rượu, khóc than không thành
Đập lò, ta ngủ yên lành
Thân còn không có, trường sanh chỗ nào?

Land of lazy fairies

Fairies gathered here, to brew cinnabar.
Missing wine and flowers, their elixir failed to form.
I kicked their cauldron and peacefully went to sleep.
Even our bodies are impermanent, what can be considered eternal?

Explanation

Thầy named this poem *Lãn tiên xứ* (Land of lazy fairies). Why did he call those who dream of finding the elixir of immortality lazy? Because they refuse to cultivate themselves to attain liberation. Their path is to seek a shortcut through the elixir of immortality.

Eternal life, or in other words, escaping the realm of death, has always been a human desire. In the book *Huyền thoại Duy-ma-cật* (Legends of Vimalakīrti), Thầy writes:

What is the end? All conditioned phenomena are subject to decline, decay, and exhaustion. Either their lifespan is exhausted, or their good fortune is exhausted, like certain deities who, due to such exhaustion, die there and are reborn here. Or a monk keeps practicing until he has completely eliminated all defilements and impurities, becoming pure, mentally liberated, and wisdom-liberated, right in this life through victorious wisdom, self-realization, and abiding. In short, to attain the realm of formless nirvana, a monk must exhaust all craving and aversion. Such a dharma is said to be supreme among all conditioned and unconditioned dharmas. This is the conventional meaning of end and endlessness.

When Vimalakīrti was asked by Manjusri “How should a Bodhisattva view the world?”, he replied:

A Bodhisattva views the world like a magician views an illusion or a phantom that he has created. Both Shravakas (TN: a follower of Hīnayāna who strives to attain the level of an Arhat) and Bodhisattvas start from such a conventional world. Because this world is merely

an illusion, not real, Bodhisattvas seek something that is truly real and not false. Such a starting point is to reject the existing world before their eyes. Like someone searching for the core of a tree, peeling off the outer layers until they find what the solid core of the tree is.

That is a cold, detached view of the world and human life. Because, every phenomenon in this world, while having the sweetness of form, also has the affliction of form. Therefore, the Buddha taught: Know this body as a bubble, all phenomena as a mirage, as an illusion; whoever understands this clearly, escapes the realm of death.

Similarly, when Śāriputra asked Vimalakīrti where he had died and been reborn, Vimalakīrti countered by asking if the dharma that Śāriputra had realized could die and be reborn. Vimalakīrti then explained that “death is the cessation of actions, and birth is the continuation of actions”. According to Thầy Tuệ Sỹ, this affirms that life and death are like waves on an ocean.

10. Dạ tọa

夜坐

逐日牢囚事更茫
中霄独坐对寒灯
空門天遠犹懷夢
歸路無期任轉蓬

Dạ tọa

*Trục nhật lao tù sự cánh mang
Trung tiêu độc tọa đối hàn đăng
Không môn thiên viễn do hoài mộng
Quy lộ vô kỳ nhiệm chuyển bông*

Ngồi đêm

Ngày tù dài, công chuyện nhiều
Đêm lo không ngủ liêu xiêu ánh đèn
Mái chùa, hồn nước, tối đen
Đường về vô hạn, lòng thêm rối bời

Midnight sitting

Days in prison are long, work is endless,
I sit alone at the midnight hour, under the cold light.
My distant pagoda, a haunting sight,
The path home is endless, my heart is even more troubled.

Explanation

To understand what worried Thầy Tuệ Sỹ enough to cause him sleepless nights while imprisoned, one only needs to look at his relentless efforts before and after his imprisonment.

Following the 1975 event, he oversaw the educational programs at the Hải Đức Buddhist Institute in Nha Trang until its forced closure in 1977, when he returned to Saigon.

In 1978, he was arrested for illegal residence and sent to re-education camp (a disguised form of prison) until 1981.

From 1981 to 1984, he taught at Quảng Hương Già Lam monastery school in Saigon.

Most Venerable Nguyễn Siêu, in *Thượng tọa Tuệ Sỹ, Trí Siêu, những thiên tài lỗi lạc* (Most Venerables Tuệ Sỹ and Trí Siêu, outstanding geniuses), recounts this period:

There were many sleepless nights for the entire monastery as the police would conduct identity checks at one or two o'clock in the morning, forcing the monastic students to hide in the attic.

On April 1, 1984, he was arrested along with Venerable Trí Siêu Lê Mạnh Thát and 17 other monks, nuns, and lay people. While the Hanoi government claimed the Venerables were plotting a coup, the primary reason for their persecution was their opposition to the dissolution of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. In a trial held in September 1988, both Venerables were sentenced to death. However, due to widespread international condemnation

and advocacy from Western governments and human rights organizations, Hanoi commuted their sentences to 20 years of hard labor. Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ was subsequently transferred to Ba Sao prison in Nam Hà province, located in the harsh, northernmost part of Vietnam.

On August 21, 1998, 14 years following his arrest, the police persuaded him to sign a plea for pardon. “As I do not recognize the legitimacy of this trial, you have no right to judge me”, responded the Venerable, “And as you have no right to detain me, you have no right to pardon me”. Threatened with life imprisonment, he embarked on a hunger strike. He was released after a 10-day hunger strike, including the last 7 days of complete fasting.

In a state of near-death due to his 7-day complete fasting, during the next 36 straight hours on a train returning from Ba Sao prison, he fainted multiple times and had to be taken to Hải Đức Buddhist Institute, Nha Trang.

In April 1999, he accepted the position of General Secretary of the Institute of Dharma Propagation of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

On May 12, 2019, at Từ Hiếu Pagoda in Saigon, Most Venerable Thích Quảng Độ issued a decree nominating Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ to succeed him as the head of the Sangha Council. However, Most Venerable Tuệ Sỹ, prioritizing transparency and unity within the Church, requested to assume the position temporarily, paving the way for a formal election of the new Sixth Patriarch.

After the passing of Most Venerable Quảng Độ in February 2020, he was entrusted with the position of Acting Head of

the Sangha Council. In this role, he and other monks of the Church tried to fight for religious freedom in Vietnam, particularly the right to revive the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, but to no avail.

According to *Chiến binh Tuệ Sỹ* (The Warrior Tuệ Sỹ) by his disciple Trần Bảo Toàn, in 2015, Thầy was diagnosed with prostate cancer that had metastasized to his bones, entering the final stage. Conventional treatments, like surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, were no longer viable. His doctor predicted he had only months to live if he did not seek treatment abroad. Initially, understanding the natural cycle of life, aging, and illness, he accepted his fate. Yet, after a tempestuous inner debate, he recognized the value of his knowledge in translating Buddhist sutras into Vietnamese. He ultimately decided to pursue treatment in Japan. On December 12, 2019, he was admitted to the Fujita Health University Hospital in Nagoya. However, in July 2020, Dr. Takahara delivered the disheartening news that all treatment options had been exhausted. He returned to Vietnam on November 5, 2020.

Knowing that his time was limited due to his prostate cancer, he devoted himself to translating Buddhist scriptures, editing works, and organizing a catalog for the translation project of the Tripitaka according to international academic standards.

In November 2021, at the first congress of the Dharma Propagation Council, he decided to establish the Tripitaka Translation Council. He served as its chairman, with Professor Trí Siêu Lê Mạnh Thát (Vietnam) as an advisor, Most Venerable Thích Như Điển (Hannover, Germany) as

the chief secretary, and Most Venerables Thích Nguyên Siêu (San Diego, USA) and Thích Thái Hòa (Vietnam) as deputy secretaries. In early 2023, the council released 29 volumes of the Tripitaka.

It should be noted that the number of his works exceeds these 29 volumes, but some were not included in the Tripitaka because they fall outside the scope of the Hīnayāna.

Wikipedia ³⁸ writes about Thầy's version of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*:

Among the Vietnamese translations, the version by Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ is the most accurate. Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ translated from the Kumārajīva version; but, for accuracy, he compared it with the Sanskrit version and two other Chinese versions, as well as the commentaries by 窺基 (Kuiji, Khuy Cơ), 僧肇 (Sengzhao, Tăng Triệu), 吉藏 (Jizang, Cát Tạng), etc.

Refer to page 247 to read a mistake Thầy found in Kumārajīva's translation.

³⁸ *Duy-ma-cật sở thuyết kinh*. Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 8 October 2024
https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duy-ma-cật_sở_thuyết_kinh

11. Mộng

夢

夜殘蝴蝶叩禪扃
兩兩松梢笑我遲
擬坐綠苔翻貝葉
空留枯樹對空庭

Mộng

*Dạ tàn hồ mộng khấu thiền quynh
Lưỡng lưỡng tùng sao tiếu ngã trình
Nghỉ tọa lục đài phiên bối diệp
Không lưu khô thọ đối không đình.*

Mộng

Đêm tàn, mộng tưởng về chùa,
Hai cội tùng bách cười đùa cùng ta.
Ngồi trên phiến đá rêu già,
Lật chiếc lá bối để mà đọc kinh,
Ồ kìa, chùa sao vắng tanh
Cây khô lạc lõng sân đình hoang vu

Daydream

I dreamt of returning to my pagoda at night's end,
Hoping the twin pines would welcome my return with
laughter,
I'd sit on a green moss-covered rock, and read scriptures
made from talipot palms.
But there were only dead trees in that desolate shrine.

Explanation

The word 貝葉 (*bối diệp*, lá bối) in the third line of the poem refers to the talipot palm. The talipot palm tree has the Latin scientific name *Corypha umbraculifera*. Historically, the leaves were written upon in various South and South-East Asian cultures, including India, to create palm leaf manuscripts. When Buddhism was introduced to China, scriptures were also written on talipot palms, so the term 貝葉 (*bối diệp*, lá bối) also came to mean Buddhist scriptures.

Before April 30th, 1975, there was a publishing house in South Vietnam called *Lá Bối* that published many valuable books. For example, in terms of research books, there were *Thiền học Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Zen studies) published in 1966 by professor Nguyễn Đăng Thục and *Xứ trầm hương* (The land of Agarwood) in 1973 by Quách Tấn; In terms of translated works, there were *Chiến tranh và Hòa bình* (War and Peace) in 1970 by scholar Nguyễn Hiến Lê and *Vô Môn Quan* (Wumen Guan) in 1972 by professor Trần Tuấn Mẫn; In terms of fiction, there were *Hương rừng Cà Mau* (The Scent of the Cà Mau forest) in 1967 by Sơn Nam and *Đoạn đường chiến binh* (The Soldier's Journey) in 1971 by Thế Uyên.

The term *lá bối* is also used in *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều) when Nguyễn Du described Kiều's situation while studying at Chiêu Ân shrine with nun Giác Duyên:

*Sớm khuya lá bối phiến mây,
Ngọn đèn khêu nguyệt, tiếng chày nện sương.*

Handle palm leaves, fly banners in the clouds ³⁹,
Light lamps at moonrise, ring the bell at dawn.
(translated by Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông in *The Tale of Kiều*)

The word *phiến mây* is often mistakenly written as *phươn mây*. Venerable Nun Thích Nữ Trí Hải ⁴⁰, in the chapter

³⁹ When translating as “fly banners in the clouds”, Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông translated the word *phươn mây*, not *phiến mây*, as Venerable Nun Thích Nữ Trí Hải correctly explained in her book *Đạo và Thơ* (Dharma and Poetry).

⁴⁰ Venerable Nun Thích Nữ Trí Hải (1938–2003) was the director of the Vạn Hạnh University library from 1968 until the University was closed in 1975. As director of the Vạn Hạnh University library, the Venerable Nun successfully made it comparable to renowned libraries in Europe and America. The library held tens of thousands of microfilm reels containing original copies of ancient books from various civilizations throughout history. After 1975, these films were discarded, and their canisters were used to raise fish.

When the Nun died in a tragic traffic accident in 2003, Thầy Tuệ Sỹ wrote a very moving eulogy as follows:

*Cánh chim đã vượt qua vũng lầy sinh tử
Bóng nắng rọi lên dòng huyền hóa
Thân theo tro tàn bay
Hoa trắng vỡ trên đại dương sóng cả
Sao trời chợt tắt giữa lòng tay
Sương còn đọng trên đầu cây lá
Đến rồi đi nước lừng vui đầy
Heo hút bờ hoang ảnh giả
Người sống mãi mòn trong nhớ tiếc không khuây.*

The bird has crossed the swamp of life and death,
Sunlight shines on the river of illusion,
The body follows the flying ashes,
White flowers shatter on the stormy, vast ocean,
The stars suddenly extinguish in her palm.

Truyện Kiều với đạo Phật (The Tale of Kiều and Buddhism) in her book *Đạo và Thơ* (Dharma and Poetry), analyzed:

The two words *phiến mây* are often mistakenly written as *phướn mây*. *Phướn* is explained as a banner hanging in a Buddhist temple, while *mây* (cloud) is not explained. In fact, *phiến mây* is correct. As we know, Kiều at that time was a novice nun in a temple. The work of a novice nun at night was to go to the temple to strike the wooden block (often accompanied by a drum) to wake up the others and ring the great bell. The order of work of a novice nun is fully described in the above poem: during the day (morning), she copied scriptures on talipot leaves ⁴¹, at night she woke up to strike the wooden fish (a wooden board made of jackfruit wood, often carved with the image of a fish symbolizing wakefulness, because fish sleep very little) as a signal to wake up; next, she lit the and then rang the great bell. No one would fiddle with the banners at that time! Therefore, *phiến mây* can only be the wooden fish,

Although dew still lingers on the tips of leaves,
Coming and going, the water level rises and falls.
Desolate on an empty and illusory shore,
The living wearily persist in inconsolable grief.

⁴¹ As I explained above, *lá bói* has two meanings: (1) the leaf of the talipot palm tree, which was used by Indians in ancient times to write scriptures, and (2) Buddhist scriptures. In the verse *sớm khuya lá bói phiến mây*, Venerable Nun Trí Hải thought that Kiều copied scriptures onto talipot leaves, but if we understand *lá bói* as Buddhist scriptures, then it means that Kiều chanted Buddhist scriptures.

which is struck to wake everyone up in the middle of the night.

The word *mây* (cloud) is derived from the preface of the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra and many other sūtras. Bodhisattvas gather as numerous as clouds, so there is the word *vân tập* (cloud gathering) in Buddhist scriptures. The wooden board is often called *ngọc bảng* (jade board, referring to the bell and board in the temple). When used to signal in the dining room, it is called *phạn bảng* (food board), in the bathroom, it is called *thủy bảng* (water board), and when hung in the main hall to summon the sangha, it is called *vân bảng* (cloud board). The word *phiến mây* originates from this *vân bảng*.

Below is a delightful poetic exchange that involves Thầy Tuệ Sỹ, poet Bùi Giáng and Nun Trí Hải.

Around 1970, one day Thầy Tuệ Sỹ read two lines of Chinese poetry to Bùi Giáng and asked him to complete it into a quatrain.

*Thâm dạ phong phiêu nghiệp ảnh tùy,
Hiện tiền vi liễu lạc hoa phi*

Deep in the night, the wind flits about, playing with the shadows of karma,
The willow flowers fall and drift in front of the face.

These two lines hold a profound meaning. While the night wind stirs the leaves and plays with their shadows, Thầy speaks of it playing with the shadows of karma. As for the willow flowers, symbols of prosperity, Thầy portrays them

falling and drifting before our eyes, as if to ask, “Can anyone grasp such fleeting things?”

I translated into Vietnamese poetry:

*Gió đêm thổi, giỡn đùa bóng nghiệp,
Hoa liễu rơi, lạc trước lông mày*

The night wind blows, playing with the shadows of karma,
Willow flowers fall, drifting before the eyes.

After hearing these two lines, Bùi Giáng teased him: “Why don’t you ask Nun Trí Hải (who was then the Chief Librarian of Vạn Hạnh University) to help you?”

Thầy bashfully said, “Don’t make fun like that” (quoted from Bùi Giáng’s account).

Bùi Giáng then took a piece of paper and wrote:

*Phiêu bồng tâm sự tâm toan lệ,
Trí Hải đã tàm trúc loạn ty.*

The first line of Bùi Giáng’s poem means that a person with wandering thoughts shed bitter tears.

In the second line,

(1) if we understand *tàm*, 蠶, as a silkworm, then here it means eyebrows, *đã tà*m means thick eyebrows. Silkworm eyebrows (*mày ngài*, in Vietnamese), are often used to describe the beauty of a woman’s face, but the great poet Nguyễn Du in *The Tale of Kiều* described both men and women as having silkworm eyebrows (verse 927 describing a prostitute: *bên thì má*y ả *mày ngài* and verse

1267 describing Từ Hải: *râu hùm, hàm én, mày ngài*). So, this line means that looking at Nun Trí Hải's thick eyebrows, the zither strings are tangled and cannot be played (*trúc loạn ty* = tangled bamboo strings, the poem does not mention the zither, the reader must understand implicitly). In his book *Đi vào cõi thơ* (Entering the realm of poetry), Ca Dao published in 1969, Bùi Giáng confirms that he wrote *Trí Hải* in capitals.

(2) If we understand *tàm*, 慙, as shame, then the second line has a different meaning, as *trí hải* means sea of wisdom: Because of being ashamed of the vast sea of wisdom of the world, the zither strings are tangled and cannot be played.

I choose the second meaning to translate because such a playful story is interesting, but one must know when to stop:

*Tâm sự chơi vui, cay nước mắt
Thẹn vì biển trí, trúc rối dây.*

Wandering thoughts bring forth bitter tears,
As shame of the vast sea of wisdom fills my heart, the
zither strings are tangled.

So, this is the quatrain, composed by two young Vietnamese great poets, at that time (1969) Thầy was 24 years old, and Bùi Giáng was 33 years old:

*Thâm dạ phong phiêu nghiệp ảnh tùy,
Hiện tiền vì liễu lạc hoa phi.
Phiêu bổng tâm sự tân toan lệ,
Trí hải đa tàm trúc loạn ty.*

Let me rewrite this poem in Traditional Chinese:

深夜風飄業影隨
眼前为柳落花飛
飄蓬心事添愁淚
智海多慙竹亂絲

Below are my translations.

*Gió đêm thổi, giỡn đùa bóng nghiệp,
Hoa liễu rơi, lạc trước lông mày.
Tâm sự chơi vơi, cay nước mắt,
Thẹn vì biển trí, trúc rối dây.*

The night wind blows, playing with the shadows of karma,
Willow flowers fall, drifting before the eyes.
Wandering thoughts bring forth bitter tears,
As shame of the vast sea of wisdom fills my heart, the
zither strings are tangled.

12. Ngộ thụy

午睡

睡回午雨思輕煙
想個寒風拂面前
庭樹黃花成幻事
曲肱安枕抱孤眠

Ngộ thụy

*Thụy hồi ngọ vũ tứ khinh yên
Tưởng cá hàn phong phất diện tiền
Đình thọ hoàng hoa thành huyễn sự
Khúc quăng an chẩm bảo cô miên.*

Ngủ trưa

Tỉnh giấc ngủ trưa, mưa như khói,
Tưởng như gió lạnh thổi phát phơ.
Hoa vàng sân trước huyễn mơ,
Gác tay làm gối, thần thờ cô miên.

Afternoon nap

A drizzle woke me from an afternoon nap,
A cool breeze lightly caressing my face.
The yellow plum blossoms in the front yard were nothing
but an illusion,
Resting my head on my elbow, I drifted back to slumber.

Explanation

The words 孤眠 (*cô miên*) in the poem, according to *the New Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary* by scholar Nguyễn Quốc Hùng, published by Khai Trí in 1971, have two meanings: (1) to sleep alone, and (2) the state of immobility of insects during molting or of animals during hibernation. Both these meanings are applicable to this poem, so I kept the original *cô miên* in my Vietnamese translation. In the English translation, instead of sleep, I choose *slumber*, as this word also has two meanings: sleep and hibernation. Hibernation is a way for many creatures like butterflies, bats, bears, etc., to survive the cold winter without needing to forage for food or migrate to warmer places. Instead, when hibernating, they reduce their metabolic rate to conserve energy. Bears, in particular, don't sleep for the entire six or seven months of winter, but they still conserve energy by lying still, not eating or drinking, and rarely urinating or defecating.

The third line 庭樹黃花成幻事 (*Đình thọ hoàng hoa thành huyễn sự*, the yellow plum blossoms in the front yard are nothing but an illusion) reminds me of the last line of a very famous poem, and also the only one, by the Vietnamese Zen Master Mãn Giác (1052–1096). He once served as a high-ranking official under Kings Lý Thánh Tông and Lý Nhân Tông but later resigned to become a monk. On October 17, 1096, at the age of only 45, he sat in the lotus position, called the congregation together, recited the following poem, and then passed away.

Xuân khứ bách hoa lạc
Xuân đáo bách hoa khai

*Sự trục nhãn tiên quá
Lão tòng đầu thượng lai
Mạc vị xuân tàn hoa lạc tận
Đình tiền tạc dạ nhất chi mai*

Spring passes, a hundred flowers fall
Spring comes, a hundred flowers smile
Before our eyes, tasks go on endlessly
Above our heads, old age arrives
Don't think that when spring ends, all flowers fall
Last night, a yellow plum blossom bloomed in the front
yard.

Poet Ngô Tất Tố (1893–1954) translated to Vietnamese:

*Xuân qua trăm hoa rụng
Xuân tới trăm hoa cười
Trước mắt việc đi mãi
Trên đầu già đến rồi
Đình tường xuân tàn hoa rụng hết
Đêm qua sân trước nở nhành mai.*

The first four lines depict the cyclical nature of life and the impermanence of all things. Just as the seasons change and flowers bloom and wither, so too do our lives. The last two lines introduce a contrasting idea: amidst this constant change and decay, there is an underlying unchanging truth – the nothingness (Śūnyatā) as taught in Buddhism.

In the fourth line of Thày's poem, 曲肱安枕 (*khúc quăng an chẩm*, resting my head on my elbow) refers to the sleeping posture of the Buddha: lying on his right side, with his left arm extended alongside his body and his right arm serving as a pillow for his head.

13. Tự vấn

自問

問余何故坐牢籠
余指輕煙絆獄穹
心境相持驚旅夢
故教枷鎖面虛隅

Tự vấn

*Vấn dư hà cố tọa lao lung
Dư chỉ khinh yên bán ngục khung
Tâm cảnh tương trì kinh lữ mộng
Cố giao già tỏa diện hư ngưng.*

Tự hỏi

Nhà tù hay cõi âm ty?
Tường cao, xích sắt làm gì được mây?
Cảnh, tâm: ác mộng đêm ngày
Gông xiềng như ảo, lời thầy không quên.

Self-reflection

On self-reflection, I asked: “Am I in jail?”,
Can prison bars confine a thin veil of smoke on the window
frame?
Mind and scene intertwine, resulting in terrifying travel
dreams,
But drawing on ancient teachings, these shackles are mere
illusion.

Explanation

The second verse, 余指輕煙絆獄穹 (*Dư chỉ khinh yên bán ngục khung*, who can detain a thin veil of smoke on the prison window frame?), is a bold and unwavering declaration by Thầy, equivalent to his saying “You have no right to detain me, neither do you have the right to pardon me” when the communist prison officers wanted him to sign the plea for pardon.

The third line of the poem, 心境相持驚旅夢 (*Tâm cảnh tương trì kinh lữ mộng*, mind and scene intertwine, resulting in terrifying travel dreams) paints a picture of a human facing the harsh realities of confinement, and unimaginably inhuman tortures in a communist prison. Even though the poem expresses distress, it also indirectly reveals his resilience. This verse refers to mind and scene in ancient teachings, as in the following verse by Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ.

無常諸法行
心疑罪便生
本來無一物
非種亦非萌
日日對境時
景景從心出
心境本來無
處處巴羅密

*Vô thường chư pháp hành
Tâm nghi tội tiện sinh
Bản lai vô nhất vật
Phi chủng diệc phi manh*

*Nhật nhật đối cảnh thời
Cảnh cảnh tông tâm xuất
Tâm cảnh bản lai vô
Xứ xứ ba la mật.*

All dharmas are impermanent.
Doubtful minds give rise to sin.
There has never been a single thing:
Neither seed nor sprout.
Daily, when facing a scene,
The scene is born from the mind.
Mind and scene are originally nothing.
Everywhere, nirvana is spontaneously completed.

According to the poem above, when facing a scene, we should understand that the scene is born from the mind and our experiences are a reflection of our minds. When we realize the true nature of reality, which is devoid of inherent existence, we achieve enlightenment. In this enlightened state, all suffering, including our deepest fears and the constraints we feel, is seen as illusory. Therefore, we can strive towards nirvana, or the ultimate goal. At that point, not only nightmares are unreal, but also shackles are unreal.

In Thầy's poem, in the last two words 虛隅 (*hu ngung*), 虛 (*hu*) means empty or void, like an illusion or nothingness; while 隅 (*ngung*) means corner or angle. Therefore, 虛隅 (*hu ngung*) can be understood as an empty corner of a prison or, more metaphorically, as a void aspect, similar to nothingness. The latter interpretation might be more fitting, considering that shackles are worn on a prisoner's hands and feet, not placed in a corner.

14. Bán niên tù

半年囚

別世封關近半年
丹砂現鬼誤神仙
青鬚⁴²不斷磨紅掌
傾倒南山怪老夫

Bán niên tù

*Biệt thế phong quan cận bán niên
Đan sa hiện quỷ ngộ thần tiên
Thanh tu bất đoạn ma hồng chưởng
Khuyh đảo nam sơn quái lão thiên.*

Nửa năm tù

Nửa năm đóng cửa lánh đời
Đan sa hóa quỷ hại người cõi tiên
Nắm râu xanh kéo liên miên
Núi nam sụp đổ, lão thiên kinh hoàng.

⁴² 鬚 (beard, râu cằm), containing 毛 (hair) and 多 (many), suggests abundance of hair. Beards were seen as a symbol of personal integrity and honor in ancient Chinese culture. To have one's beard pulled was a grave humiliation and to have it cut off was a grave punishment.

In mythology, mountains are believed to be inhabited by gods and spirits. These beings are often depicted with beards, linking facial hair to the mountainous realm. Therefore, when the fairies had their beards pulled, then the fairies had their beards pulled, the southern peak crumbled and the old God plunged into despair.

Half-year imprisonment

Half a year waned from life, behind closed doors,
Cinnabar-turned fiends taunted the helpless fairies:
Their red hands relentlessly tore the fairies' azure beards,
Crumbling the southern peak, to the old God's despair.

Explanation

Cinnabar is a mineral. In traditional Chinese medicine, it was believed to have cooling and sedative properties, used to treat insomnia, sore throat, and mouth ulcers. It was also applied topically to treat skin infections. The ancient Chinese believed that cinnabar was the primary ingredient in an elixir of immortality. However, the main components of cinnabar are mercury and sulfur, which can be fatal if consumed over a long period. Many Chinese emperors, seeking eternal life, consumed large amounts of cinnabar and died from mercury poisoning.

This poem was written after the author had spent six months in prison, at the end of 1981. In this short time, he observed that outside the prison walls, cinnabar had transformed into a demon, harming deities and causing great upheaval. Therefore, in this poem, cinnabar simply is a metaphorical representation as a destructive evil force.

Thầy had a treatise on demons. The following excerpt from his work *Một tâm lòng của Kinh Kha* (A heart as resolute as Jing Ke) reveals his views on the use of poetry as a form of magic. He wrote:

Using poetry as a magical technique is not merely a skill.
Behind the illusion of words, there lies a hidden world

of dreams and solitude. To truly understand the depths of this world, we cannot rely solely on curiosity; we must approach it with a deep-seated yearning, driven by the very essence of human existence. For instance, when Nguyễn Du wrote *Văn tế thập loại chúng sinh* (Lament for ten types of beings), could we not perceive his profound sorrow? Or perhaps, discern the societal context that gave rise to such sorrow?

*Trong trường dạ tối tăm trời đất
Xót khôn thiêng phảng phất u minh
Thương thay thập loại chúng sinh
Phách đơn hồn chiếc lênh đênh quê người
Hương khói đã không nơi nương tựa
Phận mồ cô lữ lần đêm đêm
Còn chi ai khá ai hèn
Còn chi mà nói ai hiền ai ngu*

In the immense darkness of the universe,
Sacred souls wander aimlessly in the netherworld.
Pity all ten types of beings,
Adrift and alone in the foreign land.
Finding no solace without incense and prayers,
Orphaned spirits roam night after night.
Does it matter who is noble or lowly,
Wise or foolish, in this world of suffering?

Certainly, those words are not the self-confessions of a ghost. They are, in fact, the sorrowful laments of a human being, facing the harsh reality of exile, a journey limited to the span between life and death. Living and dying in absolute and eternal solitude; with one's homeland echoing mournfully in the underworld, in the

long, dark night. So, what kind of words could truly be called the words of a ghost?

A story told by Su Dongpo: the son of Li Dao, the prefect of Xuzhou, at the age of 17 or 18, originally did not know how to write poetry. Suddenly, he composed a poem about falling flowers, saying:

流水難窮目
斜陽易斷腸
誰同研光帽
一曲舞山香

*Lưu thủy nan cùng mục
Tà dương dị đoạn trường
Thùy đồng nha quang mạo
Nhất khúc “Vũ sơn hương”.*

*Nước cuộn mòn con mắt
Tà dương lảm đọa tràng
Chao ôi hương phấn rã
Chưa dứt một bài ca*

Swirling water erodes the eyes
The setting sun, a tormenting flight
Alas, the make-up has worn out
When the song is not yet finished

The story goes that after hearing his son read this poem, the father was startled and asked where it came from. And thus, he learned this story:

In a banquet hosted by the Queen Mother of the Heavenly West, a dancer sang and danced wearing a hat, with flowers pinned to the hat. But before the song 舞山

香 (*Vũ Sơn Hương*, mountain fragrance dance) was finished, all the flowers had fallen.

The inspiration of a person who does not know how to write poetry, or does not care for poetry, but who expresses a deeply sorrowful and passionate mood; that alone is perhaps enough to say that these are truly the words of a ghost. If so, the torment of the ghost is also the torment of a human; it is the suffering before the sight of flowing water and the setting sun...

Human life, viewed through a certain realistic lens, can be a romantic and tragic image, like a traveler walking in the autumn wind; of a passionate flame that burns forever and fades forever into voidness. The same life, in the eyes of dark mystery, can be the innocent songs of an ethnic woman on vast, desolate mountains, amidst a vast expanse of green wilderness dotted with blood-red flowers as bright as tears. Blood of hatred and tears of love; these are the crystals of a demon. That hatred is truly meaningless and illogical. Because dreams are too far away, unrealistic, and it is difficult to hide what people call boundless, unforgivable arrogance.

Therefore, those tears are also just a sign of meaningless torment. People choose their destiny with their dreams. When destiny comes knocking, blood is not enough to wash away hatred and tears are not enough to sweeten the essence of love:

秋雨晴時淚不晴
(Su Dongpo)

Thu vũ tình thời lệ bất tình

The autumn rain has stopped, but the tears do not dry up.

The sound of a ghost is like that.

Or differently, like Nguyễn Du's lament in *Văn tế thập loại chúng sinh* (Lament for ten types of beings):

*Giàu sang càng nặng oán thù
Máu tươi lai láng xương khô rã rời
Đoàn vô tự lạc loài nheo nhóc
Quỉ không đầu kêu khóc đêm mưa
Đã hay thành bại là cơ
Mà u hồn biết bao giờ cho tan?*

Wealth and power only increase resentment,
Fresh blood flows profusely, and dry bones fall apart.
Heirless souls wander aimlessly,
Headless ghosts cry in the night rain.
It is known that success and failure are fate,
But how long will the ghosts wander?

The soul does not dissipate, because resentment is buried deep in a dark tomb; because the blood has not yet dried to become dust. Li He's ⁴³ ghost poetry sometimes echoes with a fishy smell.

⁴³ Li He (790–816) was a Chinese poet in the Tang dynasty. His poems famously explored ghostly, supernatural and fantastic themes.

Among Thầy's posthumous works, there is an incomplete book titled *Lý Hẹ: Bàn tay của quỷ* (Li He: The devil's hand), found at the Hải Đức Buddhist Institute. In one chapter, he writes: "Perhaps, this devilish talent can be understood as a bizarre genius whose language is used at a level of magic and deceit. It's an innate quality, filled with surreal imaginations. Using poetry as a magical technique is not

It is the drop of hatred's blood from a soul torn apart in the autumn wind, withered by the aimlessly drifting yellow leaves. The autumn wind blows through the Chinese parasol tree, the young man is startled and bitter. The gentle, desolate autumn wind is not strong enough to create storms and landslides; but it consumes the mind, turns the hair of youth gray, amidst the cold chirping of crickets and the flickering light of a lamp. A head of green hair bows over the book, allowing bookworms to draw ephemeral flowers of dreams and heartbreak. In the dim light, dreams flutter, stretching the intestines. Cold rain, the ghost weeps for the literary guest. On the autumn mound, the golden leaves pile up into the tomb of autumn, the ghost sings a poem in a fishy voice. Thousands of years of hatred become jade beads in the earth.

Is this a ghost poem with the wild emotions of a ghost?
No! That's an autumn of Li He.

A Bodhisattva's heart is needed to declare that, not only human beings, ghosts also suffer. It implies that true understanding and compassion can extend beyond human limitations and encompass all beings, regardless of their form or existence.

merely a skill. Behind the illusory words and phrases lies an illusory world; a world of dreams and solitude, perhaps. What lies at the very depths of that world? We may not be able to reach it merely out of curiosity, but only through the heartfelt calls of human destiny”.

15. **Mộng khứ mộng lai**

夢去夢來

半年禁固夢威絲
踏遍江湖放任爛
夢去夢來身外物
夢殘呆坐撥長眉

Mộng khứ mộng lai

*Bán niên cấm cố mộng thành ty
Đạp biến giang hồ phóng nhiệm qui
Mộng khứ mộng lai thân ngoại vật
Mộng tàn ngốc tọa bát trường mi.*

Mộng đến mộng đi

Nửa năm tù mộng như tơ,
Giang hồ dẫm khắp, cõi mơ mặc lòng.
Trong mộng, thân ở ngoài song,
Tĩnh mộng, ngồi vuốt mày cong thẫn thờ.

Dream after dream

Half a year in solitary confinement spun my dreams into
intricate webs,
Where I had reached far and wide, crisscrossing the land,
unrestrained and carefree.
Dream after dream, my spirit soared beyond these prison
walls,
Awakened, I sat in stunned silence, stroking my long
brows.

Explanation

Thầy's dreamscape reflects the celestial realms of distant dreams he penned in his 1973 work, *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams).

Su Dongpo's life bears striking similarities to Thầy's as both were renowned scholars, both staunchly opposed tyranny, and both faced imprisonment.

What's truly remarkable is that the distant celestial realms Thầy depicted in Su Dongpo's life are, in essence, reflections of his own experiences. To demonstrate this, let's explore five key periods in Su Dongpo's life, drawing from excerpts of Thầy's work:

(1) When Su Dongpo was an official in Fuxian County, Henan Province:

In a foreign land, one always senses the presence of their homeland; the sky of one's homeland echoes with history. Homesickness and the feelings of a stranger are but the long notes of history ... The hidden and the revealed emotions in each poem share a common sorrow. This sorrow is temporarily wrapped up in the misty, dreamlike skies of one's homeland.

This is the feelings Thầy described in *Hận thu cao* (Rising autumnal sorrow, page 39) when he left Vạn Hạnh University to go to Nha Trang.

(2) When Su nearly faced execution, he was merely exiled to Huangzhou:

Even in autumn, there are rain and wind, and floods. So, the tranquil sadness of the sky is also the tumultuous sadness of the earth.

Thầy also escaped execution and was exiled to Ba Sao prison in Nam Hà province, northernmost point of Vietnam. Although Su was free while Thầy was incarcerated, their sentiments share a striking resemblance.

(3) When Su lived in poverty in Huangzhou:

On one hand, Lushan is hidden amidst clouds and mist, harboring mankind's deepest aspirations. On the other hand, the floodwaters of a ruined nation, carrying the once-mighty heroes, are swept away into the vast, unknowable ocean.

Similarly, Thầy spent three years living in Vạn Giã forest in a thatched hut he built himself. "There was nothing there at night except a flickering oil lamp in the hut and the endless darkness of the vast mountains and forests".

(4) When Su was appointed as a Hanlin Academician:

Whether one rises or falls in life, it does not create poetry, nor does it build a poetic realm. It is not through the descent from the pinnacle of power to the depths of poverty that the poetic sky expands. Poetry is like a lost wild goose seeking its homeland across mountains and rivers, and that homeland continues to echo in a silent, spaceless melody.

Similarly, Thầy was appointed professor at Vạn Hạnh University when he was only 25 years old. His book *Tô*

Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams), despite being written in prose, is fundamentally a poetry collection.

(5) When Su was exiled to Hainan Island:

Wulao Peak had once welcomed him in his time of wealth and fame, and the cascading waterfalls had once proudly served his talents. Now, from afar, Lushan appears as a distorted, tormented vision ... The azure of Mount Emei, the color of the sky that echoed the homeland of old. In those days, the azure Mount Emei against the sky was the warm affection of home. But now, a mere glimpse of that color in a dream is enough to cause countless heartbreaks.

Similarly, Thầy regarded his time after the release from Ba Sao prison is a form of exile in his homeland. This final excerpt reveals a profound sense of nostalgia and loss shared by both Su Dongpo and Thầy.

Importantly, although their circumstances were similar, Su Dongpo's sentiments differed markedly from Thầy's. When he was imprisoned in 1080, Su Dongpo sent two poems to his brother Su Zhe. This is the first poem:

聖主如天萬物春
小臣愚暗自亡身
百年未滿先償債
十口無歸更累人
是處青山可埋骨
他年夜雨獨傷神
與君世世為兄弟
又結來生未了因

*Thánh chủ như thiên vạn vật xuân
Tiểu thần ngu ám tự vong thân
Bách niên vị mãn tiên thường trái
Thập khẩu vô quy cánh lũy nhân
Thị xứ thanh sơn khả mai cốt
Tha niên dạ vũ độc thương thân
Dữ quân thế thế vi huynh đệ
Hữu kết lai sinh vị liễu nhân.*

The benevolent king is like heaven and earth, bringing spring to all things
The petty officials, ignorant and blind, harm themselves
Not yet a hundred years old, I already repay my life's debt
Leaving behind ten mouths to feed, without a home to return to, making their lives even harder
This green mountain may be my burial place
Next year, in night rains, my lonely soul will feel the cold
I vow to be brothers with you in life after life
May this bond continue in the next life.

The poem is filled with sorrow and resentment. The sentiments are complex, criticizing the officials but praising the benevolent king, even though Chancellor Wang Anshi was appointed by Emperor Shenzong of Song. The poem's poignancy is heightened by the heart-wrenching fear of dying young and leaving ten dependents with no means of support. But the part where he wishes to be brothers with Su Zhe in life after life is really moving.

Unlike Su Dongpo, through all 18 poems in this *Somniloquies in prison* volume, Thày was full of compassion, harboring no resentment towards those who imprisoned him, nor was he filled with fear.

16. Tự thuật

自述

三十年前學苦空
經函堆案暗西窗
春花不顧春光老
翠竹斜飛翠夢魂
荏苒長眉垂壞案
蹉跎素髮絆殘風
一朝撒手懸崖下
始把真空對壁紅

Tự thuật

Tam thập niên tiên học khổ không
Kinh hàm đống lũy ám tây song
Xuân hoa bất cố xuân quang lão
Thúy trúc tà phi thúy mộng hồn
Nhãm nhiễm trường mi thùy hoại án
Sa đà tổ phát bặt tàn phong
Nhất triêu tán thủ huyền nhai hạ
Thủy bả chân không đối trụ hồng.

Tự thuật

Đời là bể khổ, pháp là không
Ba mươi năm học, sách chất chồng
Hoa xuân chẳng ngó, xuân tàn úa
Trúc biếc bay ngang, biếc mộng lòng
Mây dài thấm thoát rủ án hồng
Tóc bạc dần dà vương gió rung

Một sáng thông tay nơi vách núi,
Nhật cánh hồng rơi giữa cõi không. ⁴⁴

Autobiography

I've embarked on the study in the last thirty years that life
is a sea of suffering, and all dharma are empty,
Stacks of sutra books piled up by the west window.
The spring, saddened by its unnoticed blossoming spring
flowers, withers.
My verdant spirit, burdened by the verdant, swaying
bamboo leaves, suffers.
My eyebrows have quickly grown long, drooping over the
wrecked bench.

⁴⁴ In my first edition of this book, the Sino-Vietnamese transcription of this poem was Thầy's original work that he created in prison, but the Chinese transcription was the updated version he modified himself after his release. For consistency, this edition only utilizes the modified version.

The last word 紅 (hồng, red) in this poem means a rose in this version. The falling rose here could be the falling flower Thầy refers to in his *Su Dongpo* book: "Practicing Zen for thirty years, torturing body and mind for thirty years, yet without success. Feeling resentful, I gave up; suddenly seeing a flower falling, the state of nothingness was suddenly revealed".

But in the original version, it refers to the Communists. Below are its last two verses:

一朝撒手懸崖下
始把真空對壁紅

*Nhật triêu cước lạc huyền nhai hạ
Thủy bả chân không đối tịch hồng.*

Một sáng hụt chân nơi vách đá
Nhờ nắm Chân Không thoát đêm hồng

Having misstepped on the cliff's edge one morning,
Clinging to emptiness, I escaped the nights living beneath the red flag.

My hair has slowly turned gray, entangled with the
withering winds.

Holding the emptiness while on a cliff one morning,
I picked up a falling rose petal amidst the sky of the void.

Explanation

The first line, 三十年前學苦空 (*Tam thập niên tiền học khổ không*) literally means *in the last thirty years I've studied suffering and emptiness* (ba mươi năm trước học khổ không), but I believe such a translation fails to help readers understand what suffering (*khổ*) and emptiness (*không*) mean. Suffering (*khổ*) comes from the phrase *life is a sea of suffering* (đời là bể khổ) and emptiness (*không*) from *all dharma are empty* (vạn pháp giai không). So,

I've embarked on the study in the last thirty years that life
is a sea of suffering, and all dharma are empty,
Stacks of sutra books piled up by the west window.

Đời là bể khổ, pháp là không
Ba mươi năm học, sách chất chồng

In the third line, Thầy twice repeats the word 春 (*xuân*,
spring) and also 翠 (*biếc*, verdant) twice in the fourth line.

春花不顧春光老
翠竹斜飛翠夢魂

Xuân hoa bất cố xuân quang lão
Thúy trúc tà phi thúy mộng hồn

Hoa xuân chẳng ngó, xuân tàn úa
Trúc biếc bay ngang, biếc mộng lòng

The spring withers, saddened by its unnoticed blossoming spring flowers.

My verdant spirit suffers, intoxicated by the verdant, swaying bamboo leaves.

As you may have observed, both my Vietnamese and English translations maintain the symmetrical and recurrent hallmarks of Tang poetry.

In the last line, *a falling rose petal* represents the impermanence in contrast with the poet's no-mind state, represented by *the sky of the void*.

Naturally, eight lines of Tang poetry, with only 56 words, cannot fully encapsulate Thầy's life and experiences. Therefore, let us turn to the accounts of those who were fortunate enough to have known him personally.

The following is excerpted from the essay *Thượng tọa Tuệ Sỹ, Trí Siêu, những thiên tài lỗi lạc* (Most Venerables Tuệ Sỹ, Trí Siêu, outstanding geniuses), written by his former student Most Venerable Thích Nguyên Siêu:

Thầy single-handedly shattered the foundations of the philosophy of Śūnyatā, unearthing and presenting the deepest values of *Mādhyamaka* (Middle Way) thought.

For all the works composed and translated by these ancestors were like bedside books to Thầy, and as for the Tripitaka and the Great Collection, there was no volume he had not perused.

Having studied under Thầy and subsequently worked with him on translating the *Mādhyama Agama*, the

Dhammapada, and collections of Nikāya Agamas, from 1975–1977 at the Hải Đức College in Nha Trang and from 1980–1984 at the Quảng Hương Già Lam Monastery, which also housed the Vạn Hạnh Library, I was able to witness firsthand Thầy’s extraordinary abilities and memory. Of the Sūtras, Vinaya, Abhidharma, and the entire Tripitaka, he seemed to know by heart from some past life. Perhaps in countless lives of endless birth and death, he had been a Zen master, dharma master, and Abhidharma master, for whenever I asked about numerical formulas, sūtra meanings, or Abhidharma interpretations in the Great Collection, he could immediately turn to the correct page, volume, and line. Working alongside Thầy, I came to understand his diligence, unwavering determination, and self-reliance in building himself up.

At almost any given moment, Thầy was studying, researching, pondering, reading scriptures, poetry, the Classic of Poetry, the Classic of Changes, philosophy, and literature. He also taught himself music: the piano and violin. He practiced writing Chinese characters, particularly the cursive script of Wang Xizhi, and read the poetry of Li Bai, Du Fu, and Su Shi. Thầy lived a simple, pure life, spending his days and nights immersed in the worlds of spirituality, thought, philosophy, poetry, language, and had no time to consider the clothing or appearance of others. Thus, he was always dressed in a simple, four-flap, faded robe that reached below the knees, whether teaching or going out. Though small in stature, his mind was vast and brilliantly gifted.

The following excerpt is from an essay by professor Phạm Công Thiện, a fellow faculty member with Thầy at Vạn Hạnh University, entitled *Buổi chiều nắng hạ đọc thơ Tuệ Sỹ* (A summer afternoon reading Tuệ Sỹ's poetry):

All ordinary political actions are biased; a comprehensive political consciousness is only expressed in a person who is both a poet, a Zen master, and a worldly activist with the “skillful means” spirit of a Bodhisattva. Such a person engages in vigorous and thorough actions while maintaining a sense of detachment and idealism. It is because of their lack of selfish and blind ambitions that they cultivate a sense of detachment, and because they are not trapped by the worldly desires, anger, and ignorance that they cultivate idealism. To engage in politics while knowing how to dream and live poetically, and to maintain detachment and idealism, is very rare in the harsh reality of our homeland today.

From Most Venerable Thích Phước An, who has lived with Thầy Tuệ Sỹ in his thatched hut, nestled deep within the Vạn Giã forest, the following excerpt is from *Theo Quách Tấn*⁴⁵ *tìm về núi cũ xem mai nở* (Following Quách Tấn to return to the old mountain to see the plum blossoms):

In the final months of 1975, and continuing through 1976 and 1977, as far as I know, those were the saddest

⁴⁵ Quách Tấn (1910–1992) was a distinguished poet whose poetic journey began in 1939 with his Tang-style masterpiece *Một tâm lòng* (A heartfelt sentiment). Known for his meticulous craftsmanship, Quách Tấn produced a limited yet highly refined body of work.

years of Quách Tấn' s life. Old friends, some had passed away, while others who remained were afraid of “walls have ears” and few dared to visit to chat or confide, even though there was so much to talk about.

At that time, Tuệ Sỹ was still in Nha Trang, and the temple had nothing much to do, so Tuệ Sỹ and I often went down to visit Quách Tấn, and occasionally he would also come up to the temple to visit us. Even though Tuệ Sỹ was much younger than Quách Tấn, Quách Tấn always had a deep respect for Tuệ Sỹ's abilities and, above all, his integrity.

When discussing the two works written about Su Dongpo, one by Nguyễn Hiến Lê ⁴⁶ and the other by

⁴⁶ Professor Nguyễn Hiến Lê (1912–1984) was a scholar, writer, translator and educator. He published 120 works across various genres, the vast majority of which were before the fall of Saigon.

Below is an excerpt he writes in the updated *Introduction* section to his book *Tô Đông Pha* (Su Dongpo):

Just a few days ago, due to the sudden change in weather, as soon as I turned on the light to eat dinner, a swarm of termites flew in. I had to turn off the light and go outside to eat dinner in the dark (in Long Xuyên). Then, late at night, the frogs croaked loudly outside my room, so I had to get up, find a sleeping pill, and think back to the time when he was exiled to Hainan Island. Despite living in extreme poverty, he was still cheerful and full of humor. In every aspect, he deserved to be my teacher...

In 1974, I revised my book *Su Dongpo*, adding a few sections (including one about the West Lake scene). Before Cao Thom Publishing could reprint it, Saigon was liberated, and the press had to close. Some resistance fighter friends really enjoyed that book.

The way professor Nguyễn Hiến Lê uses language in this updated Introduction clearly reflects his political views.

Thầy Tuệ Sỹ, poet Quách Tấn said, “Nguyễn Hiến Lê has only looked at Lushan from a distance, while Tuệ Sỹ has truly entered its depths” ...

Perhaps unable to bear the stifling atmosphere of the city, Tuệ Sỹ went to work on a farm in a remote forest in Vạn Giã town, about sixty kilometers from Nha Trang. Most of the poems expressing his own melancholy and concerns for his homeland were written in this secluded mountainous area.

- *Sài Gòn được giải phóng* (Saigon was liberated): Using “liberated” in this context can be interpreted as adopting the regime’s own language and potentially downplaying the violence and upheaval experienced by many during this period.

- *Bạn kháng chiến* (Resistance fighter friends): This term means he called those who participated in the war against the South Vietnam government as his friends. It shows his respect and empathy for them.

While Thầy Tuệ Sỹ and millions of others suffered persecution, professor Nguyễn sought collaboration with the communist regime. He was evidently ignorant of the lies and fundamental flaws of Communism.

It wasn’t until five years later that he admitted in his memoirs the failure of the ruling regime. He considered the regime’s biggest failure to be its inability to unite the nation. The second point was that society had become more unjust than before. Third, there was a lack of responsibility and excessive factionalism, leading to a lack of discipline, disobedience, and chaos. Fourth was the collapse of the economy. Finally, society had become degenerate: Cadres were corrupt and engaged in theft. In such a society, he admitted, people easily lose their humanity, becoming vile, greedy, immoral, and deceitful, devoid of any human compassion.

17. Nhất bôi thanh thủy

一杯清水

自隱孤峰不味茶
清心清水玩空花
希夷人影風塵外
托夢蒼蒼望紫霞

Nhất bôi thanh thủy

*Tự ẩn cô phong bất vị trà
Thanh tâm thanh thủy ngoạn không hoa
Hi di nhân ảnh phong trần ngoại
Thác mộng thương thương vọng tử hà.*

Một chén nước trong

Không trà, khi ở trên non,
Lòng trong, chỉ uống nước trong như lòng.
Thưởng ngoạn hoa đốm hư không,
Xa xa thấp thoáng ngoài song bóng người.
Vén mây gởi mộng lên trời,
Trời xanh, ngóng đợi ráng chiều tím than.

A cup of clear water

Not a drop of tea taken since seeking refuge on this lonely mountain,
With a heart serene and water clear, I watched flowers in the void.
As a looming shadow appeared in the dusty distance,

Entrusting dreams to the vast azure sky, yearning for a glimpse of violet clouds.

Explanation

In the second verse, Thầy uses the term 空花 (*không hoa*). These are the flashes of light or other visual sensations, such as either black and white or colorful dancing patterns, that occur without external light stimulation we see when we press on our eyes. Buddhism likens these fleeting, illusory phenomena to “flowers in the void”, emphasizing their impermanence and lack of inherent substance.

The *Diamond Sūtra* (kinh Kim Cương, in Vietnamese) further elaborates on this concept, urging us to view all conditioned phenomena – everything that arises due to causes and conditions – as illusory as dreams, bubbles, shadows or flowers in the void. They are merely temporary manifestations and lack any enduring, substantial self.

*Nhất thiết hữu vi pháp,
Như mộng ảo bào ảnh,
Như lộ diệc như điện,
Ứng tác như thị quán.*

All conditioned dharmas
Are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows,
Like dew drops and a lightning flash:
Contemplate them thus.

In the final verse, the violet clouds Thầy wishes to see can symbolize his spiritual aspirations, dreams, or the divine. The author, living in the prison cell, consigns his dreams in

the sky as he is relying on dreams to connect with the world beyond the prison wall.

In the essay *Truy tìm tự ngã* (Searching for the Self) in the *Pháp luân* (Dharma wheel) magazine, issue 60, Thầy explains why the self does not exist. The beauty of this essay is that Thầy begins by assuming that everything has a self, then explains the common perception of why this self seems to exist, and then refutes it by arguing that it is a construct, shaped by experiences, language, and cultural conditioning, proving that it ultimately does not exist.

The scripture says: “All conditioned phenomena are like dreams, illusions, etc.”. This is to say about the doctrine of nothingness and no-Self through direct experience or realization. ...

Buddhism teaches that there are good and bad actions, and corresponding good and bad results, but there is no doer and since there is no doer, there is no person to receive the consequences of their actions. This is very difficult to understand.

We should start with the easy and move on to the difficult. The easy thing to understand is that everything has a self: I walk, I stand, I eat, I sleep, etc. But when a person sleeps without dreaming, it seems that this self disappears. Or like a person who has an accident and loses their memory, they no longer remember who they are. If they are treated and their memory recovers, then it is still the same self as before. And when a person dies, does that self still exist? To admit that it does is to admit that there is an unchanging soul that exists both when awake and asleep, both when alive and after death.

This is the everyday experience of a self. This experience is the accumulation in a lifetime of memories, sufferings, happiness, fame, and misery. From these accumulated experiences, the idea of a permanent self is formed. At the lowest level, this self is identified with the physical body and possessions. A great emperor has an entire empire: me and my empire. But once this body decays, and it certainly will, who am I, and what is this empire? Those emperors, like Qin Shi Huang, Han Wudi, and Genghis Khan, believed in a self and their physical body that could exist for a long time, because they did not want to lose their fame and power; they sought out Taoist priests and searched for the elixir of life. Where are those who sought immortality? ...

Suppose a man bought a dog and named it *Lucky*. At first, when called, *Lucky* was indifferent and unresponsive. Gradually, upon hearing the name *Lucky*, it would wag its tail happily. It had come to understand what *Lucky* meant, and in doing so, it had also developed a sense of self. It formed a new ego through this new name. Before it had a name, it still existed and protected itself. It sought food, found a place to sleep, and would bite anyone who came too close as a threat. After being given a name, its entire existence was now encapsulated in the name *Lucky*. However, if someone insulted the name *Lucky*, it wouldn't react. But with humans, when a name or title is insulted, beware. Of course, humans don't know their names until a certain age, just like *Lucky*. Clearly, the name that carries the connotation of self is merely a false name, yet humans suffer or rejoice because of this very false name. ...

This means that this body, with these sensations, thoughts, and perceptions, is a collection of accumulated experiences as vast as the universe. This mass solidifies into a thick hard shell. It can only be shattered by the *Diamond Sūtra* pestle.

In short, the teachings in the *Diamond Sūtra* begin with the negation of self: no-self view, no-person view ... In various religions and philosophical systems, there are different concepts of self. In many religions, the self is a soul given by God. The goal of human life is to keep the soul from being lost, so that one can enjoy the blessings of God later. ...

In Buddhism, whether it's a small self or a great self, they are merely nominal concepts. But this nominal concept is solidified by the accumulation of countless delusions. The self is formed in this life, influenced by tradition, religion, thought, and society, and from this, a personality and a soul are formed, and then one clings tightly to it in order to exist. This is called the view of a separate self.

The self, formed from the accumulation of delusions over many lifetimes, creates the instinctual desire for survival even in the smallest creatures; this is called the birth of self-grasping.

Therefore, there is no need to search for a small self or a great self, but to eliminate the false concept created by delusions.

In essence, this essay argues that our sense of self is a socially constructed illusion and that true liberation comes

from recognizing this. Finally, Thầy explains that the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to break free from the illusion of self and realize the interconnectedness of all things.

On a separate note, the essay sparks a personal reflection. Naming an imaginary dog Lucky to explain the concept of nothingness and naming his real room in Già Lam pagoda *Thị Ngạn am* (Thị Ngạn hermitage) ⁴⁷ to guide his visitors makes me wonder: What truly distinguishes imagination from reality, when both shape our perceptions and experiences? In short, what is imagination and what is reality?

⁴⁷ *Thị Ngạn* is an abbreviation of the Chinese idiom 回頭是岸 (*hồi đầu thị ngạn*, turn your head around to see the shore). In Buddhism, it's a call to abandon worldly attachments and illusions to attain nirvana. *Thị Ngạn am* was the name Thầy gave to his room at Già Lam pagoda.

The following writer Nguyễn Đạt's tale of Thầy's *Thị Ngạn am* paints such a compelling portrait of Thầy that I feel a deep connection to his story.

The first room, on the left, right after ascending the steps to the upper floor of a series of rooms in Già Lam Pagoda, was the meditation room of Venerable Tuệ Sỹ, named *Thị Ngạn am*.

This morning, looking up at the wall of *Thị Ngạn am*, there was a beautifully handwritten poem in Nôm script by Tuệ Sỹ. I asked Tuệ Sỹ for a copy to bring home. He happily agreed. Spreading the paper with header *Thị Ngạn am* on the tiled floor, he hunched over like an old calligrapher, carefully writing this poem in Nôm script:

輔導移眸悉溪
撥空翹鶴趁術黃昏

*Nằm chầy đá ngủ lòng khe,
Lưng trời cánh hạc đi về hoàng hôn.*

Deep in the crevice, a stone slumbers through the year,
Against the vast sky, a crane sails towards the sunset.

18. Tự trào

自嘲

山中懶卧一殘僧
夢寐喧譁党更謊
獨对青松誇所悟
百余年後史傳灯

Tự trào

*Sơn trung ản ngoạ nhất tàn tăng
Mộng寐 huyền hoa giác cánh hoang
Độc đối thanh tùng khoa sở ngộ
Bách dư niên hậu sử truyền đăng.*

Tự diễu

Núi kia ản một ông tăng,
Ngủ thì huyền não, thức càng huyền hoang,
Gốc tùng xanh, tự khoe khoang:
Trăm năm sau nữa danh vang sử Thiên.

Self-mockery

A ludicrous monk, secluded on a mountain,
Chattered nonsense in his sleep, but his ramblings became
wilder when awake.
He bragged about his enlightenment to a stoic green pine,
Boasting that his name will enshrine in the list of Zen
masters for centuries.

Explanation

In the last sentence, Thầy uses the term 傳灯 (*truyền đăng*, transmission of the lamp). The transmission of the lamp means the passing of the torch. The first person to receive the torch from the Buddha was Mahākāśyapa, based on the story of the *Flower Sermon*, or 拈花微笑 (*Niêm hoa vi tiếu*, the Buddha picking up a flower, Mahākāśyapa smiling):

Śākyamuni was once engaged at the Mount of the Holy Vulture in preaching to a congregation of his disciples. He did not resort to any lengthy verbal discourse to explain his point, but simply lifted a bouquet of flowers before the assemblage, which was presented to him by one of his lay-disciples. Not a word came out of his mouth. Nobody understood the meaning of this except the old Venerable Mahākāśyapa, who quietly smiled at the Master, as if he fully comprehended the purport of this silent but eloquent teaching on the part of the Enlightened One. The latter perceiving this opened his golden-tongued mouth and proclaimed solemnly: “I have the most precious treasure, spiritual and transcendental, which this moment I hand over to you, O Venerable Mahākāśyapa!”

(quoted from Dr. Daisetz Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, the first series, page 167)

The poem is titled *Tự trào* (Self-mockery), but the speech Thầy wrote in 2000, which he intended to read before the Dutch Parliament when the Dutch government and parliament invited him to visit, but he was not allowed to

go abroad by the Hanoi government, is not sarcastic at all. The main part is as follows:

People only need to look at the garbage and waste dumped in the backyard to know what has been consumed in the front yard. We, some people who have long been accustomed to thinking about the fate of the nation from piles of garbage, have asked ourselves many questions about the human conscience, the meaning of social progress, and above all a historical question: How much blood and bones of generations of ancestors and friends has the country absorbed to become such piles of garbage, piles of garbage that are growing larger and larger in a terrifying way.

Vietnam is becoming a huge garbage dump. That is not my personal opinion, but the observation of the highest-ranking officials of the Vietnamese Communist Party. This is not just an economic issue. It encompasses all aspects of life: culture, politics, and even religion. So, a question needs to be asked to those who still have a bit of national pride: Why would a nation that has always been proud of its 4,000-year-old civilization suddenly let its country become a garbage dump, a repository for all the worst things of civilized humanity. ...

Despite significant changes from certain perspectives, I know for sure that one thing hasn't changed. That is: the Communist Party still considers itself the benefactor of the nation and therefore has the exclusive right to decide the nation's fate (whether it is a benefactor or a criminal, the masses and history will judge). This is different from other famous authoritarian regimes in history. This is

also the reason for one of the things that conservative party members consider “capitalist garbage”. That is corruption. Because bureaucracy, arrogance, and the attitude of a benefactor are both the nature and the nutrient of corruption in Vietnam today.

All crimes involve a perpetrator and a victim. In corruption, at first glance, no one is clearly harmed. Initially, both the bribe-giver and the bribe-taker receive certain benefits. Thus, the real victims are the masses who do not have enough privilege to participate in order to benefit directly from corruption. That means those who are equally miserable in society have nothing to give, so they receive nothing, and therefore they become victims. The unique nature of corruption victims in Vietnam today is due to the patronizing attitude of those in power towards the “subjects” under their rule.

Corruption in Vietnam is not just a bilateral agreement to secure lucrative economic contracts. It sucks the marrow out of the people; those who are equally miserable have to work hard to pay taxes.

Corruption is the root of other social evils. Because it organizes, protects, and nourishes them all. It erodes all traditional moral values. Protecting or promoting national culture on this basis is merely a shield for rampant corruption.

I say, corruption is the backyard of power. Because it is the impoverished people, whose voices are always suppressed by intimidation, who are suppressed by the most brutal authoritarian regime, but who also endure silently. They are the witnesses to the dark side of

corruption and power; the direct victims of all its suppression of human dignity.

Nowadays, many people want to evaluate Thầy as a poet, a writer who has made great contributions to Vietnamese culture, or as an outstanding monk of Vietnamese Buddhism. According to them, Thầy should not engage in political activities. In the last paragraph of the above speech, I think Thầy writes for them:

I don't know what my tomorrow will be like when the things I say don't please the party and the state. The situation in Vietnam is such that our people have to suffer too much pain and humiliation. For the intelligentsia in particular, whom traditional Vietnamese society respects very much, the greatest humiliation is that they cannot honestly speak on behalf of the common people about all the resentment and suffering they endure. Because, in Vietnam today, those who can speak have their pens bent; those who want to speak have their pens broken.

In conclusion of this volume, I want to quote Most Venerable Nguyễn Siêu's comment in *Tuệ Sĩ – Thơ và tư tưởng Triết học* (Tuệ Sĩ – Poetry and Philosophical Thought), which is as follows:

The poems in *Ngục trung mị ngữ* (Somniloquies in prison) are written during his time in prison, it is said that there are quite a lot, but only about twenty poems have reached the readers. In those twenty poems, we see a peaceful, carefree, and transcendent soul, in the spirit of a prisoner who is not confined by imprisonment.

This is the mind of a practitioner, a prisoner in body but not in mind. Even within the four walls of a prison, he is still at ease, wandering freely, talking and laughing with his own shadow, seen as an old friend who is always there to talk, to share. This mind, wherever it is, is not bound by worldly ties, not influenced by external circumstances and causes, because it has mastered itself and is not affected by the wrongs, rights, commonality and differences of the world, once the mind is at peace, the three realms are also at peace. ...

Indeed, the mind is not bound by the three thousand great worlds. If the mind is free, who can imprison it? If the clouds are light and float freely, what prison bars can hold them?

Thầy is like a cloud floating in the boundless sky!

Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

Volume 4

Tĩnh tọa | Meditation

This volume, *Tĩnh tọa* (Meditation, ngồi thiền), containing 9 poems, is mostly written during his second imprisonment in North Vietnam (1984–1998).

Time of composition: 1984–2000.

1. Bài ca cuối cùng

*Chim trời xếp cánh
Hát vu vơ mấy tiếng trong lồng;
Nhớ mãi rừng cây thăm thẳm
Ủ tâm tư cho hạt thóc cay nồng
Rát bỏng với nổi hờn khổ nhục
Nó nhịn ăn
Rồi chết gục.*

*Ta đã hát những bài ca phố chợ:
Người ăn mày kêu lịch sử đi lui;
Chàng tuổi trẻ cụt chân từ chiến địa
Vỡ lẽ đường đoán mộng tương lai.
Lộng lẫy chiếc lồng son
Hạt thóc căng nổi hờn
Giữa tường ca bóng mát
Âm u lời ca khổ nhục
Nó nhịn ăn
Và chết.*

*Ta đã hát bài ca của suối:
Gã anh hùng bẻ vụn mặt trời,
Gọi quỷ sứ từ âm ty kéo dây,
Ngập rừng xanh lấp lánh ma trời.
Đêm qua chiêm bao ta thấy máu,
Từ sông Ngân đổ xuống cõi người
Bà mẹ xoi tim con thành lỗ,
Móc bên trong hạt ngọc sáng ngời.
Lồng son hạt cơm trắng
Cánh nhỏ run uất hận
Tiếng hát lịm tắt dần
Nó đi về vô tận*

The last song

The sky bird folded his wings,
Singing a few words in vain within the bars of the cage.
Missing the vast, deep forest,
Nurturing bitterness in its heart, like searing spicy grains,
Burning with resentment and humiliation,
The bird fast,
Then died.

I sang these songs in the markets:
The beggar begging history to turn back,
The young man with a war-amputated leg,
Tapping the curb, predicting future by interpreting his
dreams.
But in this beautiful red cage,
The rice grains swelled with resentment.
Amidst the tall and shady walls,
Echoing mournful and despairing songs,
The bird fast,
And died.

I sang these songs of the stream:
The brash hero shattering the sun,
Summoning the demons from the underworld,
Flooding the forest with will-of-the-wisps.
Last night I dreamed of blood,
Pouring down from the Milky Way into the human realm,
Where a mother gouged out her child's heart,
Pulling out a shining pearl.
The gilded cage, the pearly grain,
The little wings trembled with resentment,

Its song a whisper, fading fast,
It flew towards the endless void.

Explanation

His point in the first stanza is that no songs can compare to the final song of a bird trapped in a cage, preferring death to a life of shame.

In the second stanza, *Thầy* echoes the crying voices of the market, capturing the cul-de-sac of its inhabitants: the beggar begged history to turn back, and the legless soldier patted the roadside predicting future by interpreting his clients' dreams.

In the third stanza, *Thầy* channels the ethereal melody of a stream, mirroring the aspirations of the people. A brash hero's defiance against demons only serves to unleash their menacing presence upon the forest (here, *gã* in the phrase *gã anh hùng* is used with a contemptuous undertone, hence, I translate it as brash hero). But the following four lines, where a mother gouged out her child's heart to get a pearl, are deeply moving and bring me to tears:

*Đêm qua chiêm bao ta thấy máu,
Từ sông Ngân đổ xuống cõi người
Bà mẹ xoi tim con thành lỗ,
Móc bên trong hạt ngọc sáng ngời*

Last night I dreamed of blood,
Pouring down from the Milky Way into the human realm,
Where a mother gouged out her child's heart,
Pulling out a shining pearl.

This isn't just his imagination. Stories of parents selling their children to survive aren't uncommon in the so-called "land of heroes", according to communist propaganda. It's heartbreaking to see a nation so deceived that there's no humanly way out.

The image of a bird preferring death to a life of shame in a cage is a reflection of Thầy's stance through the following statement:

If my words mean digging my own grave, I am willing to bury myself, rather than accepting that. And if you say it's the law, yes, I respect the law, but if the law violates my ideals, I don't accept that law. Don't use the word "law" with me. It's true that in any country, one must respect the law, but if one creates a law to use it to violate the values, the ideals of others, then I don't accept that law, I'm ready to die. I've already faced a death sentence, I'm not afraid, I accept it. This is not a challenge, but a matter of my ideals.

(Copied from his article *Định hướng tương lai với thế hệ tăng sỹ trẻ ngày nay* (Orientation for the future with the younger generation of monks today).

Nothing is clearer than his statement: *If my words mean digging my own grave, I am willing to bury myself, rather than accepting that.*

The *words* Thầy mentioned in this statement is Thầy's stance when the Vietnamese Communist Party wanted to dissolve the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

He dedicated his life to advocating for a strict separation of religion and politics. While his efforts were unsuccessful during his lifetime, he remained steadfast in his belief that they would ultimately prevail. His key arguments can be summarized in the following four points:

(1) Separation of religion and politics: Thầy firmly believed that religion, particularly Buddhism, should be separate from politics. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam should not be affiliated with any political organization.

(2) Respect for religious freedom: Thầy demanded that the government should respect religious freedom and not use religion as a tool for political gain.

(3) Preservation of Buddhist traditions: Thầy rejected any attempt to use Buddhism as a tool for political purposes, as he believed it would compromise the integrity of the religion.

(4) Historical perspective: Thầy believed that the traditions of Buddhism are timeless against the fragility of political regimes.

Considering the themes of imprisonment and the poet's personal experiences, it's likely that this poem was written during his period of confinement in prison. Such circumstances would provide a poignant backdrop for the emotional intensity and the symbolic resonance of the caged bird.

2. Bình minh

*Tiếng trẻ khóc ngân vang lời vĩnh cửu
Từ nguyên sơ sông máu thấm đồng xanh
Tôi là cỏ trôi theo dòng thiên cổ
Nghe lời ru nhớ mãi buổi bình minh.*

*Buổi vô thủy hôn tôi từ đáy mộ
Uống sương khuya tìm sinh lộ viễn trình
Khi nắng sớm hôn nồng lên nụ nhỏ
Tôi yêu ai, trời rực sáng bình minh?*

*Đôi cò trắng yêu nhau còn bỡ ngỡ
Sao mặt trời thù ghét tóc nàng xinh?
Tôi lên núi tìm nỗi buồn đâu đó
Sao tuổi thơ không khóc buổi bình minh?*

Dawn

The infant's cries echo endlessly,
A timeless echo of the fields stained with blood of fallen
heroes.
A blade of grass, adrift on the river of time,
Upon hearing a lullaby of past ages, I deeply remember
the nation's dawn.

In the beginning, my soul emerged from the grave,
Drinking midnight dew, seeking a path for my long
journey.
When the morning sun kisses tiny flower buds,
Who do I love that makes the sky glow bright at dawn?

Two white storks, in love yet still bashful,
Why does the sun envy their graceful plumes?

I climb the mountain, seeking the cause of my sorrow,
Why don't our youth cry for their nation's dawn?

Explanation

Given that the *dawn* here alludes to the nation's emergence, I replaced it with nation's dawn in my translation.

A timeless echo of the fields stained with blood of fallen heroes is a haunting reminder of our ancestors' sacrifice, who shed their blood so that these fields could be green and fertile.

The blade of grass, rooted in the earth, serves as a witness to the history of its country. It has heard the cries of infants and their mothers' lullaby and witnessed the fields stained with blood since the nation's dawn. This imagery positions the blade of grass as a silent observer and a living testament to the nation's past:

*Tiếng trẻ khóc ngân vang lời vĩnh cửu
Từ nguyên sơ sông máu thấm đồng xanh
Tôi là cỏ trôi theo dòng thiên cổ
Nghe lời ru nhớ mãi buổi bình minh*

The infant's cries echo endlessly,
A timeless echo of the fields stained with blood of fallen heroes.
A blade of grass, adrift on the river of time,
Upon hearing a lullaby of past ages, I deeply remember
the nation's dawn.

In my translation, I seek to establish a connection between the poem's allusions to infants' cries, maternal lullabies,

and the nation's dawn. This also is the reason that in the last sentence, I write *their nation, the youth's nation*, instead of our nation, as their nation might not be ours:

Why don't our youth cry for their nation's dawn?

I believe that this is the message Thầy placed in this poem.

This poem poses three interesting questions, inviting the reader to consider the complexities of history, the enduring nature of love, and the challenges of remembering and honoring the nation's past:

(1) *Khi nắng sớm hôn bông lên nụ nhỏ
Tôi yêu ai, trời rực sáng bình minh?*

When the morning sun kisses tiny flower buds,
Who do I love that makes the sky glow bright at dawn?

(2) *Đôi cò trắng yêu nhau còn bẽn lẽn
Sao mặt trời thù ghét tóc nàng xinh?*

Two white storks, in love yet still bashful,
Why does the sun envy their graceful plumes?

(3) *Tôi lên núi tìm nỗi buồn đâu đó
Sao tuổi thơ không khóc buổi bình minh?*

I climb the mountain, seeking the cause of my sorrow,
Why don't our youth cry for their nation's dawn?

3. Bồi hồi

*Thời gian đi khắp khiêng
Đẻ rưng phấn rơi hồng
Tơ nắng dài tâm sự
Bồi hồi mộng vẫn không.*

Fretfulness

Time stumbles with a limp,
Scattering its pollen and scent.
Sunlight thread is burdened with thoughts,
Fretfully, my dreams remain unfulfilled.

Explanation

Bồi hồi mộng vẫn không (Fretfully, my dreams remain unfulfilled). What are his dreams?

After assuming the position of General Secretary of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, he affirmed that “the Church does not place itself under the direction of any secular power; is not a tool to protect the existence of any political trend, of any secular organization; does not practice, propagate according to any ideological orientation; the only orientation is the Ten Directions of the Buddha; the only ultimate goal is liberation”.

In the article *Định hướng tương lai với thế hệ Tăng sỹ trẻ ngày nay* (Orientation for the future with the younger generation of monks today), he further explains:

| The issue of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam
| being a member of the government’s Fatherland Front, I

do not accept. The unification between the two churches is another issue. I say our position is that there is no unification. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha ⁴⁸ is a member of the Fatherland Front, which is a political organization; we do not do politics, we do not unite with any political organization. Then people say that in the regulations, in our constitution, the party leads everything. I say I know that point. I also know that Lenin said “the party must go through religion to gather the mass”. Lenin said, any communist cadre who suppresses religion is reactionary. Lenin did not accept the suppression of religion; in communism, there is no suppression of religion, that is what Lenin instructed. “The party must go through religion to gather the mass” means that religion is a political tool of the party. Because the party is not capable enough to gather, it must borrow the hand of religion to gather. But I will never let Buddhism be a tool for any political party. Like the Soviet Union, a political party, collapsed after 70 years. Even if the Communist Party of Vietnam exists for another 1000 years, I will never use 2500 years of Buddhist heritage as a tool for any party. I also said: “If my words mean digging my own grave, I am still willing to bury myself, rather than accepting that”.

⁴⁸ In Buddhism, Sangha refers to the monastic communities. Therefore, to call a Church a Sangha is a deceptive use of language, a sleigh of hand. As this Church is affiliated with the Communist party’s Vietnamese Fatherland Front, Thầy referred to it as *giáo hội mặt trận* (the Front Church).

4. Hạt cát

*Nữ vương ngự huy hoàng trong ráng đỏ
Cài sao hôm lấp lánh tóc mai
Bà cúi xuống cho đẹp lòng thần tử
Kìa, khách lạ, ngươi là ai?*

*Tôi sứ giả Hư vô
Xin gởi trong đôi mắt Bà
Một hạt cát.*

A grain of sand

The Queen gloriously sits in her crimson glow,
Adorned with a sparkling Hesperus hairband.
With a tilt of her head, she inquires:
“Stranger, who are you?”

“I am the messenger of the Void,
I’d like to place this in your eyes, the Majesty,
A grain of sand.”

Explanation

Was it this grain of sand that made the Queen so furious
that she wanted to execute this brave stranger?

5. Loạn thị

*Cắt gân máu chiêm bao quỷ hiện
Ai làm gì bên chiếc ghế mây
Vách tường trắng bàn tay năm ngón
Một bông hồng năm cánh đang xoay.
Chồng gối cao không thấy mặt trời
Trên khung cửa con chim thắt cổ
Đàn kiến bò hạt cát đang rơi
Tôi nhắm mắt trầm ngâm ánh lửa.*

Astigmatism

Once a blood vessel was cut, ghosts emerged,
The bamboo chair was moving, yet no one was near,
A five-fingered hand imprinted on the white wall,
A five-petal rose was twirling in the air,
A high stack of pillows blocked the sun,
On the window frame, a bird hung its neck,
And a colony of ants crawled over a falling grain of sand.
I closed my eyes, contemplating the fire.

Explanation

Thầy would not harm himself by cutting his blood vessel to experience the things described in the poem. It's common for meditators during retreats to experience vivid and sometimes bizarre dreams, which can occasionally serve as omens of future events.

In the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, it is recorded that before his enlightenment under the bodhi tree, Prince Siddhartha had five strange dreams that he could explain only after

attaining Enlightenment and becoming the Śākyamuni Buddha.

First vision: The Prince dreamed that he suddenly became enormous and was sleeping on the surface of the earth, his head resting on the peak of the Himalayas, his left hand on the eastern sea, his right hand on the western sea, and his feet on the southern sea. This vision indicated that he would attain Enlightenment and become the teacher of gods and humans.

Second vision: The Prince dreamed of a red Tiriya grass growing from his navel. It grew taller and taller, piercing the sky and stopping there. This was an omen that he would find Enlightenment and spread his teachings throughout the heavens and realms of human existence.

Third vision: The Prince dreamed of four types of birds, green, red, gray, and yellow, flying from the four directions. When they landed on his feet, they all turned white. This vision foretold that the four classes of kings, monks, merchants, and common people would all convert to his teachings, become monks, and attain enlightenment.

Fourth vision: The Prince dreamed of white worms crawling up his legs and covering his knees. This was an omen of the appearance of a large number of white-robed lay people who would follow him.

Fifth vision: The Prince dreamed that he was walking on a large, filthy mountain but his feet were not soiled in the slightest. This was an omen that he would receive the respect and offerings of all beings in the heavens and human realms with a pure heart.

Trần Nhân Tông ⁴⁹, a renowned Vietnamese king who ruled from 1278 to 1293 before abdicating to become a monk, also had a profound dream.

While visiting Từ Phước pagoda, in his afternoon nap, he dreamt of a golden lotus, as vast as a wheel, unfurling from his navel with a radiant golden Buddha enthroned upon it.

This dream foreshadowed his role as the First Patriarch of the Trúc Lâm Zen Buddhist sect, which he founded and now has branches worldwide.

Refer to page 245, for his rigorous 12 dhūtaguṇas austerities.

⁴⁹ Although king Trần Nhân Tông was not the primary military leader (the credit goes to General Trần Hưng Đạo, his uncle), he played a crucial role in maintaining national unity to defeat both Mongol invasions.

In December 1284, Kublai Khan, having conquered Song China, ordered a two-pronged attack: a land invasion from the north through Đại Việt (present-day northern Vietnam) and a naval invasion from the south via Champa (present-day southern Vietnam). The Trần dynasty employed a strategy of “scorched earth” and guerilla warfare. They evacuated the capital, Thăng Long (Hanoi), and retreated south, drawing the Mongols deeper into their territory while denying them supplies and disrupting their supply lines. The battles of Hàm Tử in April and Chương Dương in May 1285 weakened the invasion, and the Mongols were eventually forced to retreat.

In March 1287, Kublai Khan, enraged by the previous defeat, launched a larger and better-organized invasion. This time, the Mongol army was led by Prince Toghan, Kublai Khan’s son. But the invasion ended after a disastrous defeat of their navy in the battle of Bạch Đằng on April 8th, 1288, when General Trần Hưng Đạo, first lured the Mongol fleet into the Bạch Đằng river, then unleashed a devastating ambush, using a hidden field of stakes to trap and destroy the Mongol ships.

6. **Mộng ngày**

*Ta cõi kiến đi tìm tiên động,
Cõi trường sinh đàn bướm dật dờ,
Cóc và nhái lang thang tìm sống,
Trong hang sâu con rắn nằm mơ*

*Đầu cửa động đàn ong luân vũ,
Chị hoa rừng sơn phấn lẳng lơ.
Thẹn hương sắc lau già vượn dây,
Làm tiên ông tóc trắng phát phơ.*

*Kiến bò quanh nhọc nhằn kiếm sống,
Ta trên lưng món nợ ân tình.
Cũng định mệnh lạc loài Tổ quốc,
Cũng tình chung tơ nắng mong manh.*

*Ta hỏi kiến nơi nào cõi tịnh,
Ngoài hư không có dấu chim bay.
Từ tiếng gọi màu đen đất khổ,
Thấp tâm tư thay ánh mặt trời?*

*Ta gọi kiến, ngập ngừng mây bạc,
Đường ta đi, non nước bồi hồi.
Bóc quá khứ, thiên thần kinh ngạc,
Cẩn vô biên trái mộng vỡ đôi.*

*Non nước ấy trầm ngâm từ độ,
Lửa rừng khuya yêu xác lá khô.
Ta đi tìm trái tim đã vỡ,
Đói thời gian ta gặm hư vô.*

Daydream

On the back of an ant, searching for a sanctuary,
Where death does not exist, I find a herd of butterflies
fluttering,
Toads and frogs wander around, looking for food,
Deep in its cave, a snake lies daydreaming.

At the entrance, a swarm of bees dances around the forest
flowers,
Which proudly show off their beautiful colors and
attractive perfume.
Ashamed of their inferior colors and fragrance, the
flowers of the reeds reach upwards,
Looking like old angels' white hair, wavering in the wind.

Here, too, are some ants running around, searching for
their homeland.
With a heavy debt of love that I carry on my back,
I, too, find myself homeless, sharing the ants' fate,
That the love for our homeland is as fragile as sunlight
threads.

I ask my ant where the tranquil world beyond the void is,
Where traces of bird flights linger forever,
And from the darkness of this suffering Earth,
Rises the light of hope, in lieu of sunlight?

I call the ants, but silver clouds hesitantly arrive instead.
My homeland trembles following my path.
The angels are utterly shocked when I unveil my
country's past,
That her dream fruit broke in half when I bit into the
limitlessness.

My country has been in a stalemate,
Since the day her forests were furiously burnt down.
In search of her broken heart,
I'll bite the emptiness when I'm hungry for time.

Explanation

When I read the line:

Ta gọi kiến, ngáp ngừng mây bạc

I call the ants, but silver clouds hesitantly arrive instead,

I feel as if I'm reading the poetry of the Chinese Zen master
Fudaishi (497–569). His poem has four lines:

空手把鋤頭
步行騎水牛
人從橋上過
橋流水不流

*Không thủ bả sừ đầu,
Bộ hành kỵ thủy ngưu.
Nhân tòng kiều thượng quá,
Kiều lưu thủy bất lưu*

Tay không: nắm cán mai
Đi bộ: lưng trâu ngòi
Trên cầu người qua lại
Cầu trôi, nước chẳng trôi.

Hand does not hold anything at all, but it is like holding
the handle of a hoe.

Walking on the ground, as if riding on the back of a water
buffalo.

People on the bridge passing back and forth,
The bridge flows, but water does not flow.

Back to the poem, these verses,

*Ta hỏi kiến nơi nào cõi tịnh
Ngoài hư không có dấu chim bay*

I ask my ant where the tranquil world beyond the void is,
Where traces of bird flights linger forever,

remind me of the story of Zen Master Mazu Daoyi (709–788) and his disciple Baizhang Huaihai (720–814).

While they were walking, they saw a flock of birds flying by. Mazu asked Baizhang, “Where do the birds go?” Baizhang replied, “They have flown away”. Immediately, Mazu twisted Baizhang’s nose so hard and asked: “*何曾飛去?*” (*Hà tăng phi khứ?*, from the beginningless time, have they ever really flown away?), causing Baizhang to suddenly realize the true dharma in the midst of pain.

Therefore, I translate his verse *ngoài hư không có dấu chim bay* as where traces of bird flights linger forever.

The poem has 6 sections:

In the first section, I use the phrase *where death does not exist* to describe the realm of perpetual being, instead of the word “eternal”, to underscore Thày’s intention that this place transcends birth and death.

Every action here is depicted in the present moment, not the past. The whole poem unfolds in the present tense, as though events are occurring right now. Since the

Vietnamese language doesn't have the same nuanced tense system as English, I believe conveying Thầy's meaning by using the present tense is the better choice.

In the second section, Thầy continues to paint a picture of superficial tranquility in the celestial realm. He suggests that even in a place beyond birth and death, petty ambitions and envy still exist. Therefore, I translate the three words “thẹn hương sắc” as ashamed of their inferior colors and fragrance. Thầy is merely using the celestial realm as a metaphor to express his feelings about his homeland, a place where ambition and envy also prevail, as he will elaborate in the following sections.

In the third section, Thầy reveals that he carries a heavy burden. It is the debt he owes his homeland, one of the fourfold graces⁵⁰ in Buddhism. His verse *ta trên lưng món*

⁵⁰ The fourfold graces in Buddhism include grace of parents, grace of the Triple Gem, grace of nation and society and grace of all sentient beings.

Grace of parents: Parents give birth to us and raise us. Their kindness and dedication are immeasurable. We must repay our parents' kindness. According to Buddhism, being born into a particular family is not by chance but due to past karmic connections.

Grace of the Triple Gem: In Buddhism, the Triple Gem represents the Buddha (the enlightened one), the dharma (the teachings), and the sangha (the community of monks and nuns). By acknowledging this grace, individuals express gratitude for the teachings and guidance that have helped them on their spiritual journey. It is a way of recognizing the importance of these elements in their lives.

Grace of nation and society: This refers to the benefits and opportunities provided by one's nation and society, such as education, infrastructure, and social support. Citizens have the duty to comply with their nation's laws and protect the sovereignty of their nation.

nợ ân tình can be interpreted as I carry the debt of gratitude on my back. While some translations suggest Thầy places this debt on the back of an ant, I believe it refers to Thầy himself carrying this burden on his back while he is riding on an ant's back. He would not put his debt on anyone's back.

The repeated use of “*tổ quốc*” (homeland) in the following lines emphasizes his sense of belonging and loss. His love for his country is as delicate as a sunbeam, yet it is strong and enduring.

In the fourth section, on the journey to find the realm of serenity, where birds have flown but their traces remain, guiding his path. This is the realm of enlightenment that Zen Master Baizhang discovered upon seeing the traces of birds in flight. With a deep love for his homeland, Thầy's realm of serenity is our homeland, where our minds illuminate, replacing the sunlight:

*Từ tiếng gọi màu đen đất khổ,
Thấp tâm tư thay ánh mặt trời*

And from the darkness of this suffering Earth,
Rises the light of hope, in lieu of sunlight.

In the fifth section, Thầy expresses his intense love for his homeland, a love so profound that it moves even the heavens and the earth: *Ta gọi kiến, ngập ngừng mây bạc* (I

Grace of all sentient beings: This encompasses gratitude for all living beings, recognizing that one's existence is intertwined with the existence of others.

call the ants, but silver clouds hesitantly arrive instead).
Nothing can hinder his path.

*Bóc quá khứ, thiên thần kinh ngạc,
Cắn vô biên trái mộng vỡ đôi.*

The angels are utterly shocked when I unveil my country's
past,
And her dream fruit broke in half when I bit into the
limitlessness.

Why are the angels utterly shocked when Thầy unveils his
country's past? Thầy didn't say.

The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression is a 1997 book by Stéphane Courtois and several other European academics documenting a history of political repression by communist states, including genocides, extrajudicial executions, deportations, and deaths in labor camps and allegedly artificially created famines. According to the introduction of the book, the number of people killed by the Communist governments amounts to more than 94 million. But this is only an estimation. The truth should be much worse than that. The book, although having many limitations, contradictions, and inconsistencies, estimated 1 million deaths caused by the Vietnamese Communists.

The next verse, *cắn vô biên trái mộng vỡ đôi* (her dream fruit broke in half when I bit into the limitlessness), represents his desire to grasp something beyond his reach (the limitlessness), only to find his cherished hope or aspiration for the nation has been shattered.

In the final section, “trầm ngâm” means a stalemate or a state of being stuck, paralysis, and *lửa rừng khuya yêu xác lá khô* literally means that forest fire at night loves dead dry leaves, as a metaphor for a raging fire. Specifically, it describes a profound sense of stagnation, comparing the situation to a raging wildfire consuming everything in its path. This clearly is a reference to the tumultuous event of April 30th, 1975.

Since the nation was in a state of paralysis, Thầy relentlessly sought to mend her broken heart, undeterred by adversity. In the last verse *đôi thời gian ta gặm hư vô*, I translate “hư vô” as emptiness rather than nothingness to convey a sense of void or vacancy without completely negating existence. Emptiness suggests a state of mind free from distractions, while nothingness implies a complete absence of everything.

Dreams, while intangible, aren't nonexistent. They are vivid mental experiences that can feel incredibly real, complete with physical manifestations like shouting or sweating.

Finally, I have opted for the title of this poem as Daydream rather than Day Dream (a literal translation of the Vietnamese title *Mộng Ngày*) to indicate that the dreams referred to in the poem are imaginative thoughts that occur while one is conscious, as opposed to the nighttime dreams that occur during sleep.

7. Trăng

1

*Nhà đạo nguyên không khách
Quanh năm bạn ánh đèn
Thẹn tình Trăng liếc trộm
Bẽn lẽn núp sau rèm.*

2

*Yêu nhau từ vạn kiếp
Nhìn nhau một thoáng qua
Nhà đạo nguyên không nói
Trăng buồn trăng đi xa.*

The moon

1

Not a visitor disturbs the hermit's solitude.
Year in and year out, his friend, the lamplight.
Blushing with affection, the moon steals glances,
Shyly concealing behind the curtains.

2

Bound by love through countless lifetimes,
Yet all they share is a fleeting glance.
As the hermit keeps his love unspoken,
The moon, heartbroken, flees away.

Explanation

In the artist's perception, the moon is not merely a source of light in the night or a measure of time, but has become an art form. There, it has become a polyphonic harmony, carrying many emotions about war and peace, happiness and suffering, homeland and family, love and despair.

However, it is only Thầy who sees the moon's coy glances:

*Thẹn tình Trăng liếc trộm
Bẽn lẽn núp sau rèm*

Blushing with affection, the moon steals glances,
Shyly concealing behind the curtains.

In the poem, the hermit is depicted as a solitary figure, seeking solace in nature and the company of the moon. But there is a sense of unfulfilled longing, as the hermit and the moon are drawn to each other but unable to fully connect.

Is it possible that the unspoken love of the hermit is actually Thầy's unspoken love in *Ta sống lại trên nỗi buồn ám khói* (Reborn from the ashes of sorrow), page 443?

*Vẫn yêu người từng khoảnh khắc chiêm bao
Từ nguyên sơ đã một lời không nói
Như trùng dương ngưng tụ ánh hoa đào*

My love for you endures, even in fleeting dreams
A word unspoken, from the very beginning,
Like a vast ocean gathering the glow of peach blossoms.

The moon's departure at the end underscores the theme of unfulfilled longing and the bittersweet nature of their relationship, from the joys of love to the pains of loss.

8. Trúc và nhện

1

*Nắng sớm in tường bạc
Trúc gầy ngả bóng xanh
Tâm tư lắng tĩnh mặc
Tơ nhện buông xuôi cành*

2

*Trúc biếc che ngày nắng
Hương chiều đuổi mộng xa
Phương trời nhuộm ráng đỏ
Tóc trắng nhện tơ lò*

3

*Gió khẽ lay cành trúc
Hương vàng ánh nhện tơ
Buông rời giấc tịnh tọa
Nghe động phương trời xa*

4

*Ngõ vào qua khóm trúc
Cửa khép vượt đường mây
Tá túc trăng hờn nhện
Nghiêng nghiêng áo lụa dài.*

5

*Trúc già ngọn phơi phơi
Trời hận tuôn mưa rào*

*Nặng trĩu tình tơ nước
Trúc già lặng cúi đầu.*

Bamboo and spider

1

Early sunlight paints the wall silver,
Slender bamboo casts a green shadow.
Peacefully settled in stillness,
Spider's silken web drapes the branches.

2

Green bamboo guards against the sun's glare,
Afternoon fragrance chases lingering dreams.
As twilight paints the sky with red hues,
Spider web, a wisp of white hair.

3

A gentle breeze shakes the bamboo,
The silken threads shimmer with golden hues.
From meditative depths, I gently rise,
Drawn to distant echoes from the sky.

4

The entrance is veiled by the bamboo grove,
Its gate hidden beyond the clouds,
The moon, envious of the spider's shelter,
Tilts her silk gown áo dài.

5

The old bamboo vigorously stands tall,
But angry heavens unleash a downpour.
Laden with his love of rain-soaked web,
The old bamboo silently bows its head.

Explanation

The poem paints a beautiful and delicate picture of love between a bamboo tree and a spider. The imagery used is colorful, rich and evocative, with elements of nature like sunlight, wind, and moon contributing to the overall theme of love and connection.

*Nắng sớm in tường bạc
Trúc gầy ngã bóng xanh*

Early sunlight paints the wall silver,
Slender bamboo casts a green shadow.

*Phương trời nhuộm ráng đỏ
Tóc trắng nhện tơ lò*

As twilight paints the sky with red hues,
Spider web, a wisp of white hair.

*Gió khẽ lay cành trúc
Hương vàng ánh nhện tơ*

A gentle breeze shakes the bamboo,
The silken threads shimmer with golden hues

*Tá túc trắng hờn nhện
Nghiêng nghiêng áo lụa dài*

The moon, envious of the spider's shelter,
Tilts her silk gown áo dài.

These lines suggest that the moon desires to dwell upon the bamboo branch, but finding the spider already there, it casts a jealous glance, draping its silvery gown over the bamboo in a fit of pique.

As *Thầy* emerges from meditation, a distant rumble heralds an impending storm. The bamboo, fearing the rain would sever the delicate web, a symbol of the spider's love, bows its head in silent worry.

The poem explores a unique form of love, not between humans, but between a spider and a bamboo tree. The bamboo recognizes the significance of the web and worries for its safety during the impending storm.

The poem thus conveys a sense of empathy and compassion, even towards a seemingly insignificant creature. It highlights the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of protecting the delicate balance of nature.

9. Vết rạn

*Áo lụa mỏng đẹp bờ vai thiếu phụ
Tóc nàng xanh chỉ nói một tình riêng
Tôi nhạc sĩ, nhưng âm đàn ngược gió
Nàng yêu chồng cho giấc ngủ bình yên.*

*Nắng lụa đỏ phủ tường rêu xám bạc
Lá cây xanh nghiêng xuống mắt mơ màng
Người có biết mặt trời kia sẽ tắt?
Tôi yêu người từ vết rạn thời gian.*

The rift

A silken dress adorns the young woman's shoulder,
Her emerald hair, a reserved love story.
She loves her husband, giving him peaceful sleep,
A musician I am, but my melodies lost against the current.

Crimson silky sunlight drapes the gray mossy walls,
Green leaves lean towards dreaming eyes.
Do you not know the sun will one day die?
But my love for you endures through the rift of time.

Explanation

In the first stanza, the term “nàng” refers to a woman, but in this context, it seems to represent Thầy’s homeland, so I translate it as “her”, in the third person.

She is Thầy’s homeland. Her beauty takes his breath away. All she desires is tranquility with her husband, which could be a metaphor for her people.

The original verse is rich in imagery, using elements like silk, hair, wind, and sun to convey emotions and ideas. The translation attempts to preserve these images while adapting them to English. For instance, “tóc nàng xanh” is translated as her emerald hair and “âm đàn ngược gió” literally means tunes against the wind, but I choose to translate it as melodies lost against the current to give it a more poetic and evocative quality. He loves her (his homeland), but the winds of time muffle his voice, having sent him to prison and exiled him in his homeland.

In the second stanza, the term “nàng” is changed to “người” (a specific person or people). While “người” can also be used in the third person, I choose to use it in the second person, *you*, to represent the love Thầy has dedicated to his homeland:

*Người có biết mặt trời kia sẽ tắt?
Tôi yêu người từ vết rạn thời gian.*

Do you not know the sun will one day die?
But my love for you endures through the rift of time.

This dedication becomes his vow. Therefore, this choice of *you*, instead of *him*, *her*, or *them*, in my translation is to create a direct and personal connection between Thầy and *you*, my reader.

Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

Volume 5

Tĩnh thất

| Meditation room

Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

These are 32 short poems named *Tĩnh thất* (Meditation room, thiền phòng). All of these poems do not only contain more or less Zen thoughts, but also reveal Thầy's deep feelings for his homeland.

Time of composition: 2000–2001

1. Cho tôi một hạt muối tiêu

*Cho tôi một hạt muối tiêu
Bờ môi em nhạt nắng chiều lân la
Tôi đi chán chinh sơn hà
Hồng rơi vách đá mù sa thị thành*

Give me a pinch of pepper salt

Give me a pinch of pepper salt,
To season your lips, faded in the evening light.
I will go to reform my homeland,
To cast the red demons into the abyss and to let dews fall
upon my cities.

Explanation

I've changed *một hạt muối tiêu* (a grain of salt and pepper) to *một nhúm muối tiêu* (a pinch of salt and pepper) in my translation because salt and pepper are mixed together, there can't be just one grain.

Don't think that the first two lines and the next two lines are unrelated. In the first two lines, because her lips are bland, he'll use salt and pepper to season them. In the next two lines, driven by his homeland's turmoil, he seeks to purge the red demons and restore the dews. They are connected by similarity. We will discuss this and other relationships in detail on page 366.

Using salt and pepper to season one's lips so they won't be bland is a strange idea, but full of Zen meaning! Many people think Zen is something abstract and hard to

understand. Zen is eating when hungry, sleeping when tired. The difference is, according to Zen master Baizhang Huaihai (720–814), a Zen master knows when they're eating or sleeping, while ordinary people think about all sorts of other things while eating or sleeping.

How to obtain the true Zen spirit? Ordinary people often associate Zen with meditative sitting. The following story shows that meditative sitting does not help to obtain the true Zen spirit.

Mazu Daoyi (709–788) was a renowned Zen master during the Tang dynasty of China. He was the most outstanding disciple of Zen Master Nanyue Huairang (677–744) who himself was a major disciple of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng. The following is the first lesson that Huairang taught Mazu:

In the year 713 of the Tang Dynasty, Master Huairang arrived at the Baoya Temple on Mount Heng. There was a monk named Mazu Daoyi at the monastery who sat in meditation every day. Huairang approached him and asked:

- Why do you sit in meditation?

- To become a Buddha.

Huairang took a brick and began to grind it in front of Mazu. Seeing this, Mazu asked in surprise:

- Master, what are you doing with that brick?

- I'm making a mirror.

- How can you make a mirror by grinding a brick?

- If you can't make a mirror by grinding a brick, how can you become a Buddha by sitting in meditation?

- Then how does one become a Buddha?

- This principle is like an ox pulling a cart. If the cart doesn't move, do you beat the cart or the ox?

Mazu was speechless. Huairang continued:

- Are you learning to sit in meditation or to sit as a Buddha? If you are learning to sit in meditation, then meditation is not about sitting or lying down. If you are learning to sit as a Buddha, then a Buddha does not have a fixed form. The dharma has nowhere to abide, so when seeking the dharma, one should not cling, reject, or be attached. Like clouds drifting in the sky, no one can use force to nail them in place. Since the dharma has no fixed abode, one should not cling to it or reject it. If you learn to sit as a Buddha, you are killing the Buddha. If you cling to the form of sitting, you will never see the dharma.

Upon hearing these words, Mazu felt as if a thirsty person had just drunk a cupful of cold water. He immediately bowed to Huairang and became Huairang's disciple. More fascinating stories about Zen Master Mazu Daoyi can be read in pages 324, 383 and 466.

Nanyue Huairang's teacher was Dajian Huineng (638–713) who is a semi-legendary but central figure in the history of Chinese Zen Buddhism. According to the *Platform Sūtra*, Huineng was a poor, illiterate young man from southern China who was selling firewood. When he heard someone reciting the *Diamond Sūtra* (kinh Kim Cuong, in

Vietnamese), he had an awakening experience. Huineng learned that the man reciting the sūtra had come from Daman Hongren's monastery, in Huangmei (Yellow plum) Mountain, so he traveled to Huangmei to meet Hongren.

Hongren saw that this uneducated youth from South China had a rare understanding. But to protect Huineng from jealous rivals, he put Huineng to work doing chores instead of inviting him into the Buddha Hall for teaching.

One day Hongren challenged his disciples to compose a verse that expressed their understanding of the dharma. If any verse reflects the truth, Hongren said, the monk who composed it will receive the robe and bowl passing to him from the First Patriarch Bodhidharma and become the Sixth Patriarch.

Yuquan Shenxiu, the most senior monk, accepted this challenge and wrote this verse on a monastery wall:

身是菩提樹
心如明鏡臺
時時勤拂拭
勿使惹塵埃

*Thân thị bồ-đề thọ
Tâm như minh kính đài
Thời thời cần phát thức
Vật sử nhạ trần ai*

Thân là cây bồ-đề
Tâm như đài gương sáng
Phải luôn lau chùi sạch
Chớ để bụi trần bám

The body is the bodhi tree.
The mind is like a bright mirror platform.
Moment by moment wipe and polish it,
Not allowing dust to collect.

When someone read the verse to the illiterate Huineng, the future Sixth Patriarch knew Shenxiu had missed it. Huineng dictated this verse for another to write for him:

菩提本無樹
明鏡亦非臺
本來無一物
何處惹塵埃

*Bồ-đề bản vô thọ
Minh kính diệc phi đài
Bản lai vô nhất vật
Hà xứ nhạ trần ai?*

Bồ-đề vốn chẳng cây
Gương sáng cũng không đài
Xưa nay không một vật
Bụi trần bám vào đâu?

Bodhi originally isn't a tree,
The mirror has no platform.
Nothing has ever existed,
Where might dust collect?

Hongren recognized Huineng's understanding and gave him the robe and bowl, as insignia of his authority and in acknowledgment of his unsurpassed spiritual attainment. The patriarch then advised him that it would be wise for him to hide his own light under a bushel until

the proper time arrived for his public appearance and active propaganda, and also that the robe which was handed down from Bodhidharma as the sign of faith should no more be given up to Huineng's successors, because Zen was now fully recognized by the outside world in general and there was no more necessity to symbolize the faith by the transference of the robe. That night Huineng left the monastery.

Three days after the flight of Huineng from the Yellow Plum Mountain, the news of what had happened in secret became noised abroad throughout the monastery, and a party of indignant monks, headed by one named Ming, pursued the fugitive, Huineng. When Huineng was overtaken by the pursuers, he laid down his robe on a rock nearby and said to Ming:

- This robe symbolizes our patriarchal faith and is not to be carried away by force. Take this along with you, however, if you so desire.

Ming tried to lift it, but it was as heavy as a mountain. He halted, hesitated, and trembled with awe.

- I come here to obtain the faith and not the robe.

- If you come for the faith, stop all your hankerings. Think not of good, think not of evil, but see what at this moment your own original face looks like, which you had even prior to your own birth.

Ming felt as if he had taken a cupful of cold water and tasted it to his own satisfaction. Approaching the Patriarch, he bowed and asked,

- Besides this hidden sense as is embodied in these significant words, is there anything which is secret?

- In what I have shown to you, there is nothing hidden. If you reflect within yourself and recognize your own face, which was before the world, secrecy is in yourself.

Whatever historical circumstances surrounded Huineng in those remote days, it is certain that in this statement, “to see one’s own face even before one was born”, we find the first proclamation of the new message, which was destined to unroll a long history of Zen and to make Huineng really worthy of the patriarchal robe. We can see here what a new outlook Huineng has succeeded in opening to the traditional Indian Zen. In him, we do not recognize anything of Buddhism as far as phraseology goes, which means that he opened up his own way of presenting the truth of Zen after his original and creative experience. Prior to him, the Zen experience only had some borrowings, either in wording or in method, to express itself. To say “You are the Buddha”, or “The Buddha is living in you”, is too stale, too flat, because too abstract and too conceptual. They contain deep truth but are not concrete nor vivifying enough to rouse our dormant souls from insensibility.

Hence his unusual freshness in the way he handled the problem.

(Copied, with minor modifications, from Dr. Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, the first series, pages 207–211)

2. Đến đi vó ngựa mơ hồ

*Đến đi vó ngựa mơ hồ
Dấu rêu còn đọng trên bờ mi xanh*

Do those fading hoofprints mark an arrival or a departure

Do those fading hoofprints mark an arrival or a departure,
When traces of moss still linger on her green eyelids?

Explanation

I had to think really hard to understand these two lines. It was all because the poem lacked a question mark.

Literally, these two verses are translated as,

*Coming, going, vague hoofprints
Traces of moss still linger on green eyelids.*

With the question mark added, the first line becomes: “Can you tell whether the horseman is coming or going, just by looking at the fading hoofprints on the ground?” Of course, without more details, the answer would be a 50/50 guess.

The second line says: “(When) the traces of moss (representing tears of longing that have accumulated over time) still linger on green eyelids”. From this, it’s clear that the horseman has left, leaving behind feelings of longing for the one who stayed.

In *Dreaming the Mountain*, professor Nguyễn Bá Chung and poet Martha Collins translate this poem as:

*Coming and going muffled horse hooves
Traces of moss gather on green eyelashes*

Their translation mistakenly assumes that the very act of coming and going muffles horse hooves, but this muffling is actually the work of time. Furthermore, the translators failed to show the cause-and-effect relationship between the two verses, leaving readers to wonder what the author intended to convey. In my opinion, a translator should not only understand the words but also the author's intent and convey that meaning to the reader.

On December 2, 2015, on the 250th anniversary of Nguyễn Du's birth, the World Record Union declared *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều) a literary masterpiece. If *The Tale of Kiều* is only translated literally and not accurately in terms of meaning, how can its true beauty be appreciated?

In a speech commemorating the 104th death anniversary of Nguyễn Du on December 8, 1924, scholar Phạm Quỳnh declared, "A nation cannot be without a national flower, and *The Tale of Kiều* is our national flower; a nation cannot be without a national treasure, and *The Tale of Kiều* is our national treasure; a nation cannot be without a national soul, and *The Tale of Kiều* is our national soul".

There's a particularly beautiful verse in *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều) that I admire Nguyễn Du for writing. It's the line 2242:

Dẫu lìa ngó ý, còn vương tơ lòng.

We know that when a lotus stem is broken, it doesn't always break completely. The fibers within the stem often

remain attached. Nguyễn Du used the image of the lotus stem to describe the longing of Kiều. As for who she is longing for, some say it's Kim Trọng, while others argue it's Thúc Sinh or Từ Hải. But that's not the point here.

Yale University Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông, in his book *The Tale of Kiều*, translates this verse

Dẫu lia ngó ý, còn vương tơ lòng

as:

Cut from her mind, it clung on to her heart.

This translation is accurate in terms of meaning but it omits the words *ngó* (lotus stem) and *tơ* (filaments). So, if I were to translate this verse, I would say,

Although the lotus stem of her mind was cut, its filaments of love clung on to her heart.

Certainly, the professor omits the lotus stem and its filaments for the sake of brevity, as the meaning of the poem is more important.

3. Nghìn năm trước lên núi

*Nghìn năm trước lên núi
Nghìn năm sau xuống lầu
Hạt cải tròn con mắt
Dấu chân người ở đâu?*

A thousand years ago, I climbed that mountain

A thousand years ago, I climbed that mountain.
A thousand years later, I descended these stairs.
The mustard seed's eyes were wide opened:
“Where are your footprints?”

Explanation

Arriving and departing, leaving no footprint.

In the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (kinh Hoa Nghiêm in Vietnamese), book 39, when Sudhana asked the Bodhisattva Maitreya where he came from, the Bodhisattva's response was “The Bodhisattvas neither come nor go; thus, they arrive. Without a place, without attachment, without loss, without birth, without abiding, without moving, without arising, without clinging, without defilement, without karma, without retribution, without arising, without ceasing, without being cut off, without being permanent, thus, they arrive”.

Similarly, in the *Diamond Sūtra* (kinh Kim Cương, in Vietnamese), the Buddha told Subhuti: “O Subhuti, if anyone says that the Tathāgata (i.e., the World-Honored

One) comes or goes, sits or lies down, that person does not understand the meaning of my words. Why is that? The Tathāgata does not come from anywhere and does not go anywhere; that is why he is called Tathāgata”.

As explained above that the Bodhisattva arrives without arriving, and departs without departing, how can there be footprints left behind? Therefore, Thầy gives eyes to a mustard seed, making the mustard seed round its eyes in wonder and ask Thầy, “Where are your footprints?”

After an all-night discussion with Zen Master Zhaojue Chanshi at Donglin Temple (on Lushan), Su Dongpo, believing that he understood this “arrival without arriving, and departure without departing” concept, wrote this poem to boast about his “realization”:

溪聲便是廣長舌
山色豈非清淨身
夜來八萬四千偈
他日何如舉似人

*Khê thanh tiệ̣n thị quậ̉ng trường thiệ̣t,
Sơn sắc khởi phi thanh tịnh thân.
Đạ lai bát vạn tứ thiên kệ,
Tha nhật hà như cử tự nhân*

The sound of the stream is the wide and long tongue of the dharma.

The color of the mountain is the pure color of the body of the Tathāgata.

Last night, I recited eighty-four thousand verses.

How will I ever explain (my realization) to others tomorrow?

In *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams), Thầy translates this poem into Vietnamese:

*Suối reo vẫn Pháp âm bất tuyệt
Màu non kia Chân thể Như Lai
Đêm đó tám vạn bốn nghìn kệ
Ngày sau nói lại làm sao đây?*

After that, he went around challenging monks to debate Zen with him. Drawn by rumors of profound wisdom of Zen Master Chenghao in Yuquan Temple in Jingnan, Su Dongpo disguised and sought him out. When the Master asked for his name, Su Dongpo replied:

- My name is Steelyard, the steelyard to weigh all Buddhist elders in the world.

The Master shouted at the top of his lungs, then asked:

- How much does this shout weigh?

Unable to answer, Su Dongpo was deeply impressed and realized that his “realization” was far from complete.

In their translation of this poem by Thầy, professor Nguyễn Bá Chung and poet Martha Collins, in *Dreaming the Mountain*, not only failed to see the Zen concept of arrival without arriving, and departure without departing, but they also ridiculously allowed the mustard seed to have a footprint, and worse, let Thầy wonder about his own footprint:

*Like mustard seeds, my eyes round with wonder
Where is the trace of our footprints?*

4. Ta không buồn

*Ta không buồn
có ai buồn hơn nữa?
Người không đi
sông núi có buồn đi?
Tia nắng mỏng soi mòn khung cửa
Để ưu phiền nhuộm trắng hàng mi
Ta lên bờ
nắng vỗ bờ róc rách
Gió ở đâu mà sông núi thì thâm?
Kìa bóng cỏ nghiêng mình che hạt cát
Ráng chiều xa, ai thấy mộ sương dầm?*

If I do not feel deep sorrow

If I do not feel deep sorrow,
Whose sorrow surpasses mine?
If no one steps forward,
Will mountains and rivers be sorrowful?
A ray of sunlight creeps in, wearing away the window
frame,
Letting sorrow through, whitening my eyebrows.
I step ashore,
Sunlight gently taps the shore.
There's no wind, yet I hear the whispers of mountains and
rivers.
And look, blades of grass bend down, shielding grains of
sand.
In the fading light, does anyone see the dew-soaked
grave?

Explanation

When Thầy leaves the temple and steps ashore, he hears the mountains and rivers whisper. *Gió ở đâu mà sông núi thì thầm?* literally means “Why is there no wind but I can hear the mountains and rivers whisper?”, but I translate, omitting the question mark: “There’s no wind, yet I hear the whispers of mountains and rivers”.

He also sees blades of grass bend down, shielding grains of sand: *Kìa bóng cỏ nghiêng mình che hạt cát*. The phrase “grains of sand” in this line alludes to people living under the communist regime. In the last verse, *Ráng chiều xa, ai thấy mộ sưng dầm?* (In the fading light, does anyone see the dew-soaked grave?), the dew-soaked grave represents the people who have lost their lives due to the communist ambition to unite the country under their control.

On June 3, 2001, the citizen monk Thích Tuệ Sỹ sent a protest letter to the government. Here is a portion of it:

I am well aware that in the administrative procedures of a bureaucratic apparatus made up of a large number of officials who specialize in harassing and suppressing the people, full of corruption, ... the protest letter will have to go through many levels before reaching the gate of the highest leaders, who always seek to evade their responsibilities, only accepting what is praised as glorious and great.

The poem ends with a question,

Ráng chiều xa, ai thấy mộ sưng dầm?

In the fading light, does anyone see the dew-soaked grave?

As no one saw that dew-soaked grave, at the end of August 2022, Thầy officially stepped out to assume the position of Chief Secretary – Permanent Executive of the Supreme Patriarch, Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

Poet Tuấn Khanh explains in his essay *Thầy Tuệ Sỹ trong vận mệnh Phật giáo Việt Nam* (Venerable Tuệ Sỹ's place in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism) as follows:

In late August 2022, Vietnam was abuzz with news about the appearance of Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ, officially taking the position of Chief Secretary - Permanent Executive of the Supreme Patriarch. This long-hidden enlightened master suddenly appeared at the ceremony to receive the will, seal and inauguration from the Fifth Patriarch Thích Quảng Độ, bringing joy to those who truly love and are devoted to the freedom of Buddhism in Vietnam.

However, many people mistakenly believe that Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ's current position is that of the new Patriarch, which is the position of the overall leader of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). In reality, when he accepted the will of Most Venerable Thích Quảng Độ in 2020, Most Venerable Tuệ Sỹ announced that after reorganizing the personnel and leadership of the UBCV, when “conditions are favorable”, he and the Church would hold a congress to elect the Sixth Patriarch, the highest successor leader of the Church. Currently, in layman's terms, Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ has the role of interim leader.

Anyone who has followed the struggle for the existence of the UBCV since 1975 knows what the phrase “favorable conditions” means. Even Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ’s ceremonies to receive the position of Chief Secretary – Permanent Executive of the Supreme Patriarch and to receive the Will, seal, and inauguration, etc., had to be carried out quietly and announced only after a week. The purpose of this quiet and unexpected announcement was to avoid the familiar disturbances that have been happening for many years.

In his final days of illness, Most Venerable Thích Quảng Độ realized the internal disorder caused by the various branches of the UBCV having different agendas. Two main branches caused internal disagreements: one was to use the Church’s manpower for political struggle; the other was to compromise with the government through certain corrupt individuals within the Church. Taking advantage of Most Venerable Thích Quảng Độ’s illness, those who wanted to manipulate the UBCV forged and issued Edicts, causing much conflict among the leaders of the Sangha Council, both domestic and foreign.

Initially, Most Venerable Thích Quảng Độ’s intention was to pass on the position of Sixth Patriarch to the Most Venerable Tuệ Sỹ, but because he wanted everything to be transparent and create internal unity, Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ requested only to temporarily take over the position, waiting for the time to elect the new Sixth Patriarch.

The passing of the Most Venerable Thích Quảng Độ in February 2020 created a series of undercurrents. Those

who wanted to eliminate the UBCV saw this as an opportunity to finish off the thorn in their eye. At the funeral of the Most Venerable Thích Quảng Độ, people witnessed monks from the government side trying to steal his ashes to bring them back to the government's temple to preserve and worship, as a tactic to unify all Vietnamese Buddhism under the control of the state. Immediately after that, there was also a hasty election of the Sixth Patriarch in Bình Định province, aiming to seize leadership. Fortunately, despite the UBCV being tortured from all directions, the monks and disciples still maintained their steadfast loyalty to the Will. All these plots quickly faded away. Regarding these abnormalities, Most Venerable Thích Không Tánh once summarized with the phrase "The government wants to nationalize the funeral of the Most Venerable Thích Quảng Độ".

It must be told like this to see that the UBCV, despite being erased and denied, when its highest leader passed away, most of the major state newspapers still received orders to hastily publish defamatory and slanderous.

Excerpt from the September 2022 announcement of the Central Sangha Council of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam - the Supreme Patriarch:

Never before has Buddhism, under the guidance of monks and nuns, with pagodas under state control, failed to lead sentient beings towards peace but instead pushed them into darkness, traps, and manipulation to serve worldly power. The presence of the Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ and the Unified Buddhist Church of

Vietnam is like a bell awakening people, reminding us of the profound value of those who follow the Buddha: “The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam is not a secular association; therefore, it does not place itself under the direction of any secular power, nor is it a tool to protect the existence of any political trend or any secular organization; it does not practice or propagate the dharma according to any ideological orientation; it has only one single orientation: the Tathāgata (TN: the World-Honored One) of ten directions (TN: N, S, E, W, NE, SE, SW, NW, upwards and downwards) and one vehicle of nirvana; its only ultimate goal is liberation”.

5. Lon sữa bò nằm im bên chợ

Lon sữa bò nằm im bên chợ

Con chó lạc

đến vỗ nhịp

trời mưa

Tôi lang thang

đi tìm cọng cỏ

Nó nhìn tôi

vô tư

An empty milk can lies still by the side of a street market

An empty milk can lies still by the side of a street market.

A stray dog

Taps the can

In rhythm with the rain.

I wander,

Searching for a blade of grass.

The dog looks at me

With innocent eyes.

Explanation

A stray dog comes tapping the can to the rhythm with the rain and looks at me with innocent eyes. Tapping the can to the rhythm of the rain simply means that the dog enjoys the rain. But does the dog's innocent look convey any meaning? Does the dog know why I am searching for a blade of grass?

The answer to these questions is the answer to this famous koan given by Zen Master Zhaozhou Congshen (778–897).

A monk asked the master, “Does a dog have Buddha-nature?” The master replied, *Wú!* (無, *vô*, nothing).

His “nothing” is not about denying the reality of the world around us but seeing beyond the limitations of our usual conceptual frameworks. This koan is placed at the beginning of the *Wumen Guan*, compiled and commentated by Zen Master Wumen Huikai (1183–1260) who attained enlightenment after studying this koan of “nothing” for six consecutive years.

In the first case of his collection of 48 koan cases in *Wumen Guan*, Wumen Huikai encourages his disciples to study this koan, drawing on his own experience of attaining enlightenment through its contemplation:

Arouse your entire body with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints and its eighty-four thousand pores of the skin; summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word *Wú!* (無, *vô*, nothing).

Carry it continuously day and night. Do not form a nihilistic conception of vacancy, or a relative conception of “has” or “has not.”

It will be just as if you swallow a red-hot iron ball, which you cannot spit out even if you try.

All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously

united. You will know this, but for yourself only, like a dumb man who has had a dream.

Then all of a sudden, an explosive conversion will occur, and you will astonish the heavens and shake the earth.

It will be as if you snatch away a great warrior's sword and hold it in your hand. Meeting the Buddhas, you kill the Buddhas; meeting the Patriarchs, you kill the Patriarchs. On the brink of life and death, you command perfect freedom; among the six realms of existence ⁵¹ and four modes of birth ⁵², you enjoy a merry and playful samadhi.

Now, I want to ask you again, "How will you carry it out?"

Employ every ounce of your energy to work on this koan *Wú!* (無, vô, nothing). If you hold on without

⁵¹ Six Realms of Existence:

- Deva Realm: Heavenly beings, gods.
- Asura Realm: Titans, demigods.
- Human Realm: Humans.
- Animal Realm: Animals.
- Preta Realm: Hungry ghosts.
- Naraka Realm: Hell realms.

⁵² Four modes of birth:

- Jalābuja: Born from a womb, such as humans.
- Aṇḍaja: Born from an egg, such as birds and reptiles.
- Saṃsedaja: Born from moisture, or required moisture for their reproduction, such as insects.
- Opapātika: Spontaneous appearance, without a birth process, such as deities and ghosts.

interruption, behold; a single spark and the holy candle
is illuminated!

Excerpted from *Wumen Guan – The Barrier that has no Gate*, compiled and edited by Paul Lynch, 6th Edition, published by Before Thought Publications, 2010.

The specific Zen Master Zhaozhou’s koan about the dog and Buddha-nature is a classic example of how Zen masters use seemingly simple questions to probe the depths of consciousness.

Nāgārjuna explains the term “Śūnyatā” (nothingness) in essence as follows: “All phenomena and dharmas are formed through dependent origination, they do not exist independently, or have substantial self-nature. Therefore, all phenomena and dharmas are ultimately nothing or, in other words, are merely nominal”.

In simpler term, Nāgārjuna is saying that everything we perceive is like a wave in the ocean. Waves appear to be solid, but they are really just temporary formations of water. Similarly, all things in the universe are temporary formations that arise from a combination of causes and conditions. They don’t have a permanent, unchanging essence. This concept of nothingness is a central tenet of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The poem connects a personal observation (a dog enjoying the rain by tapping to the rhythm of the rain) to a profound Zen concept (the dog looks at me with such innocence, i.e., the nature of existence and enlightenment). It highlights the use of koans in Zen practice to challenge conventional thinking and facilitate a deeper understanding of reality.

6. Thuyền ra khơi có mấy tầng tâm sự

*Thuyền ra khơi, có mấy tầng tâm sự?
Nắng long lanh, bóng nước vọt đầu ghềnh*

A ship sets sail, how many decks of feelings does it have

A ship sets sail, how many decks of feelings does it have?
The sun sparkles, water shadows leap over the rapids.

Explanation

Only Thầy could think of transforming the ship's deck into a space for profound conversation. The “decks of feelings” suggest the layered emotions and memories that make up our inner worlds. The question posed implies that the depths of human emotion are vast and intricate, much like the many levels of a ship.

The “rapids” could signify challenges or obstacles that life presents. The poem suggests that just as the water shadows can leap over the rapids, even though the water cannot, our emotions can be guided and controlled.

Let's read Thầy's profound and heartfelt conversation in the article *Thuyền ngược bến không* (The boat drifting against the empty wharf):

During the war, a group of friends went to the mountains. In peacetime, another group went to the sea. The nation suddenly returned to the myth of opening up

the country ⁵³. The children who followed their mother, had once despised their siblings, and left for the mountains. After a while, the children who had followed their mother to the mountains now returned to the city. And other siblings, frightened, hurriedly fled, seeking the sea.

⁵³ Thầy alludes to the Vietnamese myth that 50 sons followed their mother Âu Cơ to the mountains and the other 50 sons followed their father Lạc Long Quân to the sea:

Âu Cơ was a beautiful young immortal who lived high in the snow-capped mountains. She traveled to help those who suffered from illnesses since she was very skillful in medicine and had a sympathetic heart. One day, a monster suddenly appeared before her while she was on her travels. It frightened her, so she transformed into a crane to fly away. Lạc Long Quân, the dragon king from the sea, passed by and saw the crane in danger. He grabbed a nearby rock and killed the monster with it. When Âu Cơ stopped flying to see the very person that saved her, she turned back into an immortal and instantly fell in love with her savior. She soon bore an egg sac, from which hatched a hundred children. However, despite their love for each other, Âu Cơ had always desired to be in the mountains again and Lạc Long Quân, too, yearned for the sea. They separated, each taking 50 children. Âu Cơ settled in the snow-covered mountains, which is now the northern part of Vietnam.

Âu Cơ. Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 8 September 2024
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Âu_Cơ

7. Trời cuối thu se lạnh

*Trời cuối thu se lạnh
Chó giỡn nắng bên hè
Nắng chợt tắt
Buồn lê thê*

In the chilly late autumn

In the chilly late autumn,
A dog plays with its shadow on the terrace.
Suddenly, the sunlight disappears,
The dog's sorrow lengthens.

Explanation

The unique aspect of this poem lies in the juxtaposition of the long shadow cast by the sun, which provides amusement for the dog, and the subsequent long, lingering sadness when the shadow abruptly disappears. The poet has effectively substituted the long shadow with the long sadness.

However, it's important to note that the shadow is merely an illusion, not a tangible entity. The dog, believing it to be real, becomes deeply saddened by its disappearance.

The poem may be seen as a reflection of the human condition, where we often find ourselves attached to things that are ultimately impermanent.

8. Lời rao trong ngõ hẻm

Lời rao trong ngõ hẻm:

Đồng hồ điện!

Cầu dao!

Công tắc!

Những lời rao chọt đến chọt đi

Một trăm năm mưa nắng ra gì

Cánh phượng đỏ đầu hè, ai nhặt?

The street cries resounded in the narrow alley

The street cries resounded in the narrow alley,

Electric meter!

Circuit breaker!

Light switch!

The vendors' cries fill the air, coming and going.

Where are these cries in a century of rain and sunshine?

Who will pick up the fallen scarlet poinciana petal at the beginning of the sidewalk?

Explanation

Referring to the final verse of this poem, *Cánh phượng đỏ đầu hè, ai nhặt?* the phrase “đầu hè” means either the beginning of the sidewalk or early summer.

In *Dreaming the Mountain*, professor Nguyễn Bá Chung and poet Martha Collins interpret it as early summer:

Who picks the poinciana in early summer?

However, based on the verb “nhặt” (to pick up from the ground), I believe it refers to the beginning of a sidewalk, or terrace. Thus, I translate:

Who will pick up the fallen scarlet poinciana petal at the beginning of the sidewalk?

Where do these cries go after a hundred years of rain and sunshine? Like fallen poinciana flowers: once vibrant and noticeable, they are eventually forgotten and discarded. The image of the fallen poinciana petal lying on the terrace, being picked up or not, symbolizes the impermanence and eventual fading of these cries.

I notice that when two things are mentioned in a poem by Thầy, there’s always a connection, be it through similarity, cause and effect, or contrast.

In this poem, the similarity lies in the fact that both the street cries and the fallen poinciana petal will go unnoticed. Similarly, in the first poem of this volume, *Cho tôi một hạt muối tiêu* (Give me a pinch of pepper salt), page 339, the similarity is that both her bland lips and his homeland in turmoil need help. In *Đến đi vô ngựa mơ hồ* (Arrival or departure from vague hoofprints), page 346, the connection lies in the cause-and-effect relationship between the eyelashes and the hoofprints. In *Cây khô* (Withered tree), page 100 and *Hoa rừng* (Forest flowers), page 120, the connection is the contrast between the girl who wants to change the nature to her way and Thầy’s state of no-mind, with a ripe smile blooming on his lips.

This interconnectedness sets Thầy’s poetry apart from others.

9. Nghe luyến tiếc như sao trời mơ ngủ

*Nghe luyến tiếc như sao trời mơ ngủ
Đêm mênh mông để lạc lối phù sinh
Ánh điện đường vẫn nhìn trơ cửa sổ
Ngày mai đi ta vẽ lại bình minh*

A lingering regret, like slumbering stars

A lingering regret, like slumbering stars,
In the boundless night, where fleeting lives wander astray.
As the streetlights gaze blankly through the windows,
I set out tomorrow to paint anew the dawn.

Explanation

The streetlights are personified as passive observers, staring blankly at the windows. This imagery suggests a sense of detachment and indifference to the human society. It's as if the streetlights, though illuminating the night, are oblivious to the emotions and experiences of the people they illuminate.

This contrast between the active, emotional state of the people and the passive, mechanical nature of the streetlights emphasizes the loneliness and isolation often felt in a bustling, impersonal world.

Comparing the poet's feeling to distant, slumbering stars, and the image of the streetlights staring at the window suggests a sense of isolation and the transience of life.

In spite of this deep nostalgia, the final line introduces a hopeful note, suggesting a desire for a fresh start and a new beginning for his country. The poem clearly expresses Thầy's love for his homeland.

Let's read a passage that Thầy writes in the preface for his book, *Huyền thoại Duy-ma-cật* (The Legend of Vimalakīrti):

Even on peaceful days, the temple remains quiet. Whether in war or peace, life is like waves rising and falling in a dreamlike ocean. The humble, solitary, and serene atmosphere of the temple is like withered grass, a witness to the impermanence of the world.

Whenever I saw the flag flying on trains traveling between the North and South, or the South and Central regions, whether in wartime or peacetime, my feelings about the temple remained the same. Suddenly, I felt inspired to write a couplet for the temple, although I knew the temple would be hesitant to display it for visitors:

*Vượt Trường Sơn nghìn dặm Bắc Nam, nhìn nắng động
sân chùa, khách có biết mấy lần dâu biển?*

*Ngắm sông bạc một màu chung thủy, lắng chuông ngân
đâu cỏ, người không hay một thoáng Vô vi?*

Crossing the Trường Sơn mountains, a thousand miles between North and South, looking at the sunlight settling on the temple courtyard, do visitors know how intangible this world changes?

Gazing at the silver river, a constant color from beginning to end, listening to the bell's chime reverberating over the grass leaves, don't people realize how frivolous this fleeting life is?

Rereading my own couplet, I suddenly remembered a poem by the Tang Dynasty poet Li Shangyin titled 登山 (*Đăng sơn*, climbing the mountain):

終日昏昏醉夢間
忽聞春盡強登山
因過竹院逢僧話
偷得浮生半日閒

*Chung nhật hôn hôn túy mộng gian,
Hốt văn xuân tận cưỡng đăng sơn.
Nhân quá trúc viện phùng tăng thoại;
Thâu đắc phù sinh bán nhật nhân.*

All day long, I've been as hazy and indistinct as a drunkard in a dream,

Suddenly realizing that spring is almost over, I force myself to go mountain climbing.

Passing by the bamboo grove of a temple, I meet a monk and we chat.

Then I realize I've stolen half a day in this fleeting life!

The poet's inspiration often arises from the mundane aspects of daily life, amidst the hustle and bustle; living in that world, he feels as if he's drifting in a drunken dream. When he realizes that spring is ending or about to end, he hastily seeks out a patch of green in the mountains, meaning he seeks a bit of tranquility and

release for his mind to compensate for the days spent tirelessly striving for fame and fortune:

*Mùi phú quý như làng xa mã;
Bã vinh hoa lừa gã công khanh.
Giấc Nam kha khéo bắt bình
Bừng con mắt dậy thấy mình tay không.
(Cung oán ngâm khúc) ⁵⁴*

The scene of wealth tempts noble society people;
The dregs of glory deceive government bureaucrats.
Illusory dreams cause resentment,
Awakening only to find oneself empty-handed.
(The lament of a concubine)

Passing by the bamboo grove, he happens to meet a monk; they stop and chat. After a while, the poet suddenly feels like he has gained half a day of leisure in his turbulent life. There is a realm called “beyond the world”, where Taoist priests, Zen masters, and hermits live carefree, forgetting about time and all the busy struggles of the world.

⁵⁴ *Cung oán ngâm khúc* (The lament of a concubine) is a poem by Nguyễn Gia Thiều (1741–1798), written in Nôm script, consisting of 356 verses. It’s written in “song thất lục bát”, a traditional Vietnamese verse form with alternating lines of two seven followed by one six and one eight syllables.

The poem offers a glimpse into the inner world of a concubine who yearns for the emperor’s affection, which she briefly experienced but ultimately lost. Therefore, she feels imprisoned within the gilded cage of the palace.

10. ĐỂ TRONG GÓC TIM MỘT QUẢ XOÀI

*Để trong góc tim một quả xoài
Khi buồn vớ vẫn lấy ra nhai
Hỏi người năm cũ đi đâu hết?
Còn lại mình ta trên cõi này*

*Anh vẽ hình tôi, quên nửa hình
Nửa nằm quán trọ, nửa linh đình
Nửa trên thiên giới, quần tiên hội
Nửa thức đêm dài, ôi u minh*

In a corner of my heart, I keep a mango

In a corner of my heart, I keep a mango.
In moments of gloom, a sweet memory to chew.
Where are they now, those friends of a bygone era?
In this world, I'm left alone.

You drew my portrait, but you forgot the other half,
Half of me lingers in a tavern, the other half drown in
despair,
Or half of me soars in celestial realms, where fairies
convene,
While the other half remains trapped in sleepless, long
nights, oh, so dark and drear.

Explanation

In the first stanza, when feeling aimlessly sad, the poet takes out a mango to chew, probably because mangoes are sweet, symbolizing a comforting memory, as he feels he is left alone by his friends.

11. Lặng lẽ nằm im dưới đáy mồ

*Lặng lẽ nằm im dưới đáy mồ
Không trăng không sao mộng vẫn vơ
Tại sao người chết, tình không chết?
Quay mấy vòng đời, môi vẫn khô*

Quietly lying still at the bottom of a grave

Quietly lying still at the bottom of a grave,
No moon, no stars, only futile wondering:
Why does love endure when life succumbs to death?
Having gone through several turns of life, my lips remain
dry.

Explanation

The first two lines create a vivid image of a person lying in a grave, surrounded by darkness and solitude, no longer able to see the moon or stars. Yet, a profound question lingers: why does love endure when life succumbs to death?

The phrase *through several turns of life* alludes to traversing multiple lifetimes, while *lips remain dry* suggests a persistent thirst, or in other words, an enduring love. How profound!

Why does love endure when life succumbs to death? Of course, no one can answer this question. Nonetheless, the word “love” here, for us, might signify romantic love; but for Thầy, it could be a love for his homeland – a love akin to patriotism? This love compelled him to stay in Vietnam

in the war's aftermath, to face imprisonment, and ultimately, the death penalty. This love compelled him to return to Vietnam, even though the Japanese doctor warned him that, by refusing cancer treatment in Japan, he might have only months to live.

But perhaps Thầy isn't speaking solely of his own experience. Perhaps he's addressing love in a more universal sense, encompassing romantic love as well. After all, how many people find peace in death? Most linger, filled with attachment and regret.

The poem, therefore, I believe, conveys both the personal experience of Thầy and the universal human experience of love, loss, and the afterlife.

But sharing the themes of love, loss, and the afterlife with more profound and eloquent exploration, particularly for Vietnamese people enduring the hardships of the communist regime, are these verses in *Thủy mộ quan* (The underwater graveyard gate) by poet Viên Linh,

*Trinh nữ trăm oan nổi giữa dòng
Thân băng ngàn hải lý về sông
Xung quanh không một người than khóc
Chỉ cá trùng dương theo hộ tang.*

A virgin, drown in a sea of grievance, floats on the current,
Her icy body travels thousands of miles back to the river.
Surrounded by no one to mourn,
Only Ocean fish accompany her funeral.

12. Một hai ba

*Một hai ba
những ngày quên lãng
Tôi vùi đầu trong lớp khói mù
Khói và bụi
chen nhau thành tư tưởng
Nhưng bụi đường lâu lòng bến thâm u*

One, two, or three

One, two, or three
Forgotten days.
When I buried my head in a haze of smoke,
Smoke and dust
Wrestled in my mind,
The road dust settled on a dark, foreboding pier.

Explanation

The first two lines immediately establish a sense of time passing without meaning or purpose. The image of “burying my head in a haze of smoke” suggests a deliberate attempt to escape reality, perhaps through substance use or simply by withdrawing into oneself. The final image of “road dust settled on a dark, foreboding pier” shifts the focus to the external world. The pier, often a symbol of departure, takes on a sinister quality. It represents a deadlock, or a sense of isolation.

In this poem, Thầy criticizes those lacking ambition.

13. Bỏ mặc đàn bò đôi mắt tình diệu vợi

*Bỏ mặc đàn bò đôi mắt tình diệu vợi
Ta lên trời, làm Chúa Cả Hư Vô
Nhìn xuống dưới mặt đất dày khói thuốc
Loài người buồn cho chút nắng hong khô*

Abandoning the herd, their eyes filled with profound tenderness

Abandoning the herd, their eyes filled with profound
tenderness,
I ascend to the heavens, becoming the Lord of the Void.
Gazing down upon the smoke-laden Earth,
Humanity yearns for a sliver of sunlight.

Explanation

Thầy laments, highlighting the irony:

Even the cow can convey affection, though it has no words. But humans, selfish and destructive, consume cigarettes, pollute the Earth with smoke. Then, they refuse to accept the consequences, complaining that they can't find a sunny spot.

The smoke symbolizes the negative impact of human activity and the sliver of sunlight represents a small ray of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape.

14. Giữa Thiên đường rong chơi lâu lông

*Giữa Thiên đường rong chơi lâu lông
Cõi vĩnh hằng mờ nhạt rong rêu
Ta đi xuống quây trần hoàn nổi sóng
Đốt mặt trời vô hạn cô liêu*

I have roamed aimlessly through Paradise

I have roamed aimlessly through Paradise.
This eternal realm, a fuzzy, mossy place for me.
I descend, to stir the world of mortals into tumultuous
waves,
And I will set the sun ablaze in boundless solitude.

15. Con trâu trắng thẫn thờ góc phố

*Con trâu trắng thẫn thờ góc phố
Nỗi hoài hương nhói mãi nhúm trăng mòn
Đám sẻ lạnh gặt gù trên mái đỏ
Sương chiều rơi có thấy lạnh nhiều hơn?
Một chuỗi rắn rình mò trong hẻm nhỏ
Không bụi đường đâu có chỗ đi hoang?*

A white buffalo, dazed on the street corner

A white buffalo, dazed on the street corner,
Chews on the nostalgia of the fading moon.
A huddle of sparrows, shivering on the red roof,
Does the falling evening mist deepen the cold?
A den of snakes lurks in the narrow alleyway,
Without the dusty road, where can they wander?

Explanation

The underlying message seems to be a reflection on the Vietnamese people's attitude, after the significant political change of April 30th, 1975, longing for democracy, but doing nothing.

They chew grass on homesickness, like the cow, stand in the cold and perch rather than actively find a warmer place, like the sparrows, or pray for dust on the road before daring to go, like the snakes in the poem.

16. Bứt cọng cỏ

*Bứt cọng cỏ
Đo bóng thời gian
Dài mênh mang*

I pluck a blade of grass

I pluck a blade of grass,
To measure its shadow over time.
How immensely long it grows!

Explanation

Here's a paradox in this poem: a blade of grass should be very short, yet when measuring its shadow over time, Thầy finds it incredibly long. Herein lies the Zen meaning of the poem.

The difference between form (the physical body of the grass, which is short) and function (measuring its shadow over time, which is long) is wonderfully expressed by Thầy through a single blade of grass.

However, how can one differentiate between form and function when the deep understanding of Zen is wordless and Zen enlightenment completely transcends form?

The following story taken from Dr. Daisetz Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, the first series, pages 305–306, with minor modifications, explores the duality of form and function, and the ultimate beyond-word realization of non-duality through the silent dialogue.

Yangshan was the chief disciple of Guishan, and one of the peculiar features of this school was to demonstrate the truth of Zen concordantly both by the master and disciple. They once went out picking tea-leaves.

- Picking tea-leaves all day, I hear only your voice and do not see your body; manifest your original form and let me see it, Guishan said to Yangshan.

Yangshan shook the tea-plant, without saying.

- You have only got its function, you have not got the form, said Guishan.

- Master, how with you then? Yangshan said.

The master kept quiet for a while, whereupon the disciple said:

- O master, you have got only the form, you have not got the function.

- You will be spared of my twenty blows, concluded the master.

In Buddhist ontology three conceptions are distinguished, as was referred to previously: form, appearance, and function. *Form* corresponds to the idea of mass or being, *appearance* to that of form, and *function* to that of force. Every reality is regarded by Buddhist philosophers as analyzable into these three notions. Sometimes, however, the second conception, appearance, is absorbed in that of form. Without functioning no objects exist, but functioning cannot take place without something functioning. The two ideas,

according to Buddhist philosophers, are thus inseparable for our understanding of the universe. But Guishan and Yangshan were not metaphysicians and would not argue on the subject. The one shook the tree and the other stood still.

Yangshan shook the tree-plant to allow the function to speak for itself, then Guishan only saw the function in his disciple's action, not the form, while Guishan kept quiet to allow the form to speak for itself, then Yangshan only saw the form, not the function, in his non-action.

But did Yangshan keep quiet when shaking the tree? Surely, he did. If so, when the master kept quiet, did he only repeat a part of his disciple's answer? No, because the master didn't just keep quiet, he stood still. Therefore, the correct response to Guishan's question probably is to stand still (to show the form) and to silently shake the tree (to show the function) simultaneously! Even if you are the Monkey King Sun Wukong, it's of no use. Not only language is transcended, but action is transcended, too.

There is no difference between the *original form* referred in this story by Guishan, the *original face before birth* that was asked by the Sixth Patriarch Huineng (pages 341–343 and 465) and the *meaning of the First Patriarch Bodhidharma's coming from the West* in the fifth case in *Wumen Guan* (page 200).

In *Wumen Guan*, Wumen's following comment is the reply to those seeking the answer to Guishan's question, "Even if your eloquence flows like a river, it is of no use. Even if you can expound the whole body of the sūtras, it is of no avail. If you can respond to it fittingly, you will give life to

those who have been dead, and put to death those who have been alive”.

Dr. Daisetz Suzuki, in *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, the second series, page 211, alludes that

|| This question points directly to the presence of some truth innerly and mystically lying in the system of Buddhism. It amounts to this: “What is the essence of Buddhism as understood by the First Patriarch of Zen Buddhism?”

Below is a collection of famous answers to the above question. These answers, while seemingly unrelated or even nonsensical, are designed to provoke thought and challenge the seeker to find their own answers. They are often used in Zen practice to help students break through their conceptual understanding and experience a direct realization of reality. In short, each one is a koan.

Zhaozhou Congshen: “The oak tree in the front yard”.

Another time, Zhaozhou said: “It is the leg of the chair”. When asked “That is what it is, isn’t it?”, Zhaozhou replied: “If that is what it is, you may remove it and take it with you”.

Xianglin Chengyuan: “Sitting for a long time becomes tiring”.

Damei Fachang: “There is no meaning at all”.

Lyangsan Yongwan: “Don’t talk nonsense”.

Chiupheng Puman: “What’s the point of asking someone else?”

Paoning Jenyang: “Like adding frost to snow”.

Tianhuang Daowu: “Your question is not to the point”.
When asked: “How shall I get it to the point?”, “I will tell you when I am dead” was the master’s answer.

Shitou Xiqian: “Ask the pillar standing there”.

Linji Yixuan: “If there’s an intention, it cannot be saved”.

Xuefeng Yicun: When asked this question while fixing a fence, he shook the fence without saying anything.

Guishan Lingyou ⁵⁵ raised his whisk, without saying anything.

Shishuang Qingzhu: “If there was someone who fell to the bottom of a thousand-foot well, and you could pull them up without a single inch of rope, then I would answer you”.

⁵⁵ Guishan Lingyou raised his whisk in response to the question, “What is the essence of the Buddha’s Way, as understood through the First Patriarch Bodhidharma’s Western journey?”. This action mirrored his disciple Yangshan Huiji’s gesture of shaking the tea plant, page 379, yet Guishan criticized Yangshan for demonstrating function rather than form.

Given the “nonsensical” koan-like responses, silent or not, of the Zen Masters in this compilation, it’s evident that true understanding of the original form, the original face before birth, the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West or in short, the true dharma cannot be conveyed through words, neither action. Indeed, the moment your mind churns in the attempt to understand these koans, you throw yourself into the shadow world.

The monk did not evidently take this very seriously, for he said, “Lately, the venerable Chang of Hu-nan was given a monastery to preside over, and he is also giving us all kinds of instruction on the subject”. Shishuang called a boy-attendant and ordered him: “Take this corpse out”.

The boy-attendant, who later came to be known as Yangshan Huiji, one of the most masterful minds in Zen, afterwards asked Master Danyuan Yingzhen how to pull someone up. The master replied, “You fool, who is down the well?” Yangshan didn’t understand, so he went to ask Guishan Lingyou. Guishan called, “Huiji”. Huiji replied, “Yes, Master”. “There, he is out!”, Guishan said.

When Shuiliao asked Mazu Daoyi about the meaning of the First Patriarch coming from the West, Mazu said: “Show reverence”. Thinking Mazu expected him to pay homage, Shuiliao bowed down, Mazu immediately kicked him over the chest, sending him to the ground. This, however, awakened Shuiliao to the realization of the truth of Buddhism, for when he stood up on his feet, he declared this, while clapping his hands and laughing loudly: “How wonderful! How wonderful! A hundred thousand samadhis and the most mysterious teachings – I know them all now through and through as they are revealed at the tip of one single hair”. Later, he said to his disciples, “Ever since I took that kick from Master Ma, I haven’t stopped laughing”.

17. Cho xin chút hạt buồn thôi

*Cho xin chút hạt buồn thôi
Để cho ngọn gió lên đồi rắc mưa
Gió qua ngõ phố mập mờ
Mưa rơi đâu đó mấy bờ cỏ lau
Nắng trưa phố cổ úa màu
Tôi đi qua mộng đồi cao giật mình*

Grant me a touch of sorrow's rain

Grant me a touch of sorrow's rain,
For the wind to sprinkle upon the hill.
But the wind strays through dim-lit alleys,
Sprinkling the rain among the reeds.
As the old town's colors fade in midday's glare,
I climb the hill, lost in a dream, then wake up, startled.

Explanation

Thầy requests a touch of sorrow's rain to be sprinkled upon the hill, desiring that those dwelling there recognize the society's suffering. However, the wind, instead of delivering the rain to the hill, strays through dim-lit alleys, scattering it among the reeds, highlighting Thầy's disappointment.

The poem concludes with the word “giật mình” (startled). Perhaps, upon reaching the hill, Thầy is startled by an unexpected discovery – a touch of hope to end the poem.

18. Lão già trên góc phố

*Lão già trên góc phố
Quần quai trời mưa dông
Áo lụa gầy hoa đỏ
Phù du rụng xuống dòng*

An elderly man on a street corner

An elderly man on a street corner,
Writhing in the stormy downpour,
Wearing a thin silk shirt, flower-red,
Stumbles and falls into the river.
His life, ephemeral as a mayfly's.

Explanation

This moving poem contemplates the fragility of life, the harsh realities of aging and poverty, and the inevitability of death. It invites us to appreciate the beauty of existence, even as we confront life's challenges.

19. Anh đi để trống cụm rừng

Anh đi để trống cụm rừng

Có con suối nhỏ canh chừng sao Mai

Bóng anh dẫm nát điện đài

You leave behind a ravaged forest

You leave behind a ravaged forest,
Where a small stream, guarding the Morning Star,
Detected your shadow trampling on the radio tower.

Explanation

In the poem *Nghìn năm trước lên núi* (A thousand years ago I climbed that mountain), page 349, Thầy gives eyes to the mustard seed; in this one, Thầy gives eyes to the stream.

The underlying meaning of this poem is the law of karma in Buddhism: whatever seed you sow, you reap. No one escapes this law.

Below is a Zen story, demonstrating that no one escapes this law of karma.

Whenever Zen Master Baizhang Huaihai (720–814) delivered a sermon, an old man was always there listening with the monks. When they left, he left too. One day, however, he remained behind. The Master asked.

- Who are you?

- I am not a man. In the past, in the time of Kashyapa Buddha, I lived on this mountain (as a Zen priest). On one

occasion, a monk asked me, “Does a perfectly enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect?”, I answered, “He does not”. Because of this answer, I fell into the state of a fox for 500 lives. Now, I beg you, Master, please say a turning word to release me from the body of a fox. Does a perfectly enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect?

- The law of cause and effect cannot be mistaken, the Master answered.

Upon hearing this, the old man immediately became deeply enlightened.

- I have now been released from the body of the fox and will be behind the mountain. I dare to make a request of the Master. Please perform my funeral as you would for a deceased priest, he said, making his bows.

The Master ordered the monastic administrator to strike the wooden fish to announce to the congregation that after the meal there would be a funeral service for a deceased priest. The monks wondered, saying, “All are healthy. No one is sick in the infirmary. What’s this all about?”

After the meal, Baizhang led the monks to the foot of a rock behind the mountain and with his staff poked out the dead body of a fox. He then performed the ceremony of cremation. That evening Baizhang ascended the rostrum in the hall and told the monks the whole story.

Wumen Huikai (1183–1260) comments in his book *Wumen Guan* (commonly known as *The Gateless Gate*, refer to pages 199 and 359):

If one doesn't fall into karma, why was one condemned to be a fox? If one doesn't mistake karma, why was one able to escape the fate of being a fox?

If such a commentary does not confuse the reader enough, he adds this verse:

*Not falling, not obscuring,
Two faces, one die.
Not obscuring, not falling,
A thousand mistakes, ten thousand mistakes.*

In *The Gateless Gate*, Japanese Zen Master Koun Yamada explains:

As you know, a die has six faces and when you throw it, sometimes a one appears, sometimes a four. Each time a different face may appear, but the die is at all times one and the same. Similarly, sometimes the form of a fox appears, sometimes the form of a man, but the essential nature is always one.

20. Ôi nỗi buồn

*Ôi nỗi buồn
Thần tiên vĩnh cửu
Nhớ luân hồi
cát bụi đỏ mắt ai*

Oh, sadness

Oh, sadness,
You're an eternal immortal.
Missing saṃsāra,
Will sand and dust redden your eyes?

Explanation

Thầy's assertion that sadness is an everlasting fairy, transcend the saṃsāra (the cycle of birth, death and rebirth), is both intriguing and perplexing.

The poem's last verse, *Nhớ luân hồi, cát bụi đỏ mắt ai* literally mean missing saṃsāra, whose eyes are reddened by sand and dust, indicating that fairies also possess emotions. Therefore, I believe the poem will be clearer by translating as:

Missing saṃsāra,
Will sand and dust redden your eyes?

The poem's structure is also noteworthy, with the first two lines establishing the overarching theme of sadness and the final two lines exploring a specific manifestation of this emotion in the context of saṃsāra. This creates a sense of unity and coherence within the poem.

21. Tiếng muỗi vo ve

*Tiếng muỗi vo ve
Người giật mình tỉnh giấc
Ngoài xa kia
Ai đang đi?*

*Nước lũ tràn
Em nhỏ chết đuối
Tôi ngồi trên bờ
Vuốt ngọn cỏ mơ*

By the sound of mosquitoes buzzing

By the sound of mosquitoes buzzing,
The sleeper is startled awake.
Out there,
Who is going?

The floodwaters rise,
The little child drowns.
I sit on the bank,
Stroking a calea leaf, and pray

Explanation

In the last line, the plant “cỏ mơ” has the scientific name *calea zacatechichi*, or simply *calea*. However, in Vietnamese, “mơ” also means wishing or dreaming, so I add “and pray” to capture this dual meaning.

The first stanza effectively sets a scene of tranquility disrupted by a sudden disturbance. The buzzing of mosquitoes is used to evoke a sense of peacefulness that is

abruptly shattered. The verse *người giật mình tỉnh giấc* (the sleeper is startled awake) conveys the suddenness and intensity of the disruption, suggesting a sense of vulnerability and helplessness. The lines, *ngoài xa kia ai đang đi?* (Out there, who is going?) add a layer of mystery and intrigue, inviting the reader to ponder the identity of the person on the move as well as his/her intention. This line also creates a sense of anticipation and suspense.

The second stanza of the poem paints a harrowing scene of a child drowning in a flood. The imagery of the rising floodwaters and the tragic fate of the child is emotionally impactful and evokes a sense of sympathy and sorrow.

The final two lines,

*Tôi ngồi trên bờ
Vuốt ngọn cỏ mơ*

I sit on the bank,
Stroking a calea leaf, and pray,

create a stark contrast between the serenity of the natural world and the tragedy that has occurred. The image of Thầy stroking a “cỏ mơ” (calea leaf, but literally it means wishing grass) suggests a sense of peace and contemplation, while the word “pray”, added to capture the dual meaning of the word “cỏ mơ”, implies a longing or desire for something better.

22. Người hận ta

*Người hận ta
Bỏ đi trong thiên hà mộng du
Bóng thiên nga bơ vơ*

*Nghìn năm sau
Trong lòng đất sâu
Thấm hạt mưa rào
Giọt máu đổi màu*

Hating me

Hating me,
You've moved to your sleepwalking galaxy,
Leaving behind this lonely swan.

But a thousand years later,
Deep within the earth,
Having absorbed raindrops,
Your blood will turn a different color.

Explanation

Driven by your hatred, you've retreated into a self-created fantasy. But time will prove, comprehension will draw, and your essence will undergo a profound shift.

23. Hoang vu

Hoang vu
Còn cát cháy
Trăng mù

Hoang vu
Còn cát
Trăng mù

Cỏ cây mộng寐
Cơ đồ nước non

In this abandoning land

In this abandoning land,
The sand dunes were burning,
The moon was obscuring.

In this abandoned land,
Burnt sand dunes,
Obscured moon.

Plants can only dream
Of the nation's past.

Explanation

Before things become irrevocably late, if we do nothing to save it, plants (grasses, flowers and trees) will only be able to dream of the past glories of our nation.

24. Người đi đâu bóng hình mòn mỏi

*Người đi đâu bóng hình mòn mỏi
Nẻo tới lui còn dấu nhạt mờ
Đường lịch sử
Bốn nghìn năm dợn sóng
Để người đi không hẹn bến bờ*

Where have you gone leaving me to wait in vain

Where have you gone leaving me to wait in vain?
The path you walked now bears only the faintest trace.
Despite our historical path
Of four thousand years of rippling waves,
You have gone with no promise to return.

Explanation

*Despite our historical path
Of four thousand years of rippling waves,
You have gone with no promise to return.*

In the above lines, Thầy criticizes those who have abandoned their country in its time of need, choosing personal comfort over national duty.

25. Gió cao bong bóng vỡ

*Gió cao bong bóng vỡ
Mây sương rải kín đồng
Thành phố không buồn ngủ
Khói vồ bờ hư không*

High winds burst the balloons

High winds burst the balloons,
Mist and clouds cloak the fields,
In the city that never sleeps,
Smoke laps at the shores of the void.

26. Đàn cò đứng gập ghềnh không ngủ

*Đàn cò đứng gập ghềnh không ngủ
Ngóng chân trời con mắt u linh
Chân trời sụp ngàn cây bóng rù
Cổng luân hồi mở rộng bình minh*

The storks shift and sway, unable to sleep

The storks shift and sway, unable to sleep,
Gazing at the horizon with their pale, ghostly eyes.
The horizon collapses, and trees cast long, creeping shadows,
The gate of reincarnation creaks open, welcoming the new dawn.

Explanation

The poem's overall tone is one of mystery and contemplation. The reader is left to ponder the deeper meanings of the images and symbols presented.

The storks, unable to sleep and with their “ghostly eyes”, could symbolize souls in a liminal state, awaiting rebirth or passage into the afterlife. Their restlessness suggests a sense of anticipation and uncertainty. The collapsing horizon could represent the arrival of death. The new dawn suggests that death is not an end but a passage to a new beginning.

Ultimately, the poem's meaning is open to interpretation.

27. Chờ dứt cơn mưa ta vô rừng

*Chờ dứt cơn mưa ta vô rừng
Bồi hồi nghe khói lạnh rưng rưng
Ngàn lau quét nắng lùa lên tóc
Ảo ảnh vô thường, một thoáng chung?*

When the rain subsides, I'll enter the forest

When the rain subsides, I'll enter the forest,
Shivering with cold, I watch the smoke curl and rise.
Forest reeds brush sunlight through my hair,
Are illusions, though fleeting, but a momentary gleam?

Explanation

The image of the rain falling and stopping, the reeds swaying in the wind, and the illusions that come and go all serve to remind us about the fleeting nature of existence.

The poem also includes some thought-provoking philosophical musings on the nature of reality and the meaning of life. The question of whether illusions can last a fleeting moment is a particularly intriguing one, as we all know that a fleeting moment can sometimes last forever in our memory, and it invites the reader to consider the nature of perception and the limits of human knowledge.

28. Ở kia nắng đỏ hiên chùa

*Ở kia, nắng đỏ hiên chùa
Trăng non rỏ máu qua mùa mẫn tang
Áo thầy bạc thếp bụi đường
Khói rêu ó nhạt vách tường dựng kinh*

Oh, look at the blazing red sun on the pagoda's porch

Oh, look at the blazing red sun on the pagoda's porch,
Where a young moon bleeds through the mourning
season.
The monk's robe, faded and dust-kissed, a testament to
time,
Against the smoky, mossy walls, he stands firm,
upholding the scriptures.

Explanation

Ms. Hà Nguyễn, on my Facebook page, analyzes: When we think of a pagoda, we usually imagine a serene, cool, and tranquil place, not one with a blazing red sun on the pagoda's porch, because blazing red sun evokes a sense of oppression and discomfort for the pagoda setting. One would think that after the war, there would be peace, but that's not the case at all. The young, fresh moon, which should only be white, is now bleeds, further emphasizing the sorrow of this unusual space. The monk is like a seasoned warrior, though solitary, his clothes faded and dusty from the road, yet his will to uphold the scriptures remains steadfast and brave, alongside the tragic history of the suffering Vietnamese nation.

29. Người không vui, ta đi về làm ruộng

Người không vui, ta đi về làm ruộng

Gieo gió xuân chờ đợi mưa hè

Nghe cóc nhái gọi đôn khe suối

Biết khi nào phố chợ chắn bờ đê

If you are not happy, I'll return to farming

If you are not happy, I'll return to farming,
Sowing winds of spring, and waiting for rains of summer.
When frogs and toads sing their chorus from the streams,
I'll know the market's crowd has filled the dike.

Explanation

The opening line, “If you are not happy, I'll return to farming”, suggests a sense of disillusionment with the “you” addressed in the poem. This “you” could represent the communist regime. Farming becomes a retreat. But his farming is basic: sow winds of spring, and wait for rains of summer, i.e., the cycles of nature.

The contrast between the peaceful sounds of “frogs and toads singing their chorus from the streams” and the disruptive, bustling “market's crowd” highlights the tension between rural tranquility and the intrusions of a bustling society.

30. Thao thức đêm khuya trộm bóng ma

*Thao thức đêm khuya trộm bóng ma
Ẩn tình khách trọ, nến đâm hoa
Chồi mai trẩy lá, mùa xuân đợi
Đã quá mùa xuân ánh điện nhòa*

Unable to sleep, the lodger steals glances at a ghostly figure

Unable to sleep, the lodger steals glances at a ghostly figure,
Mirroring his secret emotions, the candle's flame flickers.
An apricot bud unfurls, awaiting spring time,
But spring has long passed, and the streetlight dimmed.

Explanation

The lodger was so troubled that they couldn't sleep and began to hallucinate, seeing ghostly figures. The image of the candle flickering is used as a metaphor for the lodger's troubled mind, where even simple things can take on a more sinister appearance. The passage also includes a reference to the disappointment of waiting for spring and seeing no results, further emphasizing the theme of unfulfilled expectations.

Candle flickering is a phenomenon where the candle flame flares up. This phenomenon mostly occurs when a firefly flies into the flame, causing its body to burn. Until now, entomologists have not been able to explain why fireflies fly into the fire and self-immolate.

31. Oi người cắt cỏ ở bên sông

*Oi người cắt cỏ ở bên sông
Nước cuộn ngoài khơi có bận lòng?
Phấn liễu một thời run khoe mọng
Hương rừng mờ nhạt rải tầng không*

Hey, grass cutter by the river

Hey, grass cutter by the river,
Have you ever worried about the swirling water offshore?
Willow pollens, once quivering at the plump flower,
Now barely fill the forest air.

Explanation

The poem silently poses two open-ended questions.

The first is clearly stated: “The grass cutter, have you ever worried about the swirling water offshore?” While the “swirling water offshore” could symbolize unknown dangers, the answer is not a definite yes or no.

The second is hidden: “Are the willow pollens sad that they now barely fill the air?” The answer is definitely no.

The contrast between the grass cutter and the willow pollens highlights different approaches to life’s uncertainties. The grass cutter represents the human tendency to worry and contemplate the future, while the willow pollens embody a natural acceptance of change and impermanence.

32. Khói ơi bay thấp xuống đi

*Khói ơi bay thấp xuống đi
Cho ta nắm lại chút gì thanh xuân
Ta đi trong cõi vĩnh hằng
Nhớ tàn cây nhỏ mấy lần rụng hoa*

Smoke, descend, drift lower

Smoke, descend, drift lower.
Let me recapture a glimpse of my youth.
Here, in this timeless realm,
I remember the many times the blossoms fell from the
small tree's foliage.

Explanation

Smoke, drift lower so I may grasp you. But as no one can grasp smoke, no one can grasp back the days of youth.

Thầy remembers the many times the blossoms fell from the small tree's foliage, but composer Lê Mộng Nguyên, author of the famous song *Trăng mờ bên suối* (Dim moon by the stream), could not forget the April thirtieth, 1975:

*Ngày ba mươi như cuộc thể thăng trầm
Muôn đời hận như dân Chàm đã chết*

April thirtieth, like the ebb and flow of life,
The enduring hatred, as profound as the dead Champa.

Loyal to the covenant I have made with my conscience, I shall share to the end of my exiled life: The day freedom is restored, that day I will return to my homeland.

Volume 6

**Những điệp khúc cho
dương cầm**

| Refrains for piano

Dreams on the peaks of the mountains

These are 23 short poems, named *Những điệp khúc cho dương cầm* (Refrains for piano), that Thầy transformed into 23 piano refrains by infusing them with music and Zen.

Time of composition: 2006

1. Ta nhận chìm thời gian trong khóe mắt

*Ta nhận chìm thời gian trong khóe mắt
Rồi thời gian ửng đỏ đêm thiêng
Đêm chợt thành mùa đông huyền hoặc
Cánh chim bạt ngàn từ quãng vô biên.*

I drown time in the depths of my eyes

I drown time in the depths of my eyes,
Then time bleeds red into the sacred night.
Suddenly, night transforms into a winter of illusion,
A bird soars between two musical notes into the endless
expanse.

Explanation

The word “quãng” in the final verse of the poem is the key word of the poem, in order to convert a poem to a refrain for piano. It’s not a physical space, but the interval between two musical notes, i.e., it’s a time interval. Therefore,

Cánh chim bạt ngàn từ quãng vô biên

A bird soars between two musical notes into the endless
expanse.

In this volume, Thầy also uses the word “quãng” in poem number 15 (*quãng im lặng thời gian nặng hạt*, in the downpours of rain, for a fleeting moment between two rest notes) and poem number 20 (*quãng im lặng nghe mùi đất thở*, in silent moments between rest notes, the earth’s

breath fills the space). In these poems, “quãng im lặng” means the interval between two rest notes. In this poem, although Thầy did not specify, it could also be the interval between two rest notes because it aligns with the musical metaphor and the passage of time from the night into winter myths, suggesting a sense of both nothingness and endlessness. It’s the sound of silence, or the soundless sound, as discovered by Toyo ⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ This story is recounted, with minor modifications, in the book *101 Zen stories*, written by Zen master Mujū in the 13th century, and compiled by Nyogen Senzaki in 1919.

The master of Kennin temple was Takeda Mokurai (1854-1930). He had a little protégé named Toyo who was only twelve years old. Toyo saw the older disciples visit the master’s room each morning and evening to receive instruction in sanzen (TN: a private interview between student and Zen master). Toyo wished to do sanzen also.

- Wait a while. You are too young. Mokurai said.

But the child insisted, so the master finally consented.

In the evening, little Toyo went at the proper time to the threshold of Mokurai’s sanzen room. He struck the gong to announce his presence, bowed respectfully three times outside the door, and went to sit before the master in respectful silence.

- You can hear the sound of two hands when they clap together. Now show me the sound of one hand, Mokurai said.

Toyo bowed and went back to his room.

From his window he could hear a geisha singing. “Ah, I have it!” he proclaimed. He came immediately. When Mokurai asked him to illustrate the sound of one hand, Toyo sang the song of the geisha. “No. That is not the sound of one hand”, said Mokurai.

Thinking that such music might interrupt, Toyo moved his abode to a quiet place. He meditated again. He happened to hear the

In *Refrains pour piano*, Mrs. Dominique de Miscault, translates this poem into French as follows:

*J'ai tenté de noyer le temps tout au fond de mon oeil
La nuit sacrée en a rougi
Aussitôt la nuit se métamorphose
En hiver de tous les mythes*

sound of water dripping. "I have it", imagined Toyo. When he next appeared before his master, he imitated dripping water.

- That is the sound of dripping water, but not the sound of one hand. Meditate again", Mokurai said.

In vain, Toyo meditated, trying to hear the sound of one hand. He heard the sighing of the wind. But the sound was rejected.

For more than ten times, Toyo visited Mokurai with different sounds. All were wrong.

One year passed.

Mokurai became anxious, "What happened to the boy? He has not come for a year".

So, he went to his room and found him outside it, sitting under a tree, silent, his body vibrating with some unknown sound. Mokurai sat there waiting. Hours and hours passed.

Finally, when the sun was setting, he called:

- Toyo?

The boy opened his eyes and said:

- I have transcended all sounds until I could collect no more. So, this is it.

- Yes, you have got it! Mokurai confirmed.

Conclusively, what is the sound of one-hand clapping? It cannot be described in words because it is the soundless sound of the true dharma, that you hear with your pure heart and no-mind, not your ears.

*Au-delà des sommets, un oiseau plane
Entre deux notes, l'intervalle est infini*

I sink time deep into the eyes
The sacred night blushes red
Immediately, the night screen transforms
Into the winter of legend
Outside the high mountain peak, a bird flies
Between two musical notes, the distance is endless.

In the last line, “between two musical notes, the distance is endless”, the distance between two musical notes is the distance of time, correct with the meaning of the poem.

In *Dreaming the Mountain*, professor Nguyễn Bá Chung and poet Martha Collins translate this poem as follows:

*I sink time in the corners of my time
Time reddens the sacred night
Suddenly night is a winter myth
Immense wings from endless space.*

Endless space or boundless space, a Zen context, refers to a limitless, empty space that is not merely physical but also metaphysical, but it is not a time interval. The translators do not only miss the mark, the time interval, but also the musical notes in the poem.

2. Từ đó ta trở về Thiên giới

*Từ đó ta trở về Thiên giới
Một màu xanh mù tủa Vô biên
Bóng sao đêm dài vời vợi
Thật hay hư, chiều nhỏ ưu phiền.*

*Chiều như thế, cung trầm khắc khoải
Rát đầu tay nốt nhạc triền miên
Ôm dấu lặng, nhịp đàn đứt vợi
Anh ở đâu, khói lụa ngoài hiên?*

And so, I return to the heavenly realm

And so, I return to the heavenly realm,
Where boundless blue stretches into eternity,
Starlight spills across the endless night.
Is this twilight real, or a veil of sorrow?

Such an afternoon, with a deep and yearning melody,
The endless strain burns my fingertips,
Embracing a rest note, the rhythm breaks.
Where are you, amidst the silken smoke on the balcony?

Explanation

In this poem, Thầy describes how a pianist with a sorrowful heart, no matter how splendid the heavenly realm might be, can only experience the pain of their fingertips.

When the rest note sounds, the rhythm of the music abruptly stops. At that moment, the heart becomes calm, allowing us to see the source of the pianist's sorrow: "Where are you?".

A rest (or rest note) is a moment of silence. It is just as necessary as any other musical note.

Sometimes, rests are more necessary and carry a more profound meaning than other notes, as in the Vietnamese song *Hồn tử sĩ* (Souls of the Dead Soldiers), the American *Taps*, or the British *The Last Post*.

Hồn tử sĩ (originally titled *Hát giang trường hận*, Forever Resentment of River Hát) was composed by Lưu Hữu Phước around 1942–1943 when he visited the Hát River, where the Trưng sisters drowned themselves in 43 AD. The bugle call for this song was used by the South Vietnamese government for military funerals and memorial services for fallen soldiers. After the reunification of Vietnam, it was officially used nationwide.

There are several legends concerning the origin of *Taps*, but the most widely circulated one states that a Union Army infantry officer, whose name often is given as Captain Robert Ellicombe, first ordered *Taps* performed at the funeral of his son, a Confederate soldier killed during the Peninsula Campaign. This apocryphal story claims that Ellicombe found the tune in the pocket of his son's clothing and performed it to honor his memory.

The Last Post, composed around the 1790s, is one of about 20 songs that the British military would sing and play at the end of the day before soldiers went to sleep. The song was adapted and used in military funerals and memorial services around the 1850s.

3. Trên dấu thăng âm đàn trữu nặng

*Trên dấu thăng âm đàn trữu nặng
Khóe môi in dấu hận nghìn trùng
Âm đàn đó chìm sâu ảo vọng
Nhịp tim ngừng trống trải thời gian.*

*Thời gian ngưng mặt trời vết bóng
Vẫn thời gian sợi khói buông chùng
Anh đi mãi thêm rêu vơi mỏng
Bởi nắng mòn cỏ dại ven sông.*

A sharp note heavily hangs in the air

A sharp note heavily hangs in the air,
A thousand layers of sorrow etched upon my lips.
The piano tune, lost in illusion's depths,
Stills my heartbeat in the vast emptiness of time.

Time pauses, the sun reveals a burning scar,
Time hangs, like wisps of smoke, fading away.
Your prolonged absence has thinned the moss on the steps,
Like wild grass withered by sunlight on the riverside.

Explanation

In this piece, Thầy uses the sharp note to portray a moment in music when time stands still, and the color of time becomes like languid smoke.

4. Ta bay theo đốm lửa lập lòe

*Ta bay theo đốm lửa lập lòe
Chập chòn trên hoang mạc mùa hè
Khung trời nghiêng xuống nửa
Bên rèm nhung đôi mắt đỏ hoe
Thăm thẳm chòm sao Chức nữ
Heo hút đường về.*

I fly after the flickering flame

I fly after the flickering flame,
Over the shimmering heat of the summer desert.
The heavens tilt, cleaved in two,
Behind a velvet curtain, two bloodshot eyes peer out.
The Lyra constellation, so deep and far,
Oh, how abysmal is the way back!

Explanation

The poem evokes a sense of isolation, loss, and yearning.

- Isolation: The character is alone in a vast and desolate landscape, physically and emotionally.

- Loss: The imagery of the flickering flame suggests a loss of direction, rather than a guiding light, while the tilting sky creates a sense of disorientation.

- Yearning: The reference to the Lyra constellation, so deep and far, an unreachable goal, and his desire to return to the Lyra, both evoke a sense of yearning, desperate and powerless.

5. Chiều tôi về

Chiều tôi về

Em tô màu vàng ó

Màu bụi đường khô quạnh bóng trăng

Đường ngã màu bóng trăng vò vố

Em có chờ rêu sạm trong đêm?

In the evening when I return

In the evening when I return,
You paint your face ochre,
The road dust shimmers, a desolate moonscape,
Drenched in the lonely moonlight.
Will you wait for me in the mossy shadows of the night?

Explanation

Returning to the old city where all the roads turn a yellowish hue, and even his lover has an ochre face, then he'd probably already know the answer to the question *Em có chờ rêu sạm trong đêm?* (Will you wait for me in the mossy shadows of the night?).

Thầy's "lover" is his homeland. So why does his homeland turn its back like this? Because "the young generation is educated to forget the past", as in the letter Thầy wrote to young postulant monks in Thừa Thiên - Huế on October 28, 2003:

You grow up in a peaceful era, but you are thrown into a directionless society. Homeland and religion are beloved terms but have become empty. The highly

revered Buddhist monks, who once awakened the conscience of humanity before the brutal war, who held firm to the ship of religion in the hearts of the people; now only shadows remain, and oblivion.

The young generation is educated to forget the past. Many of you do not know what the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam is; what it has done and contributed to the cause of culture, education, and national peace, in the most difficult periods of the nation's history and religion. A past that is only like yesterday, whose legacy still exists but has been hastily rejected. A legacy accumulated over centuries, with countless thoughts through countless sorrows and sufferings, with the blood and tears of countless monks and Buddhists; those who built that legacy with their vows and strength, some were executed by tyranny, some endured years of imprisonment and humiliation.

Living or dying, honor or disgrace, do not disturb the minds of those who know how to live and die worthily of human dignity, and who are not ashamed of the noble virtues of an ordained.

An ordained person, with each step, ascends towards a sublime and expansive realm. Their mind and body remain detached from the mundane world, unyielding to its false values, and unbowed to any force or coercion. A little bit of fame, a little bit of worldly gain, a little bit of peace of mind; these are only small, trivial, and deceptive values, which even many worldly people willingly discard to preserve their honor. Do not boastfully protect the dharma, but in reality, only hold

onto temples and pagodas as a hiding place for the devils, as a gathering place for the dregs of society. Do not loudly call for the transmission of the dharma and the explanation of the sūtras, but in reality, borrow the words of the Buddha to flatter kings and officials, to beg for a little leftover favor from the secular world, to buy fame and sell rank.

In the past, when kings and lords forced monks to bow their heads and accept the titles of the court to become their servants, the ancestors were ready to place their heads before sharp swords, upholding the integrity of the ordained, following in the footsteps of the fearless and selfless Noble Disciples. ...

Endure the world but do not let the dark power of the world command you. Conform to the world but do not drown yourself in the whirlpool of the world's filth. You must cultivate for yourselves an unshakeable faith; a courageous and fearless virtue; strive to cultivate wisdom through study, thought, and practice to see clearly the true and false appearances, to see and know clearly where you are and where you are going; do not close your eyes and recklessly follow the magnificent but inwardly fragile carriage that is rushing down a long, directionless slope. ...

I pray that you have enough courage to walk on your own feet, to see with your own eyes; to self-determine your own direction.

6. Màu tối mù lan vách đá

*Màu tối mù lan vách đá
Nhớ mênh mộng đôi mắt già từ
Rời đi biệt
Để hồn trên đỉnh gió
Ta ở đâu?
Cánh mỏng phù du.*

As darkness shrouds the cliff face

As darkness shrouds the cliff face,
I'm lost in endless memories of our farewell glances.
And so I was gone,
Leaving my bitterness on the wind's crest.
Where am I now,
With paper-thin wings of a mayfly?

Explanation

A mayfly is a small insect with delicate wings that often rests on the surface of water and only lives for a few hours. The passage compares the poet's ability to leave to that of a mayfly. Both are limited in their ability to travel far due to their fragile nature.

The final line *Where am I now, with paper-thin wings of a mayfly?* suggests a simile for greater emphasis on the speaker's vulnerability.

7. Chung trà đã lịm khói

*Chung trà đã lịm khói
Hàng chữ vẫn nối dài
Thế sự chùng hoa dại
Ủ mờ con mắt cay.*

The tea's steam has dissipated

The tea's steam has dissipated,
But the lines keep stretching on.
World's current affairs, a tangle of wildflowers,
Bring tears to my weary eyes.

Explanation

Thế sự chùng hoa dại, ủ mờ con mắt cay,

World's current affairs, a tangle of wildflowers, bring tears
to my weary eyes,

are such heartfelt words.

On June 3rd, 2001, the citizen Phạm Văn Thương writes to
the Supreme People's Procuracy of Vietnam:

The arbitrary and selective application of the law, by law enforcement agencies, not only adversely affects the lives of individuals but also creates a power base for bureaucratic evils, corruption, and abuse of power, which our people have had to endure for half a century. Therefore, with the conscience of a human being, with the duty of a citizen in a country, I feel it is necessary to point out these evils.

8. Công nương bỏ quên chút hờn trên dấu lặng

Công nương bỏ quên chút hờn trên dấu lặng

Chuỗi cadence ray rút ngón tay

Ấn sâu xuống ưu phiền trên phím trắng

Nửa phím cung chõi nhịp lưu đày.

The princess leaves her resentment in rest notes

The princess leaves her resentment in rest notes.

The cadences, a rhythmic sequence, strains her fingers.

She pours her grief into the white keys,

A half-step offbeat, echoing the rhythm of exile.

Explanation

Again, another interesting point in Thầy's poetry: To abandon resentment in rest notes.

In this poem, Thầy uses a musical term, “nửa phím cung đàn”, which I translate as half-step, following the advice of my musician friend Huân Cung. In music, a half-step is the smallest interval between two adjacent notes, such as *E* and *F* or *A* sharp and *B*. These notes are so close together that there are no other notes between them on a piano keyboard.

Thầy also uses a French word, cadence. Cadence comes from the Latin word “cadere”, meaning to fall. Initially, cadence referred to falling tones, often at the end of a musical phrase, but now it means a rhythmic flow of sounds.

In his essay, *Theo dấu lặng nghe điệp khúc dương cầm của thầy Tuệ Sỹ* (Following the rest note to listen to Thầy Tuệ Sỹ's refrains for piano), writer Huỳnh Kim Quang comments:

In everyday life, with the continuous actions of the stream of thoughts passing through body, speech, and mind, people are swept up in the whirlwind of delusional dreams. Therefore, moments of pause, release, and stillness are extremely necessary and beneficial. These are the silences in the music of life.

Indeed, have you ever taken the time to savor the moments of absolute silence that occur so unexpectedly amidst the tumultuous torrents of sound and melody? If you have ever experienced this incredibly magical moment, you probably feel like you are swimming in an infinite space where there is only mysterious joy in the absence of all human suffering and defilement.

The life of a Zen master is an endless moment of peaceful, carefree, and transcendent silences amidst a life of suffering and pain. Thầy Thích Tuệ Sỹ was such a Zen master.

In Thầy's pair of bright eyes, the endless stream of birth and death is merely a faint shadow behind the flickering flame of awakened wisdom, allowing one to look deeply into it and realize that it is nothing but an illusion.

9. Đôi mắt cay phím đen phím trắng

*Đôi mắt cay phím đen phím trắng
Đen trắng đuổi nhau thành ảo tượng
Trên tận cùng điểm lặng tròn xoe
Ta gửi đó ưu phiền năm tháng.*

My eyes sting, blurred by the dance of black and white keys

My eyes sting, blurred by the dance of black and white keys,
Black and white, an endless chase, a mirage.
On the topmost key, a round rest note,
In it, I confide my year-after-year melancholy.

Explanation

Thầy deposits his sorrow in a rest note.

Poet Phùng Quán, renowned for his poem *Lời mẹ dặn* (Motherly advice), expressed a similar sentiment:

*Có những phút ngã lòng
Tôi vịn câu thơ mà đứng dậy*

In moments of despair,
I find solace in the lines of my poem to stand up.

The poet suggests that poetry serves as a lifeline, a means to rise above sorrow. By crafting verses, one can alleviate the weight of despair.

10. Cửa kín chòm mây cuốn nẻo xa

*Cửa kín, chòm mây cuốn nẻo xa
Ngu ngơ đếm chữ, mắt hoa nhòa
Tay buồn vuốt mãi tờ hương rã
Phảng phất mưa qua mấy cụm nhà.*

Behind closed doors, distant swirling clouds

Behind closed doors, distant swirling clouds,
With blurry eyes, I struggle to count the words.
And with grieving fingers, I caress the crumbling incense
paper,
While a hint of rain falls softly over the clustered houses.

Explanation

Reading this poem is like viewing a Chinese ink wash painting. The simple touches, like the distant swirling clouds and the gentle rain whispering over a few houses, depict a melancholic scene. However, a painting cannot fully capture the beauty of the poem, especially with the repeated use of the words *ngu ngơ* (vaguely) and *phảng phất* (gently). No translations can describe such beauty when it creates a soft flowing rhythm in the repetition of the [ng] sound in *ngu ngơ* and the [f] sound in *phảng phất*.

On the background of this ink wash painting is an old fairy sitting and reading a book, leisurely turning each frail leaf. This suggests a deep connection to nature and a desire for peace and tranquility.

11. Ve mùa hạ chợt về thành phố

*Ve mùa hạ chợt về thành phố
Khóm cây già che nắng hoang lương
Đám bụi trắng cuốn lên đầu ngõ
Trên phím đàn lặng lẽ tàn hương
Tiếng ve dội lãn tăn nốt nhỏ
Khóc mùa hè mà khô cả đại dương.*

The city awakens to a chorus of cicadas

The city awakens to a chorus of cicadas,
A grove of ancient trees offers a cool sanctuary from the
blazing sun,
White dust whirlwinds at the alley's entrance,
The lingering scent of incense quietly fades on the piano.
The cicada melody echoes, rippling like cue notes.
Their summer song weeps, drying up the ocean.

Explanation

The second last verse, *Tiếng ve dội lãn tăn nốt nhỏ*, literally means “the cicadas’ sound ripples in tiny notes”, but the term “nốt nhỏ” is a musical term (cue note), so, I translate it as “the cicada melody echoes, rippling like cue notes”.

Thầy transforms the cicadas’ song into a mournful cry. Although it’s just a gentle ripple of tiny notes, or cue notes, it can dry up the entire ocean.

How heartbreaking!

In *Refrains pour piano*, Mrs. Dominique de Miscault translates:

*Soudain l'été a surgi
Les cigales chantent sur la ville
Un bouquet de vieux arbres
Protège du soleil torride
La poussière blanche s'enroule au bout de la ruelle
Le "silence" est parfumé
Le chant des cigales ondule légèrement
Je pleure l'été qui assèche l'océan.*

Suddenly, summer has arrived
The cicada's song resounds through the city
A cluster of ancient trees
Provides shade from the scorching sun
White dust swirls at the alley's end
A "silent" note emits a fragrant scent
The cicadas' sound vibrates gently
I weep for the summer that dries up the ocean.

The translator's choice, *le "silence" est parfumé*, to put *silence* in quotation marks and connect it to a fragrant scent is a very clever detail. I did not see that the word "lặng lẽ" (quietly or silently) in the poem can be connected to the musical silent note. It shows the translator's subtlety in conveying the deep meaning of the poem.

However, there are three translation errors:

Tiếng ve dội lãn tẩn nốt nhỏ is translated as *Le chant des cigales ondule légèrement* (The cicadas' sound vibrates gently): this translation omits the crucial element of "nốt nhỏ" (cue notes), losing the musical subtlety of the poem.

Tiếng ve ... khóc is translated as *Je pleure* (I cry): This is a rather serious error, completely changing the subject of the poem from the cicadas' cry to the poet's cry.

Khóc mùa hè mà khô cả đại dương is translated as *Je pleure l'été qui assèche l'océan* (I cry for the summer that dries up the ocean): This translation changes the subject performing the action from the cicadas' cries drying up the ocean into the summer's heat drying up the ocean, losing the profound symbolic meaning of the original poem.

12. Đạo sĩ soi hình bên suối

*Đạo sĩ soi hình bên suối
Quên đâu con mắt giữa đêm
Vội bước gập ghềnh khe núi
Voi mòn triền đá chân chim.*

A Taoist contemplates his image in the stream

A Taoist contemplates his image in the stream,
Losing sight of his inner vision.
He stumbles through rugged mountain clefts,
Seeking to wear down the rocky cliff with his frail bird-like steps.

Explanation

A Taoist contemplates his image in the stream, trying to see his true self. However, by losing sight of his inner vision, he doesn't see it. What he might see in the stream is only a perception of himself, but that is not his true self. He does not see the natural scene and he does not hear the call of nature. Therefore, he hurries onward, stumbling through rugged mountain clefts, with his frail bird-like steps.

This poem draws upon the Buddhist concept woven in *con mắt giữa đêm* (inner vision) in the second verse: The inner vision refers to one's true self; the ability to see beyond the surface of things. The rugged mountain clefts symbolize the arduous path of spiritual cultivation. The frail bird-like steps highlight the fragility and limitations of one's physical body.

In the book *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams), Thầy uses his spiritual eye to look at Lushan:

Lushan is majestic, floating, but mysterious. The heart of the mountain hides thousands of years of unspoken stories; the heart of the mountain harbors silent lives; bodies as thin as cranes and bamboo, souls as cold as winter ashes. The mountain is silent, allowing the wind to howl, the clouds to swirl, and waterfalls to cascade from the highest peaks.

Lushan resonates with a vast realm of poetry. The realm of poetry is filled with layers of miraculous metaphors. Ordinary travelers, whose boats dock at Poyang or Xunyang, only see it as a beautiful land covered in mist and fog; they only see it as a sky in the twilight, then the strange sun, then the twilight. How can they see and hear the melancholic feelings within? Whether melancholic or furious, Lushan has countless forms. The imperial hats of Taoist priests, the tattered robes of monks; here, the Taoist temples chant the Huang-t'ing Sūtra, there, the pagodas' morning bell sounds. These images and sounds, from century to century, have fallen into the long dream of human history; there are competitions of courage against time that take place in coldness and solitude. Day and night, torturing body and mind, standing alone, terrified, on a solitary bridge, crossing the abyss of life and death.

13. Ô hay dây đàn chột đứt

*Ô hay, dây đàn chột đứt
Bóng ma đêm như thật
Cắn đầu ngón tay giá băng
Điệp khúc lắng trầm trong mắt*

*Rồi phím đàn lơ lửng
Chùm âm thanh rời, ngón tay rát bỏng
Chột nghe nguyệt quế thoảng hương
Điệp khúc chậm dần theo dấu lặng*

Alas! The piano string snaps

Alas! The piano string snaps,
The night's phantom seems so real.
I bite my ice-cold fingertip,
A haunting melody echoes in my eyes.

Then the keys turn slack,
The notes fall apart, my fingertips burn.
A sudden and sweet laurel fragrance fills the room,
The melody fades on the final rest notes.

Explanation

The poem's beauty lies in its ability to capture the complex emotions following a moment of musical loss.

In this poem, the musician undergoes two extraordinary experiences:

(1) *Điệp khúc lắng trầm trong mắt*

A haunting melody echoes in my eyes.

It's extraordinary that the melody echoes in his eyes, rather than his ears;

(2) *Chợt nghe nguyệt quế thoảng hương*

literally means the musician hears, instead of smells, the fragrance of the laurel. I choose to translate this verse as:

A sudden and sweet laurel fragrance fills the room.

Sweetness is one of at least five basic tastes detected by the tongue's taste buds. Humans cannot directly smell sweetness, as our olfactory receptors are not designed to detect sugar molecules. However, certain scents can be associated with sweetness, such as the aroma of ripe fruits or baked goods. This association is learned through experience and can contribute to our perception of sweetness. In another word, it's olfactory hallucinations.

Given that the slack keys, fallen apart notes, and burning fingertips are only illusory perceptions experienced by the musician in this soundless world, the laurel fragrance could be a tangible scent that wafts through the air.

Fantasy and reality become indistinguishable.

14. Đêm sụp xuống

*Đêm sụp xuống
Bóng dồn một phương
Lạnh toát âm đàn xao động
Trái tim vỡ nhịp dị thường.*

*Ngoài biên cương
Cây cao chói đỏ
Chiến binh già cổ mộ
Nắng tắt chiến trường
Giọt máu quạnh hơi sương.*

As night falls

As night falls,
Shadows gather in one direction,
To play a chilling, restless melody,
Stirring an irregular rhythm in my heart.

Beyond the frontier,
Beneath towering, dazzling crimson trees,
An aged warrior sits by an ancient grave,
Watching the last rays of sunlight on the battlefield,
Where fog carries the scent of blood.

Explanation

The poem paints two distinct yet interconnected scenes, both imbued with a sense of unease and the passage of time.

The first scene sets a somber tone with the approaching night and the chilling, restless melody that seems to emanate from the deepening shadows. This evokes a

feeling of inner turmoil, mirroring the speaker's irregular rhythm of the heart. It's a scene of introspection and growing anxiety as darkness closes in.

The second scene shifts to a broader perspective, beyond the frontier. Here, we encounter an aged warrior by an ancient grave, likely contemplating past battles and losses as the sunlight bleeds from the battlefield. This scene is steeped in a sense of history and the lingering impact of conflict. The fog carrying the scent of blood adds a haunting, ghostly element, suggesting that the past is not entirely gone.

The connection between these two scenes lies in their shared sense of unease and the passage of time. The falling night in the first scene mirrors the fading sunlight in the second. Both scenes evoke a feeling of reflection, with the speaker's internal anxieties in the first scene mirroring the warrior's contemplation of past struggles in the second. The chilling melody and the lingering scent of blood also contribute to an overall atmosphere of melancholy.

15. Một ngày chơi vui đỉnh thác

*Một ngày chơi vui đỉnh thác
Nghe bồn chồn tiếng gọi hư không
Giai điệu nhỏ dần lên đôi mắt
Mặt hồ im ánh nước chập chờn
Mặt hồ im, tăng màu man mác
Ảnh tượng mờ, một chút sương trong
Quãng im lặng thời gian nặng hạt
Tôi nghe đời trong tấu khúc Thiên hoang*

A day adrift on top of a waterfall

A day adrift on top of a waterfall,
Listening to the void's beckoning call,
A subtle melody rises to my eyes.
The lake lies still, its surface flickering,
The lake lies still, a canvas of vague hues,
A shimmering image, veiled in mist.
In the downpours of rest notes,
I hear the voice of life in this wild symphony.

Explanation

We have seen that “quãng” in the first poem represents the time interval between two musical notes, therefore, “quãng im lặng” in this poem represents the time interval between two rest notes.

How can the poet hear these moments of silence when he is atop a noisy waterfall? It's even stranger when he hears this melody filling up his eyes, instead of his ears, *giai điệu nhỏ dần lên đôi mắt* (a subtle melody rises to my eyes).

Thầy explains in *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams):

Those who study Zen, learn from suffering, from illusion; they learn so that body and mind become like cold, lifeless ashes. To learn like that is to learn to torture oneself. The achievement of that learning is to let go, to transform into nothingness and become stillness. Letting go means not grasping, not being bound. It's also as carefree as a liberated and romantic poetic soul. A still mind is as calm as a still surface of water, reflecting the entire external scene. An empty mind, containing nothing, is as vast as the ocean, containing all the stars and galaxies. Those who study Zen torture their bodies to become thin, their minds to become cold, and within that is an extraordinary efficacy. Those who write poetry, whose lives are full of trials and tribulations, also find a magical bitterness and saltiness within. A lifetime of studying Zen is a lifetime of torturing body and mind, of torturing oneself in nothingness and stillness. That torture is, in fact, not torture. Similarly, a lifetime of writing poetry is a lifetime of suffering and turmoil, but it is not suffering and turmoil. That magic, not having reached the highest realm of poetry, how can one understand? ...

So, that place of dreamy torture seems like it should be terrifying, it makes even the land become a desert, with scorching heat and chilling winds. And yet it's completely different. It is the nothingness of nothingness and the stillness of stillness.

16. Phủ tay kinh nổi đảo điên

Phủ tay kinh nổi đảo điên

Tôi theo con kiến quanh triền đỉnh hoang.

Brushing my hands, shaking off the grip of a dreadful madness

Brushing my hands, shaking off the grip of a dreadful
madness,

I follow an ant's winding path around a deserted peak.

Explanation

Just like an ant that flees when it senses danger, so did Thầy, fearing the upheaval, abandon everything and went to cultivate the land in Vạn Giã (1975–1977).

Most Venerable Nguyễn Siêu writes about this period in his essay *Thượng tọa Tuệ Sỹ, Trí Siêu, những thiên tài lỗi lạc* (Most Venerables Tuệ Sỹ, Trí Siêu, outstanding geniuses), as follows:

From Nha Trang to Vạn Giã, a distance of about 60 kilometers, Thầy traveled on nighttime trains, immersing himself in quiet contemplation. He became less talkative than before. Sometimes, he would shut himself in his room for a whole week without eating or drinking. He would only consume sugar-lemon water or plain water. Occasionally, he would be seen walking outside. He had noticeably lost weight, but his face always bore a quiet, sacred sorrow that was evident in

his eyes. It was as if he carried a secret, a deep-seated sorrow that he couldn't share with anyone.

But following an ant round a peak will eventually return to the same place, Thầy returned to Saigon in 1977.

In 1978, he was arrested for illegal residence, but in reality, for his resistance to the government's decision to dissolve the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), and subsequently imprisoned in a re-education camp, a thinly veiled prison, until 1981.

His unwavering opposition to the regime's attempts to coerce the UBCV into joining the Fatherland Front ultimately led to his arrest again in 1984. In a sham trial held in September 1988, he was sentenced to death alongside Venerable Thích Trí Siêu, also known as Professor Lê Mạnh Thát.

Most Venerable Nguyễn Siêu provides a powerful indictment of the communist regime in Vietnam about this sentence in the abovementioned essay as follows:

Even faced with death, their unwavering faith in the impermanence of all things remained unshaken. The communist regime, however, failed to recognize the true nature of the Vietnamese people. The blood of the martyrs had nourished the land, and the ideals of selfless service would continue to inspire future generations.

The communist regime's obsession with power and control led them to commit atrocities, such as the execution of these two monks. By silencing its critics and destroying cultural heritage, the regime created a

society devoid of intellectual and spiritual growth. The death sentences of 1988 stand as a testament to the Communist regime's crimes against humanity and its disregard for the Buddhist faith.

Throughout the history of our nation and our religion, through periods of both prosperity and decline, it can be said that the era of Vietnam under the communist rule is the first time in thousands of years that Buddhist monks have faced death sentences. This death sentence reveals a harsh truth: under a socialist regime, Buddhism cannot exist, or if it does, it is merely for show. The Communists do not realize that from the very beginning, our ancestors have partaken of the fruit of liberation offered by Buddhism and have drunk from the pure stream of compassion that is Buddhism. Yet today, their descendants are uprooting the tree, digging out the roots, and draining the spring, causing great turmoil...

Vietnam is truly unfortunate, for the Communist Party of Vietnam has overturned all social order, morality, and rituals. They have destroyed the foundations of our rituals, our dignity, and our culture through oppression, terror, inhumanity, and the destruction of all books from the South. The Communist Party of Vietnam has stained the pages of Vietnamese history.

17. Hơi thở ngưng từ đáy biển sâu

*Hơi thở ngưng từ đáy biển sâu
Mênh mông sắc ảo dậy muôn màu
Một trời sao nhỏ xoay khung cửa
Khoảnh khắc Thiên hà ánh hỏa châu.*

My breath catches

My breath is held captive by the ocean's depths,
Where a kaleidoscope of light unfolds,
In the moment the starry sky pirouettes around the
window frame:
A galaxy of fireworks.

18. Tiếng xe đưa ngoài ngõ

*Tiếng xe đưa qua ngõ
Cành nguyệt quế rùng mình
Hương tan trên dấu lặng
Giai điệu tròn lung linh.*

The rumble of a passing car

Upon the rumble of a passing car in the alley,
The laurel branch trembles.
Its fragrance disperses on the rest note,
A sparkling, harmonious rondo.

Explanation

A rondo is a structure of music that uses a recurring theme, called a refrain. The refrain is interspersed with sections of music called episodes. If the refrain is referred to as *A*, and each episode is labeled *B*, *C*, and so forth, then a rondo traditionally follows either a 5-part pattern (*ABACA*) or a 7-part pattern (*ABACABA*).

The passage is a poetic exploration of music and symbolism. It suggests that the music is not just a series of notes, but a complete and meaningful entity. The image of the laurel branch shivering in response to the sound of a car is evocative and suggests a deep connection between nature, music, and human experiences.

The reference to the laurel wreath, associated with victory and underscoring darkness and destruction, serves as a counterpoint to the beauty and harmony of the music.

19. Bóng cỏ rơi giật mình sững sốt

*Bóng cỏ rơi, giật mình sững sốt
Mặt đất rung, Ma Quỷ rộ phương trời
Chút hơi thở mong manh trên dấu lặng
Êm huyền vi, giai điệu không lời*

Startled by the shadows of falling grass

Startled by the shadows of falling grass,
The earth shudders, demons rage across the sky,
My breath, a fragile wisp, fades on rest notes,
In this enchanted night, a silent symphony unfolds.

Explanation

The phrase “giai điệu không lời” (a silent symphony) in the last verse is often understood as instrumental music, without vocals, but here there are neither vocals nor instruments. It’s the sound of silence.

In Zen koans related to the sound of silence, the sound of one hand clapping on page 406 is one.

Here is another koan, a young monk asking Zen master Shoushan Xingnian (926–993) to play a stringless tune. The master was silent for a long time, then asked:

- Do you hear it?
- No, sir, replied the young monk.
- Why didn’t you ask it to play louder? scolded the master.

20. Theo chân kiến

*Theo chân kiến
luồn qua cụm cỏ
Bóng âm u
thế giới chập chùng
Quãng im lặng
nghe mùi đất thở*

Following the ants' trail

Following the ants' trail,
I crept through the grass,
Darkness shrouds the world,
Its shadows undulating.
In silent moments between rest notes,
The earth's breath fills the space.

Explanation

Just like in poem number 15, “quãng im lặng” represents the distance between two rest notes, making the poem a silent piece of music. Can you hear a silent piece of music? Yes, if you hear it with other senses, instead of your ears, such as your touch or your heart. Many talented musicians were born with hearing loss. Thầy, as explained in the excerpt from his book (pages 431–432), can hear the sound of silence even when he is atop a noisy waterfall because he hears with his mind, or precisely, no-mind.

Similarly, in the poem number 13, with his no-mind, he experiences the scent of the laurel, and in this poem, he hears the experiences of the earth breathing.

The following is an excerpt from *The Blue Cliff Record* ⁵⁷, demonstrates how silence can be a powerful means of communication:

As Subhuti was sitting in silent meditation in a cliffside cave, flowers were showered down.

- Flowers are showering down from the sky in praise; who is doing this? Subhuti asked.

- I am Indra, king of the gods.

- Why are you offering praise?

- I esteem your skill in expounding the transcendence of wisdom.

- I have never spoken a single word about wisdom; Why are you offering praise?

- You have not spoken and I have not heard. No speaking, no hearing, this is true wisdom, Indra said.

⁵⁷ *The Blue Cliff Record* is a collection of one hundred koans, with his additional verses, compiled by Zen master Xuedou Chongxian (980–1052). About sixty years after Xuedou's death, Yuanwu Keqin (1063–1135) gave a series of talks elucidating the original anecdotes and the verses of Xuedou's collection. The anecdotes, Xuedou's verses, and Yuanwu's introductions, remarks, and commentaries all together form *The Blue Cliff Record*.

The Blue Cliff Record gained great popularity, so much so that Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163), a disciple of Yuanwu, destroyed the printing blocks because he observed that enthusiasm for eloquence was hindering people from experiencing enlightenment on their own.

The text was reconstituted in 1302 by Zhang Mingyuan.

21. Nỗi nhớ đó khát khao

*Nỗi nhớ đó khát khao
luồn sợi tóc
Vòng tay ôm cuộn khói
bâng khuâng
Uống chưa cạn chén trà
sương móc
Trên đài cao
Em ngự mây tầng*

*Lên cao mãi đường mây
khép chặt
Để soi mòn ảo tượng
thiên chân.
Ồ, nguyệt quế!
trắng mờ đôi mắt
Ồ, sao Em?
sao ắn mãi cung đàn?
Giai điệu cổ
thoáng buồn
u uất
Xưa yêu Em
xao động trăng ngàn*

A wave of yearning

A wave of yearning
Weaves its way through strands of my hair.
Embracing a wisp of smoke,
Lost in wistful contemplation.
Though my cup of dew-kissed tea
Remains unfinished,

On a high dais,
You reign among the clouds.

As you ascend,
The clouds close the path behind you,
To erode the façade
Of innocence.
Oh, laurel, your whiteness blinds my eyes.
Oh, my love,
Why do you persist with that mournful melody?
The ancient melody,
Tinged with sorrow and despair,
In days gone by,
Your love stirred the forest moons.

Explanation

They have showered you with praise, elevating you to extraordinary heights. Yet, the illusions they weave may eventually unravel, leaving you exposed. I see the accolades they bestow upon you, but their dazzling brilliance blinds me to the underlying realities that may lie beneath.

This poem might be the voice Thây wrote for the veterans who, once lauded as heroes, end up living in poverty and neglect.

22. Ta sống lại trên nỗi buồn ám khói

*Ta sống lại trên nỗi buồn ám khói
Vẫn yêu người từng khoảnh khắc chiêm bao
Từ nguyên sơ đã một lời không nói
Như trùng dương ngưng tụ ánh hoa đào
Nghe khúc điệu rộn ràng đôi cánh mồi
Vì yêu người, ta vói bắt ngàn sao.*

Reborn from the ashes of sorrow

Reborn from the ashes of sorrow,
My love for you endures through each fleeting dream.
A love unspoken, from the very beginning,
Like a vast ocean, gathering peach blossoms' blush.
The vibrant symphony overwhelms my weary wings,
Yet for your love, I'll strive to catch the stars.

Explanation

Thầy expressed his hope of catching a star or the moon in at least two poems, as in this poem, *vì yêu người ta vói bắt ngàn sao* (for your love, I'll strive to catch the stars), and in the Dedication he wrote for the book *Ngục trung mị ngữ* (Somniloquies in prison):

*Anh ôm giấc mộng đi hoang
Biết đâu mà kiếm trăng ngàn cho em*

Embracing a dream of wandering,
How can I capture the silvery moon for you?

23. Giăng mộ cổ mưa chiều hoen ngấn lệ

*Giăng mộ cổ mưa chiều hoen ngấn lệ
Bóng điêu tàn huyền sử đứng trơ vơ
Sương thấm lạnh làn vai hờn nguyệt quế
Ôm tượng đài yêu suốt cõi hoang sơ.*

Soft afternoon rain weeps over ancient graves

Soft afternoon rain weeps over ancient graves,
Where ruined remnants of legend stand forlorn.
As cold mist seeps into my shoulders, I taste the bitterness
of the laurels;
Embracing these monuments, I love this untamed
universe.

Volume 7

Thiên lý độc hành | A thousand-mile solitary journey

These 13 poems, named *Thiên lý độc hành* (A thousand-mile solitary journey, chuyến đi vạn dặm trong đơn độc) are written about a Zen master's solitary journey of ten thousand miles, but this journey has no departing, only returning. Why?

Time of composition: 2011–2012

1. Ta về một cõi tâm không

*Ta về một cõi tâm không
Vẫn nghe quá khứ ngập trong nắng tàn
Còn yêu một thuở đi hoang
Thu trong đáy mắt sao ngàn nửa khuya*

I return to the realm of no-mind

I return to the realm of no-mind,
But memories of the past overflow in the twilight.
I still cherish the time I wandered,
When autumn settled deep within my eyes, and forest
stars shone at midnight.

Explanation

What realm is the realm of no-mind? If it's called no-mind, why does the heart still hold onto memories, as shown in the verse *Vẫn nghe quá khứ ngập trong nắng tàn* (But memories of the past overflow in the twilight)?

Furthermore, the 13 poems of *A thousand-mile solitary journey* describe a solitary traveler's journey of ten thousand miles, yet they begin with "Ta về" (I return), instead of "I depart". Why does this journey have no departing? How can one start a journey without departing?

Perhaps we can find the answers in the paintings of *Thập mục ngưu đồ* (Ten ox-herding pictures) ⁵⁸ which portray

⁵⁸ The Ten Ox-Herding pictures describe the Zen training path to enlightenment using folk images, accompanied by poems and commentaries. They depict a child whose quest leads him to find,

the journey of a child searching for his ox. These ten steps of ox herding, explained by Thầy in *Thiền qua tranh chăn trâu* (Zen in the ox-herding pictures), represent three stages in Zen practice: ordering mind to find mind (in the first six pictures), reaching the no-mind (pictures No. 7 and 8), and attaining the ordinary mind (pictures No. 9 and 10). The last stage, *Entering the marketplace, with bliss-bestowing hands*, involves reaching a state of ultimate freedom.

In the beginning of this explanation, I pose four questions. The following answers would help you understand the Zen wisdom Thầy has woven into this volume.

(1) What is the realm of no-mind?

The realm of no-mind isn't a physical place but a state of consciousness. It's a state of being free from the constraints of conceptual thinking, where one transcends the duality of

train, and transform his mind, a process that is represented by subduing the ox. Even though these images are presented in a sequence, self-development and Zen practice do not go in a straight line. It is more like a spiral, and one goes back to different previous stages but with more understanding. You can see these pictures adorning the walls of Zen temples in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam.

- 1) Searching for the ox
- 2) Seeing the footprints of the ox
- 3) Seeing the ox
- 4) Catching the ox
- 5) Herding the ox
- 6) Riding the ox home
- 7) The ox transcended
- 8) Both the ox and the child transcended
- 9) Returning to the origin, back to the source
- 10) Entering the marketplace, with bliss-bestowing hands

self and other, subject and object. It's a state of pure awareness, where the mind is still and clear, like a mirror reflecting reality without distortion.

(2) Why does the heart hold onto memories in the realm of no-mind?

This is where the paradox lies. While no-mind implies a state of emptiness and non-attachment, it doesn't mean the complete eradication of memories. Memories exist, but they don't have the same power to bind or afflict the individual. In the realm of no-mind, one can observe memories without judgment or attachment, like clouds passing across the sky. The verse *Vãn nghe quá khứ ngập trong nắng tàn* (But memories of the past overflow in the twilight) acknowledges the presence of memories, but they are bathed in the soft light of acceptance, not the harsh glare of clinging.

(3) Why does the journey have no departing?

The journey in *A thousand-mile solitary journey* is not a physical journey but a spiritual one. It's a journey to return to one's true nature, to the realm of no-mind. This "return" signifies a homecoming, a rediscovery of something that was always there but obscured by the illusions of the ego. In this sense, there is no departing because one is not truly leaving anything behind; rather, one is shedding layers of delusion to reveal the true self.

(4) How can one start a journey without departing?

This is another paradox that points to the non-dualistic nature of reality. In the realm of no-mind, there is no

separation between self and other, beginning and end, departing and arriving. The journey is not a linear progression from one point to another but a circular movement, a continuous return to the present moment. The starting point is therefore also the destination.

The poems in this volume invite us to contemplate these paradoxes and challenge our conventional understanding of reality. They offer a glimpse into the profound wisdom of Zen Buddhism, where the journey is not about escaping the world but about awakening to its true nature.

In Zen Buddhism, complete enlightenment is often described as a state of freedom where existence and non-existence themselves become indistinguishable – arrival without arriving and departure without departing, as in the poem *Nghìn năm trước lên núi* (A thousand years ago I climbed that mountain), page 350.

A monk asked Zen Master Dongshan Liangjie (807–869):

- What is a Buddha?
- Three pounds of thorns, the Master replied.

The monk was confused. The Master explained:

- Language is only a tool to express things, don't cling to the words and cause confusion and delusion. For example, if you throw a stone at a dog, the dog will chase the stone; but if you throw a stone at a lion, the lion will chase the person who threw it. When engaging in Zen dialogue, you should be like a lion, not like a dog.

Three pounds of thorns is a stone. Are **you** a dog or a lion?

2. Ta đi dẫm nắng bên đèo

*Ta đi dẫm nắng bên đèo
Nghe đau hồn cỏ rủ theo bóng chiều
Nguyên sơ là dáng yêu kiều
Bông đầu đảo lộn tịch liêu bên bờ
Còn đây góc núi trơ vơ
Nghìn năm ta mãi đứng chờ đỉnh cao.*

Walking along a sunlit mountain pass

Walking along a sunlit mountain pass,
I feel the pain of the wilting grass, as twilight falls.
Once pristine, the graceful mountain now lies desolate,
Its beauty marred.
Standing at a solitary corner of the mountain, I'll wait
forever —
For the peak to arrive.

Explanation

This solitary journey of a thousand miles grows stranger still, for he is prepared to wait for a thousand years for the peak to come to him, rather than going to it. This attitude echoes the no-mind perspective expressed in Fudaishi's poem (page 323).

In my translation, I add the em dash (—) to create a pause, as he is prepared to wait forever for the mountain peak to arrive, emphasizing the timelessness of his devotion.

3. Bên đèo khuất miếu cô hồn

Bên đèo khuất miếu cô hồn

Lung trời ảo ảnh chập chờn hoa đăng ⁵⁹

Cây già bóng tối bò lan

Tôi ôm cỏ dại mơ màng chiêm bao.

Beneath the pass, a hidden ghost shrine lurks

Beneath the pass, a hidden ghost shrine lurks,
Above the sky, a phantom of flower lanterns shimmers.
At the foot of the ancient trees, their shadows creep and
crawl,
While I embrace the wild grass, lost in a dreamy reverie.

⁵⁹ Hoa đăng (flower lanterns) are small, floating lanterns made from multi-colored paper and bamboo. Often in a lotus shape, they are traditionally released on waterways during festivals in Vietnam. These beautiful and symbolic lanterns represent hope, peace, and good luck.

4. Đã mấy nghìn năm đợi mỗi mòn

*Đã mấy nghìn năm đợi mỗi mòn
Bóng người cô độc dẫm hoàng hôn
Bởi ta hòn đá phơi màu nắng
Ôm trọn bờ lau kín nỗi buồn.*

Waiting in vain through countless ages

Waiting in vain through countless ages,
For a solitary silhouette emerging from the twilight,
A soul of stone, weathered and worn, yet enduring still,
Embraces the reeds, filled with sorrow.

Explanation

Let's review the monk's journey through the first four poems: Initially, he returns to his no-mind. Then, he walks by the pass, waiting for the peak to arrive. At the pass, he encounters a hidden ghost shrine, where he dreams of shimmering lanterns in the sky and crawling shadows on the ground. Here, a reed-embraced stone tells him that it has been waiting for him for countless ages.

It is common for reeds to embrace stones. But here, the stone embraces the reeds. Such paradoxical situations abound in Zen stories.

Vimalakīrti (refer to page 213), the man renowned for his thunderous silence, once said he was ill because all beings were ill.

According to the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, when Manjusri, obeying the Buddha, visited the ill Vimalakīrti, he asked:

- The World-Honored One countless times has made solicitous inquiries concerning you. Layman, what is the cause of this illness? Has it been with you long? And how can it be cured?

- This illness of mine is born of ignorance and feelings of attachment. Because all living beings are sick, therefore I am sick. If all living beings are relieved of sickness, then my illness will be mended. Why? Because the bodhisattva, for the sake of living beings, enters the realm of birth and death, and because he is in the realm of birth and death, he suffers illness. If living beings can gain release from illness, then the bodhisattva will no longer be ill.

It's hard to accept Vimalakīrti's argument that he was ill because all beings were ill, but it's harder to step into his realm.

Su Dongpo stepped into Vimalakīrti's realm with this poem dedicated to his third wife, Wang Zhaoyun. She was a woman of both beauty and talent who accompanied him for 23 years, never leaving his side, even during times of slander, misfortune, and exile.

白髮蒼顏
正是維摩境界
空方丈散花何礙
朱唇著點
更髻還生彩

*Bạch phát thương nhan
Chính thị Duy Ma cảnh giới
Không phương trượng tán hoa hà ngại*

Chu thân trợ điểm
Cánh ké hoàn sinh thái

White hair and a wrinkled face
Precisely this is the realm of Vimalakīrti.
In the empty room, flowers scatter without hindrance.
Lips painted red,
The hairdo becomes even more vibrant.

Su Dongpo compares her aging appearance to the realm of Vimalakīrti, suggesting that true beauty comes from within and is not diminished by physical aging. The imagery of flowers scattering in an empty room suggests that beauty can arise from emptiness.

In *Tô Đông Pha: Những phương trời viễn mộng* (Su Dongpo: Celestial realms of distant dreams), Thầy explains this poem as follows:

Grey hair and wrinkled skin are the realm of Vimalakīrti. It is the realm of the most profound dialogue, a realm of vast, silent, and wordless stillness of the layman Vimalakīrti. It is also the realm of quiet yet magnificent poetry. Vimalakīrti's house is a square space of one zhang (TN: 3.2 meters or 3.5 yards) each side; it is an empty room, yet it contains three thousand lion thrones; guests from three thousand worlds gather to listen to Vimalakīrti's unspoken word.

And there, a celestial maiden scattered heavenly flowers, applauding the unspoken words. Was this celestial maiden Zhaoyun? And was the realm of the unspoken words the realm of his poetry?

5. Từ thuở hồng hoang ta ở đâu

*Từ thuở hồng hoang ta ở đâu
Quanh ta cây lá đã thay màu
Chợt nghe xao xuyến từng hơi thở
Thấp thoáng hồn ai trong khóm lau.*

Where was I in those primal times

Where was I in those primal times?
Around me, trees and leaves transformed colors,
I suddenly feel my breath quicken,
Catching a glimpse of a soul within the reed bush.

Explanation

I sense a deep love for his country in Thầy's words here:

Quanh ta cây lá đã thay màu (Around me, trees and leaves transformed colors) is a metaphor comparing the changing of seasons to the changing of times.

Chợt nghe xao xuyến từng hơi thở (I suddenly feel my breath quicken) aims to convey the emotional intensity of coming unexpected events.

Thấp thoáng hồn ai trong khóm lau (Catching a glimpse of a soul within the reed bush) suggests a spark of hope even in challenging times. Is this his hope for a miracle to unfold in his country?

6. Trên đỉnh đèo cao bát ngát trông

*Trên đỉnh đèo cao bát ngát trông
Rừng, mây, xanh, ngát tạnh, vô cùng,
Từ ta trải áo đường mưa bụi
Trông thấy tiền thân trên bến không*

From this lofty peak, the world unfolds below

From this lofty peak, the world unfolds below,
Emerald forests, towering clouds, a clear blue sky
reaching to the horizon.
Since I began my life as a wandering monk,
I have sought glimpses of my previous lives on the
enlightenment wharf.

Explanation

In this poem, Thầy uses the word “ngát tạnh” that very few people know. This word was used by Nguyễn Du in *The Tale of Kiều* to describe the moonlit night when Kiều was taken away by Mã Giám Sinh to Lâm Tri, and she remembered the night she had sworn eternal love to Kim Trọng under the moon:

*Dặm khuya ngát tạnh mù khơi
Thấy trăng mà thẹn những lời non sông*

A road that stretched far off in hushed, still night:
She saw the moon, felt shame at her love vows.
(translated by Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông)

Scholar Đào Duy Anh, in *Tự điển Truyện Kiều* (Dictionary of the Tale of Kiều), explains that *ngất tạnh* means a clear, vast sky, suggesting a clear and bright night.

The term “mưa bụi” means drizzle or fine rain, with a small size of raindrops, but in the verses

*Từ ta trải áo đường mưa bụi
Tưởng thấy tiền thân trên bến không,*

drizzle or fine rain could not be used as a cause-and-effect relationship to explain the second line, *tưởng thấy tiền thân trên bến không* (I have sought glimpses of my previous lives on the enlightenment wharf). The path to enlightenment, as Wumen Huikai poignantly describes in *Wumen Guan*, is not a leisurely stroll. It’s akin to “swallowing a red-hot iron ball, which you cannot spit out even if you try”. This evocative image depicts the life of a wandering monk, facing challenges and uncertainties.

*Từ ta trải áo đường mưa bụi
Tưởng thấy tiền thân trên bến không*

Since I began my life as a wandering monk,
I have sought glimpses of my previous lives on the
enlightenment wharf.

7. Khi về ngã nón chào nhau

*Khi về ngã nón chào nhau
Bên đèo còn hẹn rừng lau đợi chờ
Trăm luân từ buổi ban sơ
Thân sau ta vẫn bơ vơ bụi đường*

Hat off when we say goodbye

Hat off when we say goodbye,
Let's make our next rendezvous at the reed forest.
Though I've wandered through countless lives in sorrow,
Still I yearn, in the next life, to wander lost and alone.

Explanation

Most Venerable Hạnh Viên shared that on a late autumn day in 2011, probably around the same time Thầy Tuệ Sỹ wrote this poem, he received this email message from Thầy:

I wander aimlessly following the drifting clouds towards an uncertain realm. Riverbanks, mountain caves, everywhere is a place of burial. If fate still binds us together, we'll meet again, in this life or the next.

And he signed his name as Thị Ngạn Am vô trụ xứ (A person without a fixed abode at Thị Ngạn hermitage). Refer to page 298, for an explanation of the name “Thị Ngạn Am”.

Could this be the awaited rendezvous at the reed forest that Thầy was referring to in this poem?

8. Bóng tối sập mưa rừng tuôn thác đổ

*Bóng tối sập, mưa rừng tuôn thác đổ
Đường chênh vênh vách đá dọa nghiêng trời
Ta làm lũ bóng ma tròn thế kỷ
Rủ nhau đi cùng tận cõi luân hồi*

*Khấp phớ thị ngày xưa ta ruổi ngựa
Ngang qua đây ma quỷ khóc thành bầy
Lên hay xuống mắt mù theo nước lũ
Dẫm bàn chân lên cát sỏi cùng trôi*

*Rồi ngã xuống nghe suối tràn ngập máu
Thân là thân cỏ lá gập ghềnh xuôi
Chờ mưa tạnh ta trái trăng làm chiếu
Nghìn năm sau hoa trắng trở trên đời.*

Darkness falls, and a cascade of rain lashes the forest

Darkness falls, and a cascade of rain lashes the forest,
The cliff's precarious path, threatening to tilt the sky.
Trudging alongside the ghosts of centuries past,
Together we journey toward the end of reincarnation's realm.

Once, on horseback, I rode through this city,
Amidst the cries of wandering ghosts,
Blinded, tossed and turned,
Treading on shifting sands, swept away by the torrent.
Then they fell, their blood inundating the stream.
Like broken leaves, they were carried away.

Waiting for the rain to subside, I spread the moonlight for
my sleeping mat.

A thousand years later, when I wake, white flowers will
be blooming on this hill.

Explanation

Dear Thầy, we too yearn to witness this: The wailing
ghosts' bodies are swept away by the flood.

In my translation, I've combined the first two lines of the
third stanza with the second stanza, allowing the story of
Thầy witnessing the wailing ghosts to conclude with their
bodies being tossed and turned in the flood.

The remaining two verses form the final stanza to express
Thầy's desire for peace in the world. These verses have
been widely quoted and admired by our critics, seen as
reflecting Thầy's divine nature:

*Chờ mưa tạnh ta trải trăng làm chiếu
Nghìn năm sau hoa trắng trở trên đồi*

Waiting for the rain to subside, I spread the moonlight for
my sleeping mat

A thousand years later, when I wake, white flowers will
bloom on this hill

But for this wish to become reality, there is another wish:
that the ghosts' bodies will be swept away by the flood.
Why do our critics ignore this?

In my translation, I add “when I wake”, as I believe Thầy
wants to see white flowers blooming on the hill, too.

9. Gởi lại tình yêu ngọn cỏ rừng

*Gởi lại tình yêu ngọn cỏ rừng
Tôi về phố thị bởi tình chung
Trao đời hương nhụy phơi hồn đá
Thăm thăm mù khơi sương mấy tầng*

A blade of forest grass

Leaving behind a blade of forest grass, a token of my love.

I return to my city, to fulfill my duty.

I bare my heart, offering my essence to the world,

Facing the unknown depths, veiled in layers of mist.

Explanation

Although bound by a deep connection to the mountains and rivers, he must return to the city, leaving behind a blade of forest grass as a token of his love. It is a sacrifice made for a higher purpose.

Returning to the city, he vows to dedicate his life to making a difference in the world. He knows this journey will be arduous, as he ventures into layers of mist.

Only by understanding the depth of his poetry can one truly appreciate his compassion.

10. Một thời thân đá cuội

*Một thời thân đá cuội
Nắng chảy dọc theo suối
Cọng lau già trầm ngâm
Hỏi người bao nhiêu tuổi*

Once I was a pebble

Once I was as a pebble,
Basked in the sunlight along streams.
An old reed pensively asked,
“How old are you?”

Explanation

“Once I was a pebble” is often used to convey a sense of humility, but in this poem, Thầy might intend it to represent one of his previous lives, although it seems impossible. The old reed, upon seeing this, asked in surprise: “How old are you?”

In *Thơ Tuệ Sỹ – Tiếng gọi của những đêm dài heo hút* (Tuệ Sỹ’s poetry – the call of long and desolate nights), Most Venerable Phước An supports Thầy’s position:

Some people argue that Tuệ Sỹ should have spent his time on his professional pursuits, such as writing literature, poetry, or translations, instead of wasting over twenty years on endeavors that yielded no personal benefit. I believe this argument is entirely incorrect. In fact, those who make such claims are merely trying to protect their own weaknesses.

11. Bước đi nghe cỏ động

*Bước đi nghe cỏ động
Đi mãi thành tâm không
Hun hút rừng như mộng
Tồn sinh rụng cánh hồng.*

With the first steps, you hear the grass rustle

With the first steps, you hear the grass rustle,
But if you keep walking on, the rustling fades unheard.
Deep in the forest, a dreamscape unfolds,
To survive its depths, you must shed your eagle's wings.

Explanation

The word “cánh hồng” here does not mean a rose petal. It means eagle's wings, as in *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều):

*Cánh hồng bay bổng tuyệt vời
Đã mòn con mắt phương trời dăm dăm*

After the eagle vanished into space,
She kept her eyes fast set on heaven's edge.
(Translated by Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông)

Cánh hồng (eagle's wings) in these verses in *The Tale of Kiều* refers to Từ Hải, a nonconformist who chafes against societal norms and the oppressive rule of the authorities.

The poem's mention of stirring grass reminds me of the following story about a flapping flag.

The Sixth Patriarch Huineng (638–713), after leaving the Hongren (refer to pages 341–345 for more details about his time studying under Hongren), lived a secluded life with hunters in the mountains. One day he thought that it was time for him to go out in the world. He was now thirty-nine years old. He came to Fahsing temple in Guangzhou and happened to hear some monks arguing about the flapping flag; one of them said, “The flag is flapping”. Against this, it was remarked by another monk that “The flag is an inanimate object; therefore, it is the wind that is moving”. The discussion grew quite animated when Huineng interrupted with the remark, “It is neither wind nor flag but your own mind that flaps”. This at once put a stop to the heated argument. Abbot Yintsung, surprised by the encounter, invited him in and discovered that he was the Sixth Patriarch who had been in hiding for 15 years.

This was the beginning of Huineng’s career as a Zen master. His teachings were direct and profound, conclusive and authoritative ⁶⁰, attracting thousands of devoted followers. Unlike many religious leaders, he didn’t actively seek converts. His influence was centered on his home province in the south, with the Paolin monastery at Caoxi serving as his headquarters.

⁶⁰ One example of his teachings: When Nanyue Huairang visited Huineng, he was asked, “Where do you come from?”, followed by “But what is it that shows up here?”. Huairang took eight years to answer satisfactorily.

The famous story of Huairang taking eight years to answer these questions illustrates the depth and complexity of this seemingly simple inquiry. It’s not about providing a factual answer but demonstrating a deep understanding of Zen principles.

12. Thân tiếp theo thân ngày tiếp ngày

*Thân tiếp theo thân ngày tiếp ngày
Mù trông dư ảnh lá rừng bay
Đôi theo lối cũ bên triền đá
Sao vẫn còn in dấu lạc loài*

Through countless lives, endless days

Through countless lives, endless days,
Yearning for the afterimage of leaves dancing in the forest
wind.

Along the worn path by the rocky slope,
Why do the lost imprints of my past journeys still remain?

Explanation

There's only one more poem left in the collection of *A thousand-mile solitary journey*, yet why does the traveler feel lost? Why do the lost imprints of his past journeys still remain along the old path? The old path is where the traveler traversed in his previous life, isn't it? Could it be that *A thousand-mile solitary journey* is just wandering in a maze, with no way out? One is able to get out of it only if one knows how to transcend beyond the physical realm.

What is transcending beyond the physical realm? One evening, Zen master Mazu Daoyi and his three disciples, Xitang Zhizang, Baizhang Huaihai, and Nanquan Puyuan, all great Zen Masters, were enjoying the moonlight.

- What should we do now? Mazu asked.

- This is the time for offerings, Zhizang replied.

- This is the time to cultivate, Huaihai answered.

Nanquan waved his sleeve and left.

- The teachings go to Zhizang, meditation goes to Huaihai, only Nanquan transcends all things, Mazu said.

“What should we do now?” is not a koan, however, even a straightforward question can be an opportunity for Zen practice. Recall that Xiangyan Zhixian was speechless for a moment, then broke out laughing when he heard the sound of a stone striking a bamboo stalk, page 203, Baizhang Huaihai realized the true dharma in the midst of pain on hearing the question “何曾飛去?”, page 324, and Shuiliao could not stop laughing when being kicked in the chest by Mazu Daoyi, page 383.

Below is another story about transcending beyond the physical realm.

On another day, Nanquan and the monks were working outside. Zhaozhou stayed behind in the temple to watch the fire. Zhaozhou suddenly shouted, “Fire! Fire!” Everyone rushed back and ran into the meditation hall. Seeing this, Zhaozhou slammed the door shut and said:

- Say it correctly, I’ll open the door.

No one knew what to say. Nanquan threw the key through the window into the room for Zhaozhou. Zhaozhou then opened the door.

13. Khi về anh nhớ cài quai nón

*Khi về anh nhớ cài quai nón
Mưa lạnh đèo cao không cỡi người.*

Fasten your hat strap when you return

Fasten your hat strap when you return,
For cold rains on high passes are harsh for humans.

Explanation

The collection of *A thousand-mile solitary journey* begins with the words “I return” (I return to the realm of no-mind) and ends with “you return” (Fasten your hat strap when you return). A peculiar journey as there is only returning, no departing! Why is there only returning and no departing? Because this collection of poems describes a journey to find enlightenment.

In the Śūraṅgama Sūtra (kinh Lăng Nghiêm in Vietnamese), Ananda asked the Buddha,

- What is the root of suffering?
- It is your six senses, the Buddha replied.
- What is the root of enlightenment? Ananda asked again.
- It is also your six senses, the Buddha replied.

These six senses are the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. It is precisely from these six senses that both suffering and enlightenment arise. As these six senses

reside within our body – our home – this journey is about returning home, not departing.

On November 24, 2023, Thầy passed away. In his will, besides his wish for a simple funeral, the cremation of his body, and the scattering of his ashes in the Pacific Ocean, he also left behind these eight words:

Hư không hữu tận, Ngã nguyện vô cùng.

The void has its limits, (but) my vows are limitless.

This is an excerpt from the Ten Directions Prayer:

*Hư không hữu tận
Ngã nguyện vô cùng
Tình dữ vô tình
Đồng viên chủng trí*

*The void has its limits,
My vows are limitless
I pray for all sentient and insentient beings,
That they may all attain enlightenment.*

In these eight words, Thầy did not explicitly state his vows. Perhaps this is his secret second will.

In Śrīmālādevī Sūtra, Mrs. Śrīmālā made three great vows:

- (1) To help all sentient beings attain everlasting peace.
- (2) To tirelessly teach the dharma to all sentient beings.
- (3) To sacrifice her life to protect the true dharma.

Just like Mrs. Śrīmālā's second vow, Thầy tirelessly taught the dharma and translated scriptures.

And like Mrs. Śrīmālā's third vow, Thầy accepted execution, resolutely protecting the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, and refusing its merger with the so-called Vietnam Buddhist Sangha ⁶¹.

Compared to Mrs. Śrīmālā's three great vows, Thầy was unable to fulfill her first vow in this lifetime, as Vietnamese people continue to suffer under the inhumane communist regime. Often, what one cannot accomplish in their lifetime, they vow to accomplish in the next. Therefore, I believe these are Thầy's three great vows – his secret second will.

⁶¹ Writer Trần Trung Đạo offers the following description of this Sangha in *Kỷ yếu tri ân Hòa thượng Thích Tuệ Sỹ* (Commemorative Volume Honoring the Most Venerable Thích Tuệ Sỹ):

The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) has the motto *Dharma, Nation, and Socialism*. With this dependent status, VBS is entirely subordinate to the Communist party. To put it simply, if the Communist party exists, the VBS exists; if the Communist party falls, the VBS falls.

History has shown that in any era and any place, when Buddhist monks and nuns, the leaders of Buddhism, compromise with the ruling class, become entangled in the pursuit of fame, fortune, and power, and exploit the suffering and misfortune of people, that Buddhist church no longer represents the compassionate teachings of the Buddha. Instead, it has been corrupted into a tool of the ruling regime.

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