

The Pagoda in Conception

By Nguyễn Văn Sâm

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Bửu “Ốc tiêu”⁽¹⁾ was kicking a shuttlecock, which Đạt had just given him, while he was walking. The thing was so suited for his feet. Except three pieces of fish scale, the round pieces of well-cut leather gave the shuttlecock a soft touch to kick at; it never bounced to an unexpected direction. Having given it a try Bửu felt it quite easy to control the toy, and he felt as if he could manage a thousand continual kicks at a go. Four new and beautiful cock feathers were collected somewhere by Đạt, with all their down, without a tiny scratch. After some fifty kicks, and having moved a distance equal to that of a breath in the run-and-catch game, by a kick, Bửu threw the shuttlecock onto his shoulder which in turn flung it grazing Đạt’s face, and he solemnly announced:

“I very much like this shuttlecock. From now on, Đạt, Oanh and Nhân are allowed to copy my math, but you all should make it a little different from mine so he wouldn’t be able to recognize it. Anytime we have math for home work, you should come to school early, I’ll let you have my notebook and show you the trick to copy my task...”

Those boys applauded him as if he had been a hero coming back from battlefield after a hard fighting against invaders. Bửu “Ốc tiêu” continued to play with the shuttlecock until he was in front of his house. He stopped playing to catch the shuttlecock in his hand and put it into his pocket, rewarding himself with a smile.

Đạt, who kept following Bửu all the way, told him quietly:

“Every month I’ll give you twenty đồng so you can eat *hủ tầu*⁽²⁾ for breakfast in the morning, but from now on not anyone except the three of us should be allowed to copy your task. If every pupil could do the assignments well then who’ll be the bad? There must be someone to be the worst at the bottom of our class list. We’ve occupied that position so often, there should be someone now to take our place.”

Bửu thought of Phan whose father had entreated him last month to explain the lessons to his son. Living in poverty Phan cut class so often and as a consequence, he found himself loose at basic knowledge. If he would fail to get to the higher class this year the possibility that he flunk out of school was quite clear. “If you help my son to tide over this difficult stage it would be like you have built many pagodas.” The father aspired to insist it with tears welling up in his eyes.

Đạt emphasize: “If you help him you won’t have twenty đồng every month; you won’t be allowed to go play with us; when we have something to eat, we would give you just a little.”

Bừu was standing weighing the conditions for some moments and he nodded his head. *If I failed to help this one I would support the other, nothing would matter at all. My family is in need, and I need money.* Parting company with Đạt, he walked into his house while his mouth was whistling joyfully, one of his hands was fiddling with the shuttlecock, and the other feeling the sheaf of money in his pocket.

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I have an uncle, uncle Ba - my dad’s elder brother. He was a Buddhist monk living in his hermitage within a large coconut garden of the family. Everyday I was woken by the sound of the wooden bell when the monk uncle was reciting his sutras in the break of day. My mother said the uncle used to be a teacher, one day he suddenly got rid of his teaching career and resigned himself to being a monk. “He must have experienced some heartfelt emotion,” said my mother. She also said that his intoning Buddhist sutras in the morning at least woke many people around on time to go for work, let alone his patience which was a valuable lesson for everybody to follow. At twilight in late afternoon, he started to practice his evening prayers, attentively, day after day, not a bit of weariness.

My monk uncle Ba’s hermitage was a place where I often visited when my peers weren’t prowling about so that I could join them to bum around in the fields or take a bath in the river, swipe some sticks of sugarcane, pick some coconuts, or to scoop out water from a pond to catch fish. Every time I turned up, my uncle the monk gave me some fruit, such as oranges, bananas, or papayas, all were ripe with spots on them for having been offered for a long time on the altar. Sometimes I arrived while he was inciting a sutra I simply sat down on a margin of the mat enthusiastically listening to the mysterious sounds that could lull one to sleep, and patiently waiting to be tenderly stroked on my head by the monk uncle, and he would talk to me about something, and give me a good deal of cookies and fruit.

Any time was the same; while awaiting him, I was running my eyes over the quadriptych on the wall, looking at the image of the Buddha sitting deep in meditation on it or those blue-faced and yellow-fanged demons with knobs on their heads who used their tridents to thrust someone, or they pulled someone’s tongue out and cut it. When having the time my monk uncle often spelled out to me those things depicted on the quadriptych and many a time he emphasized that it was the degenerate age of Dharma, devils and Satan were ubiquitous; the Buddha had to come to redeem men from misery but he couldn’t make it as big as he had done in primary era.

I wondered why I never saw any demon or Satan in the streets. The monk uncle smiled rubbing my head and asked: “Have you ever seen a thief or a goon, son? Such a man steals what people had to acquire by their hard work, such a man gets paid by this one to wound or kill the other...”

Those men look normally like all of us, son. But they are really the appearance of devils or demons. A painter usually draws a demon with fangs just to make it distinguishable and recognizable. In fact, those demons do not look different from normal human beings, son. That helps the demons live among people to harm them.”

“How about the Buddha, my monk uncle? The Buddha has halos above and around his head. Does the Buddha just sit to meditate, my monk uncle?”

“That was the Buddha in the very old days. In this Dharma degenerating age, the Buddha comes to the earthly world and is present everywhere. There are always the Buddha and Bodhisattvas around us to help us fight against demons, only that we may not have enough good faith to accept that is a Bodhisattva.”

“You made it rather abstruse, I can’t get it,” I said.

“Well, the Buddha does not come to this world with a human body,” explained the uncle. “He embodies in thousands and thousands of visible and invisible beings around and next to us. The Buddha creates favorable conditions for individual to help him become a Bodhisattva in a short time. Anyone that has many times become a Bodhisattva or has become a Bodhisattva for a long time, when departs this life his soul shall be free from suffering. But demons are also present beside him. These devil spirits excite human beings to do bad things, such as stealing, telling lies, committing adultery, deceiving, oppressing and persecuting the others and rip the lonely and helpless off their lands and houses... Those who follow them will become devils for a period of time. One, who has become devil for many times when meeting his end, will be banished to the hell and be tortured forever and will never be allowed to reincarnate.”

All at once, I buried my face in my hands crying loudly: “I’ll be banished to the hell! Help me, uncle. I’ve stolen three mangoes my grandma had put in the rice vase to force them ripening and I shifted the blame for it on my younger brother. So did I previously with a cluster of banana. I also stole money from my younger sister’s piggy bank, a little each time. I stole the neighbor’s sugar cane and I bullied Tùng in the upper hamlet since he is smaller than I am.”

My monk uncle explained softly:

“While doing those wrong things you may have become a devil then. If you are self-conscious about your wrong doing, you are repentant and try to refrain from doing so and you try to do the right thing instead, devils won’t be able to seduce you into being their slave any more. After a long time they will be at the end of their rope and they will go find other people who are easier to be enticed. When doing the right thing you may become a bodhisattva at that time. Bodhisattva or demon is a short timed state in our mind; it’s not a permanent state. Being a bodhisattva, you’ll feel at ease, your face will be radiant as if you were sending out halos. When being a demon you’ll feel embarrassed and your heart very hot as if it were burned and a pained

expression crosses your face. It's so when your heart is being burned by the fire of lust. Those knobs will grow into your mind, into the inside or your being."

I reasoned with him:

"So a human is both a bodhisattva and a demon at the same time?"

"That's right," answered my monk uncle. "When you are acting for somebody's sake you're a bodhisattva. When you're acting to harm somebody for your own sake, you're a demon then. That's to make it simple. Besides mental factor intention, your conduct should be taken into account. When your mental factor intention is of a bodhisattva but your conduct is of a demon, you're merely a demon. Well, you seem to be sleepy. Let's talk about one's mental factor intention and conduct on another opportunity."

I was sleepy really. Such difficult terms as "embody," "short timed state", "permanent state", and invisible "fire of lust" and "halo", or knobs that grow in one's mind, and so on, were dancing in disorder in my mind. I was also tired of hearing the concepts of "mental factor intention" and "conduct". They weren't as attractive as a cluster of fully ripe bananas, some mandarins and two cups of sweetened porridge which were very inviting on the altar.

Seeing my craving eyes, my monk uncle smiled and said gently:

"See, you are induced by devil. Now you're in your childhood it doesn't matter much, devil just entices you into doing petty bad things, but don't let that devil develop and become bigger in your soul. It's important to fight against the seduction of devils."

My monk uncle got up and he stood on tiptoe to bring down the plate of fruit from the altar and generously gave his niece a great deal of the Buddha's gift.

That was all that I had expected. I extended the front part of my dress to contain the presents and held them tight with my two arms, I ran to the ditch on the margin of my family's garden where those friends of my age often gathered to play mischievously.

"Dear passengers, please get out of the bus to board the ferry."

The bus hardly came to a halt when the bus worker had jumped off and recited his catch phrase: "Only elderly passengers are allowed to stay, the others must get out of the bus and walk onto the ferry. Come and get your ferry tickets over there."

Passengers followed one after the other to get off the bus. Someone was looking for a restroom while the others went directly to an eatery to have a bite. Teacher Biru accompanied a group of passengers to the checking point where the bus worker was distributing ferry tickets to the

passengers of his bus. Taking a look at the military convoy, teacher Bửu shook his head discouragingly. “In such situation like this, who could say the bus would be moving in two or three hours to come? Such a long military convoy in operation like this must be on top of the priority list, when will come the turn of these civil buses to cross the river?” Bửu made his way into a crowd to listen to a has-been lowering his voice to the bass note as he was singing a piece of *Vọng Cổ*⁽³⁾. Both of the busker’s arms were amputated to the elbows, only his forelimbs left. On the busker’s chest hung a tin can to receive tips from compassionate listeners. A microphone was tied to his amputated arm at such a level that when he sung the device could be raised to his mouth, proper to pick up his voice. Teacher Bửu was indifferently giving ear to the song and looking in a vague manner at the woman who seemed to have aged in advance of her years; she was holding an instrument and walking behind the disable busker. Teacher Bửu almost jumped up when all of a sudden he asked with a loud voice:

“Is that you, Phan?”

“Yes I am. You still recognize me huh, Bửu? I thought you would pretend to have forgotten me.”

Bửu shed tears giving his friend a hug:

“We haven’t seen each other for more than ten years. I haven’t met you since the end of that school year.”

The passer-bys were curiously looking at the couple of schoolmates. Phan’s woman was insensibly beholding her husband’s friend.

Bửu ardently invited the couple into an eatery near by.

With a glass of iced tea in front of him, the busker was relating the story of his life in a normally calm voice but Bửu felt painful stings in his heart.

“I was loose on math and language, with your help I managed to catch on to the subjects a little, but when you were busy I was dead to them again. At the end of that school year I failed the exam for the next class, I flunked out of school and stayed home to help my parents cultivating the field. Our native hamlet was a place where occurred a political mishmash, you know. Government’s administration was in effect in the daytime. At night, the members of the “other side” would come on the scene to propagate their policies and press-gang you into military force... They brought you to their base in the mountain. It was wartime then; when you were caught up in the system everything could happen. In a counter raid fighting I was wounded under artillery, my arms were amputated. We have been evacuated to town for five or six years. Anyway, it’s lucky to be alive. I am also fortunate that my wife always takes pains to follow me. You aren’t afraid of risking losing face when recognizing me as your friend that makes me very happy. I feel very disheartened and embittered in recent years. I often want to go out of this dusty

world. I have nothing to crave for in my life. But because of my child and my wife – this bosom friend of mine, I have to still linger on. “ Phan’s voice was lower and lower, it sounded like a sorrowful sigh. Teacher Bửu was choked and he felt uneasy as if he was guilty.

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I have been away for ten years paying my debt to the country for having lost the war. I came back and found myself bewildered in the scrambling and troublesome life which was devoid of sincerity in dealing with the other humans around. My father had passed away. My monk uncle had also left this earthly life for the Pure Land more than seven years ago. In gloomy afternoons I usually wandered into the deserted closed hermitage to reminisce about some experience in my childhood. Once I curiously unpacked an oilpaper parcel which had been put at the far end of the altar. The words written on the outside of the parcel read: “Amitabha Buddha Sutra”. In the parcel, except two packs of the sutras, there was one pack of money comprising one hundred, two hundred, five hundred, one thousand and two thousand bills, and a letter written to me.

Phong Điền, the date of hopelessness.

Dear Tuấn,

This sum of money is the result of many years I stung myself in everything, and after having them exchanged many times I’ve got these bills. This may be sufficient to buy ten taels of gold or to build a small pagoda to offer Buddhists a place to worship our Great merciful Father. I may have had enough money to meet my aspiration for building a pagoda but in the meantime I feel disappointed about myself: it turned out that it was because of this amount of money I had to be parsimonious with my expenses and experience lot of hardship; additionally, I had to smile with this follower and slavishly agree with the other one for it.

The pagoda I had depicted in my mind guided the Bodhisattva’s mental factor intention, but where was my conduct as a monk then? Building a pagoda and I would have to involve myself with the managing task to maintain and preserve it, I wouldn’t be able to concentrate my mind to my monkhood to study the sutras, and thus I would be caught to pagoda-work not to Buddha-work, thus pushing my Bodhisattva’s mental factor intention far away.

Seeing this, I became aware that all that I thought I had done right thus far was all wrong. To atone for my mistake, I chose to stop eating until I would leave for the Buddha’s land. This amount of money shall be at your disposal: you may use it just for your benefit or for others’ sake as well.

But you must remember that your conduct is much more valuable than your mental factor intention.

May God bless you.

Thích Giác Nguyên.

I tried hard to recognize the worldly name in the signature which had been blurred by time, it was Nguyễn Văn Bửu.

“That amount of money,” my mother chirped out a sigh, “at present market price, could hardly buy three tenths of a tael of gold. A small pagoda in the countryside nowadays would cost some hundred times of that money.” Looking at the bundle of mould-covered bank notes which had been offered by many people in their very reduced circumstances whose hands were stained with dust, oil, grease or having fishy odor, I decided to set it on fire to free the soul of the monk from being attached to it. I hoped in his sacred region the monk would be no more anxious about one’s mental factor intention and conduct. To my eye, these two concepts dissolved into each other without leaving a distinguishing line. The more you try to discriminate this one from the other the more you are entangled in them and unable to escape.

Sitting cross legged at the place were my monk uncle used to sit on his mattress reciting the sutras years ago, I burned piece after piece of the bank notes like someone burning their votive papers. The phosphor-like green flames gradually ate up the bills. Some pictures on them became strangely deformed in next to no time.

Suddenly I thought I had vaguely made out the gentle smile of my monk uncle around here.

“May you enter the Pure Land, my dear uncle. Bodhisattva’s mental factor intention and conduct are just the moral principles to teach people how to live altruistically and to develop affection and mercy for the others. You have lived so well with a kindly heart trying to fulfill an unselfish aspiration. You deserve to attain the Buddha’s eternal land like a Bodhisattva...”

¹ “Ốc tiêu” – an epithet describing a physically small cricket in cricket fighting, meaning “tiny but braver / or better than the others.”

² A kind of Vietnamese noodle served hot with other ingredients.

³ A type of favorable traditional songs chiefly sung by people in South Vietnam