

23 December 1962

Princeton, New Jersey

TODAY I RECEIVED MORE than thirty letters, forwarded from New York. The only ones from Vietnam were a card from Hue Duong and a letter from Phuong. The others were Christmas cards from American friends. In America, people spend a fair amount of money sending Christmas cards. Each family keeps a list of friends, and then buys hundreds of cards, signs each one, places them all in envelopes, and addresses and stamps each one. If you send cards to only ten friends, you have time to select a special card for each person. You even have time to write ten short notes. But when your list includes hundreds of friends and acquaintances, you have to buy large boxes of identical cards and sign and address them assembly-line style. What is most important, apparently, is not to forget anyone. The list changes over the years—one friend dies and another behaves poorly, so that “diplomatic relations” are severed. And new friends are added to the list. Some Americans assume I must be sad, spending the holidays alone at Princeton. But I’m not sad at all. In fact, I had to refuse several invitations to visit friends’ families so I could cherish this time for myself. It is very peaceful and comfortable here. I think about those people who are

homeless and without heat, people who have little reason to celebrate.

In Vietnam, the war is escalating. Our people are caught between a hammer and an anvil. We've lost so much already. The country has been divided in two and engulfed in flames. Even Phuong Boi is fading into the fog. But as long as we have each other, we can never be truly alone. We want to stand with those who have been abandoned. I want others, at least occasionally, to turn their thoughts to those who suffer—to think about them but not pity them. Those who suffer do not want pity. They want love and respect.

During the Christmas season in America, many organizations make donations to those in need. People send contributions for orphans, widows, and the poor without ever seeing their faces. But a direct encounter is necessary to understand another's suffering. Only understanding leads to love. Huge sums of money and material goods are distributed to the poor during this season, but these gifts are largely the fruit of pity and not love. One organization distributes several thousand pairs of shoes to poor children. Among those who donate a few dollars to pay for a pair of shoes, I doubt that many actually envision the happiness on the face of the child when she receives the shoes, or even envision the shoes they are buying for her.

Last year at this time, I went shopping with Kenji, a young Japanese student. On Christmas Eve, the stores were packed with last-minute shoppers, everyone rushing about, anxious to get home on time for Christmas

get-togethers. Kenji and I had to buy enough food to last a week, since the stores here are closed from Christmas until the first of the year. The sight of two young Asians grocery shopping on Christmas Eve moved several people to pity. One woman asked if there was something she could do to help us. We thanked her and wished her a Merry Christmas. The checkout girl, bright and cheery, looked at us warmly and wished us a Merry Christmas. Everyone assumed we were lonely. It was Christmas, and we were so far from home. But since neither of us is Christian, we didn't have warm memories of past Christmases to make us feel lonely. In Saigon, pine boughs, Christmas cards, gold ribbons, and other Christmas trappings do announce the season. Even at Phuong Boi we celebrated Christmas Eve by staying up late decorating a Christmas tree. But we didn't experience the deep feelings our Christian friends have. Perhaps it is because we respect Christ as a great teacher but don't look on him as God. The same is true of Buddha. We respect him as a great teacher, but we don't worship him as a god. The holiday we feel most enthusiastic about in Vietnam is Têt.

Still, when Christmas Eve arrived in Princeton, we noticed how desolate Brown Hall felt. It was cold but not snowing, so we decided to walk into town. We strolled along the empty streets. All the houses and stores were closed tight. Somehow, it evoked in me the feeling of New Year's Eve back home and made me feel homesick. We returned to Campus Center a bit melancholy, drank some tea, talked, and then watched TV. It's funny how much our

surroundings influence our emotions. Our joys and sorrows, likes and dislikes are colored by our environment so much that often we just let our surroundings dictate our course. We go along with "public" feelings until we no longer even know our own true aspirations. We become a stranger to ourselves, molded entirely by society. Our friends at Phuong Boi always stood up to social conformity and resisted society's molds. Naturally, we met with opposition, both internal and external. Sometimes I feel caught between two opposing selves—the "false self" imposed by society and what I would call my "true self." How often we confuse the two and assume society's mold to be our true self. Battles between our two selves rarely result in a peaceful reconciliation. Our mind becomes a battlefield on which the Five Aggregates—the form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness of our being—are strewn about like debris in a hurricane. Trees topple, branches snap, houses crash. These are our loneliest moments. Yet every time we survive such a storm, we grow a little. Without storms like these, I would not be who I am today. But I rarely hear such a storm coming until it is already upon me. It seems to appear without warning, as though treading silently on silk slippers. I know it must have been brewing a long time, simmering in my own thoughts and mental formations, but when such a frenzied hurricane strikes, nothing outside can help. I am battered and torn apart, and I am also saved.

I passed through such a storm this past autumn. It began in October. At first it seemed like a passing cloud.

But after several hours, I began to feel my body turning to smoke and floating away. I became a faint wisp of a cloud. I had always thought of myself as a solid entity, and suddenly I saw that I'm not solid at all. This wasn't philosophical or even an enlightenment experience. It was just an ordinary impression, completely ordinary. I saw that the entity I had taken to be "me" was really a fabrication. My true nature, I realized, was much more real, both uglier and more beautiful than I could have imagined.

The feeling began shortly before eleven o'clock at night on October first. I was browsing on the eleventh floor of Butler Library. I knew the library was about to close, and I saw a book that concerned the area of my research. I slid it off the shelf and held it in my two hands. It was large and heavy. I read that it had been published in 1892, and it was donated to the Columbia Library the same year. On the back cover was a slip of paper that recorded the names of borrowers and the dates they took it out of the library. The first time it had been borrowed was in 1915, the second time was in 1932. I would be the third. Can you imagine? I was only the third borrower, on October 1, 1962. For seventy years, only two other people had stood in the same spot I now stood, pulled the book from the shelf, and decided to check it out. I was overcome with the wish to meet those two people. I don't know why, but I wanted to hug them. But they had vanished, and I, too, will soon disappear. Two points on the same straight line will never meet. I was able to encounter two people in space, but not in time.

I stood quietly for a few minutes, holding the book in my hands. Then I remembered what Anton Cerbu had said the day before, when we were discussing how to research Vietnamese Buddhism. He told me that I was still young. I didn't believe him. I feel as though I've lived a long time and have seen so much of life. I'm almost thirty-six, which is not young. But that night, while standing amidst the stacks at Butler Library, I saw that I am neither young nor old, existent nor nonexistent. My friends know I can be as playful and mischievous as a child. I love to kid around and enter fully into the game of life. I also know what it is to get angry. And I know the pleasure of being praised. I am often on the verge of tears or laughter. But beneath all of these emotions, what else is there? How can I touch it? If there isn't anything, why would I be so certain that there is?

Still holding the book, I felt a glimmer of insight. I understood that I am empty of ideals, hopes, viewpoints, or allegiances. I have no promises to keep with others. In that moment, the sense of myself as an entity among other entities disappeared. I knew that this insight did not arise from disappointment, despair, fear, desire, or ignorance. A veil silently lifted effortlessly. That is all. If you beat me, stone me, or even shoot me, everything that is considered to be "me" will disintegrate. Then, what is actually there will reveal itself—faint as smoke, elusive as emptiness, and yet neither smoke nor emptiness, ugly, nor not ugly, beautiful, yet not beautiful. It is like a shadow on a screen. At that moment, I had the deep feeling that I

had returned. My clothes, my shoes, even the essence of my being had vanished, and I was carefree as a grasshopper pausing on a blade of grass. Like the grasshopper, I had no thoughts of the divine. The grasshopper's gods perceive form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and objects of mind. They know increasing and decreasing, defiled and immaculate, production and destruction. When a grasshopper sits on a blade of grass, he has no thought of separation, resistance, or blame. Human children prefer dragonflies whose wings and bellies are as red as chili peppers. But the green grasshopper blends completely with the green grass, and children rarely notice it. It neither retreats nor beckons. It knows nothing of philosophy or ideals. It is simply grateful for its ordinary life. Dash across the meadow, my dear friend, and greet yesterday's child. When you can't see me, you yourself will return. Even when your heart is filled with despair, you will find the same grasshopper on the same blade of grass.

Steve had left to spend a few days in Boston, and I was alone in our apartment. I left the door wide open day and night, like a prayer. What I was undergoing was neither happy nor sad. Some life dilemmas cannot be solved by study or rational thought. We just live with them, struggle with them, and become one with them. Such dilemmas are not in the realm of the intellect. They come from our feelings and our will, and they penetrate our subconscious and our body, down to the marrow of our bones. I became a battlefield. I couldn't know until the storm was over if I would survive, not in the sense of my physical life, but in

the deeper sense of my core self. I experienced destruction upon destruction, and felt a tremendous longing for the presence of those I love, even though I knew that if they were present, I would have to chase them away or run away myself.

When the storm finally passed, layers of inner mortar lay crumbled. On the now-deserted battlefield, a few sunbeams peeked through the horizon, too weak to offer any warmth to my weary soul. I was full of wounds, yet experienced an almost thrilling sense of aloneness. No one would recognize me in my new manifestation. No one close to me would know it was I. Friends want you to appear in the familiar form they know. They want you to remain intact, the same. But that isn't possible. How could we continue to live if we were changeless? To live, we must die every instant. We must perish again and again in the storms that make life possible. It would be better, I thought, if everyone cast me from their thoughts. I cannot be a human being and, at the same time, be an unchanging object of love or hatred, annoyance or devotion. I must continue to grow. As a child, I always outgrew the clothes my mother sewed for me. I can preserve those garments, fragrant with childish innocence and my mother's love, in a trunk for memory's sake. But I must have new and different clothes now to fit who I have become. We must sew our own clothes and not just accept society's ready-made suit. The clothes I make for myself may not be stylish or even accepted. But it is more than a matter of clothes. It is a question of who I am

as a person. I reject the yardstick others use to measure me. I have a yardstick of my own, one I've discovered myself, even if I find myself in opposition to public opinion. I must be who I am. I cannot force myself back into the shell I've just broken out of. This is a source of great loneliness for me. Perhaps I could persuade my dearest friends to accompany me on my voyage through space, but it might be dizzying for them, and might even incite feelings of hatred or resentment. Would they force me to return to earth, back to the illusory plane of old hopes, desires, and values, all in the name of friendship? What good would that be for any of us?

That is why I want to burn down the huts where my friends dwell. I want to incite chaos to help them break through the shells that confine them. I want to smash the chains that bind them and topple the gods that restrain them. For us to grow, petty amusements or even sorrows must not dominate us. A free person neither adheres to nor violates life's rules. The most glorious moment in life is to witness a friend's return, not exactly a return, but an infinitely exquisite moment when he emerges from the chaos caused by the annihilation of his last refuge. There he is, liberated from the hard shells of a thousand lifetimes, standing nobly in the brilliant light cast by his burning refuge. In that moment, he will lose everything, but in the same moment, he possesses everything. Beginning at that moment, we are truly present for each other.

During my struggle I was unable to converse, even after Steve returned. I could only manage manual chores.

Steve recognized that I was undergoing something unusual and took great care not to disturb me. When I think of how sensitive he was during that time, great affection wells up in me. He didn't try to draw me into conversation. He only communicated what was essential. From time to time, I was aware that he was watching me, his eyes filled with concern. He spent time in his bedroom so I could have the front room to myself. He was so understanding. One Sunday morning I suggested we take a walk down to the river. We sat on the grass until early afternoon and then walked home. We didn't exchange a word the whole time. Back at the apartment, Steve asked, in a soft voice, "Are you tired, Thây?" I answered that I wasn't and thanked him.

Youth is a time for seeking truth. Years ago I wrote in my journal that even if it destroys you, you must hold to the truth. I knew early on that finding truth is not the same as finding happiness. You aspire to see the truth, but once you have seen it, you cannot avoid suffering. Otherwise, you've seen nothing at all. You are still hostage to arbitrary conventions set up by others. People judge themselves and each other based on standards that are not their own. In fact, such standards are mere wishful thinking, borrowed from public opinion and common viewpoints. One thing is judged as good and another as bad, one thing virtuous and another evil, one thing true and another false. But when the criteria used to arrive at such judgments are not your own, they are not the truth. Truth cannot be borrowed. It can only be experienced

directly. The fruit of exploration, suffering, and the direct encounter between one's own spirit and reality—the reality of the present moment and the reality of ten thousand lifetimes. For each person, it is different. And it is different today than it was yesterday.

When we discover something to be true today through our own direct experience, we will see that our previous assumptions were wrong, or at least incomplete. Our new way of looking transcends yesterday's desire, prejudices, narrow-mindedness, and habits. We see that to use the golden molds and emerald yardsticks of yesterday's understanding is nothing less than slavery or imprisonment. When we attain a new understanding of reality, it is impossible to accept things we know to be false. Our actions will be based on our own understanding, and we will only follow those rules we have tested through our own direct experience. We will discard false rules and conventions of the current social order. But we have to expect that society will turn on us with a vengeance. Human history is filled with the tragedies caused by that vengeance. History teaches that we die if we oppose the system, yet many individuals continue to challenge the darkness, despite the danger in doing so.

Those who pursue the truth are members of the community of truth seekers and reformers throughout time and space. They do not resign themselves to a collective fate that offers no laurels. The faint beams of light that appear after the desolation of the storm made me feel even more alone and abandoned. I felt the unbearable pain of

a woman who is about to give birth to a child she already knows will be sentenced to death. She is consumed by despair, inconsolable and humiliated. She knows that she is with child, but a child who is already condemned to die. And she knows she will have to witness her child's death. There is no way to avoid her fate. Why couldn't she give birth to a healthy, sweet child like other mothers, a child who would give her hope, pride, and joy, a child who would earn her the praises of others? But we have to stand up for the truth. We cannot just gather moss like an old stone or assume a false self, once we see the truth.

There was a poor, young woman who dreamed of living in luxury, surrounded by jewels and silks. Then she met and married a wealthy widower, and her dream came true. She did not even mind that her husband had not married her for love. In fact, he married her because she looked exactly like his first wife. She agreed to dress, act, and speak like his first wife. At first, it wasn't a problem, but gradually it became quite oppressive. She was herself, yet she had to act like his first wife—to wear the colors she liked to wear, read the books she liked to read, and eat the foods she liked to eat. She couldn't continue. It was suffocating. She was no more than a mannequin on which her husband hung his first wife's clothes and personality. But she didn't have the courage to give up the luxury she had become accustomed to. She was trapped by her own desires.

Anyone reading this story will want her to muster the strength needed to leave her husband and return to

a simple country life where she can reclaim her true self. We think, "If I were in her place, that is what I would do." But we are only outside observers for whom the solution seems easy. If we were actually in her place, we would suffer the same confusion and indecision. Who among us would not? We already do the same thing. We feel forced to comply with the dehumanizing demands of society, and we bow our heads and obey. We eat, speak, think, and act according to society's dictates. We are not free to be ourselves, just as she was not free to be herself. We become cogs in the system, merchandise, not human beings. Our individuality is undermined, yet we comply because we lack the courage to refuse society's demands. We are no better than the wife of that man. We, too, have become so accustomed to our way of life with its conveniences and comforts that we allow ourselves to be colonized.

One day, she discovers that his first wife had been unfaithful to her husband. She takes this information to her husband in hopes he will come to his senses and let her be herself. But he tells her he knew about his first wife's infidelity, and because of that, he'd killed her. Her death, however, did not extinguish his anger. When he saw how closely she resembled his first wife, he married her and insisted she dress and act exactly like her. Now at last, she had become his first wife, and he could kill her again. He lunged at her, and she fought for her life.

I do not know whether she died or not. I leave the story unfinished. If she didn't, she certainly came close to the edge, like so many of us now. I hope humanity will

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awaken in time and not wait, like she did, until the last moment to resist.

One morning I felt the sky brighten a little. I received a birthday card from home, which arrived exactly on my birthday. That was the day I felt myself reborn. In the card, Tue had copied three lines of a poem by Vu Tru:

Walking in the desolate desert
a bear attacks me by surprise.
I simply look him in the eye.

Yes, I thought. I have looked the beast straight in the eye, and seen it for what it is. I am like someone just recovered from a near-fatal illness who has stared death in the face. I got dressed, walked outside, and strolled along Broadway, thirsty for the morning sun after so many days of darkness. The winds of the storm had finally dispersed.