



Sudama meets with Hoa Thuong Thich Tri Tinh, a Buddhist monk, during her trip to Vietnam.

Commitment, the Gift of Pain

SUDAMA NGO

My path to practice began when I was a child in Vietnam and went to the Buddhist temple for the youth clubs. At that moment I wanted to be a Buddhist nun, but the time was not right yet. My path to the Rochester Zen Center began in 1996 when a woman named Vinh, a friend of my best friend, encouraged me to return to Vietnam to meet with an old monk. I was living in California at the time and had to convince my husband to allow me to travel there on my own. Despite his initial resistance, I was able to go for a month-long trip in May 1997. Upon my arrival in Vietnam, Vinh first brought me to a nursing home and a community center for blind children, where we met with some of the residents and offered gifts. Then she took me to a very old temple in the countryside to meet with the

old monk, who is still well known for translating Chinese sutras into Vietnamese. A few weeks later, before I returned to California, Vinh took me to a ceremony held at a large temple so that I could make a donation to the monk. During the ceremony, when I saw the monk walk through the temple gate alongside a nun, I was struck by how beautiful they looked in their yellow robes and kesas. Suddenly I broke into tears, and asked myself, 'Why am I standing here crying? Why don't I just find a way to live my life like they do?' Watching them from a distance filled me with sadness. In that moment I decided that I needed to find a way.

When I returned to San Diego, I took a short trip to northern California with my family to visit a cousin. Two weeks after we got back

from the family trip I became seriously ill. I was working in my tailor shop when I first felt a sharp pain in my lungs and noticed that my breathing was heavy. Later that afternoon, my husband decided to bring me to the hospital, where I was treated for pneumonia and sent home. In the days that followed, the symptoms came back and the pain got worse. Struggling to breathe and to speak, I returned to the hospital a couple more times, and each time I was sent home after receiving treatment for low oxygen levels. Then, during my next trip to the emergency room, I developed a dark red rash all over my body. The doctor decided that I needed to stay overnight for some tests and gave me pain medication through an IV tube. I had developed a fever and chills and felt like I was dying. All I could do was just lay there in the hospital bed and try to deal with the pain.

At first, the doctor couldn't come up with a diagnosis. He kept asking me questions about the places I traveled to over the past year. A few days later, he came into my room and said, 'Congratulations, we now know what's wrong!' I had contracted a fungus called *Coccidioidomycosis* or 'Valley Fever' in my lungs during my trip to northern California. The doctor gave me a strong antibiotic and kept me in the hospital to watch its effects, giving me small doses at a time to see how my body responded. After a couple of days, it became clear that my body was able to handle it so I was sent home and continued with the medicine and painkiller for a month, at which time I was told to stop taking it because of the potential for harmful side effects. But, within a couple days of going off the medication, my cough returned violently—this time with blood spewing out of my mouth. Back to the emergency room, a bone and head scan showed that the fungus was spread through my body: knees, shoulders, lower back, even my skull. For a full year, I would need to take the medication and have monthly blood tests to monitor the fungus activity. It was during this time that I became interested in reading sutras and listening to recordings of sutra chanting by the monk I had met in Vietnam. My poor

health prevented me from chanting on my own, but at least I could listen by tape.

After a couple months of listening to chanting, I found that my body began to heal little by little. When I finally had some energy to do things for myself again, I wanted to go to the temple near my home to join in the chanting. Chanting is very emotional for me; it sometimes makes me cry. When I chanted at the temple I felt like I was the strongest and loudest chanter there. After chanting, I felt exhausted, but during chanting I didn't seem to be tired. Soon I was able to go to the temple more often because I felt well enough to drive on my own. I was also able to get off of the pain medication.

After going to the local temple for almost two years every day for the evening chanting, I began to feel sad. So I started searching for other Buddhist temples, not really knowing what I was looking for.

One day I attended a different temple that offered a one-day retreat. I saw a nun who had also come to participate in the retreat and felt that I had known her for a long, long time, as if she were a close friend. A couple weeks later I saw the same nun again at a Buddhist community celebration of the Buddha's birthday. I ran up to her to find out what temple she stayed at and arranged to meet with her. When we met she told me about her meditation practice, and I told her I wanted to learn how to do meditation. I told her about my illness, which still affected me. The nun offered to teach me how to sit and showed me a photograph of her teacher. When I saw the picture of Bodhin-sensei with Roshi Kapleau together, my body froze. I just knew in that moment that Bodhin-sensei was the teacher I was searching for.

I started to sit with the nun once a week and sat on my own every morning. First ten and then fifteen minutes, then a half hour, and, after a couple of months, finally I could sit for an hour. One morning a poem came to me when I was sitting; it was about entering a gate of practice, looking for who I was. When I showed it to the nun she offered to arrange for me to visit the Rochester Zen Center. After difficulty plan-

WHO AM I?

*One winter morning
I walked through the Zen Gate
To search for an answer
Where did I come from?
And who am I?*

*Suddenly there are flower clusters
Appearing and disappearing.
It is very serene
On a pure white wall.
Oh! I suddenly realize
I am like a piece of white paper
Now tainted with dust.*

—SUDAMA NGO,
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ning the trip due to a recurrence of my illness, resistance from my husband, and other things that got in the way, I was finally able to go in May 2002, and it was the time of the Buddha's birthday!

As soon as I stepped through the Center's front door, at that moment I knew that I was home. I attended the workshop led by Bodhin-sensei and returned a few months later for a couple of weeks of training and my first seven-day sesshin.

One afternoon before the sesshin, I was sitting in the zendo at Arnold Park, and suddenly I saw a big black hole in front of me. I was standing at the edge of it and was so scared that I would fall inside that I started screaming and crying loudly in the zendo. Amala-sensei (then Head of Zendo) came to calm me down and took me into the Oak Room. I was still shaking, so I went to the dorm to lay down and get some rest. I felt so confused and didn't know what was wrong. I was drawn to the practice but I was also very frightened of this experience.

When I returned to California, my life felt empty. I didn't want to stay with my family; I just wanted to go back to the Center. But I was still sick and had to rely on the support of my husband. At this time it felt like my body was in California, but my mind was at the Center. After a year or two of traveling back and forth between California and Rochester, I finally was able to end my marriage and move to the Center.

After being on staff for a while, it seemed like my health and my family problems had finally stabilized and I could go further. It felt like everything had been resolved, and I went to ask Roshi to make me a priest. He said, 'We need to talk.' Roshi asked me many questions, and finally he said, 'Okay, I will do the novice ceremony for you.' Then suddenly, one day I felt very sick again. The symptoms were not the same as what I had experienced with the fungus. This time it was extreme abdominal pain and digestive problems. I went to see a doctor who prescribed medicine that made the symptoms worse. (Later I found out that the diagnosis was wrong.) I kept the sitting and work schedule the best I could, even though I was exhausted from not being able to sleep at night. One night the pain was so sharp that I said to myself, 'Okay. This is so painful, I give up. I am ready to die.' But I also had the feeling that if I stayed in the Center right then I could not die because I was surrounded by bodhisattvas. During this painful period, I saw many doctors and many tests



Sudama offers gifts to children at a local community center in Vietnam.

were done, but nothing was ever found to be wrong. After sitting and listening to chanting, I always felt much better and eventually the pain did go away with the help of acupuncture and Chinese herbs. At the same time my commitment to serving the Center and the Three Treasures deepened further and on February 11, 2012, I committed myself to the Buddhist priesthood, to coming to awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings.

I am truly grateful for all the sickness. Without the pain and the support of family, friends, and Sangha, I would not have been able to go beyond the obstacles that kept me from taking the steps to live my true commitment to this practice.

An ordained priest, Sudama Ngo lives and works at the Rochester Zen Center.