

# Just Money

LUNA NGO

On April 30th, 1975, the Vietnam War ended. My husband, who had served in the Vietnamese Air Force, had to flee the country, thus leaving me and our 10-month-old son behind in Saigon. Eventually he ended up in the United States—and so did my son and I, but our journey was different.

With my husband gone, we lived in my sister's house, and later at my mother's home. We had no choice but to stay with them because we had nothing: no job, no money, no opportunity. I moved from town to town trying to raise money to feed our family and survive. With the Communists in the north getting closer and closer to taking over Saigon, it was also a time of great uncertainty and danger. There were often random shootings, so we had to be very careful as we moved about the city. People who did not support the new Communist government were placed in 're-education' camps. Even the local police were a threat; people had to pay them bribes to avoid being arrested. I was stuck in this dire situation for 5 years, but not without trying to escape.

I began to prepare for my escape from Vietnam in April 1978. My friend in Nha Trang knew people there who could arrange an escape by boat. In order to reserve a space on the boat for my son and me, I agreed to pay them all the money and gold I had.

We left in late November, traveling from Saigon to a country location outside of Nha Trang City. A group of us waited there until midnight and then began walking silently through the farm fields. Finally we reached the river where a boat was supposed to pick us up and take us to Cam Ranh Harbor, where we would board another boat that would get us out of Vietnam. The people coordinating the escape collected our money at the river. But, after wait-

ing by the river for two hours, a gunshot was heard. Everyone got very scared. The police arrived, and everyone started running. I had to quickly get my 4-year-old son and me to safety. Luckily, the police didn't catch us, but following this incident we ended up living on the streets with the homeless until we had enough money to get a bus back to Nha Trang.

When we finally got back to Nha Trang, I got in touch with my friend, who knew the people coordinating the escape. It turned out that the entire escape had been a scam. I was devastated. I had lost all the money and gold I had. I had no idea what to do or where to go, and became very sick because I was so worried that I wouldn't be able to raise my son.

In a couple months' time, I was back on my feet again. I often went to the market to try to exchange food items for money. One day while at the market, I met a Chinese storeowner named Nguyet. I offered to give her some flour and sugar in exchange for money. She could then sell the items in her store. She agreed, and we soon got to know each other very well, and I would sell her things on a regular basis.

I learned that, like me, some of Nguyet's family members wanted to escape. They had even built their own boat. She asked whether I wanted to leave with them. (Nguyet planned on staying behind and maintaining her shop.) But I needed money to reserve a place on the boat for me and my son. So, I tried to contact my husband and sister to get money to pay for the boat. My husband was already in the United States by this time, and my sister was also there as a student. I sent letters to both of them for monetary help, but I didn't get any response. I wasn't even sure that I had the right addresses.

Somehow I had to raise money on my own to pay for us to get on that boat. I continued to



Tom Kowal

go to the market, and went from town to town, trying to make money for the boat—and to feed my family. In 1979 the boat left without us because I never was able to raise enough money.

Soon after this second failed attempt to escape Vietnam, on an afternoon when I was making my usual visit to Nguyet's shop, she looked at me and noticed that something was wrong. 'Now, what do you want?' she asked me. I didn't know what to say. I knew I wanted to escape, but I didn't have any money, so I kept quiet. She kept asking me, 'What do you want? What do you want?' Still, I did not respond. Questioning me even stronger, she shouted, 'I want to know what you want!'

'I want to go,' I said.

'I will take care of it,' Nguyet replied.

So, my friend committed herself to finding another opportunity for me to escape. She had many contacts and connections with people who

were planning boat escapes. I walked back home to talk with my mother, and explained to her that the Chinese lady would loan me the money, but we first needed to give her whatever money we had. Mom gathered what we had, which was about 3 or 4 ounces of gold. I brought the money to Nguyet, and she introduced me to the man who was leading the escape. For my son and me to go on this boat, the total cost was around 15,000 USD. Once I made it to the United States, I would have to work for several years to pay off Nguyet's loan.

But, once again, the escape plan failed.

This time it was because of a bad connection. We were told that the small boat could not meet up with the larger one that would have taken us out to the ocean. So, the planners kept our money until the next opportunity arose. (Once I had paid, they guaranteed our place on the boat.) But the next escape attempt turned out to

be yet another failure. Before I even got on the boat I was caught by the police and placed in jail with my son. We were not harmed, but the police took all the money I had on me, and then released us after a few days.

In May of 1980, we made what would be our final escape attempt. My son and I waited with a group in the middle of the night, hidden in the bushes and trees along the riverbank. We waited quietly for a couple of hours and then off in the distance we saw the signal: flashing lights from the larger boat. We quickly jumped into the small boats and headed towards the big one, which was a 13-meter long wooden fishing boat. There were 81 of us who made it onto the boat that night—and there were many others who fell in the water or didn't make it in time. It was extremely dangerous to climb up the boat and avoid losing my son. I held up my son to be lifted up by someone already on the boat, and then I grabbed his legs. I was pulled up onto the boat by my 5-year-old son's legs! It all happened very fast.

The boat quickly departed for the ocean. It was packed with so many people that it felt like we were in a sardine can. But we made it ... or so we thought.

Just 2½ days after our departure the engine broke down. We drifted in place, unable to move forward or return to land. We did have some dry food on board, but we had to ration it carefully because we did not know how long we would be in this situation. We collected water from the rain to drink. Stormy weather and high waves rocked the boat. Everyone was very scared. We knew that we could die at any moment.

Chanting was our only source of comfort. As part of my preparation for this escape, I had gone to the neighborhood temple and spoken with the roshi. 'What do I do if I get stuck in the ocean?' I asked him. He gave me a small chant book and advised me to chant the Kwan Yin Sutra whenever I was afraid or in danger. I was the only person on the boat who had a chant book. I knew how to chant, so each time a big wave came I started chanting over and over again. Others joined me and lit incense. There was even a Kwan Yin figure on the boat that belonged to the owner.

On the 18th or 19th day, we ran out of water. At this point, we became extremely frightened about our impending death. Suddenly, people started to tell stories, sing, cry, chant, and even laugh. We knew we were about to die. It was in this moment that I had an insight. I realized that it was money that had enabled me to get on this boat in search of freedom for me and my son, and now we were about to die. If I were still stuck at home and living in poverty, at least I'd still be alive. I realized that money can help you, but it can also kill you.

On the 21st day, we were finally rescued. Because of the new insight I had had on the boat, my attitude about money drastically changed. Before, I had thought that money was everything. Now, I had seen how money can kill you. As a result, I never worried about having enough money again.

*Luna Ngo joined the Zen Center in 2002 and is currently a residential staff member. Donna Kowal worked with Luna in transcribing her story.*