

“One Day... Reaching the Other Shore”

(WELL-BEING and WELL-DYING)

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(Manuscript – write for myself aged U90)

It is really sad that the majority of us just begin enjoying the taste of life once we are on the verge of death.

(Padmasambhava)

One day reaching the other shore?

What shore? This shore or the other shore? Reaching the other shore? Yearn to come to that shore? Does that mean the other shore is far better than and more beautiful than this shore? Why know? Has anyone said that? Has any turtle roaming from sea to land informed where is more livable yet?

Gaté, Gaté, Paragaté, Parasamgaté... is the great mantra of great magic, unexcelled mantra, the mantra equal to the unequalled, which heals all the suffering and is true, not false? (Pine 3)¹
The people recite it, the mantra in Heart Sutra, extensively everywhere, they still feel miserable, even so miserable, they just wish to soon reach the “land of overjoy”, be reborn to the other place or the other shore. So strange! Seemingly everyone wants to remain longer, even indefinite longevity without death, in this world, “the land of over-sorrow”? Why?

I am writing down this thought at the age of U90, writing for self-reading, little by little reading until unable to read! And obviously able to share with our close friends who are “at the same generation by the sky of turbulence” in order to gossip!

Hope well-being and well-dying as well!

Dr Do Hong Ngoc, MD

(June 2023)

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Dalai Lama, Tibetan Book of Living and Dying’s foreword

-We assume we are exempted from impermanence so we postpone the spiritual practice, having time to spare. As soon as the time comes out, the only thing we can carry along is regret. We must set sail to practice right away in order to get ready no matter how soon the death happens.

¹Translated by Red Pine

- If you meditate about the death and impermanence, you will start making your life meaningful- When you reflect on the certainty of death and the impermanence of its coming time, you are supposed to make every attempt to prepare for the future.

- every day, the Tantric practitioners experience death in insight, which is like going through the death in mind. As getting used to it, they are totally ready to confront the real death. Owing to the regular practice of death in meditation, a meditator can achieve the great spiritual realization. It is the reason why the experienced practitioners generally enter a meditative state when they die.

- According to Buddhism, living and dying are seen as wholeness, here death is just a beginning of a new chapter. Death is a mirror reflecting all life's meaning. In the magnificent teachings, we find both living and dying presented simultaneously as a long series of transient reality which changes all the times.

- Meditation is the only way to provide us a limited view, then gradually a clear sight to dwell at the natural mind.

1. Funny to think

On Earth, suddenly come we. We naturally emerge to be "form" from "formlessness", though unreal and makeshift, it is useful for the time being. Parents meet each other, only one of the billions of sperms encounters egg as if they had dated since numerous past lifetimes, then all sorts of things are set to be molded in order to become a baby who is wriggling, squeaking, crying, sucking, demanding to eat, rolling over, then able to sit, creep, stand, walk, climb, run, jump until the point recurring from climbing, running to standing still, tumbling and gradually lying down. Everything seems to be reclaimed after assembling for temporary use over a period of time. Do not know why. During this process, there is a period that we are relentless to find the egg and inseminate in favor of racial preservation. Either frog or fowl, each has its own type, is ecstatic after fighting jealously and exhaustedly and finally ready to die once the mission accomplished. The male mantis dies right at the sexual intercourse session. His deceased body is taken by the female partner to feed the offspring. The blind termites noisily produced the blind racial so as to eat wood and give birth...; the rats squeak in the trunk whereas butterflies and bees intensively find food and intercourse to propagate species in multiple forms excitingly as well as exhilaratingly... In short, even if back-to-back ties interwoven, things are very clear. Is it because of genes, DNA, or RNA? Viruses and bacteria that are in a bustle search of food multiply, one eat one another. Unicellular and multicellular ones are set in an array even if they intend to mess it up. No matter what the smart humans do to transplant the things in the hope of producing new creatures, all go in vain. Who says plants have no pain and rocks are not sad upon being set apart from the other rocks? It is the fact that misery or anxiety produces the chemical called Hormone enabling the creature to feel joyful. Until a point, all is in an apple-pie order, well-planned and complete. Lend it and then reclaim it without hesitation or mercy. Either natural bond or pre-determined factor. Who creates all such silly things? everything has a particular order, filtering and plan that are perfect. Stefan Hawking says it is certain that there is a marvellous design from a virus to a dinosaur without a designer. Nonetheless, I believe there is something, called by any name, that creates this game and observes it interestingly. Just a piece of

clay is molded to the shape of a human or a marble by a child, this child must be so creative. Even the Buddha-Embryo (Sanskrit: Tathagatagarbha), there must be an artist sketching and molding to form it and responsible for it.

2. Self-reflection

Where coming from? The factors of parents, ancestors, and numerous other factors of earth, water, air, fire (C,H,O,N...) make up and reinforce everything, colouring it. The substances constituting flesh, bones, tendons, 60 chemical elements such as copper, lead, iron, zinc, Mangan, magnesium, phosphorus and so on accumulate to become functional organs on the basis of single cells. These organs undergo the process of metabolism that material retribution and spiritual retribution intertwine, originate and vanish upon the disintegration of conditions. As we see, the bone formation cell (osteoblast) work hard to turn all needed elements to be a bone while the bone degradation cells (osteoclast) turn it to be various kinds and integrate the bone frame joining by a number of ligament, flesh, nerve, blood vessel. It seems all is designed and built up to be a prototype before execution and examination. There is a beauty, there is Thi No (a grotesque).there must be something cooking up by means of the profession ofthe creator One Who Thus Come, it looks unfair but seem reasonable. When exiting, it made up a beauty. Thi No is created when sleepy. It looks like that but not really. The beauty usually lives in sorrow, Thi No in joy as the compensation. To form bone, calcium is in need but where is it from? From the broken bones of various past species. The pass-over of the preceding one is useful for the formation of the succeeding one, red corpuscles in body are constituted from the elements lasting for three months only. No more useful because of aging, it unable to move oxygen to other cells. Thus it is cleared, being replaced by another red corpuscle at once. The dismantled old elements which do not disappear are collected to the “grave of red corpuscles” in spleen in favour of reuse. Thus millions and billions of humans become ash and dust after they complete the mission and go useless. Still, such the ash and dust are suppose to be reused, awaiting for conditioned arising. Not only human bones but also animal bones include calcium, it is bone regardless of what kind. Therefore it is undistinguishable when mixing up. We blindly distinguish things, is whichridiculous to The One Who Thus Come? It is weird that everything is regulated by the genome structured by the clusters of material specified species according to the allotment. Chimpanzee’s genome 99% matches that of humans, the rat’s one 97%, the banyans 70%, the flies 60%, bok choy 26%... it is not unusual that plants have erotic relation, the rat squeaks in the trunk, “you walk gently or hit the bed, waking mum up”! Nevertheless, gene is not the ultimate phase of The One Who Thus Come. Both quantum and wave have been unveiled, shortly afterwards, it is vocalized like Hui Neng: “Originallythere is no single thing”.

3. Is there an afterlife?

I have no idea but I believe beforelife does exist. why know? Unless there is beforelife, how I come into existence in this life? It is obvious that there must be a past lifetime so the current lifetime emerges. As for the afterlife, I do not know. Is it the same betweenmyself in my previous life and that of this current life? I am not really sure, probably inasmuch as alike owing to the karma I am bearing. Karma is my inheritance so I have to bring it. Yet I don’t really know if I was either an ant or an ox in the previous life. Each species have its own karma. The

bee carries pollen from a mango's flower to another one, hardly does it mistake to any sour or sweet starfruit, even so fruit will not be born. What does it help the bee fly miles away in order to couple with mango? Today the people transplant the gene, inventing weird fruits differing its own seeds, in spite of the enhancement of harvesting productivity, it is not as tasty as it was. Sketch artists like to draw a pretty girl with her hair down standing nearby an upright forelock horse. It does not mean a horse-headed human, it implies the girl is as nice as the horse. The people invented the kind of seedless tomatoes that is able to bear thousands of fruits, which means unproductive. The today watermelons are seedless, where is An Tiem?

A recent study of Southampton about near-death discovers that consciousness still remains even heart stops beating, certifying the existence of life after death.

4. Four kinds of dear friends

They surround us since we were born. It is demon of affliction, demon of five aggregate, demon of death and demon of heaven who are around, befriend and even protect us. Buddha says all the four demons are our "attendants" who are close and provide us aid as well.

Isn't that so? How can the wandering mind infused with illusion, craving and hatred, which is "desire has no end/ breaking the old mirror to catch image", is free from affliction? Is the disorder of five cling-aggregates referred to a demon annoying our body? Demon of heaven is someone from heaven, but it is the illthought in terms of arrogance, boasting and deception leading us straight to hell. As for demon of death, a dear friend indeed, is associated with us since the early days. He is not an evil as assumed. By contrast, he is such a well-behaved man reminding us in every moment. Thanks to that, we can keep away a great deal of miseries.

Let's befriend the four demons, having fun with them. Taking a closer observation, we find them adorable and obedient. Do not raise conflict with them. They help clear our view in order to see the reality. Does a dangerous disease wake me up from an illusion? Sickness does not exempt anyone. Virus or bacteria is always fair-minded and unbiased as well.

5. Karma

What is karma? No idea. It clings to us, demanding debt payment or "retribution payment". Pay in what means? No idea, either. Can karma be converted? Probably yes. When the father's generation eats salty food, the heir's generation is thirst for water. What a pity! Karma originates from "body, mouth and mind". From attitude, behaviour, speech and thought emerges karma. All in all, that is the way of life. Optional. Karma of thought is not behaviour but that is the driving force. "Mind drives all experiences", is it true? Thing is done if all three types of karma is purified.

Where is memory reserved so that it turns to karma passing from life to life? The neural science deliver a response: the hippocampus in brain and limbic system save up the memory. They both can take charge of emotion and behaviour owing to the flexibility of synapse (the connecting point of neuron). When the body decomposes, hippocampus and the entire limbic system are no more. Is that "apart from the physical mechanism of memory, there is the engagement of a non-material factor, not always consciousness, serving as the foundation to approach the concern of

accumulating karma, until the afterlife it is involved to process the fruit differing from its cause” (Tue Sy).

Karma is transmitted by means of not only genes but also environment (Epigenetic). Earlier it is misconceived that DNA and RNA were assumed to be fundamental elements of genes which are fixed and invariable. Instead, in addition to the pathology of genes employed to diagnose and then interfere fetus, today we are clear that gene is adjustable according to the external environment. This study is known as epigenetic. In this regard, the concern of material retribution and spiritual retribution mentioned by Buddhism is accurate.

The diet, disease, addiction, and lifestyle are the mechanism of material retribution (epigenetic mechanism) that has impact on and regulates the activities of gene.

6. is there a self?

Buddha said: “there is karma generated, the changeable retribution received, but nobody generated, nobody received”. Buddhism does not believe in self, minor self, great self, soul but it has faith in a “carrying karma” to pay retribution. What bring karma along? Consciousness of rebirth, the cycle of birth?

Scientists says: “a design without designer”. The brain is a highly assigned system in which many functions appear simultaneously and there is no moderator. Neither designer nor moderator? But how can a dove can fly thousands of miles to send mail, a salmon every four year return to the old place to give birth and die? Today the creatures from a bean to mouse, bug, chimpanzee are intervened to their genes in order to create the modified results or unexpected effects, known as transgenic, is it also a karma?

Descartes stated: “I think therefore I am”. So I do not think, I am not... myself? Is it “no thought” equivalent to “no self”? yes, in samadhi see no self accurately, it dissolved into the formlessness of Tathāgata. Thus, seeing all things and creatures by the sight of “as real” gets to know that it is both formless and formative. On one hand, it is “true empty”. On the other hand, “magnificent existence”. It is because of conditioned arising, overlapped conditions to arise. we become unstoppable in not only theory by also real life. Everything unstoppable only if we are unattached. Then it is free hand to go to market, establishing a spiritual base there.

We can say as simply as: “I breathe, so I am”. It means if I do not take breath, I will not be there. However, while I was in mother’s womb, I did not breathe but I was there. Accordingly, it is inferred that when I no longer breathe or stop breathing, I still exist there. Why not? Then I have to return to mother’s womb. I have to carry the karma so as to pay retribution.

7. Buddha is old and sick also

While Buddha was doing a raining retreat in the Baluva village, a serious disease brought about to him. Too much pain, almost dead. Nevertheless, the Blessed One maintained mindfulness and alert. He succumbed the gruesome pain without any exclamation.

“Ananda, I am now old, worn out, venerable, one who has traversed life’s path. I have reached the term of life, which is 80. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps,

so the Tathagata's body is kept going by being strapped up. It is only when the Tathagata withdraws his attention from outward signs, and by the cessation of certain feelings, enter into the signless concentration of mind, that his body knows comfort" (translated into English by Alexander Duncan)²

Buddha has to undergo sickness, aging and death as a man but Tathagatha does not. In Mahaparinibbana Sutta, a young Bodhisatta named Kassapa doubtfully asked Buddha why he also pass away as everybody else.

Buddha replied: "dear good man! Tathagtha's body stays permanent and unbreakable, as strong as a diamond. The body is not formed by food and drink. That is Dharmakaya (Dharma-Bodhy)".

Dharmakaya is the Tathagatha's body, permanent and long-lasting. Hence Buddha is Tathagatha but Tathagatha is not Buddha. Tathagatha is himself.

Buddha's manifestation endures the pain of sickness because he aims to subjugate the living beings. "Subjugation" has the meaning of reminding and instructing. Manifestation is the appearance to be visible. Overall, everyone comes to old age, sickness and death in the end so clinging to greed, hatred, and ignorance is troublesome. It is Buddha who is bound to get aging, sickness and death. Let's stay in the everlasting Dharmakaya.

The young Bodhisatta continued asking: "Buddha achieved Dharmakaya by what conditions?"

"Long ago, I protected Dharma so now I attain the Diamond body, immutable and permanent...", which implies the true practice of Dharma. On reflection, ascetic Gotama applied wrong method by undertaking austerity in a period of six years.

8. Buddha is Tathāgatha...

Buddha once asked Vimalakīrti: "*if you want to see Tathagata, then how can you reflect on Tathāgatha?*". He did not say: "*if you want to see Buddha, then how can you reflect on Buddha?*". Instead, he said how to reflect on Tathagata. Vimalakīrti replied: "Reflecting on Tathagata by introspecting the true form of our body, so does reflecting on Buddha". In other words, seeing the "true form" prompts the realization of Tathāgata, Buddha and even living beings. All sorts of the things originally originating from Buddha embryo will be merged with Buddha embryo one day.

Buddha is Tathāgata as he always lives within Tathāgata. In other words, Buddha lives in his own Dharmakaya, i.e. "true form of formlessness".

By means of brassy sound and glimmering light, one is not only obscured from seeing Tathāgata but also referred to step on evil path by Tathāgata because he is formless. Tam Tang³ pays homage to the false Buddha innumerable times on his journey to receive Buddhist canon. It is

²<https://palisuttas.wordpress.com/2015/02/01/mahaparinibbana-sutta-dn-16/>

³A fictional character in the Chinese novel "Journey to the West"

fortunate that his disciple, Ton Ngo Khong⁴, opens the magical third eye to spot the devils, wielding the golden-banded staff to throw a beat on them.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva told to pay homage when seeing Buddha. As for Tathāgata, only applause to him is needed, which means praising, commenting, admiring, nodding head without postulation. According to Lotus Sutra, those who intend to become a preacher of Dharma have to “enter Tathāgata’s house, put on Tathāgata’s robe, sit on Tathāgata’s throne” instead of “entering Buddha’s house, put on Buddha’s robe, sit on Buddha’s throne”. So do “the lifespan of Tathāgata and the Superpower of Tathāgata” instead of “the lifespan of Buddha and the superpower of Buddha”.

9. But Tathāgata (Nhu Lai in Vietnamese) is not Buddha

Nhu means Thus, Lai come. Thus comes it. That’s it regardless of personal desire. No sooner does it turn sour, green, fairly ripe, plump, and odourous than it is. Likewise, it was not until it goes overripe, rotten, patchy and spoiled in the end that it has to be. It is impossible to prevent it. Tathagata is Pali term, Sanskrit Tathāgata, “One who is thus gone”, another equivalent term Tathā-āgata, “one who has thus come” i.e. Thusness, Suchness, Thus Come One...

Buddha proclaimed himself Tathāgata because no other alternatives can be used. Buddha cannot self-proclaim “I”, “Tram”, “Qua Nhan”⁵, “worshipped one” or “master of humans and gods”. As he proclaimed Tathāgata, we mistake Buddha is Tathāgata. Tathāgata is water, air, earth, fire, flower petal, bee, butterfly etc.

Buddha is the one who realizes that. Enlightenment. Awakening. Illumination. Oh, that’s it. Buddha chuckles. Understand each other thoroughly, and see everything clearly. Don’t deceive one another. That is Buddha’s insight. He does not either conceal or outwit. He tells the truth. All the living beings possess such kind of insight i.e. Buddha’s nature. Everyone is going-to-be Buddha.

10. One is all

Phan Rang has a craft village, Bau Truc. All kinds of forms such as nymph Apsara, Bodhisattvas, Arahants, Buddhas, God, deities and even pans, saucepans, flower vases, some bowls, whatsoever, possibly created by the hand of a craftsman. Where come from? From clay. After molding all statues as wish, the craftsman gets them dried under sunshine in order to use. From soft to hard, as hard as unexpected. If we bake it in raw flame, wood flame or burning charcoal, we will get special colours really nice. All from where? From clay also. Each craftsman, owing to lifestyle (culture), produces very different statues (conditioned-arising). If bowl and pot in need, ready. The same to bakery, utensils, even God, Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Deities. Placing them all on the altar along with burning incense, it goes sacred. Obviously, all is made from clay. Clay is a storage. From one we have all. Until one day, all things, forms are dismantled into clay.

⁴ Tam Tang’s disciple. He is a monkey-man who possesses the great skill of fighting and an amazing superpower. He often wields a golden-banded staff as a weapon.

⁵ Tram and Qua Nhan are the honorific titles used by emperors in ancient China and Viet Nam.

Is that one is all and all one? True emptiness but magnificent existence? Hence it is said that “true form” is “formlessness” but not “formlessness”, not formlessness but formlessness, which is accurate. If we look at a form without attachment, then we know Tathāgata(seeing form but as not as form, that is to see Tathāgatha, Diamond Sutra).

“I use be a clay craftsman once upon a time. I am fantastic with this job. Do you understand how to mold a piece of clay to become the favorite thing? Oh, you turn the table around and the clay rotate as a magic while you crouch towards it and say: “I will make a pot, a plate, a lamp or thing like that, who know it? it is what we called to be a human: freedom” (Alexis Zorba)

According to *śrīmālādevī-sūtra*, “Buddha embryo is beyond the effort action. That is permanent and indestructible. Thus Buddha embryo is the maintenance, the establishment”.

11. There is Dharma without Buddha

What is not Dharma? A blossoming flower, a cloud around the mountain top, a river flow, a water stream, a young lady, a man, a bee, a butterfly, a worm in a heap of dung, or a dry nearly-fallen leaf is such a Dharma. Even you and me are Dharma. For long time we do not know, expecting, craving, building, training all the dullness. It is Dharma that does not need us at all. It is not us or owned by us. It undergoes formation, existence, destruction and ending. It is both impermanent and selfless. It rises and falls at once. Sometimes it looks like firefly, lightning, sometimes like a mountain or a river. Only if looking at it by the eyes of a thousand years or even a million years, we see the flow of rising and falling. A lot of current cities and mountain were under ocean tens of thousands of years ago. The shell, and fishbone that are discovered in Himalayas indicate the area used to be sea. That’s it. It is leisure. It makes a joke with itself. Unborn Dharma. We are Dharma, we are not born, either. On account of ignorance, we endure suffering by haphazard bondage.

“Dharma eye” is the sight of “as reality”. As reality? Yes, because the form manifested explicitly is just an embodiment, it quickly disintegrates. Seeing as reality is that of “true form”. True form is ... formlessness, but not formless; not formless but it is formless”. Is that true? Our seeing is the combination of both true emptiness and magnificent existence. It is the seeing that ourself is included in the impermanence and selflessness of all phenomena, existence and creatures. The fragrant mango was originally born from the flower. The petal comes from a bud formed by pollen carried by a bee thousands of miles away. Getting it touch, and then earth, air, water etc. together produce a tiny mango. Thereafter, it grows succulent, then sweet-scented, almost ripe. Unless it is picked for sale in the market or got fallen by children that share later on, it will be rotten and smelly. Then where does it go? It will compost the other mango trees, waiting for another naughty bee. Hence, seeing the true form insofar as realize the “as reality”, actually it is formless from Buddha embryo.

12. Opening eyes to enter the awakening

One day, Buddha’s backache is relieved. After drinking a cup of tea, he summons Bodhisattva disciples around him and states: “I am already old, I am near to entering Nirvana, don’t let your doubt in your mind, you should present it at once!”. For a long time you follow me, do you think

I would not die? Not sick? Not frustrated? otherwise I do not advise people to be patient, meditative etc. Otherwise I encourage to attain wisdom, though it is “no wisdom as well as no achievement”.

It is unexpected that the Bodhisattva noisily asks if there is a shortcut to quickly attain Buddhahood. Buddha is assumed to get irritated but in fact he smiles joyfully. He replies: “yes, there is. It is so easy and quick. That is to enter “samadhi of endless meaning field” so as to realize it.

What is endless-meaning field? What is samadhi? That is samadhi (concentration) lying in endless meaning field, not human, and all sentient and non-sentient beings. In a grass, a flower, a bird swings, in all livings lies such a “field”. In the endless meaning field, we can see as Hu nan: “fundamentally there is no a single thing”. There is nothing until now. Even quantum or wave is empty, to create the material is empty. Why is duck different from hen, rose from chrysanthemum? Why is the huge Sumeru mountain comprised of a mustard seed? Why are four massive oceans inserted in a pore? Why is each pore contain innumerable Buddhas, Bodhisattva? It means entering the samadhi, realizing the method of “endless meaning field” having only one i.e. formlessness. Those who want to enter such samadhi have to sacrifice body and life on a daily basis as many as the sands in Ganga river while the number of sands is indefinite and unboundary. Where are that many lives? Yes, there are. It is not difficult to enter the emptiness. Then, we have “unrestriction” thanks to Prajna, true emptiness.

13. Where do conditions arise?

If ending at the seeing of complete emptiness, then it would be so charmless. Buddha does not intend to lead us to disenchantment. Instead, he aims at enchantment. The enchantment must emerge. If so, there so many things ensue. Hence Buddha would like to recall the past issue. We dwell at the samadhi of endless meaning field, having fun with Tathāgata but later on, we are pushed out to take a form of a Buddha. That is just a “false form”. We embody as Tathāgata, we are not Tathāgata, though. Before preaching, we dwell at meditation, occasionally coming out to have a gossip. In other words, we live in “true form”. Please keep in mind Tathāgata is formless but formlessness here is not only no form but also no formless, nor no form but that is formless! “true form” means we are have both form and no form. No form because we understand Prajna and true emptiness. Having form because we comprehend the conditioned-arising with numerous embodiments i.e. magnificent existence (Avatamsaka). Therefore it is boundless existence. Existence but emptiness, emptiness but existence, so great! The Moon’s reflection in the river. We leisurely fly with no attachment. Relaxation, tranquility, and equilibrium. That’s it so. But for us, flowers either blossom or wither. We enjoy the life in every minute, and every moment.

14. true emptiness Prajna, magnificent existence Avatamsa.

What if asking where to learn Prajna, Manjuri would reply. Theory is there. As for existence, Samantabhadra teaches conditioned-arising which is the fact. Both theory and fact are identical in terms of nature. Both are boundless and unified. Both have interacted mutually for generations. Prajna is supposed to be learned while Avatamsaka practiced. Until a point, that we see everything unstoppable is done.

However, how can enter Samantabhadra Samadhi? Once entering Samntabhadra samadhi, we get to know Tathāgata embodies as a Buddha that children sing: “a Buddha comes out, three demons disappear! The demons of craving, hatred and ignorance.

The purpose of Avatamsaka’s existentialization aims to help us live a peaceful and equanimous life right now and here. A “world of flowers”, splendid and glorious, would be accomplished according to our mind. Therefore those who are capable of ruling themselves, knowing to live equanimously are the rulers of the world who are not gods coming from elsewhere.

Learning Avamṭaka is to find theory and factuality unstoppable in order to attain the boundlessness in all sorts of things.

Boundlessness is unrestricted, unhidden, undivided, and undistinguished. That’s transparent on account of the realization of inter-dependence in rising and falling. In the net of overlapping conditioned-arising see the existentialization comes from emptiness (Prajna).

Theoretically, the giant Sumeru mountain is comprised of a mustard seed, water in the four massive oceans can be contained in a pore. Prajna shows us the true emptiness and formlessness. Nonetheless, emptiness here is not interpreted as nothing. As for the existence, it is only conditioned-arisen so it is magnificent existence, what a marvelous existence! Sometimes it comes into existence in just a quick moment and then vanishes, which leaves us bewildered. Only with the sight of true form as Buddha taught in Lotus Sutra, one can enter the Buddha’s insight.

How the “true form” is! It comes into existence on the basis of formlessness; birth, stay, decay, and death that dwell in the existential world in a fleeting moment return the formlessness. Diamond sutra says, “all the conditioned phenomena, are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows, like dew drops and lightnings, thus you consider”. All things and phenomena in the world (the conditioned) are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, hallucinations, dew drops, lightning etc. Let do contemplate like that. Do not attach and pursue illusion.

A flower flickering in the wind, a colourful butterfly moving slowly, a bee pollinating, a peacock dancing, a lion roaring and so on come from an embryo that really is Buddha embryo (Tathāgata-garbha). All the dharma world of Buddhas and even gods, humans, hungry ghosts, is rooted in Buddha embryo. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva in samadhi observes clearly: “all Buddhas take the body of Vairocana Tathāgata”. In other words, the bodies of Buddhas are Vairocana, all of them emerging from Buddha embryo.

One time Buddha asked Vimalakirti: “how do you contemplate Tathāgata?”. Vimalakirti answered: “I contemplate the Dharma body of Tathāgata as I do so to Buddha’s body and mine, no difference!”.

It is special that Buddha owing to karma in endless generations has attained enlightenment with 32 good signs and 80 characteristics of beauty, and I ...am merely called a “home-resided Bodhisattva” in Vaishaly, I have to practice spirituality for more lifetimes”. Buddha smiled: “I already become a Buddha, you are going-to-be Buddha! Because everybody has Buddha nature intrinsically, everybody possesses the Dharma body and everybody comes from Buddha embryo.

As so, why does Tathāgata who is originally formless manifest as a Buddha? To eradicate the sorrows of all living beings so he is known as venerable, master of gods and humans. The original disease of the living beings is craving-hatred-ignorance. If the three of them are eliminated, then here is Nirvana. How? That's easy. Four noble truth, Eightfold noble path, twelve causes... step by step moves up to the formless Tathāgata, seeing the Buddha embryo and looking at everything as its true form. Since then, it becomes leisure, tranquil and unstoppable. That is a path Buddha taught step by step after his enlightenment and it took him a period of time to search for a new approach so that living beings can accept it.

Buddha dwells in meditation all the time, rarely does he come out. Thanks to the preaching of his two attendants, brilliant Manjuri Bodhisattva riding a lion and compassionate Samantabhadra Bodhisattva riding six-tusked elephant, on Buddha's behalf, Buddha sits still and smile without speaking. Before entering Nirvana, Buddha told his disciples: "so far I have not said a single word, I have not instructed anything". It might be because Buddha foresaw the inventions of AI and the internet which will link their statements to Buddha.

15. Austere way of ascetic Gotama.

Maha Saccaka sutta describes the Gotama's attribute of great effort as wrong as:

Ascetic Gotama thinks:

"Suppose that I, clenching my teeth and pressing my tongue against the roof of my mouth, were to beat down, constrain, and crush my mind with my awareness"⁶.

"Suppose that I, clenching my teeth and pressing my tongue against the roof of my mouth, were to contain and get rid of evil mind by noble mind. As I did so, sweat poured from my armpits . . . Just as a strong man, seizing a weaker man by the head or the throat or the shoulders, would beat him down, constrain, and crush him..."

"And although tireless persistence was aroused in me, and unmuddled mindfulness established, my body was aroused and uncalm because of the painful exertion..."

After that, the ascetic came up with: "Suppose I were to become absorbed in the trance of non-breathing".

"So I stopped the in-breaths & out-breaths in my nose & mouth. As I did so, there was a loud roaring of winds coming out my earholes, just like the loud roar of winds coming out of a smith's bellows".

"And although tireless persistence was aroused in me, and unmuddled mindfulness established, my body was aroused & uncalm because of the painful exertion".

"So I stopped the in-breaths & out-breaths in my nose & mouth & ears. As I did so, extreme forces sliced through my head, just as if a strong man were slicing my head open with a sharp sword..."

⁶Translated by Thanissaro Bikkhu, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.036.than.html>

“Extreme pains arose in my head, just as if a strong man were tightening a turban made of tough leather straps around my head”

“Extreme forces carved up my stomach cavity, just as if a butcher or his apprentice were to carve up the stomach cavity of an ox... “

“There was an extreme burning in my body, just as if two strong men, grabbing a weaker man by the arms, were to roast & broil him over a pit of hot embers.”

Ascetic Gotama thought:

“Suppose I were to take only a little food at a time, only a handful at a time of bean soup, lentil soup, vetch soup, or pea soup”

“So I took only a little food at a time, only a handful at a time of bean soup, lentil soup, vetch soup, or pea soup. My body became extremely emaciated. Simply from my eating so little, my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems... My backside became like a camel's hoof... My spine stood out like a string of beads... My ribs jutted out like the jutting rafters of an old, run-down barn... The gleam of my eyes appeared to be sunk deep in my eye sockets like the gleam of water deep in a well... My scalp shriveled and withered like a green bitter gourd, shriveled & withered in the heat & the wind... The skin of my belly became so stuck to my spine that when I thought of touching my belly, I grabbed hold of my spine as well; and when I thought of touching my spine, I grabbed hold of the skin of my belly as well... If I urinated or defecated, I fell over on my face right there... Simply from my eating so little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair — rotted at its roots — fell from my body as I rubbed, simply from eating so little”.

Practice austerity in various forms, ascetic Gotama gained nothing but exhaustion. Blood ran out, tendon contracted, flesh shrank, eyes got blurred. He remained just as living skeleton. However, the death was near. (Buddha and His Teachings, Narada).

16. Middle Path

After six years of self-experience, ascetic Gotama firmly believed that extreme austerity does not benefit at all even though contemporary philosophers and ascetics assured its inevitability as a way to liberation. Aware of the intellectual and spiritual disadvantage caused by asceticism, he abandoned that kind of practice at once.

Recalling to the childhood, on the occasion of rice ploughing festival, while the father king and everyone else were engaging to festive activities, he was sitting still under a Jammu tree, meditating, entering samadhi and attaining the First Level of Samadhi.

That is truly the path to enlightenment!

He considered that a malnourished body could not prompt a complete illumination, or a well-adapted fitness is essential for spiritual progress. Therefore he decided to consume raw food instead of starving.

Sitting under the tree shadow encompassed by a cool paddy field and unattached with the rice ploughing festival, at the time, he was totally unaware of meditation, concentration, four or eight levels of meditation since he was a very young innocent boy. But he discarded the craving, inquiry (vitarka), and investigation (vicāra) to enter the realm of tranquillity known as “contentment” and achieve true purity. Later on, the people did analysis to categorise from the first to the four level of meditation, and to the state of neither thinking nor not thinking, which just complicated the thing. If remaining innocent as a child, leisurely and purely, one has already entered Samantabhadra’s samadhi.

It is a mistake that one practices relentlessly clinging to plenty of desires. Consequently, the ego keeps growing by means of giant statues, huge temples, promotion to high ranking that all look so ridiculous, then threatening living beings in pursuit of self-honour and wealth. That is no longer the Dharma practice.

17. Enlightenment

Extreme austerity does not bring any results. Considering body polluted prompts to eradicate it to salvation but it leads to near-death state. At the time Buddha is assumed to have almost died, little to little of the milk porridge of Lady Sujata helped him retrieve awareness. He decided to opt for a new path i.e. Middle Path. I personally think I was not until the moment of near-death, the formlessness originated from Tathāgata embryo, awareness from his own Dharma body. Actually, everybody possesses this kind of body too and are able to be enlightened as him, why still sinking into ignorance and sorrows? Since then Buddha viewed all living beings with egalitarianism that everyone is capable of becoming Buddha. Just being covered by craving, it occurred. Lotus Sutra clarifies the formlessness and true form: “all phenomena are as tranquil as emptiness ever since; birth, stay, change, death occurred constantly while its nature remains thus unchanged; permanent stay: it is formless”. Nature-form has been empty and quiet ever since. Because the humans conduct wrong thinking, the evil misconception arises, leading to evil acts...”. Once Buddha regained consciousness, he was startled to see his own “formless Dharma body”. He descended to Niganjana river to take a bath and then sat by Bodhi tree, taking a subtle breath as he had done under Jammnu tree in a field on the occasion of rice ploughing festive held by the father king. During the next 49 days, Buddha entered samadhi, exited samadhi, contemplated a new approach receptive gradually to everyone in order to adjust the views and behaviours in favour of balanced joy.

18. Turning Dharma-wheel

Upon attaining enlightenment, Buddha intended to enter Nirvana as nobody would believe his insight of formlessness and true form. During 49 days of contemplation, he came up with “four noble truths” (Dukkha, Samudaya, Nirodha, Marga) as the greatest means of approaching. Who does not endure dukkha (suffering)? everyone sees suffering. Life is an ocean of sorrow. The tear of living beings is greater than the combined water of four oceans. Thus, how to erase suffering? That is the nearest purpose. Everyone like that. To get it, one has to know the cause of suffering: Samudaya. Then looking for the path to end it: Marga. Altogether that is the way stretching from diagnosing symptoms, to investigating cause to cure. Therefore Buddha is

revered as “the King of Medicine” or “the king of physicians”. Buddha invented so many kinds of medicine such as King of herbs, Medicine Risen, other herbs so on and so forth. On that base emerges Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Noble Path, Twelve Conditions so as to erase craving, the root of all sorrows. Next, there is Samadhi in order to cut hatred, anger. Without craving and hatred, wisdom is unveiled. It is obvious that one has to move step by step with persistence and “the collaboration of the patient”. So strong a medication would bring adverse effect. The curable medicine might be toxic. Hence the way to end suffering sometimes needs to be tortuous, sometimes dealing with symptoms or causes.

“The tranquil pure and shining mind that is unattached with affliction goes subtle, usable and impenetrable, in this respect, I leads my mind to “the insight of my past lives”. Then Three Insights and Six Penetrations took place at dawn. Gotama became Buddha. He attained enlightenment and engaged in the world with great compassion, first sharing with his former ascetic mates.

19. The Only Path

The only path leading to “purity for living beings, cessation of suffering, attainment of ultimate wisdom, entering Nirvana” is meditation. Meditation possibly came into existence from ancient time, when the mankind was there, so there have been innumerable methods according to cultural contexts. Buddha opted for a simply but efficient way of meditation: Four areas of contemplation (Satipathana). Placing thought (sati) in four areas: body, sensation, mind, dharma that later masters touched upon for easy to memorize: impurified body, unpleasant sensations, transient mind and selfless dharma. In fact, it is not as simple as that. Because Buddha afterwards mentioned in Mahaparinirvana Sutta: “**permanence, pleasure, self, purity**”. Owing to the wrong view as a drunk man, one says **impermanence, suffering, non-self and impurity**.

That meditation is classified, analysed, and evaluated will make meditation fall. There cannot find the pure and innocent. Any attempts to suppress and eradicate the evil minds will lead to the mistake as Gotama did. Destroying the body in search of a pure mind is a such a great mistake.

Zen school highlights “mind as Buddha” regardless “body as Buddha” (Tantric school). No mind without body. If no body, where are 32 good signs and 80 characteristics of body? The manner of assessment, teaching, labelling is so scary that humans fail to attain tranquillity. They increasingly get caught to tension, their craving grows more and more, their ego keeps expanded to against the nature. Absolutely, in the monastic sphere, the monks have to keep the right track step by step according to true Dharma. Huineng stood out on unfollowing the conventional way so he got enlightened by overhearing a sentence in Diamon sutra. However, it is such a long way between “enlightenment” and “entering” of Huineng himself.

Meditation is the only path to get enlightened, which indicates the insight of human life from an embryo in mother’s womb to return to Tathāgata’s womb. From Buddha embryo begins the eternal journey or known as “no birth”. Upon insight of the tortuous way, there won’t be birth or death. No birth, no death. It must be, thus is it.

20. Buddha entered Nirvana

Buddha told Cunda: “time has come. Tathāgata is going to enter Nirvana”.

On hearing those words, Cunda suddenly burst into tears: “So sad! Heartbroken! The world would be empty. We have to unanimously and sincerely request Buddha not to enter Nirvana”. Buddha again told Cunda: “*you should weep as grievously as that. Let you contemplate the body like a banana trunk, a sun ray, a bubble, illusion, Gandhara’s citadel, unbaked pottery, a lightning, a drawing on water surface, a death-row inmate, an overripe fruit, a meat, an oversized embroidery, and the stamping of pestle into mortar. Let see the phenomena like both food and toxicant*”.

Cunda replied: “ *it is true as Buddha has said. Even though I know your Nirvana entering is manifested contrivance, I can’t bear my grief. Now on retrospection, I feel pacified*”.

Buddha commented Cunda: “*That’s good! That’s good! Now you know Buddha’s manifestation that is analogous to living beings exercise contrivance to enter Nirvana*”.

So it is clear. Buddha only exercises contrivance to manifest, through which shows living beings anyhow death will come. Therefore they should cultivate behaviours and eradicate craving, hatred, and ignorance to get relaxed. Buddha has to die so we are not exempted. Nevertheless, keep in mind that Tathāgata’s body is long-lasting eternally because it comes from Buddha embryo or Dharma body. We have Buddha nature, Dharma body coming from Buddha embryo too so why we are afraid of “birth, sickness, aging, death”.

21. Permanence, pleasure, self, purity

Ever since we are used to living with impermanence, suffering, non-self, and impurity. Suddenly at the moment of passing away, Buddha stated in the Mahaparinirvana sutra that there are no such things as impermanence, suffering, non-self, impurity but permanence, pleasure, self, purity. It is because the humans live in “upside down” as a drunken man so perceiving the universe invertedly. Impermanence, suffering, non-self, impurity are common things in everyday life in the realm of humans that everyone knows and attempts to overcome so as to attain happiness. As a matter of fact, that is just the shortsighted sight of common people, Buddha doesn’t. It is noticed that if Buddha delivered teaching straightforward right after his enlightenment, nobody would understand. Consequently he had to take a torturous route for better reception than it would be practice with attentively. No sooner was the situation appropriate than Buddha opened the eyes of living beings for them to enter Buddha’s insight as mentioned in Lotus Sutra. Since then “penetrating to the realm of peace and joy. Seeing what? Tathāgata, Buddha embryo, formless and true form. Living beings who own Buddha nature must have the same insight as Buddha. Nonetheless, one day, at the foot of **Griddhrakūta**, in face of Arhats and Bodhisattvas, Buddha revealed a secret hidden for so long, then five thousand disciples left, saying that Buddha went back on. Buddha had to justify many times: in the beginning, in between, in the end, I just say one word. As a physician, after diagnosing, prescribes medicine to relieve pain, then going on to cure the root of disease. Curable medicine is also toxic with many side-effects, so must be cautious.

it is reminiscent of Venerable Phuoc Hau (1862-1949) wrote after realizing Tathāgata:

Canons remain in the eighty four thousand words

Neither surplus nor deficit in studying

Now reflect, forgetting all

On the head remains the word “thus”.

Ever since impermanence, suffering, non-self are referred to “three seals of Dharma”, what teaching excluding the three seals is not Buddha’s. In Mahāparinirvāna sūtra, prior to the moment of Nirvāna, Buddha said they are only “formative words” not “true meaning”, because the living beings perceive upside down, leading to such thought. “As a drunk man sees houses, mountains, rivers head over heels but in fact they don’t. Likewise, covered by ignorance and affliction, the living beings come up with the wrong view: self is assumed to be non-self, permanence impermanence, purity impurity, pleasure suffering. Thinking like that but not really clear about that ...”

However, we are used to impermanence. We are fascinated with it in our thrilling world, why we look for the impermanence of Tathāgata? Likewise, we are familiar with suffering, we find it also happy, mistaking suffering as joy and vice versa. Therefore coming to the Buddha's embryo is a passive process i.e. being put into it. It is not our intent, isn't it?

Then Buddha said:

“now I am going to elaborate the “entering to Buddha’s embryo:

***Self** actually is the real meaning of Buddha. **Permanence** is the real meaning of Dharma body (of Buddha nature or of Buddha’s embryo). **Pleasure** is the real meaning of Nirvāna, **purity** is the real meaning of Dharma.*

To rescue the entire living beings, so instructing to practice non-self. On account of that kind of practice eradicated the mind of self-attachment, entering the realm of purity and pleasure (in the meantime).

If self exists, then Dharma does not decouple with suffering.

If self does not exist, then there is no point in practicing noble deeds.

By thinking so, those who cultivate the suffering are referred to unfortunate, those who practice pleasure are referred to fortunate. Those who cultivate non-self are referred to affliction, those who practice permanence are referred to Buddha’s embryo (Mahāparinirvāna sūtra)

It indicates that as long as there is self, then cannot get rid of the mind of attachment so as to erase suffering, continuing to bear suffering longer. Without self, hazardous cultivation in search of tranquillity goes in vain. One must know that self is the true meaning of Buddha (true self) rather than the common self of ours.

In living beings' bodies lies Buddha's nature i.e. Buddha's embryo, also understand permanence, pleasure, self, purity. Let's take refuge to "three actual refuge", do not find it elsewhere.

Buddha told Kassapa (a young Bodhisattva asking why Buddha also dies): *"OhKassapa! Tathāgata's body is long-lasting, indestructible, a diamond body distinctive from a common flesh body. That is Dharma body. You should know Tathāgata's body is not body but body, neither birth nor death, neither accumulation nor practice, infinite, unmarked, neither perception nor form, absolute, immovable, neither sensation nor mental activity, unconditioned, not karma, not retribution, neither go nor pass, neither functioning mind nor its mental actions, unconceivable..."*

If saying ignorance triggers mental activities (Sankara), the common people will prompt to distinguish two phenomena: wisdom and ignorance. The wise people clearly know thatthe phenomenon originally has no duality. Non-duality is the true phenomenon.

Hence Heart Sutra says: "no ignorance, no end of ignorance". There is not only no ignorance but also its endlessness! So great!

In Vimalakirti Sutra, while the present Bodhisattvas discuss "non-duality" as their own insight, in the end, Manjuri requests Vimalakirti for his own opinion. He kept silent without speaking. Amidst the perplexity of everyone, Vamalkiti appears to be stuck, then Manjuri applause: "that is really non-duality!". Because non-duality is "cutting words, erasing mind, action and conceptual world", no longer talking or thinking.

22. Respiration and meditation

I am a medical doctor who graduated from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy – Saigon in 1969. For so many years, I worked relentlessly in the Emergency Department of Children's Hospital and then in charge of Health Education, involvingteaching, writing etc. Until one day, I was admitted to hospital for brain operation as a result of stroke (1997). From unconscious to awake in ICU, seemingly I have passed to a new life. The sunshine looked different.The wind-blowing leaves feel strange. The pebbles in the courtyard seemed not the same. When able to take the very first steps clumsily as a toddle, I felt it was really a miracle. I find it adorable as well as funny to see my image in mirror. Is it me? My colleagues prescribed a lot of medicine. I selected solely one because I know my disease cannot be cured by medicine. Have to find another way. The a friend gifted me a copy of Heart Sutra (a blurred duplicated copy): "Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when in deep practice of Prajnaparamita, saw the emptiness of five skandhas (aggregate) and sundered the bonds that caused the suffering". The canonical words that were previously ambiguous suddenly became comprehensive to me. Oh, yeah. Must be "uncontrollable". Must count on ourselves. Must do practice. I both studied Buddhist canon and looked for in heap of medical scriptures that I had learned tens of years ago. There is a ready-made path that I have beenunfamiliar for so long. "The meditation of observing breath" (Anapanasati, mindful the inhale and exhale). *"Know breath in when breathing in, know breath out when breathing out....* There is only that. Is it credible? Looking for it thoroughly, practising continuously, then there is a base of belief.

Recently, more and more physiologists and psychologists in collaboration with monks applied the cutting edge technology such as EEG, PET, fMRI and more in the hope of finding out the “mystery” of meditation, then meditation thrives as much as it brings about confusion and doubt. In fact, the application of technology in observing meditation just partly deal with the concern, because behind it are numerable “unspeakable things”!

There are as many as forty areas of meditation, I just pick one, breath, as Buddha taught in Anapanasati sutta. It may pose a question why I choose breath as the object of meditation. Why not the others? Since breath is the most observable. It is right before the nose and the eyes. Breathe every time and everywhere. We take breath ten times every minute so it is easy to observe. Sometimes it is fast or slow, short or long. Sometimes it is soft or strong, varying all the time. When in breathe, we are the only ones to know it, not disturb anyone.

Breathe unconsciously. In deep sleep is still breathing. The respiratory centre lies in medulla oblongata, below and outside of the cerebral cortex. Breath does not need us, it is outside of us.

Breath is the connection between mind and body. In case of fear, we gasp. In case of exhilaration, we take a soft breath. Breath dwells in the present, here and now, neither yesterday nor tomorrow. So life in fact is only a breath. Taking a deep breath in at birth and a breath out in death, i.e. returning what we borrow temporarily!

As far as breath is concerned, we come up with chest. However, breath happens at abdomen rather than chest. Abdominal breathing which is also known as diaphragmatic breathing is the psychological way. To know that, let take a look at a sleeping child, a frog or a lizard.

Respiration takes place not only at lungs but also at each cell. Lungs work as an air pump. Hence, if we somehow regulate the intake and outtake of air, its effect will happen to every cell.

The brain makes up only 2 per cent of total weight but consumes up to 25 – 30 per cent of oxygen. A large part of that is spent on nonsense things. If mindfulness is applied to each breath, craving, hatred, ignorance, resentment etc. will gradually go away and finally disappear.

When in deep meditation (commonly known as fourth level of meditation), the practitioner seems breathless. The breath appears to stop. Tranquil, dissolved, disintegrated. That is the “stage of stillness” at the end of breath – usually lasting long, quietly, calmly, tranquilly since less energy consumption. As a flying bird without lifting wings or a smooth-moving car at neutral gear with high fuel economy, I call it stage “Prana”. Pra means prior to while Ana breath in (*prior to breath-in* also indicates *following breath-out*). The stage of stillness gets longer continuously as much as it goes borderless, vanishing into air, quietly and delicately. Then there is no such mind of space, time, self, otherness etc.

“Relinquish” even the thought, because thought is still related to recall or think. Have to overcome mindfulness. So the fourth level of meditation is to “clear thought tranquilly”. Clearing the thought (recalling or thinking) paves the way for tranquillity. But that is not all because there exists the mind of knowing supposed to analyse, evaluate and compare. That knowing is detrimental. Still, it is unattached to craving, hatred, ignorance, it tends to know, follow, evaluate. In short, here requires an absolute “thoughtlessness”. It is thoughtless to not

only the outside world (seeing without generating thought) but also the tendency of knowing of the inner world.

Why is meditation referred to hierarchy for evaluation and acknowledgement? Who presents the attainment, who certifies it, who confers the rank etc. There have been many arhats who did not step on the “hierarchy of sainthood”. They came across Buddha, listened to him a few words, and then attained the arhat at once. Somebody who was coming close to death are visited by Buddha. Buddha said one sentence: “the seeing is the seeing, the hearing is the hearing”. Owing to only that, the one got enlightenment right away, becoming an arhat.

To mind my, the determined factor in meditation is to “unwind the whole body” like flowing downstream or hanging the body on the hanger. Unwinding the whole body is to make the body soft, contracting, adrift, unstressed. Tonus musculature ends up energy extensively (roughly 40 percent), so relaxation is attributed to a considerable reducing energy consumption

The body releases and the energy consumption drops considerably, which results in the lesser need of nutrition by means of food supply. Eat less but it is still sufficient. The body will work less hard, the cells will not work relentlessly. The research conducted on starving creatures shows that they live longer and younger.

Who can breathe for whom? Who can do meditation for whom? So let's count on ourselves only.

When going to deeper stage of meditation (fourth level), the practitioners put the breath on ease, there is no point taking breath, no more breath. Actually, they still breathe as lightly as untouchable by diaphragm. Every light movement of the diaphragm to 1 cm leads to 250ml of air flowing to and fro. The oxygen is needed very little then. All the cells are resting and pausing to work hard. The remaining air in the bronchial is sufficient to maintain the life in the form of hypoxia. For multiyear-long meditator practitioners, this is the phenomenon of persistent lacking of oxygen (chronic hypoxia). At the stage of chronic hypoxia). In the situation of Chronic Hypoxia, body will discrete the hormones like dopamine, serotonin, endorphine, oxytocine that is linked to relaxation, comfort, improving memory, pain relief etc. That is the delight of meditation, too.

23. Near-death karma

A close encounter with death can bring a realawakening, a transformation in our whole approach to life. (Sogyal 29)

Perhaps one of its most important revelations is how it transforms the lives of those who have been through it. Researchers have noted a startling range of aftereffects and changes: a reduced fear and deeper acceptance of death; an increased concern for helping others; an enhanced vision of the importance of love; less interest in materialistic pursuits; a growing belief in a spiritual dimension and the spiritual meaning of life; and, of course, a greater openness to belief in the afterlife. (Sogyal 29)

I was transformed from a man who was lost and wandering aimlessly, with no goal in life other than a desire for material wealth, to someone who had a deep motivation, a purpose in life, a

definite direction, and an overpowering conviction that there would be a reward at the end of life. (Sogyal 29)

I felt slowly were a very heightened sense of love, the ability to communicate love, the ability to find joy and pleasures in the smallest and most insignificant things about me ... I developed a great compassion for people that were ill and facing death and I wanted so much to let them know, to somehow make them aware that the dying process was nothing more than an extension of one's life (Sogyal 30).

A personal, utterly non-conceptual revelation of what we are, why we are here, and how we should act, which amounts in the end to nothing less than a new life, a new birth, almost, you could say, a resurrection (Sogyal 40 – 41).

The research shows when heart stops beating, brain is not dead yet right away. By contrast, it continues working with high speed. The secreted hormone enhances the awareness ability and feeling of peace. Hormone serotonin also increases, which activates the link with sight illusion. It helps recollect all previous events in life. The researches indicate near-death experience probably caused by shortage of oxygen at brain.

During Covid 19, some patients were referred to “happy hypoxia” or “silent hypoxia” because the volume of oxygen in their blood reached low. Still, they did not feel fatigued or short of breath like the majority of patients.

Normally, the ratio of oxygen in the blood of healthy people is 95 percent while that of these patients reaches below 40 percent without the symptom of oxygen shortage, which surprised doctors. They are like normal people, they still have coughs, rapid breathing, fast or slow beating heart. Whether the patients are accustomed to meditation or the state of lacking oxygen (chronic hypoxia)?

We have seen the zen masters seek a place to practice in the high mountains due to rarefied atmosphere and low Oxygen. In the fourth level of meditation, the stage of “relinquishing peacefully”, the meditators seem to stop breathing.

24. Personal experiences.

Cattara-Satpattana (four areas of contemplation) is a fundamental technique of meditation including “body, sensation, mind, dharma”. To my mind, there actually is only one. Because body foregrounds sensations, without sensations mind would not come to existence, and no mind there would be no dharma. Dharma originates from mind. No mind, no thought, dharma ceases to exist. We suffer because of Dharma. We cannot get tranquil because of dharma, too. All dharma are the product of mind, the mind triggers all. But for sensations, perceptions would stop to be. Perceptions is the troublemaker. All issues spark from it. Sensations are from touching. Touch ensues sensations, craving, attachment, existence, going to the circle of “birth, aging, death”. That all the senses get tranquil would end the issues. When consciousness turns to wisdom, all sorts of things would get purified. As eight kinds of consciousness transform into four kinds of wisdom, things would get done. Four areas of contemplation i.e. body, sensations, mind, Dharma in which body is the gateway to getting rid of afflictions and attaining tranquility.

It leads to Nirvana. There is Buddha named “Completing no emptiness”, nothing impossible to complete, only by practice to transform five preliminary sensational consciousness to wisdom (five preliminary sensational consciousness: sight, hearing, smelling, tasting, touch get transformed *to wonderful wisdom of observation*)

We are suffered because of the bonds of craving, hatred etc. it is the fact that we perceive it as real that we dwell on things like certificates, fame, wealth, compliments, competition and more. The meditation teaches renouncement. the purpose of meditation is renouncement, too. Mindful of breath is to relinquish the breath gradually in order to attain Samadhi. As a matter of fact, the breath itself gets unravelled not by our attempt.

“does body get released yet?” is a mantra, a Dharani of my own in every morning when sitting facing the wall. I said facing the wall because my seat is one meter away the wall. Obviously, meditation is confined to sitting. Walking, standing, lying, and sitting all are meditation. Still, sitting has more fun and make sense. I cannot sit in either full-lotus position or half-lotus position as tradition, so I sit by my own like the Tibetan style, Japanese style and Western style. Whatever is fine. For 25 years, in the morning, I do meditation in my own way since it is not in line with a particular sect or a master. I just follow the teachings of Anapanasati as Buddha taught in about 30 to 40 minutes, then combine with light exercise in another about 30 minutes that I see it as a kind of “active meditation”, a kind of “exiting meditation”. Each gesture of exercise affects every “muscle, bone, joint” of the body. I find my health better, my workforce more persistent, my memory shaper. Some days if I do not practice meditation and do exercise like that, I feel tired. Gradually I seem to addict to that. I write a verse for my self: “*release the whole body, like being hung on the hanger, sitting in a round position, Shoulders as wide as the back, observe the breath, like getting from away, coming in and going out, deep and shallow, keep mind on pausing, pranasati, breath expandingly and contractingly, body mind are tranquil, no more thought, no more time, a wandering dust, attaching to breath, conditioned arising selflessly, five aggregates are empty, so it is leisure, free hands to market*”,

The gesture of releasing the body is significant to enter meditation. It would be a failure if the body is still very hard upon meditation. Thus, it is reminded that *if the body releases?* When releasing the body like that, we are like floating, there would not be living beings, sensations or things like that. If we really release the body at once, we can reduce the energy consumption considerably.

It is possible to enter samadhi at the first breath. Really? Yes, it is. Sit quietly, keep the back straight, take a soft breath and then release the whole body. Gradually detach the breath, no need to count, observe or follow it. We dive into a state of tranquillity and emptiness when a soft breath outflows before the next soft breath-in. It knows itself regardless our concern. Upon positive pressure, the air flows out. By contrast, the air flows in. The state of tranquillity happens when pressure is zero. Those who are familiar with that will let the air move passively without any effort. Otherwise, if there is some attempts, it will go in vain. I write some poetic lines for to keep myself alert: “let everything out/ the last air/ float like a flowing air/ dive into emptiness/ pervade every corner/ immense sky and earth/ as soft as nothing/ exist like nothing (yes or no).

There will be abandonment but for persistence. Regardless of all mockery, let be “resolute”. Sit cross-legged like a precious stupa. A precious stupa. In the stupa sit PrabhūtaratnaBuddha (Many Treasures) who is smiling to welcome us. It is Prabhūratana Buddha who actually is a dead body constituting of soil, water, fire, wind (Carbon, Hydrogen, Oxygen, Nitrogen) and other elements like copper, lead, iron, zinc, Mangan, Magnesium, phosphate, carbonate and whatsoever. Stupa originally means a tomb. In Lotus sutra, Buddha enter the stupa to meet Prabhūratana Buddha with so much joy.

Anapanasati (Observe the breath) is the meditation technique scientific, so easy that everyone can practice without fear of “mental disorder”. It includes Tranquil Meditation (Samatha) and Insight meditation (Vipassana), which lead to Samadhi regardless of complex levels of rupaloka and arūpaloka meditative state.

When knowing more about anatomy, physiology, psychology etc. of Anapanasati, I personally think Buddha let us discover another secret so as to quickly enter the Samantabhadra Samadhi, which is to keep the mind in the state of emptiness between two breaths. It might be considered a Bardo, the intermediary between breath-in and breath-out. There we have a period of tranquility, no breath, stop breathing, a short “death state”. That is “the effective practice of death” on a daily basis that Tantric practitioners try to experience the death, study the death, be used to and get along with the Ghosh of death. Prana that the ancient people regarded as “source of living” is the state of breathlessness, the state prior to breath. It is the stage we are in mother’s wombs or retreat to Buddha’s embryo.

When having mind or perception, it will spark issues at once. And there will be chaos right away. However, it is very so hard to erase the wandering mind. It is Buddha who even was disturbed by Mara with illusionary images, not easy to get rid of. Hence it is usual that such thoughts come and go. Let it be. It will come and then go. Do not try to banish it. The more banish, the more attached, “gone with the outside” (bonded by bonded, evoke so issue sparks).

When the body and mind get calm, we can feel tranquil and comfortable as we know.

25. Quality of Death

Today people care for not only “quality of life” but also “the quality of dying and death”, which indicates a “good death”.

World Health Organization (WHO) defines “quality of life” as an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns”⁷. Quality of life, thus, emphasizes the subjective sensation of individuals, which shows the new approach shifting from traditional method which is mostly based on the physicians’ evaluation and results of diagnosing facility.

The survey of “quality of death” in nearly 30 countries shows that England and Australia are the best places of death, America and Cana rank 30th, China 37th and India 40th. Generally, it grounds on the system of relief (pain relief medicine).

⁷<https://www.who.int/tools/whoqol>.

There are 11 indicators to measure the “quality of death”: personal qualities, life achievements, quality of experienced life, no pain, happy family, close-knit, friends, morality, spirituality (faith and religion), interest in treatment, and relationship with health workers.

Near-death karma is the karma generated by the thought upon dying. This kind of cognitive karma is so strong and crucial that it determines the intention of rebirth.

How to live is evaluated by “quality of life” but is it necessary to touch the death? As who will not die? As that is an inevitable part of life. Since then, many have suggested a definition, some indicators to measure the “quality of death”, the near-death period of an individual. It is noted that no one examines the experience of a particular dead person about how joyful he is. Instead, the examination can be done in terms of multiple factors by observing and inquiring the family members, friends, and health workers whether the late people had a good death. For example, in the near-death stage, do the people succumb to the physiological symptoms? In case of pain, is there sufficient pain relief medicine? What about the kindness of the health workers who give care to them? Does the care meet their demand? Do they take the last breath in their favourite place? Are there their loved ones nearby at the last moment? Do they receive the spiritual guide (religion) in order to be pacified in face of the death? Do they maintain personal qualities? Do they get respect and take pride in their life’s accomplishments without regrets, anxiety or fear of debt at the last moment? Obviously, it is in accordance with the cultural context and social norms prevailing in their society.

Staying alive after the moment within an inch of my life due to brain operation, I discover a lot of miracles. Life is liveable. Life must be happy and joyful. There is no point in feeling suffered. It is fine with an insufficient meal, let think we are on an isolated island. I posit it is time to learn how Buddha lived and do the same. The more we know Buddha, the more we admire him. He was stoned, was attacked by an elephant, was envied, and was competed by all kinds of people. Then it is clear that owing to six years of asceticism Buddha acquired patience. While falling asleep in a grave, he was spit to face by the shepherds. He had to search for the leftover cloths at the funeral. The ascetic life renders the person for the lifestyle of “patience and knowing enough”. I am reminiscent of my poor childhood. Seven years in forest, from the age of 5 to 12, I was sick continually such as malaria, dysentery, malnutrition, lack of food and clothing. In some places lived tigers and they used to attack humans in forest at night. Moreover, elephants destroyed the people’s residences as well as their farms. I even sometimes took the water remaining in the buffalo’s footprints or bamboo roots. Sometimes I had food with only dried fish, fermented fish beside the oiled-tube lamp. Very often only sweet potatoes and corn were in place of rice. At the age of 10 or 11, I went to school in Go Ong Nom. Every day I brought rice ball wrapped in a spathe with baked fish, sitting to eat on the a tree branch next to a U-shaped shelter in order to get ready to hide in case of bombing. Now I find everything very happy. I admire Buddha since he reiterated death which is in fact the end of a food-raised body. Tathāgata’s body is of diamond that is indestructible and long-lived. His disciples, after sobbing, got to know so they burst into laughter. As a matter of fact, Buddha did not die or pass. Thousands of years later, he gets younger and younger every day, closer to human life. Needless

to say, every species has its own Buddha. Fish, frogs, reptiles, birds, mammals etc. have Buddha or the awoken one of their own.

26. Now myself

I have to note down on paper my intention to do the next day. Otherwise, I will forget all. Paper is ready at the top of the bed, in the toilet, on the dining table where the ideas often spark in mind. The absent-mind of the elder is known as Senile dementia but only forgetting what just happens. What happened sixty or seventy years ago still remains as if it just occurred the last day. If forgetting all the past, that is Alzheimer. Quick forgetting is a clear sign of this age beside bad hearing, bad seeing. Hence, most of all, no need to practice also brings about the renouncement, inferring that no desire to be enlightened is enlightenment. The spiritual practitioners undergo great hardship in the hope of forgetting, renouncing and realizing “seeing as seeing, hearing as hearing”, no evaluation, no criticism. Thus, does it make sense to equate old age to enlightenment? One day, we get to know that we are used to living in the realm of “impermanence, suffering, non-self, impurity” enthusiastically ever since. Suddenly now it turns to “permanence, pleasure, self, purity”. Therefore, those who dwell with Tathāgata, in Tathāgata, in Dharma body do not need tirelessly practice spirituality. Kassapa Bodhisattva approached to ask Buddha why he would die like ordinary people. Buddha made distinction between Buddha and Tathāgata: “you should know Tathāgata’s body is not body but it is a body, neither death nor birth, neither do nor practice, indefinity, boundlessness, no mark, neither knowing nor form, absolutely pure...” (Mahaparinirvana).

Dharma is thus. It goes through birth, staying, change, death, coming and going. Why have to get it away, avoid it, fear, worry? It is not ourselves, not ours, not our ego. It is above of birth and death, purity and impurity, adding and diminishing. There is neither Buddha nor Dharma. It is dependent origination, overlap of condition, emptiness but existence, existence but emptiness. Let’s stay in accordance with Dharma, innocently as naturally.

Canons remain in the eighty four thousand words

Neither surplus nor deficit in studying

Now reflect, forgetting all

On the head remains the word “thus”.

(Venerable Phuoc Hau)

Living with “thus” is to live in every second, every minute. Each moment or eachksana⁸is endless. Because time and space are not existential. Space is made of time that is a product of ours. Waiting is long but wish short. The youngsters feel slow, the elders fleet. Living is each ksana is free from the time and space. Now and here. Living in each ksana is to live with Tathāgata, in Tathāgata, with “permeance, pleasure, self, purity”. From Tathāgata comes it, and then set to return to Buddha’s embryo. That’s it.

⁸A Buddhist term refers to a moment as short as a thought.

Anything just happens once. It's useless hoping to meet again. Only once. This is the first and the last time, as well. Let live at the moment.

I just study a little of Buddha's teachings owing to unknown conditions. I only try to get its essence. Seemingly everything happens to me in an unusual arrangement. After the operation, I felt I turned to the next life. After awaking, I was gifted a copy of Heart Sutra. It seemed to me that everything burst. I just learned a word: emptiness. "*Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when in deep practice of Prajnaparamita, saw the emptiness of five skandhas (aggregate) and sundered the bonds that caused the suffering*". regardless of the heated debate among scholars, philosophers, and archaeologists based on a huge amount of materials, I believe it is true. It is emptiness that does not mean nothing but it implies dependent origination and non-self. The word Emptiness (Sunyata) seems to rely much the question of why about human life. why we are? Where we come from? What we come for? Unless our parents had met, where we would be now? Without our grandparents' union, who we are? Thus, it is because of dependent origination. However, what triggers the intensive origination? It is karma that works as the leading factor. Oh, it is so fascinated. It is interesting that "the one of observation to be equanimous" is identified with "the one of world sound perception"⁹. It sounds so familiar. At the age of twelve, I heard my aunt's prayer upon bombardment: "Nam môĐạitừĐạibì Quán ThêẤmBồtát Ma ha tát"¹⁰. I quietly fell asleep next to the heap of bricks. Then I got to know that being "the one of observation" foregrounds "the one of world sound perception". In other words, to hear the cries of the world, to help others anytime and anywhere, we must be "equanimous" first. The next question is how? It is unusual that the words in the Diamond Sutra come up: "dwelling in nowhere generates mind". So it is essential to enter Samadhi. There are no other ways. On account of the statement "dwelling in nowhere generates mind", Huineng realized "fundamentally there is not a single thing" while we are still attached endlessly. Upon knowing "to be but not to be", saying that but in fact not like that, unlike that but it is as mentioned in Diamond Sutra, so interesting! If we take gentle notice, how long have we mistaken the truth but still naïve? Provided that we extend beyond the form, the manifestation or the outside embodiment, is it referred to the liberation? Meditation renders us the mindfulness and right view which leads to right thinking and right living in need of a equanimous life. Therefore, one need enter Nirvana. It is a fact that wrong meditation is prone to "madness", another deception. One has to learn through oneself. As far as I am concerned, thanks to medical knowledge such as anatomy, physiology, neurology, psychology etc. I found Buddha's teaching of Anapanasati meditation (breath-in and breath-out) really scientific. Since then, I concentrate on the practice and coin my own term: "Pranasati, keeping mind on the pause between two breaths". As I enter Samadhi, the thought of breath is erased. It's not worth classifying, hierarchizing, assessing meditation. The failure of meditation is the result of the great desire. As a child, Gautam sat for joy under a tree in a field, entering Samadhi while watching his father at the "farming festival". No one can define the Samadhi as first level, second level or whatsoever. Thereafter, Gautam was drawn by other techniques of doing starving or breathlessness so he was prone to death.

⁹Both are translations of Avalokitesvara.

¹⁰The Vietnamese chanting offered to Avalokitesvara.

To answer my inquiry of why, the Lotus Sutra comes up as magnificent as a thousand-blue petal lotus. Blue? That is the amazing image of Gadgadasvara Bodhisattva between thousand lotuses coming from the formless realm. He paid a visit to Gautam Buddha and then departed right away, which is contrary to Avalokitesvara who has massive care. In Lotus sutra, I learn one statement: “Formlessness here is of no form but non-formless, non-formless but formless is truly formlessness”. Actually, the form we are living with and the “impermanence, suffering, non-self and impurity” is produced by “an inverted view of illusion”. It is not real as it is just an illusive form. Whoever perceives it real will succumb to suffering. It is Tathāgatha that originates from Buddha’s embryo and embodies for a while, which cause our perception of impermanence and non-self.

Avatamsakasūtra which is the first teachings of Buddha after enlightenment cannot be comprehensive to anyone. It took Buddha 49 days to look for an alternative approach. Then Buddha delivered another sermon of the Four Noble Truths at Sarnath. After 45 years of preaching the Dharma, Buddha finally told his disciples: “I have never said any words”. So great! Buddha might have foreseen the coming of the internet, AI etc. so he might be attributed to falsified words. In fact, every living being has an intrinsic Buddha’s nature and one they are subject to find by themselves as the invaluable gem hidden in the pocket of the marginalized man.

For ages I have known that Buddha is Tathāgata whereas Tathāgata is not Buddha. A bunch of trees, a grass blade, a bee or an ant is Tathāgata. We are Tathāgata, too because we come from the Buddha’s embryo. We have the same Buddha’s nature, Dharma Body as Buddha but the distinction is... non-awaken. As long as we live in true form with “true emptiness and magnificent existence”, we are able to giggle with ourselves. We get to know why Buddha keeps smiling, in fact, he smiles to himself. Through the Lotus sutra, we learn a number of Bodhisattva’s amazing deeds that are applicable to life usefully, namely, respect (Sadāparibhūta, never-disrespect), honest (Bhaisajyarāja or Sarvasattvapriyadarśana, whoever gets joy on seeing him), understanding (Avalokitesvara). Let’s apply it and see the result. Come to see, not hurry to put faith in. On the ground of “true emptiness”, where “magnificent existence” emerges with a realm full of splendour (Padma-garbha-loka-dhātu) exhibited, which brings us joy and peace. It is supposed that if we entered Samantabhadra’s Samadhi, there would be a chance to come across the Buddha twisting his body to emerge from the mother’s womb, on the formlessness comes a “formative baby”. Thus, every Buddha undertakes embodiment from Buddha’s embryo as clay shapes countless things. It is recollected that Gautam Buddha opened the Stupa seeing Prabhūtaratna Buddha awaiting. Both burst into joy and exchanged the heartfelt welcome as if two old friends had not met each other for ages. Does it make sense to scare of our own Prabhūtaratna? Amid the perplexion, Vimalakirti shows up. How great it is! A lay Bodhisattva boldly take challenge by raise concerns from being monks to meditation, begging alms food, practice spirituality, preaching and so on. Then on the basis of “community approach”, he take Buddhism rooted in ordinary life: living a temporal life with the joy of Dharma.

I tried to study a little like that, selecting the fundamental teachings to get and practice. How immense the Dharma is with thousands of scriptures. In spite of lifetimes of learning, one is not able to know all. Eventually, only “on the head remains the word thus” is sufficient. I personally believe meditation foregrounds right view, right thinking etc. which leads to true cognition as well as approved behaviours.

Would the body disintegrate? It must be so. Long-use so it gets outdated. Do Five aggregates intend to dispatch beings to their origin, unattached to complicated bonds? Let it be. That’s alright. Joints become loose. Is there out of lubricant? Let it be. That is not our fault. it is not our intention. “It” renders for use for the moment and now it is time to take back. The pain or tingling must be the “interest” paid for the overuse. It might be karma. That’s it. Try to bear it. Positives or negatives are linked to happening in past lives. Whatever said, for myself, I have faith in the previous and after lives. Because of that, the fairness is undertaken.

Since turning 80, I have recorded some thoughts to compile “Ve Thu Xep Lai”. It is unbelievable that I edited the manuscript at the foot of Himalayas. Then I was in the Himalayas near Nepal – Tibet border. Every day I gazed at Snow Mountains in front of me. At day, I wandered around the Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu. At night, I made corrections of Ve Thu Xep Lai. It is funny but true. The staff in the Publishing house emailed each part of the manuscript to me. I continued to edit it and then resent it. The process kept on until the book was complete. That is a fortunate occasion that I had a chance to take the fresh air in the Himalayas while editing the new book. In such occasion, I also got to visit Lumbini where Buddha was born and Kapilavastu from which Prince Siddhartha departed for his spiritual emancipation. Thereafter, I collated my favourite writings, sometimes, I tended to leave because of no use. But I felt regretful. Eventually, I did a printout entitled “ĐỀ LÀM GI” (What for). For preparation. To prepare for a departure. To keep some memories. On that flow, I went on to collect my friends’ writings about my poems to compile “Nhu Không Thôi Đi Được”. Anyway, now I have had as many as seven poetic collections so far. I have been fond of poetry since childhood. From the first collection “Tinh Nguoi” (1967) to “Đỗ Nghê’s short poems”(2017), it is roughly 50 years. My poems sprouted from my honest feeling. I do not regard my poems as a game of speech. Such the straightforward poems trigger readers to cry, laugh, miss, memorize etc. It is amazing that only the honesty from the bottom of the heart is transmitted mutually. The poems such as “Thư Cho Bé Sơ Sinh” written in 1965 at Tu Du hospital, “Mới Hôm Qua Thôi” in 1993 in Montreal, “Bông Hồng Cho Mẹ” in 2002 on my mother’s death etc. are likely to be widely popularized. As for my humble study of Buddhism, I try to collect, arrange, and get it modified to compile “Toi Học Phật” in order to read sometimes and share with my mates. Then, somehow, I gathered the writings of the acquaintances to compile “Áo Xưa Dù Nhàu” as a gratitude. In short, recalling the “achievements of this stage” because they partly are attributed to the “quality of death”. By accident, having no intent to prepare anything, I still do something in my eighties like a closed cycle of emptiness. I see it as an achievement in my career with 12 years in paediatrics ICU, and 25 years in Health education. That is the time I wrote to pass the health know-how from childbearing (Viết cho các bà mẹ sinh con đầu lòng), adolescents (Khi Người ta Lớn), the middle-ages (Gio Heo May Da Ve) and the elder (Gia Sao Cho Suong). As far as my medical career is concerned, I highlight the major factors of illness prevention, nature-based living and less

consumption of medicine. I was in charge of the project “health care at early phase” for children, adults and then got engaged in training, contributing to the establishment of Pham Ngoc Thach Medical University as the founder of the Department of Medical ethics, Behavioural Sciences and health education. Besides, I was involved in teaching paediatrics at University of Medicine and Pharmacy. Overall, so far there have been 60 published books encompassing three areas: medicine, literature and Buddhism. I draw fascination in any area but in fact when I grows older, I am closer to Buddhism.

In recent years, as getting old, I am interested in coming back the old places like other species such as salmons go downstream up to the original place every four year. Bizzare! I recall my birthplace is the foot of iron bridge crossing over Ca Ty river (Muong Man), Phan Thiet. My mom told me that I was born with very dark skin. The midwife named me *Thằng Hai Hòn*¹¹(two island guy, Phu Quy island and Phan Thiet island where the people have dark skin and thin figure). Shortly after, I went to my maternal hometown with a garden full of multiple plants such as coconuts, palm, banana, orange etc. at the foot of Mount Ta Cu where Linh Son Truong Tho temple is located. When aged four or five, I used to be in company with my aunts and uncles to visit there. Growing up a little, I went back home in Lagi near sea. It means all such of things like rivers, mountains, paddy fields, gardens are familiar with me. Dried fish and fermented fish draw my attraction. I seem to feel puzzled with luxury and splendour. Such a really rustic man!

I also like to visit primeval forests in Lang Gang, Binh Chau, Xuyen Moc where I took refuge with my dad at the age of 5 to 6. Subsequently, I went to Go Ong Nom School in Hiep Nghia, Bau Loi. Up to 12 years old, following my father’s death, I returned to live with my mother and three little siblings. We stay with my big aunt (married to a Chinese) at a Chinese temple. Whenever I get back to Phan Thiet, I pay a visit to that temple, seeing tamarin trees and Golden sema trees. As going to Bach Van school, I also lived in Ba Duc Sanh Hoi temple. Then Phan Boi Chau school. Back to Lagi after two years, I went to school in a church. Hence, I am used to both temples and churches. After arriving back to Saigon, I took a shelter and monthly food consumption in a backward quarter in Ban Co, shifting place for five or seven times. In general, I was wandering so many places. Every time back to my hometown, I feel differently. The days in Bau Loi, I went to catch crap, asked for fermented shrimp paste to make fish sauce, cultivated garden with my mother when aged 10 to 12. Living in the temple in Phan Thiet, my work is to dry palm leaf. It might be thanks to my arduous childhood, I am able to overcome challenges subsequently. I probably learn to keep patience and self-satisfy. Now coming back to see the old places, and old landscapes, I am immersed in the nostalgia, nobody there.

My friends regularly inquire about my health. I say I have no idea. They asked whether I have disease. I reply I do not know, either. It is not a phoney response but the truth. Because well-being is the state that both body, mind and the society where one lives are completely freed. Without a doubt, there is such a long way ahead to get all three areas perfect. Arethere any health issues? There must be. It is not possible to keep away from all the problems caused by old age. Birth, old age, sickness and death are so. I do not what kind of disease as I have undergone a lot of sickness for ages. As a child living in the forest, I was infected with malaria, dysentery,

¹¹Two island guy

serious malnutrition. it is unusual to recall to recall the childhood, passing the trembling of malaria was followed by the great pleasure. It is perhaps because of the deficit of red blood cells, I fell into the state of chronic hypoxia (chronic lack of oxygen) whereas the so-called “happy hormone” continued to be released. I do not know why. At the age of 12, coming back to Phan Thiet from the refuge zone, I weighed only 25 kg. How pale I was. My spleen swept up, all fours were too thin, severe malnutrition. turning 30, as a doctor, while working at Children hospital, I was hit by a gastrointestinal bleeding and was admitted to ICU at Cho Ray hospital (1971). I used to have a terrible pain at lumbar spine as much as that I had to be bed-confined, then another pain at cervical vertebrae made me not able to turn round. In my 50, the glaucoma made me go through emergency operation whose evidence remains till this day. Aged 57, I was hit by a stroke that I was admitted to ICU again. In short, that’s enough. Since my 60s, I just got a little sick. Let it be. I am not in favour of any diagnosis and taking medicine, advertised supplements in particular. To my mind, they are not as good as stewed fish, baked dried fish, boiled veggies, sweet potatoes, corn, sweet soup and so on. When back to Phan Thiet, apart from visiting my old schools, old friends, I always go to the beach to take coconut juice locally known as “dưabanhát” (three cuts), have lunch with grilled chicken, boiled chicken along with green chilly, or bánh canhchả cá, or dinner with bánh cầreminiscent of eating for full. Last but not least, it is chềđậuxanh.

These days my sleep is not so sound. The older I get, the more I woke up at night. It must happen because of the expansion of prostate. Let it be. Now 9-hour-sleep is needed every evening. The elderly take longer sleep like old batteries need long charging. I dream every day. Scarcely do I not dream. It is frustrated at first as I wanted to have a sound sleep with no dreams. Then I found dreaming quite interesting. The dreams enable us to live another lives, reuniting with old friends who are apparently no longer.

Hence, it is the preparation for a good death and happy near-death? A friend of mine told me that I wrote “Gia Sao Cho Suong”¹² at 75 and it should be followed by “Chet Sao Cho Vui” as the next. I suddenly came up with “well-being”, the happy and healthy state of the body, then why not “well-dying”? earlier when I learn the Buddhist term “Anapanasati”, I came up with my own “pranasati”, which means to keep mindful in the middle stage between breath-in and breath-out. It is the pause-stage, rest or “bardo” between two breaths, between living and death, and rebirth. That is also the transition stage to embark on a new journey. It is time to carry the baggage or karma. whether it is heavy or light up to our choice as we are the heir of karma.

Enlightenment should be best perceived as the understanding of essential and inevitable death which is part of life. So far we have lived a temporal life with an illusionary form rising from Buddha’s embryo by the skilful hand of a so-called weird midwife. Let’s understand and practice the death, get accustomed to that, and associate with that as soon as possible.

And let be *well-being* and *well-dying*!

Saigon, June 2023

¹²Enjoy the Old Age

Dr Do Hong Ngoc MD.

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Author's introduction

Doctor Do Hong Ngoc, also known as his pen name Do Nghe, was born in Phan Thiet, Binh Thuan, Viet Nam in 1940.

Graduated Doctor of Medicine, Saigon Univeristy of Medicine in 1969, he specializes in Pediatrics. He attended the refresher course at Harvard University (USA) in 1993 and a course of Health Education in CFES, France in 1997. Moreover, he was a guest faculty at Saigon University of Medicine and Pharmacy and Head of Department of Behavioural sciences – Health Education at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine.

Apart from a doctor and an instructor, he is also a renowned poet and writer. His writings encompass multiple fields and are popular with readers. In particular, he writes intensively about Buddhism and Zen with a gentle style but persuasive, including knowledge of both Western and Eastern traditions and his spiritual experiences. Doctor Do Hong Ngoc studies, understands and practices Buddhism in a pragmatic manner.

