

VIETNAM PILGRIMAGE

Raymond Lemoine, Providence Zen Center

In early 1999, I decided to take a two-week trip to Vietnam. I had served in Vietnam with the 4th Infantry Division in 1966-67 and had not returned since I left in September 1967. Things have been changing rapidly there since the government opened up the country to foreign investment, so I wanted to see it again before it changed too much.

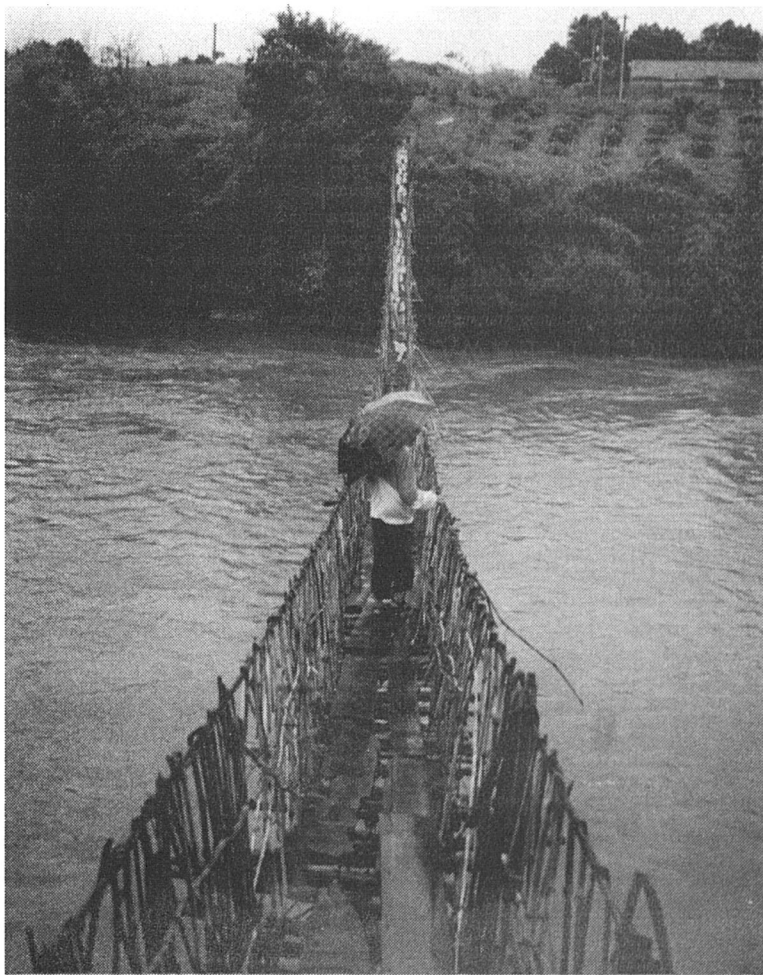
I arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) on the 15th of October. On the flight over I was quite anxious—was this the right thing to do, would the people be friendly to me, would I be safe there? As we came in for the landing I was straining to see something after all these years, but all there was to see were big white fluffy clouds. Then suddenly the plane banked to the right and through the clouds what I saw was exactly what I saw when I left 34 years ago: rice paddies, water buffaloes, small clusters of thatched-roof huts connected by ancient trails. And most shocking of all, no military presence, just the remains of our protective perimeter around the airport. After clearing customs I was met by my guide Le Cong, Hoan. He took me to the Grand Hotel and told me that I could freshen up and rest and he would meet me in the lobby in two hours. When Hoan returned we took a tour around Saigon. This was all new to me, even though I spent over a year in Vietnam, I had never been in Saigon.

Near Saigon we visited the Cu Ci tunnels in an area formerly known as the Iron Triangle during the war. It is now a tourist attraction and I was able to go down

into the tunnels, although it was a tight squeeze—they were definitely not designed for large Americans. We also visited a veteran's cemetery located nearby in the Hobo Woods. At the entrance to the cemetery was a recently erected Buddhist temple honoring the North Vietnamese dead. It was a massive structure featuring a huge white bust of Ho Chi Minh and black granite walls with all the names of the dead. There were thousands of graves of those killed in this area. Seeing all these graves shocked me; it really brought home the reality of how many Vietnamese we had killed. At one point in our tour we attended a dinner with former North Vietnamese soldiers. Again I was quite apprehensive—these were the guys we were trying to kill and now we were going to dinner. But, everything changes! We had a wonderful time together with actually little talk about the war. They don't seem to be holding on to much.

A couple days later I flew to Pleiku City in the Central Highlands near Camp Enari, former home of the 4th Infantry Division at Dragon Mountain. The next day it was on to nearby Kontum City where I was introduced to my guide for this area, Nguyen Trieu, Thanh. North of Kontum we visited the former Dak To airfield. It was still in good condition—unbelievable after all these years. We could still see the revetments where they used to park the helicopters at night. Spent bullets and cartridges were lying everywhere. The guide said we should be careful; there were still booby traps in the area.

I will never forget the emotions that welled up in me when



Suspended bridge to Montagnard village, near Dak To



North Vietnamese veterans memorial at Dak To

I once again stood on the Dak To airstrip. Looking to the west were the Annamite Mountains on the border with Cambodia. This is where I had spent most of my tour of duty. These mountains had been a major infiltration route for the North Vietnamese Army, and had been highly contested throughout the war. I could only think of all the American and Vietnamese soldiers who had died here. How many remains of MIAs are still out there. What a waste!

Later we walked down to where the Army camp had been and found the locals tending tea and coffee bushes. Right in the middle of this “hot spot” was now a peaceful farm scene. How things change!

After leaving, I asked to go to a Montagnard village. This area is predominately inhabited by indigenous tribes. A short distance down the road, after passing an army post, we pulled over and walked a short way through the woods to a flimsy suspension bridge. I am twice the size of most people who use this bridge, and I wondered if it would hold me up. I set off across the bridge discovering that the planks I was walking on were not fastened to anything and the river below was wide, fast and deep. I made it to the other side and found few people in the village, just children and some women. Everyone else was out working

the coffee plantations. There was still evidence of B-52 bomb craters throughout the village. Thanh explained that during the war the village was accidentally bombed and the survivors merely returned and rebuilt their homes around the craters. I noticed that some of the buildings had metal siding, and closer inspection revealed that they had taken the metal cans from 155mm howitzer rounds and flattened them for siding. In front of another hut I noticed that they were growing onions in 50 caliber ammunition boxes.

After leaving the village I asked Thanh if there were any Buddhist temples we could visit. He asked me if I was a Buddhist and when I told him I was, he was surprised. Thanh was the first Buddhist I had met so far; everyone else told me they were Protestant. Thanh said that he had never heard of Buddhist people in the west. He agreed to take me to his temple when we got back to Kontum, and would ask if I could meet his master.

Upon arriving at the temple I waited outside while Thanh went in to inquire about my visit.. He returned to say that his master would be very happy to meet me. I went in and was greeted by the abbot, Master Thich Dong Tri. We bowed to each other and I went to bow to the Buddha. Master Tri also told me that he had never heard of



Master Thich Dong Tri and Ray Lemoine

Buddhists in America. He asked who my teachers were, and whether we were Mahayana or Theravada. He is a Mahayana Buddhist. We talked for about an hour and a half about the war and Buddhism. I could tell by his questions that he was checking to see if we are real Buddhists.

Later the abbot invited me to stay for dinner. Word had gotten around that I was there and when the young monks found out that I had been there during the war they all came to listen. Master Tri was the same age as me. When I was there in 1966–67 he was a novice monk at a school further south. Before the war ended he was sent to Kontum. I asked if he had taken sides during the war. He said that control of the city was always changing hands, so he took care of whoever needed help. He showed me a large room where he and the monks had taken care of 75 wounded North Vietnamese soldiers. He also told me that they had another smaller temple in the mountains. The North Vietnamese told him to camouflage it because if he didn't, it would be bombed and destroyed. The day after they finished camouflaging the temple it was bombed to smithereens. He now believes that the camouflaging made the site obvious and it was taken for an enemy target.

Following the dinner I told Master Tri about all the problems I still have because of what happened to me in the

war. He smiled and said, “The past is gone and cannot be changed. The future is just an illusion, you can only live in this moment.”

“But what about the karma I made by all the bad things I did here during the war?”

“Don't be worried about your past karma. Only concern yourself with the karma that you make in this moment,” was his reply. Here I was in the boonies of Vietnam hearing the same teaching that Zen Master Seung Sahn gives in the United States—I felt right at home.

He would like to rebuild the bombed-out temple, but does not have the financial support to do so. He told me that if I ever found anyone who would be willing to help finance the project it would be greatly appreciated. The people living in the Central Highlands are very poor. In fact it appeared to me that nothing between Pleiku and Dak To had changed at all since the war.

The time to leave came quickly. Unlike 1967, I found that I was in no hurry to go. The country is as beautiful as ever and is very peaceful. The people like Americans. Sixty-five percent of the population was born after the war, and to them it is ancient history. In many ways it was a healing experience, and I am looking forward to returning to Vietnam.

North Vietnamese veterans cemetery near Saigon

