

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH A BUDDHIST MONK

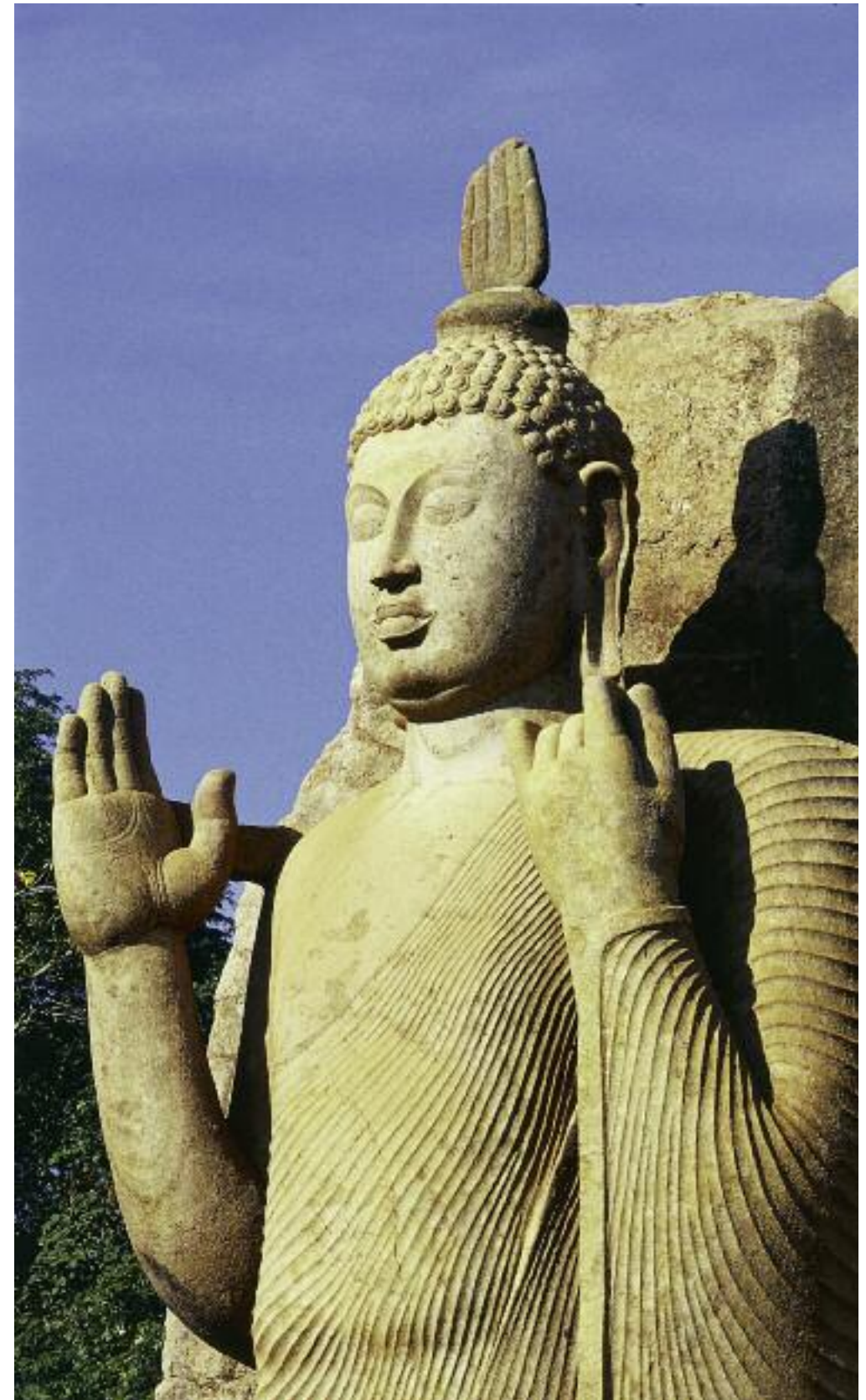
Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi

IN THE FIRST WEEK OF AUGUST 1965, after finishing summer school, I set out to travel by car from New York to California. I was twenty years old and in September would be entering my senior year at Brooklyn College. I wanted to visit a friend who was spending the summer in San Francisco, and I managed to find a ride with a couple of fellow students. We started from the Sugar Bowl, a luncheonette near Brooklyn College, on a bright Monday morning. After a full day on the road we stopped in Madison, Wisconsin to spend the night at the home of some friends of the people with whom I was traveling.

This was the first time I had traveled west of the Pocono Mountains and the experience promised to be an exciting one. After a good night's rest, the next morning I decided to take a walk. It was a bright, sunny day. My steps led me through quiet streets to a large, beautiful lake bordering the University of Wisconsin. Turning inland, I soon found myself on the campus. As I was approaching a mall in the middle of the campus, something astonishing happened. To the right of my field of vision, the door of a big stone building suddenly swung open and out stepped a middle-aged man with East Asian features, wearing a yellow-orange robe. He was immediately followed by a tall American man who then caught up with him, and the two walked side by side talking.

At once I realized that I was looking at a Buddhist monk. I had never seen a Buddhist monk before, and in America at that time the number of *real* Buddhist monks probably could have been counted on one hand. I had just begun to read about Buddhism a few months earlier, and I knew from my reading of Hermann Hesse's *SIDDHARTHA* that the Buddha and his ordained disciples wore saffron robes. Thus I could identify the person I was seeing as a Buddhist monk.

RIGHT: DETAIL OF THE STANDING BUDDHA OF AUKANA
ANURADHAPURA, SRI LANKA



I was struck with wonder and amazement at the sight of this serene, self-composed man, who radiated a lightness, inner contentment, and dignity I had never seen in any Westerner. The American man alongside him, presumably a professor, seemed to show him a certain respect and deference, which sug-



gested to me that he was not an ordinary monk but a person of some stature. Just watching him walk across the mall, I was filled with joy and happiness. I think my feeling might have been similar to what a young brahmin in ancient India might have felt if he looked up and for the very first time saw, walking down a path close by, a monastic disciple of the ascetic Gotama, the man that people called “the Enlightened One.”

I must have been about sixty yards from the path along which the two men walked. I wanted to approach the monk and ask him who he was and what he was doing, and many other questions; but I was too shy, afraid that I would appear foolish. So I just stood there watching

him from a distance, devouring him with my eyes, observing his every movement during the four or five minutes it took for them to walk across the mall. I was transfixed; I felt transported to another dimension of being. Something in my heart stirred with a deep yearning. I think that if someone had come up

behind me and stuck me with a pin I would have felt nothing, so absorbed was I in the figure of this monk. Then he and the professor reached another building, the professor opened the door, and the two men vanished inside. I still felt joy at this chance encounter with a Buddhist monk, but my joy was now dimmed by a note of sadness. My heart sank at the thought that this adventure was over and I had lost the

opportunity to tap a living source of the wisdom of the East. Now, I thought, that wonderful monk will go his way, and I must go my way, and our paths will never cross again. Still, I put this momentary sadness behind me, hurried back to the house where we had spent the night, and before long we were again on the road, heading for San Francisco.

The workings of karma are indeed strange and unfathomable! A little more than a year later, in September 1966, I entered Claremont Graduate School in California (twenty-five miles east of Los Angeles) to begin a doctoral program in philosophy. In the spring semester a Buddhist monk from Vietnam came to study at the same university and moved

in just below me in the graduate residence hall. He was not “serene and self-composed” like the monk in Wisconsin but had a “happy-go-lucky” manner about him that initially discouraged me from striking up an acquaintance with him. However, once I got to know him, I came to like him and eventually accepted him as my first Buddhist teacher. By the time the summer of 1967 arrived, we were sharing the same apartment in the graduate residence hall. I had taken ordination from him as a novice-monk in the Vietnamese Buddhist order, and later we moved to a small house off the campus.

One day (I think it was in November 1967) he told me that a distinguished Buddhist monk from Vietnam named Venerable Thich Minh Chau was in the U.S. and would soon be visiting Los Angeles. Thich Minh Chau, he said, was the rector of Van Hanh University and an accomplished Buddhist scholar. He had gotten a doctorate from Nalanda Buddhist Institute in India and had written an important comparative study of the Pali Majjhima Nikaya and the Chinese Madhyama Agama. My monk-friend was planning to go to L.A. to meet Thich Minh Chau and he invited me to accompany him.

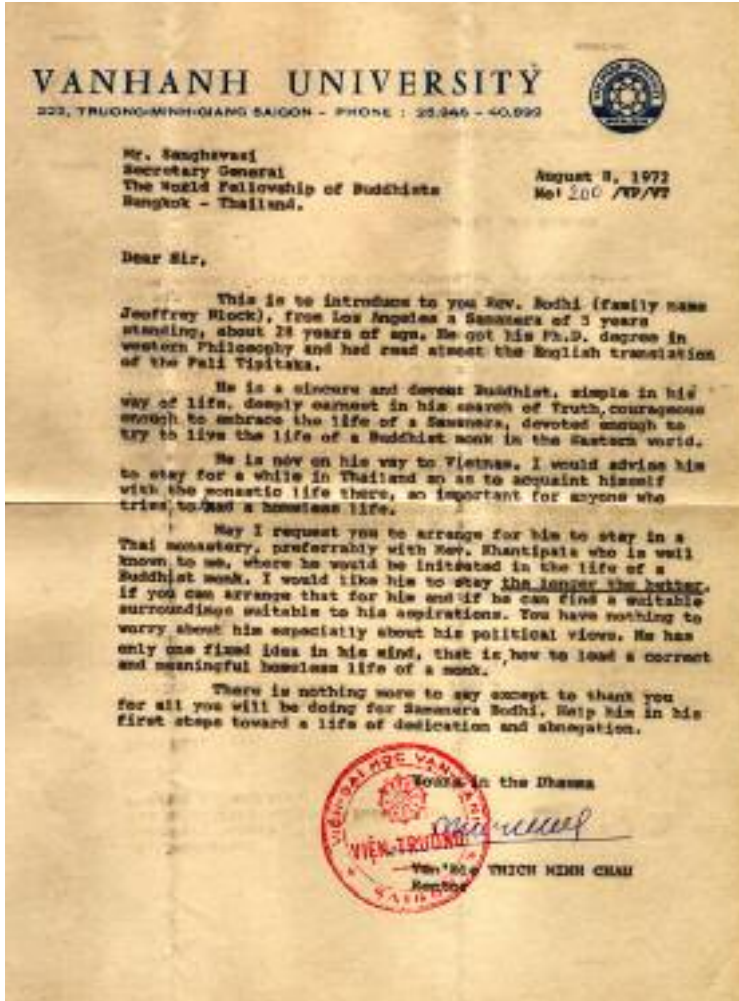
So one bright morning in the late autumn we arrived at the house of the Vietnamese family with whom the distinguished monk was staying. When Venerable Thich Minh Chau came out from his guest room, I saw a middle-aged man draped in a yellow-orange robe, serene and self-composed, dignified in manner, radiating goodness and sagacity. Somehow, he looked strangely familiar, and I asked myself: “Where have I seen him before? I’ve never before seen a monk dressed in a yellow-orange robe like that.” Then it immediately struck

me: “Yes, I have! One bright morning two years ago on the campus of the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Could this be him?” I had seen the monk in Madison from a distance of some sixty yards and thus couldn’t distinguish his facial features very well, and it was not unlikely that two middle-aged East Asian monks might look alike. So I decided to inquire. I had to wait patiently while my monk friend, the visiting monk, and the host family spoke in Vietnamese. When I got an opportunity I asked him, “Is this your first visit to America, sir?” He said, “No, I was here a few years ago.” That was what I expected. Then I asked: “By any chance, could the Venerable have been on the campus of the University of Wisconsin in early August 1965?” And he said, “In fact I was. I was visiting my friend, Professor Richard Robinson, who started a program of Buddhist Studies there.” Then I told him about that day when I had watched him walk across the campus. He chuckled gently and said, “So this is not the first time we are meeting.”

Several years later, when Venerable Thich Minh Chau next visited the U.S. (perhaps it was 1969), he stayed with us for a couple of days at our house in Claremont. Still later, when I was planning my trip to Asia to receive *bhikkhu* ordination and study the Dhamma, he gave me useful advice and provided me with a beautiful letter of introduction to the general secretary of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Bangkok, which I made my first stop when I arrived in Asia in August 1972. I kept that letter and still have it among my treasured belongings. After my one-week stay in Bangkok, before going on to Sri Lanka, I went to Vietnam to visit my first Buddhist teacher, who had returned

to his home temple after completing his doctorate at Claremont in 1970. Together, we went to visit Thich Minh Chau at Van Hanh University. I still can see him in my mind's eye rising up to greet me when I came to his office to meet him.

During my first years as a monk in Sri



Lanka I occasionally wrote to Thich Minh Chau for advice and he always answered me promptly and thoughtfully. It was he who suggested that, when I go to Sri Lanka, I study with the elder German monk, Venerable Nyanaponika Mahathera. Although I could not fulfill that aim until several years after my

arrival in the island, I eventually wound up living with Nyanaponika Mahathera during the last ten years of his life, right up to the day of his death, and already during his life I had succeeded him as editor and president of the Buddhist Publication Society.

I lost contact with Venerable Thich Minh Chau after South Vietnam fell to the Communists in 1975, but when planning a lecture in 2004, I recalled our earlier meetings, and these memories became so vivid that I wrote an early draft of this recollection. Through the Internet, I contacted a Vietnamese webmaster in Australia and found out he is still alive in Ho Chi Minh City, though weak and ill with Parkinson's disease. He is over ninety years of age. I gave the draft to a Vietnamese Buddhist friend of mine, Sukhavati Thu Tran, who had

it translated into Vietnamese. It was published in a Vietnamese Buddhist magazine and read aloud to Venerable Thich Minh Chau, who indicated that he understood it.

Over the past few decades, before his illness incapacitated him, Venerable Thich Minh Chau had translated into

Vietnamese the four Nikayas of the Pali Canon. This fact I learned only in the late 1990s. Now here is the remarkable and uncanny thing that raises some interesting questions: On that day in early August 1965, a twenty-year-old American college student, who would one day be the co-translator of the Majjhima Nikaya and translator of the Samyutta Nikaya, and who is presently working on a translation of the Anguttara Nikaya, encountered by sheer chance a Vietnamese monk, thirty years older than himself, who would translate the four Nikayas into Vietnamese. The American student at that time was not yet a Buddhist. He was not at all involved in Buddhist studies and had started to read about Buddhism just a few months earlier. He had no intention of meeting the monk, and in fact they did not meet face to face. Looked at from the standpoint of "objective causality," the encounter was sheer coincidence. The American student merely made a chance turn while taking a walk in a town he had arrived at by chance while making a car trip across the country; he saw the monk from a distance and then went away without even knowing who he was. The monk didn't see the American at all.

But what made me decide to take a walk that morning, and to turn off the lakeside road on to the campus at just that point and at just that moment? Was it really entirely a matter of chance, a mere series of random decisions? And if we can raise these questions, then let's ask: What broader loop of conditionality might have connected my trip to California with the monk's trip to Wisconsin at just that time? If I remember correctly—and I am quite sure my

memory is correct on this point—we were due to leave Brooklyn two days earlier, on a Saturday, but a last-minute hitch forced us to postpone our departure until that Monday morning. If we had left as originally planned, my meeting with the monk would probably not have taken place.

When I left the campus, convinced we would never meet again, I did nothing to consciously facilitate another meeting with him. Indeed, I hadn't the slightest idea who he was! Yet I made a series of decisions, without any conscious design, that led me to him once again, and this time in a situation where we would be facing each other as fellow Dhamma-farers. I selected a graduate school that eventually brought me into contact with another Vietnamese monk with whom I became friends—yet I selected it without even knowing that this monk would attend that school (in fact, without even knowing anything about Vietnamese Buddhist monks); and through my friendship with him, I came to meet the monk whom I had seen two years earlier, whose deportment had so impressed me—yet without knowing that these two monks were acquainted. Years later, when I took to translating Pali texts, though I knew that Thich Minh Chau had written a scholarly comparison of Pali and Chinese texts, I didn't know that he was engaged in translating the Nikayas from Pali into Vietnamese. Yet our projects, in our respective mother languages, are almost identical. Was this also in some way foreshadowed in that chance encounter at the University of Wisconsin, a place to which I have never returned since that meeting and to which I well may never return in the course of this life?||