

To a Vietnamese, images in these poems are easy to grasp, for they are set in familiar geo-historical and cultural contexts. Because most poems were rendered into English, some tend to lose the musical quality of the original version. However, their meanings seem to retain evocative power in translation. When he says “My hand on the gate” for instance, the image presented is a multi-cultural signifier. However, even if images like these do not manage to claim versatility of interpretation, the poems are interesting, not least because they offer a view to the mind of a spiritual leader whose gift of inspiring continues to draw enthusiastic audiences.

In their modern form, the “ultimate” poems go over traditional themes of overcoming the analytical attachment to duality, in order to contemplate the meta-rational leap to enlightenment. In the poem carrying the book’s title, *Call Me by My True Names*, the motif of suchness (*Tathagata*) is invoked. The central dialectics of the individual and society, the person and humanity, or the world intersects with that of Vietnam’s reality and the global situation. The theme is repeated in varied context throughout many other poems. Thus the metaphysics of being (if we accept Buddhism has a metaphysics) is brought to bear on the dichotomies of “the one and the many”, “self and others”, “knowledge and compassion”, suggestive of depths that promise newly discovered aspects with each re-reading.

One of the footnotes reveals that the author has written an essay comparing Buddhism with Marxism. Also revealing are poems dedicated to those who died for the same cause — monks and nuns who disappeared, youth workers assassinated, or the passing away of the poet Vu Hoàng Chuong, the Reverend Thich Thiên Minh who was jailed before and after 1975 for dissidence. Grief, sadness, longing are refracted through that Diamond Cutter insight on impermanence, selfhood to be purified, transformed with wisdom. Now and then, the poet’s “confessions” ensure we know that his feet are firmly on the ground, for example when he recounts the time he fell in love, or the news that made him weep. Such immersion in worldliness only served to challenge him to transcend limitations and overcome fetters. However, by wishing to see

more of these “all too human” kinds of experience, I may be expecting too much here. It is as if the author succeeds too well in a project to transform sorrow and confusion into those superb insights that characterize his thought over the past forty years.

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