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ABOVE THE OCEAN (Hải Thượng Tân Thư)

Series of letters from Master Phan-Hoang

Letter FOUR:

THE SOUL OF VIETNAMESE SWORD

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To: CHI-KIEM disciples

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This is LETTER THREE of the Series "ABOVE THE OCEAN"

(DRAFT)

(continued from Letter THREE)

The challenging Monterosso Trail seems endless as I was advancing deeper and deeper in its heart. The sun has risen, high above the horizon. The trail is now turning upward, higher and higher. I started feeling a bit tired. I left my hotel very early this morning when it was still dark, and did not have to eat much before hiking. From my hotel to the entrance of the Monterosso Trail, the distance is long enough for my body to consume all the calories of my small breakfast. I now felt hungry. Looking forward, I saw the trail rising slightly, then without notice, disappearing under the trees. Looking backward, I clearly saw the long trail nicely snaking upward to me. However, the long trail did not give me any clue of my current location and the remaining distance to the next town, Vernassa, another magical place nested in this chain of mountains. I vaguely remember that Vernassa is located about twelve kilometers south of Monterosso, but I now realize that twelve kilometers of hiking on this narrow trail is quite different from what I could have expected.

As I was continuing to advance on the trail, a nice big rock quietly makes its appearance at my left side, while the right side of the trail is the steep slope of the mountain sliding down to the ocean. The nice rock invited me to sit on it. I sat down and closed my eyes, then perform deep breathing. The fresh air revived my body and also my mind. When I opened my eyes, I could not see any beautiful *tiên* as I could have dreamed in Vietnam. According to Vietnamese imaginary tales, in high mountains live very wise and beautiful people with magical power; they are immortal. But, right now, I was not in any mountain in Vietnam: I was hungry on a deserted trail in Italy. Perhaps Italian *tiên* live in the clouds or on the sea, while bandits often hide themselves in high mountains, and of course I did not wish to meet any of them!

Anyway, what is important at this precise moment to me was what I could feel about the world inside me, but not the outside world. A world of five thousand years I was taught, which became part of my own world and was impregnated in my soul. There were many historical trails of my people, victorious or painful, that I know by heart through school lessons, from parents or mentors, and folk stories. I have personally walked on some others trails, which gave me unforgettable experiences. Again, I closed my eyes and tried to recall legends and stories on the Trang-Si Viet (Vietnamese Swordsmanship of ancient time), which was more similar to the western knighthood of Vietnamese style than the formal Japanese swordsmanship, the Samurai class in the old days of Japan.

When I was an adolescent, I have already started to collect legends of the sword. I was passionate by all of these legends, a secret passion. These include the sword of King Le-Loi, which returned to the Lake of Sword in Hanoi; the sword of King Hung, which killed his daughter; the sword of the terrific King

Nguyen-Hue, which dared to tell him that he was wrong. Also, there were many wonderful others such as the shining sword of Princess Bat-Nan, the chanting sword of Commander Ly-Thuong-Kiet, the crying sword of the young Earl Tran-Quoc-Toan, the unbroken sword of General Hung-Dao, the thunderbolt sword of Master Nguyen-Trung-Truc, the invincible sword of Master Hoang-Dinh-Bao, and the mystic sword Van-Thang- Guom. These extraordinary legends, victorious or sad, success or failure, all share a common ground, which is the soul of Vietnamese swordsmanship.

The City of Hanoi, my fatherland, had a mystical name of The Rising Dragon (Thang-Long), a name that sticks in our heart because of its beautiful image and of its nicer sound than the term Hanoi. During centuries, Thang Long has been witnessing so many historical events that there are plenty of special stories on almost every corner of a street. I have deeply known a glorious historic Thang-Long, a theater of innumerable combats of our ancestors rather than Hanoi, a city put in decline when the Nguyen Dynasty rose to power. Legends that I collected in the North when I was in Thang-Long are those that reflect the soul of Vietnamese sword and stick; those that I later collected in the South reflect the spirit of Vietnamese modern martial artists, we call it “Hao-Hon Giang-Ho” (the detached spirit of great-fighters who travel through rivers and lakes). The beauty of legends lays on the combination between facts and myths, reality and imagination. Facts provide the framework and imagination makes the legend attractive. Fiction is also very attractive, but it will not last for long. In contrast, legend is eternal because it is part of the history and part of the folk tales, and therefore a heritage. Through legends and historical records, I learned that, in ancient time, Vietnamese people believed that the sword of a Trang-Si has a soul. There were swords which were crying at night, others looking for serving a real master, other swords taking revenge for the honor of their defeated masters, and some swords refusing a dishonest combat. Could the sword have a soul? This is a vital question for those of us who practice the Art of Viet Chi-Kiem.

Sliding smoothly down from the rock onto the trail, I draw my sword Cam-Lai-Kiem and started doing the routine Four Breathing Exercises of Viet Chi-Kiem. I felt better but still a bit tired. Then I executed the daily training form Nhat-Luyen-Kiem. This form which consists of 108 movements, aims in fact to train the four most important cuts of sword. Before I could affirm anything about the quality of my training on the Monterosso trail that morning, my Cam-Lai-Kiem has already talked to me. My wooden sword told me that my gestures were imprecise, the speed of each cut lacked the usual vitality and the energy was weak. Yes, as usual my Cam-Lai-Kiem is talking to me. I was listening in silence, forgot my hunger, and put all my effort to bring my training at my normal level. When I reached it, my sword pronounced a word of approval, “Vuf”, at a clear and strong front cut action. I was so happy to hear it, and my face did light up at this moment. It is not important for me what other people could think about this phenomenon of speaking sword, but the understanding of what my sword can say to me is crucial in my practice of Viet Chi-Kiem, even for my life.

There are eight basic cutting techniques in our Art of Sword. When a designed technique is executed, the sword produces a specific sound, and the tone of that sound could tell the swordsmen about the correctness, the quality and the level of energy of their performance: weak or strong, precise or loose, sharp or dowdy. The sound of the front cut is the easiest to catch by the ears of a beginner, and the reversal-oblique cut is the most subtle. Working with a partner or in a real situation, when the two swords meet at any impact, your sword can give you a lot of information about your opponents if you are open to hear it. Not just only how strong or weak, how fast or slow your opponents are, but also more importantly how are their mind and emotion: calm or angry, confident or afraid, calculating or impatient. Yes, by the sound or by the subtle vibration, your sword can secretly reveal to you important details of your opponents and of yourself. A longtime ago, around 1786, a famous warrior who claimed to be the best of his time in northern Vietnam, General Chinh (NGUYEN Huu-Chinh), after having defeated his opponent in a thunderbolt combat of sword, had returned his invincible sword into the sheath with an exhibited arrogance. His sword produced an unusual sound, an important notice to him. While he did not take it

seriously, an experienced Trang-Si standing nearby did not miss that specific sound, a way of communication from the sword. The Trang-Si immediately predicted that the glorious time of the general would soon be ended. Discretely, he abandoned the arrogant general and withdrew to the country side. In the following year, 1787, the arrogant General Chinh was defeated and beheaded.

The precious sword of General Chinh was taken by General Hoa (NGUYEN Van-Hoa'). The latter general did not want to be the master of the sword prior to testing it. So one day, at a place called Giang-Vo in Thang-Long, he organized a contest to test the captured sword. There were a total of three combats. Being a very experienced swordsman, he had anticipated to be invincible, but surprisingly he had lost all three. He then understood that the new sword did not want to serve him. Very angry, he wanted to destroy the resisting sword by using the back of another sword to hit on the sharp edge of its blade. But indeed, the other sword was broken in half at the first impact with the punished sword. The general took a deep breath to calm himself down, and slowly place the resisting sword onto a table with respect. In front of several swordsmen, the general made a ceremonial bow to the sword and declared that the sword was now freed. No one among these swordsmen dared to take possession of the sword, but one obscure young man came forward, made three low bows and took it. He drew the sword out and executed a *Phuong-kiem*, a succession of long and complicate sequences. During his skillful performance, surprisingly no sound could be heard. This was an indication of a very high level performer, and only accomplished swordsmen could perceive the subtle sound of the moving sword. When the sword returned to its scabbard, it emitted a discrete peaceful sound. Noticing this, an oldest swordsman who was the most respected fellow of these fine warriors, was the first to advance towards the young man. He made a long bow to the sword and congratulated the young man who had become now the master of this mystical sword. Other swordsmen did not understand why their respected dean had been so respectful towards the young man. They did not even notice the subtle sound, the communication between the sword and the young man when the sword re-entered into its scabbard, like a Trang-Si returning home after a noble battle. This sound signified that the sword accepted the young swordsman as its new master, and agreed to teach him, to protect him, and to be part of his life.

(to be continued at the next letter)

Phan-Hoang (November 2009)