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## Life's Many Sides

### The sword the plough and the soul

By TON THAT THIEN

It is useful, now and then, to take time to reflect on certain things happening to Vietnam, to choose a little lane, get away from the highways, lie down on the bank of a stream or on top of a hill to muse, as I suggested the other day. Or, if one cannot do that because of the risks of bombs, shells, booby traps and all those dangerous things which the industrial or social revolution have poisoned our life with, then let one shut oneself in a room, made soundproof either by the specialist at a great costs, or simply by a mental process familiar to Buddhists – the real ones I mean – or to those who practice yoga.

Never has this country been so swamped by so much aid of all kinds: men, material, money, images (TV), words spoken (radio) or printed (papers leaflets), advice prayers and much else. We are being defended by Americans, Koreans, Australians, New Zealanders, and soon by Filipinos. Our stomachs are being filled, our bodies covered and transported, by USOM. Our health is being looked after by Germans, Japanese and Dutch doctors. Our houses are being built, or will be built by American constructors. Pigs are being imported for our gourmandise, rice for our maintenance, soap to keep us clean.

All the above in an integral part of the New Society, which, in the two thousand years or more of our history, began on the blessed Twenty First January of the One thousand nine hundred and sixty sixth year of the Christian era (another imported product, so to speak). The New Society is a revolution. Like every revolution, nothing has existed before it, at least nothing of its kind.

Being a student of history for over twenty years, I often feel rather puzzled, nay, worriedly certain things. My present worry is not that we have received aid. Not at all. I shall not foolishly proclaim that Vietnam, being temporarily in a bad way, need no help from its friends, allies and generous nations and people. What worries me is the amount, such a tremendous one, which we have been given. Our bodies are being well protected and well looked after. But what about our souls?

The most important problem has indeed been forgotten in our daily worry about bread and shelter, about improving our 'standard of living'. To use a phrase which has now become a cliché in developed as well as underdeveloped countries. That most important problem is our soul. Think of the teachings of Jesus and of Gautama. What is the good of saving one's body if ones loses one's soul? This is precisely something of which our people should be reminded by those who have the responsibility, or who put in the claim, of saving this country and people.

The soul is the source of everything else. And above all, it is the source of our real salvation, for nobody can give us, nobody can give Vietnam, a soul but the Vietnamese themselves. Our country has been able to survive through many centuries not only because it had not forgotten the use of the sword and the plough, had been able to preserve it. Now we are risking losing our soul, in addition to forgetting or perhaps because we are forgetting, the use of the sword and the plough. We are being defended by other people's swords and fed by other people's ploughs. We should be careful. So much reliance on others may lead us to rely on them to give us a soul as well. Then, Vietnam, as a nation and a race, will cease to exist.