



RISING ASIA  
JOURNAL



RISING ASIA  
FOUNDATION

Special Issue  
*Plucked-up Tales*  
Ancient Vietnamese Narratives

ALL STORIES TRANSLATED BY ERIC HENRY  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY VAN NGUYEN

## **BOOK FIVE**

# **BUDDHIST ADEPTS WITH SUPERNATURAL POWERS**



Từ Đạo Hạnh after his full acquisition of spiritual power. This image relates to Story Number 1 below.

The stories in this section tell of Buddhist acolytes who, through meditation and study, develop extraordinary powers.

**Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE.**

### **1. The Story of Từ Đạo Hạnh and his Disciple Nguyễn Minh Không**

*(Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái, Narrative 17, “Truyện Từ Đạo Hạnh, Nguyễn Minh Không 余道行阮明空傳, The Story of Từ Đạo Hạnh and Nguyễn Minh Không”)*

This tells of miracles performed by the Buddhist Adept Từ Lộ 余路, beginning with his use of magic to avenge his father’s death by causing the death of his murderer. The story then tells of his absorption of the Buddhist “Pure Heart” Doctrine which leads to a further increase in his magical abilities. An episode follows in which he prevents the reincarnation of a small boy into the royal family of the Lý Dynasty, which allows him to take that child’s place. He leaves his body behind so as to be reincarnated himself as an infant in the body of a different mother. In this form, he becomes the Ruler Thần Tông of the Lý Dynasty. One is impressed more at the supernatural virtuosity of the protagonist than by his adherence to any particular moral code.

The story, then recounts two versions of a feat performed by Nguyễn Minh Không. He miraculously cures an illness of Lý Thần Tông, who in his earlier incarnation as Từ Lộ, had been his teacher. This section begins with an example of *tóng yáo* 童謠, a prophetic song sung by vagrant children. Item 6.2 in *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* is parallel to this one. – Eric Henry.

**T**he Thiên Phúc 天福 Pagoda was on Mount Phật Tích 佛迹 (now called Mount Sài Sơn 柴山 in Phúc Sài 福菜 District, An Sơn 安山). The surname of Đạo Hành Thuyền Sư 道行禪師 was Từ 徐, and his given name

was Lộ 路. His father's name was Vinh 榮. He held the position of Monk Director in the Board of Administration in the Lý Dynasty. He often went on excursions to An Lãng 安朗 Village, and at length took a girl of the Tãng 曾 Lineage as his wife. Tũ Lộ's mother also bore the Tãng surname. When young, he engaged in many frivolous pursuits, but was bold and had vast aspirations. He had abiding friendships with Phi Nhân 費生, a classicist, Lê Toàn Nghĩ 黎全義, a Daoist, and Phạm Ất 潘乙, a soldier. At night, he studied written works with fierce devotion, but by day he devoted himself to such diversions as playing the bamboo flute, taking part in soccer games, and gambling. His father often scolded him for his abandoned ways.

One evening, Lộ's father crept by stealth to the place where his son took his rest to peer at his activities. He saw that the lad's taper had burned to ashes and that the books he was studying formed steep piles. Lộ was asleep, supporting himself on his table, his hand still resting on a book. From that time on, the father worried no more, and later, when Lộ took the *tãng thí* 僧試 qualifying examination, he was accepted into the ranks of the White Lotus [Bach Liên 白蓬] Monkhood.

Not long after that, the father, Vinh, used black magic to do battle with Điên Thành Hầu 延成侯, and Hầu, relying on Thuyền Sư Đại Điên 大顛禪師, used magic to fend him off and kill him, after which he flung the corpse into the Tô Lịch 蘇瀝 River. The corpse was carried by the current to the Quyết Cầu 決橋 Bridge where Hậu resided and suddenly stood up straight without drifting any further. Hậu was frightened and ran to announce this to Đại Điên 大顛. Đại Điên came to the spot and read out a Gatha [short Buddhist poem] saying,

“Monk, are you angry or dissatisfied?”

The corpse immediately relaxed and floated away.

Từ Lộ pondered how to avenge his father. When he still had not decided on a means, he espied Diên going out one day and, at once, went out to fight him on the road. Suddenly, he heard a voice in mid-air telling him to stop. Alarmed, Lộ threw away his staff and went on, hoping to cross the Phương Độ River to beg for a magical means of opposing Diên. The road unavoidably passed through a nest of savages with golden teeth. This posed a danger to him, so he abandoned his intention, retreated, and hid himself in a craggy mountain grotto where the Great Compassion Sutra (Dà Bēi Jīng 大悲經) of Đà La Ni 陀羅尼 had been intoned more than eighteen thousand times.

One day he saw a Spirit, who came to him and said,

“I am your disciple Trần Thiên Vương 鎮天王. Because I am moved at the meritorious industry you have shown intoning the sutras, I have come here to serve you. Do you have any commands for me?”

Assured by this that his command of magic was complete, and that he was now capable of avenging his father, he went in person to the Quyết Kiều Bridge, and tried throwing the staff in his hand down into the flowing water, whereupon the staff went counter to the current like a swimming turtle, and upon reaching the Tây Dương 西陽 Bridge came to a halt.

“My powers are now greater than Diên’s,” he said.

He went at once to Diên’s dwelling. Upon seeing Diên, he said, “Scoundrel, do you not remember what happened some days ago?”

Lộ raised his face to the Heavens and saw that the prospect was empty, so he chased and killed Diên with a mortal curse, causing him to fall ill and die.

His former hatred now wiped clean and his obligation dissolved, Lộ traveled through the forests, seeking out hidden retreats, so as to listen to Master Kiều Trí Huyền 喬智玄 at the Thái Bình Pagoda. Going

there in person, he inquired about the Pure-Heart Doctrine, and recited the following gatha (short Buddhist poem),

Toiling through the world's dust I hear no sound,  
I know not where to seek word of the Pure Heart.  
I came in hope I might be shown the path to take,  
A thousand leagues cannot deter me from my quest.

Master Trí Huyền answered with another Gatha,

The secret of the flying jade reveals itself in sound,  
In that is truly seen the dedicated heart.  
The sands and rivers are themselves Bodhi,  
But Bodhi is ten thousand quests away.

Lộ was mystified. He did not understand what he must do or where he must go. Passing by Pháp Vân 法雲 Pagoda, he asked the monk Sùng Phạm 崇範, “What does Pure Heart refer to?”

“What is there that does not partake of Pure Heart?” the monk replied.

Feeling that this was a clarification, Lộ asked, “What is meant by the doctrine of Holding Fast (bǎozhù 保住)?”

“Hunger and thirst,” replied the Monk.

Lộ withdrew, offering no word of farewell.

From that day forward, the efficacy of his magic increased and his relation to the Way ripened. Mountain snakes and wild beasts came to him in tame and obedient crowds. He burned his fingers to pray for rain, and recited spells to bodies of water to cure illnesses, practices that never failed of the intended result.

A monk questioned him, saying, “Why do you work some moments and rest at others, remain seated at some moments and lie down at others, but always act in accordance with Pure Heart?”

In response, Lộ had him look at a gatha,

As for existence, sand and dust exist,  
 And as for nothingness, all things are nothing  
 Existence, nothingness, the moon submerged,  
 All images are images of nothingness

And he continued,

The sun and moon rise paired above the mount,  
 Each person loses what is precious  
 And wealth, existence fool us for amusement,  
 So walk on foot; don't sit atop a steed.

Emperor Nhân Tông 仁宗 of the Lý Dynasty was without an heir to the Throne. In the third year of the Tướng Phủ Đại Khánh 祥符大慶 period, a memorial came to the Throne in the third month from Thanh Hoa 清花 Prefecture that said:

“In Nhữ Châu by the ocean there is a boy with great quickness of mind who was able to speak at the age of three. He calls himself Dị Tử 異子 and goes by the name of Giác Hoàng 覺皇 (“Awareness Lord”). He is aware of everything Your Majesty does.”

The King sent a mid-grade Emissary there to observe, and he found that the situation was exactly as had been reported, and took the small boy back with him to to the Bảo Thiên 報天 Pagoda in the Capital. Giác Hoàng, it turned out, was a reincarnation of Đại Điền. Seeing how intelligent and precocious he was, the King Nhân Tông was smitten with the child and wished to designate him the heir to the Throne, but his officials all advised against this, saying that if the child was truly of divine origin, he should have been incarnated within the Palace; only then would this be possible. The King accepted these words, and so opened a great festival that would last for seven days and nights so that a reincarnation could take place.

Từ Lộ spoke to his elder sister, saying,

“That youngster is a malevolent spirit who has deluded many people. If we just sit watching on the sidelines and do nothing to save the situation while he leads people into delusion, will he not do great damage to our Royal Rule?”

He, thereupon, had his elder sister disguise herself as a spectator of the festival, carrying several written spells created by Lộ and secreting them within a curtain. On the third day of the festival, Giác Hoàng fell ill, and spoke as follows to the King, saying,

“The four corners of the garden are all closed off by an iron net stretched tight. No route remains that can be used for reincarnation.”

Suspecting that Lộ had cast a spell, the King had him seized and brought in for questioning. His suspicion turned out to be justified, and he ordered that Lộ be imprisoned in Hưng Thánh Palace so that his Officials could suggest a punishment.

When Sùng Hậu Giác 崇侯覺 walked past his place of imprisonment, Lộ appealed to him, saying, “Please, Hậu, do your best to enable this poor monk to escape punishment. I am willing to make an incarnation in the Palace possible, so as to repay you.”

Hậu nodded in agreement and went to the festival, where the King’s officials all said, “Because Your Majesty had no son, you arranged to have another figure reincarnated in the Palace, but Lộ dared to cast a spell preventing this. For this crime he deserves to suffer public execution to satisfy the feelings of all.”

After this, Sùng Hậu alone addressed the King, saying,

“If Giác Hoàng truly had magical abilities, he would have been unaffected even though Lộ cast a spell. This shows that Lộ’s abilities far surpass those of Giác Hoàng. In my ignorant opinion, it would be best not to punish Lộ, but allow him to perform a miracle of reincarnation.”

The King absolved Lộ of his offense.

Lộ went to the Sùng Hậu's dwelling to thank him for the favor he had received, but when he did so, came at once to the place where Hậu's Lady Mistress Đỗ was bathing and peered in. The Lady was angry and told Hậu what had occurred. But Hậu was aware of Lộ's intentions and did not take him to task.

Lộ said to him, "Whenever your Lady is about to give birth, you must let me know."

That year, the Lady indeed became pregnant, and at the end of her term had a very difficult delivery. Hậu remembered the directions that Lộ had given him earlier and sent a messenger to inform him that his Lady was giving birth. On receiving the news, Lộ at once bathed, changed his clothing, and spoke to followers, saying,

"The end of my predestined term has arrived. I must now depart and be reincarnated in the world, and serve for a time as this land's King. On reaching the end of life I will have reigned for twenty-three years. If you see that my physical body is destroyed, it will mean that I have entered Nirvana; it will not be an actual death."

Hearing this, the monks were moved, and wept. Lộ read out the following Gatha,

When autumn comes don't say the geese will all return,  
The peoples' plenitude of tears must make me laugh;  
Tell those who follow me: 'Avoid Sorrow,  
The monks of old passed on, and now this monk as well.

Having quoted this, he entered the mountain grotto, shed his body, and went on.

Upon this, the Lady gave birth to a son and named him Dương Hoán 陽煥. On reaching the age of three, he was taken into Nhân Tông's Palace and established as heir to the Throne.

When Nhân Tông departed life, he came to the Throne. This was Thần Tông, that is, the reincarnated Từ Lô.

The people of the village thought that Từ Lô's passing was miraculous, so they laid his body in a cage for worship. The place where Lô departed from his body is near Thiên Phúc 天福 Pagoda in the Grotto of Mount Phật Tích 佛迹 in An Sơn District.

Long ago in Tràng An there was a person in Đại Hoàng Đàm Xá Village named Nguyễn Chí Thành 阮至誠 in Quốc Tự Pagoda whose sobriquet was Minh Không Thuyền Sư 明空禪師. When young, he went away from home to study and met Đạo Hạnh [Từ Lô], with whom he studied the Way as a follower for forty years. Đạo Hạnh praised him as a person of purpose and so imparted his deepest secrets to him. When Đạo Hạnh was about to leave the world, he spoke the following words to Minh Không,

“In former times, His Excellency Thế Tôn 世尊 came to maturity in our orchard and returned the favor of Kim Sáng 金創. My own skills were moreover undeveloped; I always had to guard myself. Now I am about to leave the world and become a ruler of men. The illness I shall suffer is fore-ordained, and so cannot be avoided. If an opportunity occurs, my son, you should save me from that situation.”

After Đạo Hạnh left the world, Minh Không returned to his former Pagoda for ten years and did nothing there of note. Then Lý Thần Tông fell prey to a strange illness. The sound of his groaning was like a tiger's and resounded fearsomely. Skilled doctors came in thousands, but had to give the matter up, for they could do nothing.

There was a band of small boys at that time who sang,  
To save the Son of Heaven from his illness,  
Nguyễn Minh Không must be obtained.

The Court sent men to make a search, and they in fact found Minh Không. When Minh Không arrived at Court, many famous doctors were there already directing treatments. They looked down on Minh Không as a simple, rustic person, and treated him with disdain. Minh Không held a large nail five inches long which he fixed in the base-board of the Palace and, raising his voice, said,

“Only one who pulls this nail out will be able to cure the Ruler’s illness.”

He spoke thus two or three times, and no one responded. Minh Không then used two fingers of his left hand to remove the nail, which readily followed the motion of his hand. Everyone was astonished and respectful.

Minh Không came to treat the illness, and upon seeing the King cried out in a fierce voice, “Oh great man who on high rules all the realm, why are you now in such chaos?”

The King shivered with fear.

Minh Không ordered that a great bowl be produced, and that water be poured into it and boiled. After the water had been boiled a hundred times, Minh Không used his finger to stir it several times and then sprinkled the water on the King, whose illness disappeared at once. The King conferred the status of Royal Teacher [Quốc Sư] on Minh Không and gave him a fief consisting of several hundred households to reward him for the merit he had achieved.

In the second year of the Đại Định 大定 reign period, which was the year Tân Sửu 辛丑, Minh Không departed from this life at the age of seventy-six.

**Below is another story concerning Minh Không:**

In Giao Thủy 膠水 Village was Không Lộ 空路 Pagoda. In former times a monk named Trị Bình Gian 治平間 resided there. He was praised widely as a man of virtuous behavior. Minh Không one day entered the Pagoda, and another monk (Đạo Hạnh 道行), who shared the room, hid by the threshold and jumped at Minh Không, emitting as tiger-like roar. Minh Không laughed and said,

“So, having adopted a life of prayer, you want to be a tiger? I will cure you.”

In a few years, the monk died and became King of the land. Before long he developed body hair and began jumping about and roaring, his face resembling a tiger’s. The Court sought everywhere for a doctor, magician, or monk to come to his aid, but none could cure him. Hearing that Minh Không had marvellous skills, the Court sent a boat out to welcome him to the Capital. Minh Không took a small pot and cooked rice in it to feed the boat-hands. The Court Emissary laughed and said, “There are a lot of boat-hands. I fear that won’t be enough.”

“No,” said Minh Không. “Let each eat a little bit, and see what I will cause to happen next.”

Then, all the boat hands, forty-five men in number, ate on and on without stopping. Everyone was astonished.

As dusk began to fall, Minh Không said to the boat-hands and the Emissary, “All of you go to sleep and await tomorrow’s sunrise. I will stay awake and row, otherwise, the boat will go nowhere.”

The Emissary tried unsuccessfully to dissuade him, then had to lie down and, pretending to sleep, heard the wind whistling. After a time the sun rose. Minh Không called to the men to wake up, and they saw that the boat was moored fast at the Capital’s port already. Minh Không flew through the air into the Palace and boiled water for the King to bathe in.

As soon as the King immersed himself in the water, the hairs on his body all dropped out and his appearance became normal as before. The King asked how this had happened.

“If a monk falls into error,” said Minh Không, “repentance will cause all difficulties to dissolve.”

“How did you gain these miraculous powers” the King asked.

“Those are not techniques,” Minh Không replied. “Your servant is naturally endowed with a swift aura that is invisibly sent forth, its true essence unknown, for others do not realize that all is emptiness, so I can ignore everything and proceed; it has nothing to do with miraculous power.”

Minh Không returned with empty hands, having declined to accept any gift. The King bestowed the title “Spirit Monk” on him in order to acknowledge his merit.

**Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE**

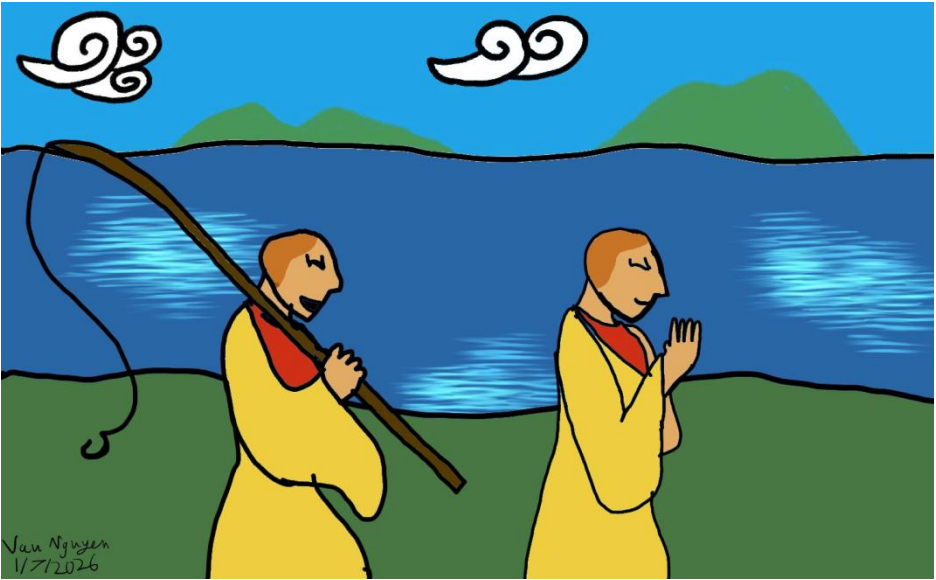
## **2. The Story of Dương Không Lộ and Nguyễn Giác Hải (*Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*, Narratxive 20, “Truyện Dương Không Lộ, Nguyễn Giác Hải 楊空路阮覺海傳, The Story of Dương Không Lộ and Nguyễn Giác Hải”)**

This recounts the miraculous exploits of two monks, both of whom were originally fishermen. Their feats cause them to be widely honored and celebrated.

**I**n Hải Thanh village 海清 there was a Pagoda called Nham Quang 巖光. The Monk there, Không Lộ Thuyết Sư 空路禪師, bore the surname Dương 楊 and was a person of the village. At home, he had always lived by fishing, but he later renounced that profession and became a monk reading the sutra Gia Trì Đà La Ni Môn 伽持陀羅尼門 in that Pagoda. Around the time of the Chương Thánh 彰聖 and Gia Khánh 嘉慶 reign



periods, he became a “companion in the Way” with Giác Hải 覺海. He went once for refuge to Hà Trạch 荷澤 Pagoda, ate grass and wore plant fibers as if he had utterly forgotten his person. On the one hand, he entirely ceased to fish, and on the other, he followed the rules of his order and cultivated his spirit. He became ever more alert and enlightened in appearance. He could fly in the air, enter the water, defeat tigers, subdue dragons, and assume a thousand different appearances in such a way that no one could guess who he was.



Dương Không Lộ and Nguyễn Giác Hải.

One day, a Buddhist Abbott questioned him, saying, “Ever since I came here I have received no instruction from you regarding the discipline of the heart, so I beg to present you with a Gatha,

Through discipline alone the heart attains to purity;  
The crowding trees defeat the feeble soul.  
A person comes to ask the Way of total emptiness;  
He waits beside the screen, confused by images.

The Monk understood and said, “You will come here as you wish. Scripture in hand you will come. I will receive you. I will plan on your behalf. What wish of yours will not be met?” With this, he laughed aloud, and bestowed a Gatha on him,

In choosing spots, the snakes and dragons do their will;  
 All day they train, hearts glad in everything.  
 At times they rise straight up to mountain peaks,  
 Three cries chilling all the empty sky.

The Monk passed away in the tenth year of Đái Khánh 大慶 (a reign period under Lý Nhân Tông 李仁宗) on the third day of the sixth month of the year Kỷ Hợi 己亥. His students prepared the corpse and buried him before the gate to the Pagoda, and a directive came to expand the Pagoda, and that three thousand households be assigned the duty to contribute the wherewithal to make offerings to his spirit.

Giác Hải Thuyền Sư 覺海禪師 was also a person of Hải Thanh 海清 Village. He resided in Diển Thanh 延福 Pagoda in his own district and bore the surname Nguyễn 阮. In his former days he was fond of the fishing profession and often lived on a boat as if it were his home, floating here and there on the ocean. Only at age twenty-five did he renounce that occupation, cut his hair, and become a monk. At first he lived with Không Lộ 空路 in Hà Trạch 荷澤 Pagoda, but later, during the reign of Lý Nhân Tông 李仁宗, made his way back to Hải Thanh. Together with Thông Huyền Chân Nhân 通玄真人, he was often called to the Liên Hoa 蓮花 (“Lotus Flower”) Palace, where he waited in attendance on a cool rock. Suddenly one day two jackdaws appeared and started calling to each other, making disagreeable sounds that echoed in the ear. The King ordered the Monk Huyền to cast a spell to make them quiet. Huyền secretly read a curse, which had the preliminary result

that only one bird ceased calling. The King laughed and said, “There still remains a bird for Sa Môn 沙門 to take care of.”

Giác Hải at once read out a spell, and the other bird ceased calling at once. The King thought this remarkable and made a poem of praise,

Giác Hải’s heart is like the open sea;

The arts of Huyền Thông are deep as well.

Communing with the spirit they change form,

One a Buddha, one a magic sage.

From that time on, the Monk became well-known and acolytes throughout the realm began to follow his teachings. The King moreover held a festival to do him honor.

Every time the King and his entourage travelled to Hải Thanh village they would visit the Pagoda. One day, the King asked the Monk a question, saying, “Have you heard of the maneuver called ‘reacting to truth and stilling the spirit?’”

The Monk at once made a verse in praise of the Eight Transformations, then flew into the air till he was several yards above the ground. The King and the members of his entourage at once praised him for the feat and clapped their hands. After that the King bestowed upon him the Kiến Ứ 肩與 carriage, which he used to go in and out of all the village lodge houses.

Later, in the reign of Thần Tông, the King several times invited him and his disciple Kinh to come for an audience, but he declined on the pretext that he was aged and ill.

A person asked him, “With regard to the Buddha’s relation to living things, which of them is the guest, and which the host?”

The Monk had him listen to the following Gatha,

Knowing that your head and beard are gray,

I order you to be an agèd guest.  
 If you are of the Buddha's realm,  
 The doors are wide and will accept the guests.

When about to pass away, he made another gatha, as follows,

When spring returns, the blooms and butterflies are not deceived;  
 Still vying with each other, coming when the season calls.  
 From ancient times the blooms and butterflies have been unreal,  
 Don't ask them what is in their hearts.

That night, the planet Mars descended to the Southwest corner of the Great House (Thái Thất 太室) constellation. As morning approached, the Monk, sitting upright with severe composure, passed away. The King issued an order that three thousand households be requisitioned to supply the wherewithal to conduct regular sacrifices to his spirit.

**Author: Unknown, 14th Century CE.**

### 3. The Story of the Saintly Deeds of a Nun

(*Linh Nam Chích Quái*, Narrative 40, “Truyện Ni Sư Đức Hạnh  
 尼師德行傳, Story of the Virtuous Deeds of a Nun”)

This tells of a Nun from a long-established Giao Châu Family in Thanh Lương who practices austerities and has miraculous powers. She goes to a location in the mountains so that wolves and tigers can feed on her flesh, but they do not dare approach. She departs from the world when more than eighty years of age while sitting erect in meditation. After her death one of her bones proves effective in dispelling peoples' illnesses. – Eric Henry.

**T**he Nun of Thanh Lương 清涼 bore the surname Phạm 范. She left her home and became an acolyte. She lived in the simplest manner, made her clothing rude, rejected every comfort, and was strict in her observance of austerities. She attained enlightenment and communed with spirits. She often practised sewing and had the face of an arhat. All monks and acolytes,



both near and far, regarded her with awe. Her great prestige made her the most revered Nun of her era. Her religious associates joined her followers in creating the celebrated Hùng Vũ 洪武 Pagoda, the fame of which spread even to great Officials of the land. It looked out upon Đông Sơn 東山 Mountain in the distance.

One day she spoke to her followers, saying, “I wish to bestow my fleshly vessel on the tigers and wolves, as a gift.” That night she went to a stone ledge and sat immobile there, eating nothing for thirty-seven days. Tigers and wolves were all around the site, but dared not approach it. Her disciples came and begged her to return to the Hermitage. Opening the door and entering, they found her fixed in meditation. She underwent an alteration, gathered them together, expounded the sutras, and calmly passed from the world as she sat. She was, then, more than eighty years old.

In Trà Bí 茶麓 there is a Hermitage that confers many benefits. Officials have established a resting place below the Temple. When alive, she often admonished her disciples, saying, “After my departure, my bones should be given to the world. They may be used to wash away people’s illnesses.” Later, when her bones were collected, people could not bear to make this use of her bones, so they were placed in a receptacle. After one night, however, they found a bone lying on a table, lying outside the receptacle. Everyone was astonished at this proof of her divine responsiveness. Later, when people fell ill, they would come there and pray, and her disciples would come with the bone to dispel their illnesses. This never failed to work. The strength of her sworn desire was able to achieve even this.