

The Jade Buddha Story

Part Four: The Vietnam Journal

By Judy Green

Monday 9th March, 2009, Quan Am Temple, Danang

Today, in Danang, we take delivery of the Jade Buddha statue. Six years after we first heard about the eighteen tonne boulder of A grade quality green jade known as Polar Pride which was found in British Columbia, Ian and I will finally get to see the finished statue "in the flesh". It is being brought from the Port of Danang to the Quan Am Temple at Marble Mountain this morning, where it will be shown to the world for the first time as part of the Avolkitesvara Festival from 13th to 15th March.

Early this morning at the Port of Danang Ian experienced some concern when the open top container holding the Jade Buddha was lifted down to the dock to reveal a very wind-torn interior. Wooden panelling had come adrift and plastic tarpaulins had ripped in the sea journey from Bangkok. However it appears no damage has been sustained by the Jade Buddha.

Later in the day at Quan Am Temple. From a very large truck a crane removes the throne first. In this case the travelling throne made from steel and poly-stone to look as much like the real alabaster throne as possible, the alabaster being far too heavy to travel. The crowd which has begun to gather in the temple grounds is intrigued by the large heavily wrapped object, obviously from its shape, the Jade Buddha statue, sitting inside a steel cage which is removed from the truck next.

The work of placing the throne is being done and meanwhile the crowd is growing around the wrapped statue on the ground. Impatient for a glimpse a hand tweaks some of the wrapping and reveals one lustrous green thigh, which becomes the object of much caressing.

Meanwhile, the throne is unpacked and placed to line up with the large dharma wheel which has been erected on the stage. The Marble Mountain looms directly behind and becomes an inspiring and dramatic backdrop. Finally the Jade Buddha in its wraps and cage is hooked on to the crane and brought over and placed on the throne where impatient hands pull away the head covering first to reveal (gasp) the beautiful golden face of the Buddha, smiling - laughing almost.

After the statue is positioned correctly the steel cage is finally unbolted. The wrapping on the body is completely removed and at last we see the whole statue – the golden face and lustrous green body. A very emotional moment for us. Words cannot describe the feeling, five years on from when we had decided to raise the money to buy the 18 tonne block of jade. Two years later, with the faith and support of our friend, the late Henry Lau, and our own production and sales of small jade Buddhas and malas, we raised enough to secure the boulder with a deposit and it was shipped to Northern Thailand to be carved. Now, by what seems an absolute miracle, we are looking at the beautiful Jade Buddha statue and we, as well as everyone here, are entranced.

Our Vietnamese friends in Australia and world-wide have been particularly supportive of our Relics exhibitions and sales of the jade items, and it seems most appropriate that the world's first glimpse of the Jade Buddha should be here in Danang in this amazing, quintessentially Vietnamese setting of the marble mountains with the full moon rising beyond. It's all so lovely and so auspicious, and I fancy the Jade Buddha looks very happy to be here.

The next three days are extremely busy with hundreds of people working to prepare the temple and grounds for the festival and the official unveiling of the Jade Buddha. On Wednesday our assistant/translator, Ian, arrives, and we are able to communicate properly with people at the temple.

Friday. We now have Vanit the carver from Thailand here with us. Arriving for lunch at the temple we see that in three days the grounds of the temple have been transformed into something like a religious fun park/giant market, and already thousands of people are milling around. The Jade Buddha is covered in a brocade cloth and the throne and surrounding stage have been beautifully decorated with flowers and ornaments and the dharma wheel. After lunch it is time for Vanit to place the star-ruby in the forehead of the Buddha. This little ceremony is accompanied by many photographs and a great deal of excitement.

The rest of the day is a blur of introductions and meetings and photos as the afternoon wears on to the opening ceremony at 5pm. When we are led to the stage area in front of the covered Buddha we have to make our way through thousands of people, and as we cut the ribbon and the covering cloth is removed to reveal the Buddha, we are looking out at a sea of people as far as the eye can see to the edge of darkness. At the close of the ceremony we are besieged by hundreds of people wanting a photograph taken with us, wanting to touch us, hug us, to autograph their hands. As near as we will come to experience what it feels like to be rockstars, and a phenomenon that over the next few years will become familiar to us, if not quite comfortable – although at this time we are quite shocked and startled by this unexpected attention.

Also, at this time an unusual phenomenon is being brought to our attention. Strange lights are appearing in photographs of the Jade Buddha. The lights are always the same – circular, and when magnified they show a rainbow of colours and shapes within the circle which are very like a mandala. At first we think it must be dust on the camera lens, but the lights are showing up on photos taken by a wide range of cameras. We don't know it at this time here in Danang, but these mandala lights, as they come to be known, will appear in photos of the Jade Buddha everywhere the statue is exhibited. And to this day they remain a complete mystery.

Leaving the temple that night we see that not only the grounds of the temple but also the roads through the town are now filling with stalls and traders and throngs of people and a huge fair is underway.

Saturday. We arrive early and already there are dense crowds of people in the grounds of the temple and around the Jade Buddha. By Saturday night tens of thousands of people are at the festival and huge crowds surround the Jade Buddha. We nearly cause a riot and are in danger of being crushed when we start giving out Jade Buddha cards. Venerable Nguyen Tang, from Melbourne, and his family come to greet us. As we walk out along the village road with them (no taxi can get near the place) the crowds are immense, people and motorbikes coming and going in huge numbers and in the booths and shops to each side business is booming. Already these enterprising people have photo-shopped their own Jade Buddha cards and posters. And the noise is incredible, the scene timeless – we could have been walking along the same street 500 years ago.

Sunday. Much like Saturday except that towards evening it starts to diminish a little as the packing up begins. At the farewell concert there are wonderful cabaret acts, lots of speeches and presentations. When we get back to our room at the temple we get our first set-back and reality check – the massive money bag holding millions of Vietnamese Dong has disappeared. Police come and interview us but don't hold out much chance of recovery. The biggest takings from the donation box yesterday and today have gone. Quite a let-down.

Monday. I stay in the hotel room counting and bundling donations while Ian goes to the temple to oversee packing and removing the Jade Buddha statue. The organizing committee from the temple want to give us 200 million Dong (about \$10,000) to help make up for the stolen money. The Abbot of Quan Am Monastery, Thich Hue Vinh, comes to visit me at the hotel bearing gifts, very sorrowful and apologetic about the robbery.

Tuesday. Our relaxing day, and we say goodbye to Ian who leaves us to return to Australia.

Wednesday 18th March. We fly to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) or Saigon as it used to be. We are met at the airport by Mr Bang - Chu Bang – a dear old friend from Australia who is to be our new translator and fixer, and we are taken by car to a villa near where he was brought up in District 1 in the heart of Saigon old area. We have the second floor of the gracious old Trang Diep Villa to ourselves, which includes some bedrooms and a large sitting room and balcony, inside a locked and guarded compound, being looked after by the family who own the villa, and this will be our home when we are in Ho Chi Minh City. A comforting thought to have this refuge as we are quite shell-shocked by the noise and traffic and seeming chaos of this huge city.

Thursday. We leave at 8am with a carload of Vietnamese for Ba Ria Vung Tao and the next temple hosting the Jade Buddha. A noisy and merry journey. We are to discover that everywhere we go in Vietnam, loads of people are vying with each other to travel with us. It's the Vietnamese way!

The Jade Buddha is to be in Vung Tao from 19th to 27th March at Dai Tong Lam Temple. On Thursday the truck arrives at the temple and unloads the Buddha and throne. It becomes an all-day operation as the temple people are only beginning to make the stage after the Jade Buddha is unloaded. This is also something we come to know well – the seemingly hundreds of things to be done at the last minute, the panic that it can never be ready in time for the opening, and the inevitable, beautifully finished display always ready in time. After finishing for the day we go to a hotel in Vung Tao, but it seems to be very little-used, cold and institutional and the rooms so tiny and uncomfortable

that we leave there next morning. The Abbot of Dai Tong Lam, Thich Quang Hien, very kindly offers us rooms within the temple grounds.

On Friday hundreds of temple people are busy as bees all day preparing for tomorrow's opening ceremony at 8am. The setting of this temple, apparently the largest in Vietnam, is very beautiful. In the huge grounds there are thousands of wonderful and exotic plants in pots and garden beds, groves of trees, many statues and many large temple buildings. This is a teaching monastery with hundreds of monks living here.

Saturday. We are woken at 5am to start taking our Relics to the Jade Buddha site ready for the Opening Ceremony at 8am. This is a long ceremony with a crowd of mostly sangha. As the day progresses large crowds begin to roll in to the temple grounds. Later in the day we try to distribute brochures and are inundated by masses of people wanting a brochure or wanting their photo with us. It's becoming hard to leave our rooms now without being mobbed. We are always very glad to hurry back to our refuge.

Sunday. Huge numbers of people, literally tens of thousands, are rolling in. The Jade Buddha seems to have really caught the people's imagination and devotion. We are told this is the biggest crowd ever to come to the temple at any one time – bigger than Tet! The huge open space in front of the Jade Buddha is now filled with thousands of people, stalls, souvenir sellers. Once again the Vietnamese are quick off the mark with selling pictures of the Jade Buddha – laminated, framed, printed on plates, small, large, some with Ian and I in front. A continuation of the trend which started at Quan Am Temple in Danang. We have a visit during the afternoon from the Abbot and his retinue belonging to Tinh Vien Bat Nha, a forest monastery nearby, who invite us to visit the next day. Meanwhile around the Jade Buddha the throngs pour in all day and night. Back in our room we count donations with three monks from Dai Tong Lam. As Vietnamese Dong is a low value currency there is an enormous pile of notes! We count till midnight.

Monday. People are still pouring in to see the Jade Buddha. After lunch we are collected and taken to Tinh Vien Bat Nha, the forest monastery of yesterday's visitors. An exceptionally beautiful place, very calm, peaceful, cool, green, heavily wooded and with wonderful simple but elegant buildings. Lovely people – all the monks and nuns turn out to welcome us. The Abbot invites us to take some land there as he would like to build us a house! We tell him we will think about it. Back at the temple later, big crowds surround the Jade Buddha.

Tuesday. It is getting very hot and humid and the crowds at the Jade Buddha have not abated. We "hold court" in our room as a lot of people want to visit us. Luckily we have a private sitting room next to our bedroom. We have a late night again helping to count donations.

Wednesday. Today we are having a rest day. The crowds continue rolling in all day to see the Jade Buddha.

Thursday. Closing ceremony day. The group from the forest monastery visit with a group from Hanoi, who are hoping we will take the Jade Buddha there. Venerable Quang Nghiem, our friend from Sydney, arrives. The closing ceremony goes off well until it is decided to give out brochures and the crowd goes berserk, nearly pushing the stage over. We collect the Relics after blessings are given. Many people want to see us. They are very warm and affectionate to us and don't want to let us go.

Friday. Asiatrans pack up the Jade Buddha and after many farewells we leave for HCMC. Arriving at the villa late afternoon, we meet with Mr Hai, Chu Bang's brother, who is becoming a good friend to us.

Saturday. We are happy to be in our lovely villa refuge in Saigon. Ian and Chu Bang go to Pho Quang Temple in Saigon for the installing of the Jade Buddha at its next hosting temple. In the evening we have a visit from the Executives of Southern Bank to get a blessing of the Relics which we have set up in our sitting room.

Sunday. Opening day at Pho Quang Temple at 4.30pm. We arrive at the temple after lunch to an enormous crowd of people thronging the entry road along both sides of which are hundreds of stalls selling Jade Buddha photos, plates, posters etc, what is becoming the usual Jade Buddha merchandise. We eventually get to the temple gates and are met by a densely packed crowd within the large inner courtyard of the monastery which is edged with four-storied buildings with galleries full of people. The scene is mind-boggling and the Jade Buddha looks amazing. With a huge blow-up photo of the Maha Bodhi Stupa behind it, the statue appears to be seated in front of the actual stupa with spot-lighting changing from purple to emerald green to yellow to blue, and it looks stunningly beautiful. The Abbot of Pho Quang Monastery, Thich Nhu Niem, is filled with pride at the wonderful presentation. At the ceremony we

are presented with the Guinness record for the largest gem quality Jade Buddha. (Vietnamese Guinness record of course!) by Mr Vo Van Tuong of Vietnam Records.

Monday and Tuesday. Huge crowds again, there are two more newspaper articles, and we find that the vendors at the temple, as well as selling pictures of the Jade Buddha, are now selling the photo of Ian and I which appeared in the first newspaper article at Danang – “Ong and Ba Green” , Mum and Dad Green, that’s us. On Tuesday the crowds are so large that we have to be taken out of the temple by security men as we did at the opening ceremony.

Tuesday. The Vietnamese tour organiser and our friend, Su Co Hue Duc comes to beg us to take the Jade Buddha to Hanoi. Now that the temples in the North have seen the success of the Jade Buddha they want it. However, we think it cannot happen because the only way there would be time enough to go to Hanoi would be to fly the Jade Buddha, and this is not do-able because the statue is too large, even for a Hercules aircraft. It has to travel by road but the problem is that we have a deadline to be in Brisbane by June 7. After much re-scheduling we agree to shorten the visit to Dong Thap Temple in the South to allow a six-day showing of the Jade Buddha in the North.

Thursday. We have dinner with Mr Dinh Ba Thanh and his family at their home. Mr Thanh is head of one of the largest media organisations in Vietnam and he has been very helpful in organizing media coverage throughout Vietnam. This visit to his beautiful home and meeting his 96 year old mother, a fine elegant French-speaking old woman, is a glimpse of another side of Vietnam to what we’ve seen so far.

Friday. We have lunch with the Abbot from Danang, Thich Hue Vinh, who has ordered a large Avalokiteshvara statue to be carved from the Jade Buddha offcuts. In the early afternoon Ian and I are interviewed on television and later Ian gives a talk to Mr Thanh’s staff of several hundred. This is very much appreciated and it is organized for their large group to have a blessing with the Jade Buddha tomorrow. Later Mr Thanh and family take us to “Legend” Restaurant in Saigon – very ritzy!!

Saturday. When we arrive at the entrance to the Pho Quang Temple road, there is such a crush of people and motorcyclists all wanting to get in to see the Jade Buddha that we have to leave the taxi and walk the last 100 metres through the crush, which takes half an hour. Mr Thanh’s people arrive at 10am and we serve them refreshments before they have a special ‘on-stage’ viewing and photo session with the Jade Buddha. Later in the day after leaving the temple we go with Venerable Quang Nghiem to a Chinese Buddhist temple. A very interesting place, quite beautiful and somewhat like a mediaeval castle on a small scale with a whole community of people living and working within the temple walls. We are taken on a tour and then have dinner with the two Abbots, one of whom, Thich Chon Tinh, is a monk very well known for his charitable work who has also invited two women who are his main benefactors. The temple serves us the most amazing and exotic gourmet Chinese vegetarian meal we’ve ever tasted.

Sunday. Closing ceremony at Pho Quang Temple, starting at 7am. We are in a taxi by 6am to get there on time. There is huge fanfare and we are very much appreciated and applauded. I am mobbed afterwards by women wanting their photo taken with me, not for the first time, and this will happen continually on the tour. It seems to me that although women in Vietnam appear to defer to their husbands publicly, they also have their own very strong ideas and aspirations and they seem to find me to be an inspiration for what a woman can do with her life. At the end of the ceremony while Ian helps pack the Jade Buddha I go with Thich Chon Tinh from last night’s Chinese temple, and his two benefactors, to visit an orphanage which is one of the Abbot’s charitable works. We visit with 54 little children, some just toddlers, and distribute a clothing parcel and treats to them all. We help the children change into their new clothes and have photos taken. After lunch with them I return to the villa. I’m shocked to find it is still only midday! Today the Jade Buddha leaves one temple and has to be set up in the next temple and ready for another opening ceremony day after tomorrow.

Monday. I sort out several financial matters with Chu Bang while Ian helps set up the Jade Buddha in its new location.

Tuesday. Opening ceremony at Hoang Phap Temple at 7am. We have to wake up at 3.30am to get to the temple one and a half hours drive away. It’s still dark when we arrive and already large crowds are arriving. The Jade Buddha is looking amazing in a red and yellow pagoda, very creatively made from hollow plastic pillars and roof which are lit from within. We have a beautiful new covering cloth for the Jade Buddha which splits to each side for the unveiling. This is quite a different style of ceremony, everyone is well organized and calmly seated with the pagoda area roped off. After the unveiling ceremony overseen by the Abbot of Hoang Phap Monastery, Thich Chan Tinh, the crowds are organized into two long lines to view the Jade Buddha.

The Hoang Phap Temple complex is very large and well-ordered, and there seems to be a lot of people living here. There is one building where old people are housed and cared for. The kitchen is a huge set-up where they can prepare meals for 3,000. (Our translator, Cat, says 10,000, but I think I hear the kitchen manager say 3,000.) We are taken on a tour of the temple but eventually have to beat a retreat to the room they have provided when we are in danger of being completely crushed by huge crowds wanting photos with us.

The Jade Buddha is at Hoang Phap Temple for over two weeks, finishing 24th April, and every day the crowds are enormous and very well ordered in their two (very) long lines.

Wednesday 8th April. Ian and Chu Bang and his brother Hai go off for a “boy’s night” to a seaside resort near Vung Tao and I am very happy to stay at the villa and be looked after by the family. That night, while alone in our room at the villa, I have what seems to be a “visitation”, or maybe a very realistic dream. I was lying in bed awake and the room was quite light from street lights outside, when I saw standing beside the bed at my right side a shadowy figure of a woman who appeared to be in the grey robes of a nun. At the same moment on my left side I saw a darker shadowy figure move to sit on the bed at my left shoulder. The nun leant over me and was hugging me and stroking my arms and pulling at me gently. Feeling rather overwhelmed, almost smothered by her, I quietly said ‘oh help’. As soon as I spoke both the figures disappeared and I was alone in the room, feeling completely amazed but unafraid, and then I went straight to sleep. When I woke up the next morning I felt very peaceful and very positive.

In the afternoon Ian returns for a media interview and we then go out for dinner. We have found a very nice vegetarian restaurant, the Hoa Dang, a few blocks from the villa, but to get there we must cross one of the main artery roads of Saigon, Dien Bien Phu Road. We take our lives in our hands when we step out onto this road and see the barrage of scooters and cars advancing towards us. I imagine our mangled bodies. And the pollution is extreme. A lot of people wear face masks all the time when they are out in the streets. A wise example for us to follow.

Saturday. The Jade Buddha is attracting huge crowds and the two lines of people are getting to be very long. This evening we are having dinner with a benefactor, Ms. Ngoc Ngha, and her family. Her husband, Mr Cuong, has land near Danang where he is planning a Vietnamese Plum Village for Thich Nhat Hahn and they have ordered a .7 metre Jade Buddha from the offcuts which is intended for this village. They have invited us to spend next weekend with them to visit the land.

Sunday. We are collected by another supporter, Ms. Linh Dao, to visit her master’s temple out of town. He is building a very large stupa/temple, To Dinh Buu Long, in the grounds of his old temple. This is a beautiful place, very peaceful, on a high hill overlooking a huge vista of the river and its shipping. This stupa seems to be very much to our way of thinking in the construction of the Great Stupa.

Tuesday. We are invited to lunch with Victor Ngu who has come from Western Australia. When we arrive at the restaurant we find he has invited about thirty people from his family and sangha to have lunch with us. We have many photos taken and give out Jade Buddha cards and the people are very happy to meet us.

Wednesday. In the morning a clairvoyant comes to see Ian. When Ian mentions my “visitation” the clairvoyant says this has happened because the Vietnamese people are so grateful to us for bringing the Jade Buddha. Interestingly not one Vietnamese person who heard of my “experience” was in the least way doubtful or surprised about it. In fact it was felt to be very auspicious and fortunate. Later on we have a meeting with Victor regarding the Jade Buddha coming to Perth. In the afternoon we go to Hoang Phap Temple to meet Linh Dao and her family and bring them to the Jade Buddha and afterwards they take us out to dinner. Linh then takes us to a silk shop where she buys us silk kimonos and scarves. She has ordered 10 wrist malas which I shall bring to Hanoi for her. I seem to be collecting a large number of orders to bring to Hanoi.

Meanwhile our life in HCMC goes on. Sometimes we go for a walk at 6am. At this time the whole city is alive and busy and there are crowds of people in the park exercising. Unfortunately the walk to and from the park through streets choked with motorbikes and cars rather reduces the benefits of the exercise!

Cat, the young lady we met when she translated for us at Hoang Phap Temple, wants to buy me some ao dais – the traditional Vietnamese woman’s gown. On Friday she collects me and we go to her tailor for a fitting and to select fabric.

Saturday 18th April. We rise at 3.30am to go to the airport to fly to Danang to look at Mr Cuong’s land for the potential Plum Village. We arrive in Danang in time for a wonderful breakfast cooked at a vegetarian restaurant run

by Thich Nhat Hahn's students. Then we drive to Phu Ninh where Mr Cuong has the rights to develop a huge tract of land surrounding the nearby city's water reservoir. The land is natural jungle which has been cleared in parts by local people who slash and burn for their subsistence farming. Some part of this is what he wants to turn into a Vietnamese Plum Village. We all jump into a motor boat to go around the perimeter of this huge lake, and have a very hot, noisy, diesel-smelling afternoon. It is clearly a massive and difficult project for Mr Cuong. Not the least because people would have to be turned off the land and another living would have to be found for them. However Mr Cuong seems like a very energetic man and anything seems possible.

Sunday. Mr Cuong takes us to a huge newly constructed cable car/tourist venue in the Ba Na Hills. It is apparently the longest cable car ride in the world straight up the side of a mountain. The ride is breathtaking and from the cable car we can see a huge vista of mountains and plains to the sea. On top of the mountain sits an enormous white Buddha and a charming old temple. After returning to Danang some hours later we fly back to HCMC.

Monday. Ian is taken to visit some temples and a fun park but I am so exhausted after the weekend I remain at the villa. In the evening the Abbot of Pho Quang Monastery, Thich Nhu Niem, a very generous and lovely man, amongst a host of very generous and lovely people, comes to visit us with Chu Bang's sister and brings a feast of spring rolls, French cakes and exotic fruits.

Tuesday. We go to Vien Giac Pagoda for lunch. This is a very beautiful temple made entirely of wood. Everything inside is also carved exquisitely from wood. The Abbot, Thich Dong Van, gives us gifts of amber wrist malas and a Buddha statue. He tells us that bringing the Jade Buddha to Vietnam has made everyone happy and so the statue he is giving us is a very happy Buddha. Later I collect the ao dais with Cat and we have dinner with her.

Wednesday. Today we have lunch at another beautiful temple, with many extraordinary large wood statues. They are in the process of building a meeting hall in which they have already placed an eight metre high wood Buddha. They are also building accommodation and teaching buildings for two hundred monks who will do a five year course, learning how to be dharma teachers. It is so wonderful that the Vietnamese people are openly starting to practice their Buddhist religion again.

Thursday. A group of women come to the villa today to bring fabric to make me more ao dais. The women are very happy for me to wear their national costume and so I'm honoured to do this for them. In the evening Dung, our contact with Asiatrans the company who move the Jade Buddha around the country, comes to bring her mother for a Relic blessing.

Friday. Hoang Phap Closing Ceremony today. I wear one of the ao dais that Cat had made for me. Everyone at the temple is so impressed! As usual everything is beautifully organized to the last detail. We are feted and thanked profusely in a lavish ceremony. At the end is an amazing candle ceremony where hundreds of people with candles stand in precise lines in the huge courtyard of the temple. Then they all walk away and leave the burning candles on the ground, creating an amazing sight of hundreds of lights in rows. The whole ceremony is very moving and wonderful.

Saturday. Leave 8am for Dong Thap in the usual car full of cheerful chatty people. The Jade Buddha has already left with a large entourage of cars and scooters. As the truck carrying the Jade Buddha passes through towns along the way people waiting by the side of the road are in tears. For the Vietnamese people the visit of the Jade Buddha is obviously a very significant event in their progress towards being able to openly practice their religion. Dong Thap is a three and a half hour journey south into the Mekong Delta. As we drive we see that it is a very watery place, with the population living on or over or next to waterways which are tributaries of the Mekong River.

On arrival in Dong Thap we drive straight to Van An Temple. This temple is as unsophisticated and unorganized as the previous temple was sophisticated and organized. But there is so much goodwill and happiness to have us there. Our friend Quang Nghiem from Van An Temple in Sydney is the Abbot also of this temple at Dong Thap and he has poured so much of his energy and resources into this visit of the Jade Buddha. The temple is reached on a narrow dirt track which runs between a village and the river. The truck carrying the Jade Buddha cannot drive to the temple so the statue has to be lowered by crane from a bridge onto a trolley and pushed and pulled down the dirt track on steel plates, by a team of people moving the plates from the back to the front. It is about half a kilometre to the temple and this is an incredible feat!

Sunday. We are at the temple here to help with the installing of the Jade Buddha and after lunch we drive back to HCMC.

Monday 27th April. We have lunch with some gold jewellery manufacturers, Mr and Mrs Lam, who very generously want to manufacture a gold Buddha pin for us to raise donations with. Later in the afternoon the ladies come with the three aodais they've had made for me. They are so generous and sweet and tell me they will be watching television in the hope of seeing me wearing their gowns. That night we have dinner with Mr Thanh and his wife and the Young Presidents Organization, a group of very successful business people, including Mai and Henry Lam. I am seated next to Mai during dinner and we make an instant connection and agree to meet again next day. We have a delightful evening with these interesting and friendly people.

Tuesday. This morning when Ian is at his WiFi cafe the owner of the shop gives him a book to give to me. She and I had been talking about this book previously and now she wants to present it to me. Such gestures are so typical of the Vietnamese people we have met who have treated us at all times with respect and kindness. In the afternoon Mai collects me and takes me to her beautiful shop in Dong Khoi Street. It is more like an art gallery exhibiting traditional Vietnamese clothes using cotton and silk fabrics and embroidery, very beautifully crafted. Her aim is to introduce Vietnamese styles to the world, combining tradition with a more up to date, commonsense approach. We then go to her home/workshop which is full of exquisite things Mai has made and collected. She tells me about her television program where she invites a guest to bring a well-loved but out-worn garment and she advises how it can be re-made into another loved garment. The previous night Mai and I had talked about embellishing the setting of the Jade Buddha forehead jewel to match the old gold of the face and now she shows me some drawings of her ideas. She and Henry wish to donate, and she to make, a re-setting of the star ruby to be surrounded by forty blood rubies. She will collect the forehead jewel at the close of Van An Temple, re-make it in her workshop and then will bring it to us in Hanoi when we take the Jade Buddha there.

Thursday 30th April. We pack up and regretfully take our leave of Villa Trang Diep for the last time. On our way to Dong Thap we call into a lovely old temple and take tea with the young Abbott who loves the tea ceremony and seems to have strong connections to Thich Nhat Hahn. We arrive in Dong Thap at 7.30-pm.

Friday: Up at 5.45 to be ready to get to temple for 8am start for opening ceremony. We discover we have left our ceremonial clothes back at the villa in HCMC, so we have to attend the ceremony in our sweaty travelling clothes. At 7.30am we walk into the temple on the dirt track alongside the river, accompanied by security men, through the village crowded with people and traders and at the temple entrance our minders have to fight for a space to get us in. The ceremony, in very very hot, humid conditions, takes two hours and by the end of it we are looking like drowned rats. The Jade Buddha is looking very beautiful however. He now has a gorgeous golden cover and the same donor is making a robe for him. We sit for lunch with Thich Chon Thin and his followers, then rest and see some visitors in our room. A huge rain storm has caused the track out to be very muddy. We are walked out by security amongst a throng of people and traders and mud! We have dinner in a Viet Chay cafe across from the hotel in Dong Thap and meet Thich Quang Nghiem's niece and sister in law who come to the hotel to see us and take us to visit a small nunnery behind the cafe where get an insight into the life of this group of women living a very simple life together. They are thrilled that we have come to see them and we leave them some cards of the Jade Buddha.

Saturday, Vesak Day: Leave for the temple about 11am. The roadway to the temple track is clogged with motor bikes and cars headed to see the Jade Buddha. At the river we get into a boat and go to the temple by water to avoid the huge crowds on the temple track. We arrive in time for lunch. There are thousands of people packed into the temple and grounds. Later in the afternoon we start giving out Jade Buddha cards with the help of security men who keep the surging crowd under control. At about 4pm we leave and pay a visit to another temple nearby and have dinner there. This temple has very nice gardens and a wonderful spacious and airy meditation hall. Then we return to the hotel and crash exhausted.

Sunday: We return to the nunnery near the hotel for a visit. It's our last day with the Jade Buddha until we get to Hanoi. We arrive at the temple in time for lunch (by boat as per yesterday) and to enormous crowds of people arriving constantly. To cope with these enormous crowds the temple have put a temporary bridge over the river so the pedestrian traffic can be all one way – down the track through the village into the temple, out of the temple to the bridge and back to the road on the other side of the river. We are giving out Jade Buddha cards again to huge throngs. It's very rewarding to be able to give something to these people, most of them poor farmers and small traders who would never have been given much in their whole lives, and they love the Jade Buddha so getting the card is like a treasure to them. There is a lot of poverty in the Mekong Delta. We left the temple by boat at about 3.30 and returned to the hotel in Dong Thap.

Monday: We drive back to HCMC to the villa where we have stored our things, people are visiting to say goodbye, all very sad, then Su Co Hue Duc takes us to the airport and we fly back to Australia.

Tuesday 5th to 13th May. I am at home in my workroom madly making malas. I need to make 60 wrist and lots of long ones for Hanoi orders. I have just received the 12mm beads for a "new" bracelet range, so I'm making them as well because I know they will love the big beads in Vietnam. At the same time Mai Lam is working in Ho Chi Minh City on the forehead jewel for the Jade Buddha which she will present to us in Hanoi.

Thursday 14th May. We fly back to Vietnam, business class courtesy of the Hanoi temple, flying straight to Hanoi. We are very tired and when we arrive at the hotel booked for us it is discouraging to find it is very small and quite unsuitable. Ian promises to find us another hotel tomorrow. Our new translator and minder, a young woman called Dung from Asiatrans, is with us now.

Friday. Ian has gone to the temple and meanwhile Dung contacts Mai who arranges for us to go to the apartments where she and Henry stay. It's clean and comfortable, and I retreat to bed and sleep for 12 hours.

Saturday. Opening day at Phat Thich Temple. We move to the Sofitel where Henry has a suite for us. Today is the big day to see Mai and Henry and the ruby, and to see the Jade Buddha again. Our lovely Jade Buddha is to receive the specially made ruby setting for his forehead jewel at Phat Thich temple this afternoon. This morning Ian and I have been invited to the Vietnam Gemstones Association where the President of the Association, Mr Nguyen Xuan An, presents us with an award in recognition of the Jade Buddha being carved out of such a magnificent jade boulder. Later we have lunch with Henry and Mai and then go to the temple. The very long road in is crowded with people walking to the temple. Phat Thich is one of the oldest, perhaps THE oldest, temple in Vietnam with a very very ancient stone Buddha. When we arrive at the temple it is very crowded and there is no security for us. We make our way to our allocated room with great difficulty and deposit our clothes for the ceremony. We then go to the statue pavilion with Mai and Henry and have a small ceremony for them to place the ruby in the forehead. The jewel is so beautiful. Then we fight our way back to our room and discover too many people using our supposedly private room. It's pretty chaotic and it looks like rain.

After a while Henry and Mai leave and we go to dinner at the temple with the Vice President of Socialist Republic of Vietnam and her entourage. Vice President Nguyen Thi Doan asks Ian what he thinks of Vietnam and Ian replies that he is pleasantly surprised to see so many Vietnamese paying homage to the Buddha. Madame Nguyen simply smiles. To get to dinner we have had to fight our way through the huge crowds once again. However we have an interesting meal in the company of the Vietnamese party members making a lot of toasts and laughing a lot and the Vice President seems to be a very humorous and interesting person. Unfortunately for us it was all in Vietnamese and we couldn't understand a word.

Afterwards we return to our room and it begins to rain and does not stop. We change into our ceremonial clothes, me resplendent in a lime green chiffon, heavily bejewelled and glittering ao dai the ladies in HCMC had made for me. Then again without an escort we fight our way in pouring rain through a huge uncontrolled crowd pressing around the Jade Buddha pavilion, and manage to find our seats. We are sitting with the Australian Ambassador, Allaster Cox, who is fairly incredulous, though good-humoured, about the lack of organisation. We are pressed in by crowds of people trying to shelter under the marquee for official guests, and meanwhile the rest of the huge crowd stands in the absolutely drenching rain. The ceremony surprisingly is not very well organised and we appear on the stage with our ceremonial clothes soaking wet and sticking to us, with rivulets of water running down the face from the hair. Truly drowned rat is about the only way to describe it. We did have a few laughs with the Ambassador though and managed to do all the right things on stage. Afterwards we were left to fight our way back to the room where we collected our things and with huge difficulty amongst the madding crowd made our way to the car and departed along with hundreds of thousands of other people and cars trying to do the same thing. Muddy, saturated, hot and wrecked!

Sunday: We have a farewell breakfast with Henry and Mai and they fly back to HCMC. For the rest of the day we relax with Dung.

Monday. We leave the hotel early to travel by car and boat to the Perfumed Mountain monastery. A trip planned for us by Su Co Hue Duc. An Interesting drive through countryside with jagged mountains on the horizon, to a river down which we putt-putt in a flat bottomed boat to the Perfumed Mountain temple. It is very old and beautiful. We meet with the Abbot who gives us gifts and is VERY interested to look at and handle my jade wrist malas and talks about the possibility of getting a jade Green Tara carved. When he hands me back the malas the 12mm one breaks

(later I saw that the string had been cut near the knot, perhaps with a fingernail). He then asks me to give himself and the two nuns some of the beads for luck. All very odd.

On the way back to Hanoi Dung told us the Abbot had criticized the jade in my mala, saying it was not perfect enough for him, but Su Co had told her not to translate his remarks to us!!

Tuesday. Rest day.

Wednesday. We are going to be taken to a mountain nunnery by Su Co. We drive first to an eating hall or sort of cafe out in the countryside where we park the car, and are served lunch by some nuns. We then start walking alongside a stream, which, over the next few hours we follow up a mountain side. The track gets rougher and smaller and at times is reduced to stepping stones over the stream, until we arrived at the most amazing place. In this very remote mountainous jungle, inaccessible to anything except foot traffic, a group of nuns have built a large and beautiful temple, with accommodation and various temple buildings, all made out of wood and other materials which they have carried by hand, walking up the side of the mountain on the path we had just walked. It had taken them twenty years. It is like stepping into Shangri-la, complete with a waterfall and rockpool in which they wash, exquisite gardens and amazing carvings and statuary. While we are there they hold a Tara Puja for us and we find that, surprisingly, they are Vajrayana Buddhists.

Thursday. Meeting day.

Friday. Early in the day we have meetings with various people, mostly about their wish to place orders for malas, then we go to the temple for the closing ceremony. By comparison to the opening ceremony it is well organized and almost subdued and goes off well.

Friday. Pack up day for the Jade Buddha which is to be taken to the port and put on a ship bound for Brisbane, Australia which is where we shall see it next.

Saturday. We have one more special trip before we leave Vietnam. A nun from Haiphong and her brother have arranged to take us to Yen Tu Mountain in Quang Ninh Province. The mountain really came to prominence after King Tran Nhan Tong retired from the throne in 1299 to become a monk. As we walk (and ride in a cable car) up the 1,068 metre high mountain we visit the cave where King Tran Nhan Tong cut off his small finger to show his resolve to reach enlightenment in that very lifetime. It was wonderful to take part in this famous pilgrimage as our farewell to Vietnam.