

Clemens Maria Heymkind

THE BHIKKU

Of Seeking and Finding

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*I dedicate this book to my children
Elena-Maria, Niclas-Georg,
Anna-Celina, Samuel-Alexander,
my wife Olga,
my parents and my siblings.*

*The purpose of man: To search for truth,
to love beauty, to wish for good, to do what is best.*

Moses Mendelssohn (1729 – 1786)

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The Heart's Calling

Once upon a time, not so long ago, there lived a little ugly man in a village in the Far East where the sun rises. Many years later I myself went there as a traveler, purely by chance, where I heard his story. I wanted to hear more about it, not because I had become curious, but because I had become gripped by the power that emanated from it. The little ugly man had been a rice farmer for many years. He had spent many days in the fields, in wind and weather, tilling them. His work had been hard, his hands wrinkled, his body battered by daily toil, his skin burned by the power of the sun.

But now he had grown old. His strength had diminished so that it had become more and more laborious to cultivate the fields. And

now they lay largely fallow. All his life he had wished for a wife and children, just as the others in the village had. But his wish had not come true. Often the little ugly man was lonely, withdrawing into his small bamboo hut, which lay at the edge of the village, and avoiding other people. However, after his work was done, he would lead the few village children home on the back of his water buffalo after they visited him while working in the fields. And so together they enjoyed the magical sunsets and the balmy evening winds that arose. In these moments of lightheartedness, the little ugly man opened the door of his heart a tiny bit and let a little joy into his otherwise closed heart. In doing so, he also touched the hearts of the children he let ride on the back of his buffalo.

During such evening returns, he told them his story, a little more each time. It went like this:

The little ugly man had been the commander of a king's army a long time ago. He had led many warriors into battle on his behalf. He had fought in foreign countries until he himself became seriously wounded at some point and had to resign from military service. Again and again the children asked him with great curiosity how he had been wounded. But the little ugly man kept silent, too painful were the memories of those war events that had caused so much senseless suffering and had shaken the souls of the people. But in his dreams those dark days of horror remained vivid and jolted him out of his slumber. He often lay awake for nights on end, thinking about the cruel events on the battlefields ...

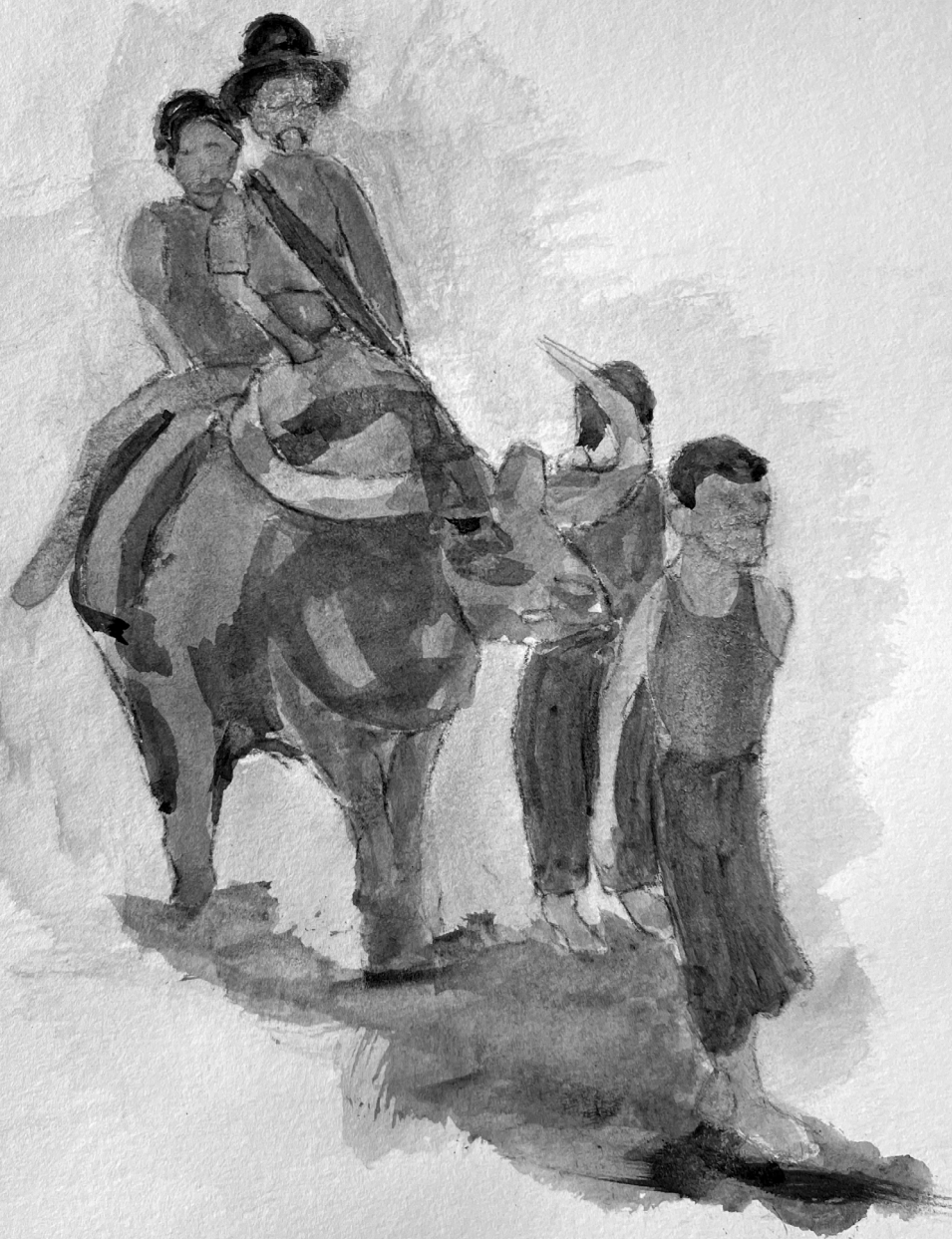
But he also told the children about the imposing cities to which he had travelled at that time and where life pulsed so powerfully: street musicians played in large squares, dancers and jugglers

captivated the spectators. He enjoyed the nights with his comrades, where wine flowed in abundance. He also told them about majestic palaces built of white marble.

The finest ornaments adorned the interior walls and ceilings, and the floors were covered with elaborate inlays of ebony and cedar. The domes that crowned those palaces were gilded. Not to mention the fountains, whose jets of water shot powerfully from the ground into the sky. He often relaxed in the colorful gardens that stretched generously behind the palaces. There were many small lakes, on the banks of which tall cypress trees provided soothing shade.

The children listened attentively. And it almost seemed to them as if they had been there themselves. The little ugly man paused to sort out the bits of his memory, then he continued:

Once he met a princess who wore a crimson silk sari. Filigree threads of gold were woven into it, set with delicately shining semi-precious stones and of exquisite beauty. Golden bangles, earrings and necklaces with precious sapphires stood out against her dark skin. The princess had lost her beloved father, the king, in the turmoil of war. She bore his loss heavily. Often the little ugly man watched her as she sat under one of the cypress trees, staring sadly into space. He could tell by the look on her face that heavy thoughts held her captive in the world of pain. The princess was sad and lonely like he was. Nothing in the world could comfort her, not even his love, which he bestowed upon her. He often listened to her attentively when she told of the carefree days with her father, took her in his arms when her pain over the loss became unbearable. The princess, however, remained inconsolable.



While telling the children his story, the little ugly man wiped the tears from his cheeks.

»What happened to the princess?« asked one of the children.

Then, in the depths of his heart, the little door opened again, a fleeting stirring, so to speak, triggered by the power of longing. Thoughtfully, he kept his head tilted, as if listening deep within himself. But there was no answer, only faded memories of times long ago.

When the little ugly man reached his hut, he offered the children a handful of rice and said goodbye. Then he tied the buffalo to the stake and threw him some fresh grass, tired from the day's work. As with every evening, when the sky put on a cloak of stars, the little ugly man sat for a while on the little wooden bench in front of his hut and drank tea. In the neighborhood he heard the dogs barking, while the birdsong had already almost ceased. The moonlight shimmered silver through the leaves of the palm trees, which swayed gently in the evening breeze. While he looked at the moonlight's reflection, memories rose in him again: He saw the princess waving sadly to him as her palanquin was carried past him one last time, saw him holding the dying king in his arms on the battlefield. All that was long, long ago, and yet it seemed to him as if it were only yesterday. Often the little ugly man had wondered what had become of the princess ... Moments later he lay on his straw mat and it took a while for his mind to rest. Then finally he fell asleep.

The next morning, when he went to the nearby village store to do his shopping, he suddenly paused as he was leaving his hut. A

fleeting thought flashed through his mind. For a brief moment, the little ugly man felt strange. The thought, however, disappeared as quickly as it had come. When he entered the store shortly after, he noticed people craning their necks, holding their hands in front of their mouths, and whispering secretly to each other about how ugly he was. The little ugly man noticed their mockery and bore it heavily. He had often heard their malicious giggles as he left the store. It always came from the same people, namely those who thought they were better. "Deluded fellows!" he muttered to himself, and then started on his way home. From the opposite side of the street, he felt the contemptuous looks that feasted on his ugliness. Some village children blatantly pointed their fingers at him and shouted:

»Run, you ugly little wretch, and take care not to trip!«

The little ugly man did not manage to run like the other people. He dragged a leg that had been injured by arrows during the war. If he did not watch his step, he would falter. Sometimes the street children would ambush him to play tricks on him. Then he would run for his life. That morning, however, he stumbled.

»Curses!« he shouted after the laughing children.

Those were the only words that crossed his lips now and then. At such moments, he raised his hands in front of his face to hide his ugliness. His face was covered with numerous scars; the many battles he had fought had left unmistakable marks on him. It hurt the little ugly man when he looked at himself in the mirror because every time he would feel the demons of his past. The people in the village despised him because of his appearance. Most of them were ignorant. They only took pleasure in superficial gossip, pleasure in

sensation, pleasure in supposed superiority. Moreover, he was not one of them, for it was only by chance that he had ended up in this musty nest after the turmoil of war. And so he remained an outsider.

When the little ugly man arrived home, he carefully dabbed the blood from his battered hands and knees with a damp cloth. Then he sat down on the little wooden bench in front of his hut and thought: It can't go on like this! All these years he had silently endured this suffering. Not once had he fought back, hoping that the villagers would accept him as he was ... But no one in the village knew who he really was. No one suspected that he avoided people only because they frightened him and because he did not know what to do with their superficiality. He loved the beauty of the landscape, the animals, trees and plants, all the colorful sunsets and also the nights illuminated by the moonlight, which brought him peace. The villagers, however, did not at all pay attention to the many small wonders that surrounded them. The love of which a compassionate man is capable was foreign to them. They preferred to waste their precious lifetimes on trivialities, as if there were nothing more beautiful in the world.

As the little ugly man sat pondering in front of his hut, that fleeting thought of the early morning flashed through his mind once again. It penetrated him with such ferocity that he winced in fright. It was a wake-up call:

»Follow a new path and let go of what you are holding onto!
Seek the holy Bhikku!«

He became quiet just then while his spirit flowed into the infinite, to a place of peace. Now that his spirit was completely at rest, he was able to listen within himself. Suddenly, he felt a deep long-