

*Empty Bowl or Full Bowl*



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## Dedication

To all followers of the Path,  
to all seekers of answers,  
and to those who, even without knowing it,  
are already on the road to Awakening.

## Acknowledgments

To the Path, which guides me along life's right ways,  
teaching me the profound meaning of Trust,  
and never allowing me to stray from the intended course.  
To the people who, without intending to, reveal truths to me  
and inspire me to reach goals  
I had never even imagined myself.

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## Prologue

### The Path That Leads Nowhere

They say every journey begins with a step.  
This one begins with emptiness.

An empty bowl. An empty stomach.  
But a heart brimming with unanswered questions.

And how do you walk when you don't know where you're going?

Sometimes the world does not guide you forward—it simply lets you be.

So you walk, drifting from place to place, and end up nowhere.

Some arrive at a monastery seeking peace.

Others come searching for answers.

Some just want a bowl of hot rice—anything to fill the hollow inside.

And then there are those who seek nothing at all, yet discover treasure in every step.

The wind carries them—through mountains, through mist, through the whisper of bamboo leaves.

The child I was didn't know what he was looking for.

All I knew was that my feet ached, the cold crept in through the seams of my heart, and my mother's voice clung to my back like a blanket, keeping me warm.

The temple wasn't waiting for me.

The world didn't miss me.

And yet, there was a place—a place that didn't need me, but welcomed me all the same.

Just a child, who understood nothing.  
But I learned not to need all the answers.

This is the story of a child.  
And a silence.

Whoever opens these pages will not find a story—  
but a river, flowing...

## ***I. Roots (Life Before the Temple)***

# 1

## The Empty Bowl

Sometimes, poverty shows itself less in hunger than in the way a person sees the world.

Liang's parents carried eyes that spoke without words, eyes that seemed to shield their child from truths too heavy to name.

That morning, the sky delayed its brightness. Fog thickened the air, urging the world to rise earlier than usual, while frost covered the ground like a wound refusing to open.

Liang, barely eight years old, woke more from habit than from rest. His stomach grumbled with the familiar echo of an appetite already used to little.

He sat on his mat, rubbed his eyes, and glanced toward the corner where his mother usually knelt to grind roots. She was there, as always, yet quieter. Her movements repeated the old rhythm, though her hands carried a tremor Liang had never seen before.

On the table lay his bowl—empty, waiting. It had been with him as long as memory reached. In it he had eaten porridge, rice, even warm water with leaves when nothing else remained.

Its rim bore a careful repair, and the bottom held a stubborn stain, a mark time had chosen to keep.

Liang lifted the bowl with his small hands, and something inside his chest tightened.

“Take it with you,” his mother said, still without lifting her gaze. “Keep it close.”

“Why?” he asked, though the answer already whispered in the language only fear understands.

She turned, came nearer, and tied a cord around his neck, securing the bowl against him.

“Because emptiness calls to be filled.”

Liang understood only in part, yet he sensed that day carried a different weight.

By the hearth, his father sharpened a tool with unusual insistence. When he rose, Liang offered him a bundle.

“Here’s dry bread, a piece of turnip, and a stone.” His father tapped his shoulder. “Keep the stone close. A weight sometimes keeps the journey steady.”

No embraces marked their farewell, no tears appeared. Sadness often hides in the body’s corners, revealing itself only in restraint.

Liang stepped through the doorway, bowl at his chest, bundle on his back. His gaze stayed forward, for a backward glance could stop his steps.

The path toward the monastery stretched long and rough.

No signs guided the way—only whispers, tales murmured by travelers, and the vague knowledge that high in the mountains lived men who spoke little yet carried wisdom greater than books.

Liang followed the hardened dirt trail, stones and roots tugging at his feet.

The forest watched with hidden eyes; branches creaked when unseen, shadows trailed from afar.

The first day passed in quiet steps. He walked, ate sparingly, and drank from a cold stream. Night brought him shelter beneath a gnarled tree that smelled of ancient earth.

On the second day, a fox appeared at a distance. Liang spoke softly, as if greeting a friend. The fox tilted its head, then slipped away.

At midday, an old man came down the path, his cart pulled by a lean mule.

“Where are you headed, young one?” he asked without stopping.

“To the temple.”

The man clicked his tongue. “There, meals wait less than silence. Yet silence feeds other parts of the soul.”

A dried plum flew from his cart. Liang caught it like treasure, saving it for the hardest moment. Today still carried life.

The third day brought steady rain.

Clothes clung to his skin, the cold bit at his fingers, and the mud turned the earth into a slippery thread.

In a small village, he asked for water. A woman studied him carefully.

“Are you a monk?”

“Not yet.”

“And what are you then?”

“A child,” he replied.

She handed him a rice cake, whispering words that felt like blessing, though their meaning slipped past him.

That night, thunder roared and lightning tore the sky. Sleep kept its distance. Liang clutched his bowl like a shield. It carried nothing, yet its emptiness seemed to matter. Sometimes what appears hollow holds all that is truly needed.

The monastery came into view on the fourth day, veiled in mist across ancient cliffs. Its presence offered no grandeur, no gilded statues.

Stone walls and dark roofs framed a silence dense with unseen life.

The stairway to the gate rose steeply, each step deepening his fatigue.

Liang climbed with trembling legs, numb hands, and hope dangling beside his bowl.

He knocked—once, twice, three times. Silence.

He sat curled at the threshold, soaked, unsure if arrival had truly come.

Tears never rose.

Cold pressed inside as well as outside, chilling the part of him that questioned belonging.

Hours slipped by, perhaps a whole day, until the door opened. A tall, slender figure appeared, face serene, eyes steady.

The monk’s robe spoke of simplicity; his presence, of timelessness.

“What brings you here?” the figure asked.

Liang lifted his bowl silently. The monk’s gaze moved from the vessel to the boy’s eyes.

“Enter,” he said gently, turning inward.

Liang rose and followed.

“Here, nothing is given,” the monk added, still walking.

“But for those willing to empty themselves, every corner reveals.”

Liang stepped inside. The door closed behind him, not with force, but with the weight of permanence.

The courtyard held stone paths, lanterns, a pond, and doors opening into mystery.

Children swept, others moved in meditation, one knelt watching fish beneath the surface.

The monk guided Liang to a room, quiet and spare: polished wood, a rolled mat, and a shelf with a bowl like his own.

He showed Liang where to rest.

“Names stay unspoken here; only steps count.”

Liang sat in the silence.

The bowl, warm from his chest, hung peacefully.

For the first time, emptiness felt full of meaning

## 2

### The Bread and the Stone

The night before his departure, Liang lay on the worn mat he had shared with his siblings for years. Now, that space seemed larger, as if the emptiness about to emerge had already settled in the room.

Outside, the wind danced among the trees, brushing the wooden windows with a gentle, mournful whisper. Inside, silence draped over everything like a dense, tangible cloak. Liang closed his eyes, yet sleep remained distant. Fear, sadness, or hunger did not keep him awake; instead, something deeper stirred, an unease he had yet to understand, a tremor of spirit that clung to him in the darkness.

His mother's slow breathing offered companionship. He sensed that she remained awake as well, lying on her side, gazing at the mud wall that, through tired eyes, resembled a blank canvas upon which future dreams might be sketched. He did not call her, allowing the silent moment to linger, as if a word might shatter the fragile connection they shared.

Carefully, he rose and approached the table. On a linen cloth, folded with care and bearing the marks of many years, rested three objects: a piece of hardened bread, a cooked turnip wrapped in leaves, and a smooth black stone the size of a small fist. Each item seemed placed with intention, yet their purpose remained hidden from Liang.

He sat before them, regarding each as a sacred relic. Moonlight filtered softly through the window, casting a tender, warm glow over the scene.

A ritual unfolded, ancient and wordless.

His mother appeared silently, barefoot, her steps as soft as a sigh. She seated herself across from him, sharing the darkness with a warm gaze.

She spoke first.

"You must be hungry," she said gently. "You understand that already." Liang nodded without lifting his eyes. The certainty of her words followed him like a shadow.

"This bread," she added, lifting the piece carefully, "feels hard now so it will endure the journey. When strength wanes, take a bite. It will remind you that each step forward remains possible."

He placed the bread in the bundle he always carried. Its hardness seemed almost absurd, yet in the approaching night, any support offered shelter.

“The turnip,” she continued in a low voice, as if the night itself could listen, “carry its scent with you. Let it whisper of home when solitude feels heavy.”

Liang pressed his lips together, holding back tears. This restraint stemmed from respect, a quiet pact with what lay ahead.

“And the stone?” he asked, voice trembling as only children’s voices do when confronting the unknown.

His mother cupped the stone in her hands, a soft smile illuminating her tired face. “You found this at four years old, saying it resembled the moon,” she recalled. “It weighs little, yet it carries the memory of your beginnings. Keep it near your heart, as a charm for the long path.”

Liang held the stone, sensing its cold and, in some mysterious way, its vitality. Perhaps it contained the essence of his small world, his childhood, his home.

Firm footsteps then broke the quiet. His father appeared in the doorway. A man of few words and calm gestures, yet something about him that night carried a different message, expressing more than words could.

He seated himself with them at the table and drew from a linen bag an old wooden bowl, cracked and full of dreams.

“It is yours,” he said. “It always has been. Now it travels with you.”

The bowl bore a bamboo-repaired crack and a darkened base from years of porridge and soup. Yet it gleamed, polished by loving hands, carrying a gentle fragrance preserved through time.

“What if it breaks?” Liang asked, innocence shaping his worry for what he had yet to value fully.

His father met his gaze with seriousness softened by warmth.

“Even what changes form retains purpose.”

Silence returned. Outside, the wind swayed the willows with a whisper of melancholy. The house carried scents of old smoke, wet earth, and farewell.

“Should I stay?” Liang ventured, his voice weighted with doubt.

“Hunger alongside you matters little.” His mother caressed his face with a steady hand, soft as velvet, bearing the years and love that requires no words.

“We wish for you to go. That is why this parting touches deeply.”

Liang lowered his gaze, sensing a mix of fear and hope.

“What if they accept me?” he asked, voice fragile.

“Then return with what you learn,” his mother said. “Here, love awaits you always. Yet embrace lessons fully, look beyond, listen to your inner self.”

Liang nodded, carrying the weight of a sacred mission. Carefully, he packed the bread, the turnip, the stone, and the bowl. He arranged them in his bundle as a portable altar.

Lying beside them, sleep finally arrived. It did not come through peace, but because a heart exhausted from ceaseless beating understood that rest forms part of the journey ahead.

### 3

## Midnight Voices

Night had fallen over the village like a damp woolen blanket—the kind that never dries completely, weighing on shoulders and skin, reminding every traveler that the journey ahead demands effort. Heavy clouds stretched across the sky, dense and unyielding. Stars remained hidden. The moon stayed behind its veil. Everything rested, surrendered to silence and deep slumber.

Everything, except Liang.

He managed to close his eyes briefly after placing the bread, the stone, and the bowl beside his mat. His body—trained through hardship—remained alert, sensing something beyond comprehension, a quiet anticipation stirring within.

The house breathed around him. Wooden planks creaked under temperature shifts, like ancient bones responding to stillness and chill.

The wind slipped through a tiny crack, carrying secrets into the night.

Liang sat upright, wrapping his arms around his knees, and drew in a slow, deep breath. A subtle, unfamiliar fear touched him—a whisper of something larger approaching.

He rose with the calm of someone who moves forward without expectation, stepping outside with silent purpose.

The world lay in shadow, profound and hushed. Village dogs stayed in their sleep. Cold bit his bare feet, reaching into bones, a reminder that life demands resilience. Liang advanced steadily to the small garden behind the house—the garden where his mother had grown onions and roots with quiet patience. The earth had dried and cracked under drought, yet its memory remained alive.

He settled on a smooth, cold stone—the same stone where his grandfather once spun stories before leaving the world. In that night's silence, the stories breathed again.

“Sleep eludes you?” said a deep voice from his left.

Liang jumped. No one expected anyone there. Turning, he saw old Wen beneath the plum tree, motionless as someone who waits lifetimes for the precise moment to speak.

“Forgive me, I didn't know you were here,” Liang whispered, attempting calm.

“I arrive when needed,” the elder replied with a cryptic smile.

Liang sensed the words could hold truth or illusion. Pale, wrinkled eyes met his—eyes that had witnessed eras beyond stars.

“You head to the temple tomorrow?” Wen asked, voice rich with wisdom.

Liang nodded.

“And what do you hope to find there?” the elder pressed.

The question reached deep. Liang paused, then spoke with the only certainty within him:

“Answers remain unclear... yet I feel the path must be taken. My parents guide me forward.”

Wen nodded slowly, a gesture approving the first step of a long, demanding journey.

“Many never leave their homes, and many linger without reason. Your parents see beyond, allowing your journey to begin.”

Liang lowered his gaze, cold brushing his ankles. Silence stretched between them, thick as woven fabric, yet rich with understanding, shared without a single word.

“At the temple,” Wen said, “questions wait. These questions weigh heavier than imagined.”

Liang sensed their gravity and tucked the words into a corner of his heart, a secret for future clarity.

“When you arrive,” the elder continued, “embraces may be scarce. Guidance may appear distant. Eyes will meet you as if you were another stone on the path. Learn to carry yourself as that stone... and strength will grow.”

“Will it hurt?” Liang asked, trembling.

“It will, yet differently than here. The temple brings emptiness, and carrying it fosters strength.”

A shiver ran through Liang—not from wind, but from something deeper.

The old man rose, steady and calm, each movement deliberate, as if shadows and steps were known to him. “Keep these words close,” he

advised quietly. “The value lies in living them, not speaking them aloud.”

Before Liang could respond, old Wen melted into the shadows beneath cherry trees, leaving only the wind’s whisper and the echo of his counsel.

Liang remained a moment longer, hands resting in his lap, heart stirring with a strange blend of peace and anticipation, a hint of destiny brushing close.

He returned inside without sound, lay on his mat, and sleep wrapped him like a gentle, warm blanket—light, soft, and serene.

Tomorrow, the path would begin.

## Reading Sample · Empty Bowl or Full Bowl

Sometimes, understanding the soul of a book requires nothing more than opening its first pages and letting yourself be carried away, like a traveler who listens without asking questions as the river speaks. At other times, it is helpful to step back, lift your gaze, and contemplate the outline of the path, sensing the aroma left by the words even before reading them.

This small excerpt—three chapters out of forty-one—does not aim to explain everything. It is merely an ajar door, a humble glimpse of a greater journey, filled with ancient questions, dense silences, and voices whispering from the margins of the world.

*Empty Bowl or Full Bowl* is available both as a Kindle ebook, ideal for accompanying you on any journey, and in paperback, for those who prefer the touch of pages and the weight of a book in their hands.

If what you read here touches you, even if only with the fingertips of your soul, perhaps the path does not end on these pages. On Amazon, you will find the complete story, along with our trilogy *Shaolin, Land of Pilgrims*, another path born from the same silence and the same gaze.

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