

NIPPONZAN



MYOHOJI

The Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii, Founder and Preceptor

December 2021

*Dōjōs are places on earth built to emulate the Pure Land....The only way to create the Pure Land where a large number of people live together is through the joy of everyone involved. Being right or wrong is secondary.*

The Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii  
Founder of Nipponzan Myōhōji

NA MU MYŌ HŌ REN GE KYŌ

**EARLIER THIS YEAR** while working on the Great Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda, a woman and her young grandson approached me, which took some gumption because I was working on scaffolding, enswathed in sound-cancelling headphones, eye protection, a KN-95 dust mask and producing a considerable amount of dust and noise with a die grinder. Pausing and removing the protective gear — the dust everywhere would have to be tolerated — we had a pleasant but unmemorable chat, until she said something that prompted me to ask if she had visited before.

“This is my fifth time,” she said. “My grandson is visiting and I wanted to bring him.”

Nearly every day visitors come up our mountain, some driving vehicles equipped to handle the steep grade, most hiking. The majority are white folks, like this county’s population, but also Black people, Asians, Europeans, young, old, some who relish the climb, others barely making it, people who tell us they are Buddhist or Christian or no religion, folks declaring they are peace activists or not activists of any sort, some who have traveled the world while others have never been outside the county. In these Covid times, we have refrained from traveling, but the world, some of it anyway, comes to us.

To be clear, we don’t invite them, and they have no idea who we are. We never advertise or promote the Peace Pagoda. Somehow, people just started showing up, and in the age of Covid, the one-time trickle of folks became a steady stream. We don’t know why they come nor do we ask. Perhaps some find the place trifling with the unfinished Peace Pagoda (see photo). But countless times we’ve found gifts left on the altar, donations left in the offering box or have been told someone is a return visitor. Many offer words of appreciation. “Beautiful” and “peaceful” are two we hear a lot.

These visits bring us joy. Our founder, the Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii (Guruji) spoke about dōjōs being a “world of joy,” referring mainly to the heart and mind of those residing at temples and Peace Pagodas. It seems our visitors also enter this world, perhaps helping create it or receiving a part of it or both. In another Dharma talk, Guruji spoke of holding a debt of gratitude toward *everyone* we meet because they may offer some kindness in this life or did so in a previous life or will do so in subsequent lives. We do not know, cannot know the length and breadth of our connection to others.

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“Toward every one we meet, we must hold this debt of gratitude,” Guruji said. “This mindset enables us to be grateful to everyone. When our appreciation is felt, they will be impelled to be kind in return. In that, peace is created.”

I had a recent conversation with a visitor from Indiana or Illinois, I can’t remember which because what called my attention, at least initially, was the T-R-U-M-P emblazoned on his hat. It was his second visit, spaced one year apart, and it became clear that he returned because he loves the Peace Pagoda, the stone carvings, the temples, the gardens, the volunteer labor, *everything*. We had a nice talk.

Things are not always as they first appear. When Utsumi-shonin and I were first shown the Peace Pagoda land by our friend, Kell, we balked at the idea of purchasing it because the land was opened by a cellphone company which built a tower that we would not own or lease but which would sit on the land until its lease expired. But then we remembered that Buddhism with its stūpas/Peace Pagodas has a 2,500-year history and was here long before cellphone towers and will exist long after they are gone. So we bought the land.

And from that land, stripped bare of forest and topsoil when we first saw it, we all — you and us together — have built and are building a place where anyone and *everyone* can come to again and again for peace, for beauty, for a place to encounter joy. For you and all the benefactors we don’t know of and for whatever will come in the future, we hold a debt of gratitude.

Gassho san pai [Palms together, bowing thrice]

UTSUMI

Shenise

P.S. Due to the continuing ups and downs of the pandemic, we are not setting a schedule for the coming year, but will send out email announcements if/when we hold ceremonies, work parties or peace walks. We have some tentative plans, however, and one is to go to Selma. Recently we were contacted by our Selma friend and ever-willing host, Khadijah Ishaq, which prompted the decision to attend the 2022 Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee in March. Most likely we will then walk from Selma to Montgomery. Based on Khadijah’s information, we believe the people hosting the Jubilee are taking the pandemic seriously and working hard to keep everyone healthy. But the organizers, like the rest of us, are struggling to balance safety and activism, so we’ll stay flexible and see what comes.

Another possibility concerns the Peace Pagoda. For months now, Utsumi-shonin has been working assiduously at preparing the concrete and railing on the Peace Pagoda for painting. He made the decision not to stucco the exterior wall, which has meant patching and grinding concrete and then doing it again and again until he is satisfied with the results. It is one heckuva job, but his work looks great and we’re almost there! So we hope to hold a Paint-the-Peace-Pagoda-Party in April. We’ll let you know.