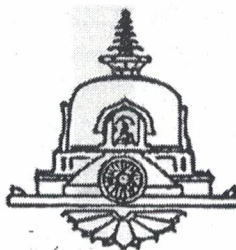


NIPPONZAN



MYOHOJI

The Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii, Founder and Preceptor

December 2022

Our practice of *rōhachi-sesshin* [week of fasting] is performed to [protect the Dharma]. Once we complete the practice to ready ourselves to protect the Dharma, we must avail ourselves in serving the people. If by “the people” you think of those in faraway places, your focus becomes blurred. Start with those close to us, such as parents, children or siblings. We must sacrifice for those with whom we share our lives.

—The Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii
December 3, 1979

NA MU MYŌ HŌ REN GE KYŌ

WHEN MY BROTHER CALLED to say he and his wife wanted to visit the Great Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda, I thought I had put him off by pointing out that they’d have to come to the Fall Work Party for that to happen. A couple of weeks later, he called again and said, “We’re coming to the work party.” Really?! How long would they stay? “Ten days.” Ten days!!!

This scenario worried me on many different levels. First, most obviously, he was very newly retired from almost 45 years of desk jobs in a bank. What if he overdid it, injured himself, had a heart attack or worse? My sister would kill me.

Much deeper and more conflicted, though, was the loving and troubled history I’ve had with my family these last 30 years.

This year was the 30th year since I joined Nipponzan Myohoji, an anniversary for which I am extraordinarily grateful and a little bit proud. But I joined over my mother’s tears and the strenuous objections of my family, some of whom wondered if I had fallen into a cult. I understood. I was raised by a solidly middle-class family that was decidedly unflashy (Utsumi-shonin calls them stiff). What did they have to prepare them for a child who would shave her head, wear funny clothes in public all the while beating a drum and chanting? Worst still, you don’t get paid.

While my head could understand the hurt and confusion on their side, my heart felt betrayed by the lack of trust for my judgment and words. Luckily for me, the love ran deep and over time tempers cooled, hearts opened wider and trust was restored.

Except. Maybe that’s not entirely true. Because when my brother, Bob, told me he was coming, some of the old hurts and fears resurfaced. I worried that an up-close look at my life would be found wanting: too poor, too strange, too weird. Bob seemed concerned, too, wondering what meaningful work he could offer. Utsumi-shonin answered that concern immediately. “Ask him to make pizza,” he said. My brother is a terrific pizza maker. So it was settled.

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In the end, he did more than make pizza. He chopped wood, gathered drinking water, pulled weeds and chatted with everyone. As the week went on and I saw he and his wife were not only enjoying themselves, they fit into our motley community and my fears were totally unwarranted. It was like my ordination ceremony after my head was shaved and I looked down at the fallen hair and realized I would never miss it. Until then, I had feared I might. Just so, after 30 years I understood that not only had I changed, everyone had, too, and I no longer need to feel judged and wanting. That was the gift my brother gave me.

A wise monk at the Trappist monastery in Conyers, GA once told me that a monk's life is revolutionary. How else to describe, he slyly asked, a life that eschews societal norms except as one of resistance? It sometimes does feel gently subversive to live in what can be best described as a gift economy where talent and time are offered and the payment comes in the form of community and a good meal.

And who knew the revolution might include dragons? But first, I have to back up to earlier this year when we received an email saying that a painting had been left in the garden. Actually, it had been left the day before and it had rained overnight. I expected to see a soggy mess, but instead I learned two things: a) oil paint on canvas can hold up in a light rain and b) Shanon Kelley, the artist, takes too much care to leave a soggy mess.

What was waiting in the garden was a beautiful cloudscape, the clouds lit with pinkish orange blush as if in a sunset. And sitting at the bottom of this tower of clouds was a small, powerful and exquisitely detailed Peace Pagoda. Though she lives locally, we had never met Shanon, but we have come to know since that she is talented, quirky and generous. A painting left in the garden was not out of character.

In later visits, Utsumi-shonin started talking to Shanon about his dream of painting dragons on the retaining wall that runs below the Peace Pagoda. In western literature, dragons are fire-breathing, fearsome creatures libel to kidnap princesses or steal glittering jewels. In the East, dragons are gods who protect many things but chiefly they protect water. And water is life, as the Standing Rock activists so profoundly taught.

So during the fall work party while others worked on stone, erected scaffolding or pulled weeds, Shanon came with her paints and two dragons—one with a lightening bolt representing water from the sky; the other with a globe signifying water from below—emerged on the wall over two weeks. All of us would steal time from whatever we were doing to watch as she started by sizing the painting, then drawing, then adding layers of detail. I don't know of any other Peace Pagoda with a wall mural, but I would highly recommend it. It's beautiful.

While it is one of the more visible of gifts offered here, the dragons join the thousands of ways that hundreds or perhaps even a thousand or more have built, sown, cooked, painted and cleaned for the revolution, a revolution of the heart yearning for a better world. I have written variations of the last sentence in just about every letter we sent annually, but it never grows old and it never ceases to be true. Likewise, our gratitude deepens and abides.

One last word on ordination anniversaries. While 30 years is a wonderful thing to cheer about, come January 2023, Utsumi-shonin marks 45 years of being a monk. And just because he's Japanese, doesn't mean his decision didn't cause conflict back home. On his first trip to his family after being ordained, his sister said, "Get him to a mental hospital!", only half in jest. He's still crazy, but in a good way. And he still cuts down trees, climbs and erects scaffolding, builds, cleans, moves stone and is the resident engineer for every project here. And he's researching what he would like to see painted next on the retaining wall. Please come visit and check it out.

Gassho san pai [Palms together, bowing three times]

UTSUMI 

