

NIPPONZAN



MYOHOJI

The Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii, Founder and Preceptor

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In Buddhism, good will eventually work to change evil into good so that nothing but good will exist. A prime example is Lord Śākyamuni Buddha. The image depicting Buddha entering Māha-nirvāṇa represents his lifelong work of transforming evil into good. Death is also a representation of evil. The image shows a tiger, lion, snake, frog, eagle, sparrow, and many others gathered after hearing of Buddha's demise and crying in sorrow. Naturally, the king, his ministers, those associated with Buddha or who had karmic connections to him, and celestial beings are all weeping together. It depicts a scene where all sentient beings, including those at low stages of life and those who survive by devouring others, gather and weep over Lord Buddha's passing. It is a representation of good overcoming evil taught in Buddhism.

...People of religion constantly face the possibility of persecution. They may be crucified or beheaded. Yet, after all is said and done, those who spread the correct teachings must emerge victorious.... We must commit ourselves to our work with a firm belief that non-violence and what is right will ultimately prevail over violence and evil.

—The Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii in conversation with
Dennis Banks, founder of the American Indian Movement
June 25, 1978

NA MU MYŌ HŌ REN GE KYŌ



WE HAVE A DOG. Without looking for one, dreaming of one, hoping for one or even wanting one, a dog named Mimi has lived here for more than 10 months. She is a good dog, very good in fact, with a sweet nature and friendliness towards all people and dogs. Raccoons are another story. Even so, keeping a dog has complicated our lives and contributed more than a little frustration given that we both are clueless when it comes to dog training.

Mimi arrived here in February at approximately three months of age, frightened, cold and very skinny. We assume someone abandoned her here while we were in town on errands; how else does a puppy with trouble walking find her way to the top of a mountain at the end of the road? None of the neighbors had ever seen her before. She remained unnamed for days while we debated what to do, knowing that bringing her to the local animal control was a likely death sentence.

A little more than a month earlier, following a record-smashing cold snap when temperatures did not rise above single digits for almost a week, we noticed our goldfish that were temporarily living in 55-gallon barrels peeking from the edge of thick slabs of ice, gasping for air. Their pond had been destroyed by a bear, and they were in barrels until we could repair it. (Living at the edge of a national forest offers a plethora of animals stories). Until that moment it never occurred to us that ice, if it was thick enough, could deplete unfrozen water of oxygen. The fishes' desperation became ours as we tried lifting out the ice—no go—and then tipping the barrels on the side to slide out the ice and dump the fish into 5-gallon buckets, picking up the ones that missed the buckets (lots) and landed on the forest floor. Almost all survived and we thought that would be our great animal adventure for the year. Then Mimi came.

If we see these stories from the vantage point of only our society, living in this unreal bubble that isolates us from the world's wars, they're inconsequential. When viewed from a more global perspective, they become even less significant and simultaneously grander, for saving the life of another person be they in a war zone or crossing a border is almost always an impossibility, but honoring the sanctity of life is often within reach in our daily lives, even if the life is one of a goldfish or a dog. They become part of our practice and prayers.

NIPPONZAN MYOHOJI—ATLANTA DOJO
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Earlier this month, beaten down by news of war and the rise of authoritarianism and intolerance, I despaired of writing this letter because words seemed to have abandoned me along with the hope and possibilities that are essential to any spiritual life. Then Yumiko Miyazaki, who has translated into English most of Guruji's words for the past five decades, asked me to look at the conversation quoted above. She has first translated it in 1980, quite well in fact, but was revisiting it at the request of a monk. I reached the part of good working to change evil—not overcoming it, but transforming it and being transformed from within—so that nothing but good remains. Those words, that faith, promise and hope, shot through me like an arrow hitting my core self, and knowing that those words still sang to my heart renewed me with gratitude and trust.

Gratitude, trust and a lot of other virtues, including a willingness to work in ways you never imagined, continue to build the Great Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda. This year we were able to purchase the scaffolding needed to go higher, which has been secured by Utsumi-shonin with his usual thoroughness. I am nervous at heights, but this scaffolding is so secure and easy to climb that it feels little different than being on solid ground. There's even a spiral staircase, made out of maple trees and recycled plywood to take you up inside the Peace Pagoda. I've always wanted a spiral staircase! And this one goes up about 40 feet! Just mind your head.

With the ability to work at higher elevations, concrete for the first Buddha niche was poured in September. When the forms came off, it looked cathedral in size and hinted at the visual impact the Peace Pagoda will have once finished. The plan was to pour concrete for the second of four niches by year's end, but COVID interrupted that goal. (We both got it. We're both fine. No, I don't want to talk about it.) Even so, much of the form and all of the rebar is in place for the second niche and the four niches will (fingers crossed) be completed in 2024.

Once the niches are completed, we will be close to the top of the Peace Pagoda. No, I am not promising a completion date. I learned long ago not to make promises about a process that is so totally out of our control. But one day the Peace Pagoda will be complete. What then? The daily choices to trust rather than fear, to choose hope over despair, to embrace nonviolence even when ridiculed as an out-of-touch idealist will always be ours to make. Building the Peace Pagodas in our hearts is an everyday, unending process.

To tie up the loose end of the story that introduced this letter, once we decided to keep the dog, Utsumi-shonin named her Mimi because of her floppy ears, "*mimi*" meaning "ears" in Japanese. Remember that bear that destroyed the fish pond along with several fruit trees? This year, no bears! And the raccoons that would eat every single muscadine grape before they became fully ripe? This year we ate our fill, brought what was left to our neighbor and he made 31 bottles of wine from it. Think of how fat those raccoons must have gotten! But the biggest changes Mimi brought was in our own lives, as we try to adapt to her needs while staying the course with our own work. It gets tricky. But each day gives another opportunity to choose, another chance to grow, another chance.

Gassho san pai [Palms together, bowing three times]

[Signed] Brother Utsumi

Sister Denise

P.S. We made changes to the annual schedule partly as an experiment and mostly to accommodate Utsumi-shonin's plan to travel to Japan in May. The Spring Work Party will be in April and includes the Peace Pagoda Flower Festival midway through. There will be the usual work of building, painting, gardening, cooking, etc. with a ceremony included. Other events have also been moved. Please check the schedule, and we look forward to seeing you in 2024.