

NIPPONZAN



MYOHOJI

December 2024

...the sacred being exists in the heart and mind. ...Nichiren Daishonin pointed out that a person's face never remains the same but displays a diverse range of expressions, reflecting one's state of mind and heart. Anger, joy, insipidness, dissatisfaction or cajolery all show through one's facial and physical expressions. Joy is a reflection of the realm of heavenly beings existing in the heart and mind of humans. 'Tranquil is this realm of mine, ever-filled with celestial beings,' is a passage from [Chapter 16] of the Lotus Sutra. Every being, be it human, dog, cat, bird, horse or cattle, possess ten realms of existence [i.e., everything from Buddhahood to hell] within its heart and mind. A manifested world in which beings live with joy in their hearts and minds is the realm ever-filled with celestial beings.

*The Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii [Guruji]  
February 8, 1977  
Sri Pada Dōjō, Sri Lanka*

NA MU MYŌ HŌ REN GE KYŌ

GURUJI WAS SITTING ALONE in a Japanese-style room, tatami mats on the floor with walls made by shoji screens of wooden frames covered in paper. Utsumi-shōnin entered, not knowing Guruji was present, and greeted him with surprise. "A Peace Pagoda can be like a child playing with the shoji screen," Guruji told him, pointing a finger as if to puncture the paper of the wall. "It brings in fresh air." A small hole, Utsumi-shōnin thought, can let in a lot of air.

Then the dream was over. It came the second night after the shattering results of the November election, when we felt depressed and hopeless for what the future might hold. Many of you felt something similar.

Initially, we were reluctant to hold a dedication ceremony for the Great Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda during the upcoming regime (though true to our openended style, we haven't even set a date!), believing it was not a time to celebrate. That view has softened as we reflect on Utsumi-shōnin's dream about a Peace Pagoda creating a small opening for fresh air, new ideas, a better way.

In the quote above, Gurujji refers to an excerpt from one of the most important writings of a Japanese Buddhist prophet, Nichiren Daishōnin, who lived around 800 years ago. At that time you are angry, you are in hell; when joyful, you are in the realms of the gods; and so on for each of the realms of existence, Nichiren Daishōnin wrote. He compared the Lotus Sūtra to a mirror to be held up to oneself, not as device to judge others, but to see your own visage reflected and know where in that moment you have chosen to be.

"A manifested world in which beings live with joy in their hearts and minds is the realm ever-filled with celestial beings," Guruji said. And in other places he taught how a "world of joy" exists in front of altars and at Peace Pagodas. It is anywhere we can deeply breathe the fresh air.

This "world of joy" that you are helping to build took another step forward right at the end of our traditional week of fasting in December when we learned that the long-awaited Buddha statues for the Peace Pagoda were *at that moment* being loaded into containers in Japan for their journey to Newport, TN. Not only are four very large Buddha statues coming, but so is a 45-foot high spire that will sit atop the Peace Pagoda and various items for the altar. Right now they are on the ocean and heading towards us, due to arrive sometime in

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January. We are both excited and nervous, thinking how we will get them up this crazy mountain we sit on. Stay tuned.

The statues were shipped soon after the concrete for the final Buddha niche was poured in late November. In October of 2023, we built the first niche where one of the 15-foot high statues will be enshrined, and shortly after Utsumi-shōnin promised to complete the next three in 2024, which seemed rather ambitious. But for the **first time ever**, we achieved our construction goal for the year, and all for niches await the coming statues. Of course the scaffolding has to come down for them to be installed and for *that* to happen, there is still a complicated network of beams and columns and covering to build to complete the dome. After that, there's this fancy box, also made of poured concrete, that sits on top of the dome, called a harmika, and the spire is bolted into it. In other words, we're not done yet. But we're getting close.

Of course the ideals we fear to lose in the upcoming regime—things like democracy, truth, inclusivity, justice—have long been under attack and it helps to read history rather than current news to better understand our place in the struggle and to see the many ways people have fought, endured and sometimes have overcome. In 2025 we will join scores of other activists to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday, when Civil Rights Workers marching from Selma to Montgomery were beaten by state troopers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The Peace Pilgrimage from March 8 to 14 will retrace the original march, which 60 years ago resulted in the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a victory that political forces have succeeded in weakening in recent years, but no one can erase the memory of what human beings of courage once did and can again achieve.

Courage and perseverance were also recognized in this year's Nobel Peace Prize when it was awarded to the Japanese survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, almost 80 years ago. They have tirelessly called for an end to nuclear weapons, eschewing negotiations about numbers and strategies for a pure, clear moral cry, "Never again!" A survivor of the Hiroshima bomb, a leader in the movement and a friend of Nipponzan Myōhoji once said, "An atomic bomb, a chain reaction of atoms, cannot be overcome by another powerful atomic bomb. The only thing that can stop the chain reaction of atoms is 'atma' [soul]. I have once described this: the chain reaction of spiritual atoms must overcome the chain reaction of material atoms."

That is true for every movement for peace, for justice, for the Earth. The year 2025 is also the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atomic bombings, and while there were small advances in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in weapons control, those treaties are lapsed with no one seemingly inclined to pursue new controls, and the U.S. is in the midst of a \$1.7 TRILLION nuclear weapon makeover. We plan to mark this anniversary with a short peace walk from the Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda to the Y-12 Plant in Oak Ridge, TN, where uranium for the Hiroshima bomb was enriched and where nuclear weapons continue to be manufactured. Never again!

For the first time we will hold a New Year's gathering in Tennessee rather than Atlanta. On January 4, we invite everyone to come for short prayer service and a longer social gathering that will include Japanese food as well as mochi making, a tradition in Japan that marks the transition from the old year into the new. *Everyone* can help pound mochi. If you come, please also bring a potluck dish. Hopefully the weather is going to cooperate for this gathering, but of all the uncertainties facing us in the coming year, that's the least worrisome one.

Since the November election, many people, ourselves included, have been less engaged in reading or talking politics. I read something recently from a woman artist who saw something good in this pause. She pointed out that nothing is reflected in a pot of boiling water, when events are happening fast and furious and we are expected to make sense of them. But in the calm of the aftermath, water can be like a mirror. At that time, to paraphrase Nichiren Daishōnin, we can examine our reflections to see if we are in hell, or in the realm of animal or in that of human beings. Or is it possible to be in a world of joy and ascend to the heavens?

Gassho san pai [Palms together, bowing three times]

[signed] Brother Utsumi

Sister Denise