

NIPPONZAN



MYOHOJI

December 2025

- *Even when all the living see at the kalpa's end
The conflagration burning,
Tranquil is this realm of mine
—Chapter 16 of the Lotus Sūtra*

NA MU MYŌ HŌ REN GE KYŌ

JUST TWO YEARS AFTER JAPAN'S DEFEAT IN WORLD WAR II, the Most Ven. Nichidatsu Fujii [Guruji] proposed building the first Peace Pagoda of Nipponzan Myōhōji. It was an audacious idea. Japan was devastated by the war, rationing was ongoing and it would remain occupied by foreign powers (mainly the US) for another 5 years. On the world stage, Japan was a pariah.

Is it our destiny to act out the tragedy of a downfall?, Guruji asked rhetorically.

Obviously no. While life may take tragic turns, no one is born for that reason. Through the construction of a Peace Pagoda, Guruji wished to guide people's hearts and minds away from the fear and delusions that led to war, away from the suffering and anguish of defeat and towards peace, pureness and tranquility. He built a Peace Pagoda with hand tools, with war orphans as volunteers, with whatever was on hand, and when it was dedicated in 1954, more than 100,000 people came to pray and celebrate.

This proposal to build the first Peace Pagoda in Hanaokayama, Japan has been on my mind for the last month or so as we near the end of the first tumultuous year under the current regime. It is not 1947 in Japan. Most (all?) of you reading this letter are not in detention, have not been deported are not being bombed. Even so, at times it can feel like we're occupants of a runaway train where the brakes have been removed by an indifferent operator. Is it our destiny to crash on this train?

Let's hope not.

Guruji bequeathed us this answer of building Peace Pagodas, but in some ways it was easier in post-war Japan where the fever of war was so unhinged and delusional that it culminated in the complete destruction of the country. A light shines brightly in total darkness. Today, some may still hold out hope that a political party or court or some other institution could rally in resistance and stop the train before it wrecks. Perhaps, though it's unlikely.

Instead what we have, what we always have, what can never be taken away, is our own heart and mind. Our lives can be taken, but not our heart and mind. That may not be the most comforting sentence written in a holiday letter. But to realize it is to break free from the cruelty and noise that dominate these times. To realize it is to be free.

Freedom usually won't comfort but it can make you brave, and courage is what these times call for. When Guruji proposed to build a Peace Pagoda amid the war rubble of Japan, he showed tremendous compassion for *all* people along with extraordinary courage, for who would think to build when there was no money, no supplies and all social order was sunk in the deepest depression. Within the defiled land, he saw the Pure Land and he helped others to see it too. This collective freedom is what builds Peace Pagodas. Your courage helps.

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This year four Buddha statues along with their thrones and backdrops and the Peace Pagoda spire arrived from Japan on the last weekend of the Spring Work Party. A short video on the website shows them being unloaded, swathed in bubble wrap and blue tarps. They are now unwrapped and on display, and early next year the plan is to hire a crane operator to place each in the soon-to-be-finished Buddha niches. It's not the end but it's a milestone which we want to celebrate with a still-unnamed ceremony. Maybe we call it the "Welcome Buddha" ceremony. So far we have the idea and a date: May 30, 2026. Please come if you can.

And this year was the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which was well marked in Oak Ridge, TN by the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance. A small group of us conducted a peace walk from the Great Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda to the Y-12 Plant, where the uranium for the Hiroshima bomb was enriched and which has played a role in the making of every US nuclear weapon since.

The photo on this year's card is taken at the end of week of events, and shows only some of the people who participated. Given the apocalyptic nature of these weapons, it is a small group standing in opposition, but they are part of a group of committed, good-hearted folks who represent decades of standing up to the scourge of nuclear weapons. We are proud to be standing with them.

Some young people participated in events around the 80th anniversary, but no doubt the anti-nuclear movement is predominantly white and old. This is not due to indifference on the part of young people. Today there are crises galore to devote energy towards. Unfortunately alarm over nuclear weapons has fallen out of fashion even though the potential for annihilation has not diminished one iota. We are grateful to groups like OREPA that continue to sound the alarm and trust that fashion can turn again, as it always does.

A hopeful event in the coming year is the dedication of the Pacific Northwest Peace Pagoda in Bangor, WA (near Seattle), directly next to the Trident Nuclear Submarine Base. This Peace Pagoda has a storied history, which started in 1980, includes permissions given and then withdrawn as well as a case of arson. It's quite dramatic. The most significant story, though, may be its current one in which construction was allowed to resume in 2019, this time without any opposition from the US Navy. It's testimony to perseverance and nonviolence on the part of the monks and peace activists, and a blessing to the entire planet.

The Pacific Northwest Peace Pagoda will be the third in the US, meaning the Great Smoky Mountains will now be the fourth, but the first in the Southeast, which is significant. When will it be done? Soon. It is already a place much visited, where people come to help build, garden, cook, clean, and keep this facility functioning. It is where the dichotomy of the defiled land and Pure Land arises and collapses, and where most days we chant the verses of Chapter 16 (in Japanese), that opened this letter, the essence of which we seek to build here:

Tranquil is this realm of mine,
Ever-filled with celestial beings
Gardens, groves, all kinds of temples and splendid buildings
With every kind of gem adorned.
Jeweled trees abound in blossoms and fruit,
A place where all the living play with glee
The devas strike the celestial drums,
Constantly making music,
Showering mandārava flowers
On me, the Buddha, and the great congregation.

Gassho san pai [Palms together, bowing three times],

Brother Utsumi

Sister Denise

P.S. Mimi, the hound dog abandoned on this property, is now 3 years old and is doing great. Utsumi-shonin wanted that information to be included.