



NIPPONZAN



MYOHOJI

The Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii, Founder and Preceptor  
December 2019

**THE FOUR GREAT VOWS**

HOWEVER INNUMERABLE ALL BEINGS ARE

I VOW TO SAVE THEM ALL ❖

HOWEVER INEXHAUSTIBLE MY DELUSIONS ARE

I VOW TO EXTINGUISH THEM ALL ❖

HOWEVER IMMEASURABLE THE DHARMA TEACHING ARE

I VOW TO MASTER THEM ALL ❖

HOWEVER ENDLESS THE BUDDHA'S WAY IS

I VOW TO FOLLOW IT COMPLETELY ❖

NA MU MYŌ HO REN GE KYŌ

ON A CLOUDLESS, MOONLESS NIGHT WHEN LOOKING UP AT THE STARS, even skeptics can experience the paradox of uplift and diminishment, feeling like one is part of something larger than oneself and simultaneously very, very small.

India is like that sharp, clear night. There it is easy to step into the spiritual stream of history, to walk on the paths once trod by sages and saints but to know that you are but a drop or even less than a drop in that stream as it continues to flow. Ah, yet how thrilling it can feel to be even a mere dribble!

This past October, we walked in the footsteps of some spiritual giants, namely Lord Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi and the Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii [Guruji]. On any Pilgrimage, your feet stay in this world replete with suffering and trouble yet the heart and mind slip into an equally real, transcendent existence, even if only for the briefest moment. This peace walk started in Bodhgaya, the place of Lord Buddha's Enlightenment, and ended in Rajgir, where Buddha lived the last eight years of his life

In Buddha's time Rajgir was a glorious place, a center of spirituality, commerce and culture. But when Guruji first visited in 1931, he found it desolate and deserted, and he wept. Then he made an audacious vow. Though he had just arrived in India with no money and no friends, he vowed in that moment to rebuild Rajgir.

And he did. The photo in this year's greeting shows us and others from the Peace Pilgrimage standing in front of the Rajgir Peace Pagoda, which marked its 50 year anniversary in October. What the photo does not show is the hustle and bustle that Rajgir has become. As a result of the Peace Pagoda and temples that Guruji built, visitors came, shops opened, other religious sects built more temples, more visitors came and, now there is even a convention center. But that is beside the point. What Guruji did in sparking the rebuilding of Rajgir was to reconnect modern day Buddhism to Buddha's last eight years when he preached the Lotus Sutra, a foundational teaching for us and many other sects. And when Rajgir regained its status as a pilgrimage destination, it was there that many laypeople who later became Nipponzan Myohoji monks first encountered Buddha's teachings. We are two of that number.

India is fertile ground for the saint. The most famous one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of course, was Mahatma Gandhi. On his first trip to India in the 1930s, it was Guruji's ardent wish to meet Gandhi, and when that meeting came about, again Guruji's tears flowed ceaselessly, he wrote later, to encounter the one person willing to sacrifice everything in order to relieve the suffering of hundreds of millions of fellow Indians.

NIPPONZAN MYOHOJI—ATLANTA DOJO  
GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS PEACE PAGODA

404-627-8948

<http://atlantadojo.org>

Apparently the recognition of sacredness was mutual because on their second meeting, one day later, Gandhi invited Guruji to live at his ashram and Guruji accepted. When Rajgir became the first Peace Pagoda to be built outside of Japan, Guruji chose the date for its dedication to coincide with Gandhi's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, so of course 2019 fell on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Buddha, Gandhi and Guruji. Being part of something bigger than yourself while feeling very, very small. Yep. We walked it.

When we join Nipponzan Myohoji, we take the Four Great Vows, which are printed at the top of this letter. Sometimes we're asked whether we've taken a vow of poverty, chastity or swear abstinence from certain foods. Great spiritual practices all, but we never specifically vow in that manner. Rather, these vows require a type of perfection that maybe one person reaches in a 100 million, billion, trillion, gazillion years. Maybe one. But like a Pilgrimage, these vows point the feet in the direction that we need to be going, help bring us back to the path when we go astray, lift us up even as they make us feel very, very small.

Utsumi-shonin's mother, in her great down-to-earth wisdom, stated it another way. You can think of life as a ladder, she'd say, and if you look up, there are always people above, and if you look down, there are always people below. Don't beat yourself up because you're not up with the others; don't be arrogant because you're a few steps above someone else.

I might think I feel better when I look down that ladder and see a certain political someone and think, "What a moron!" But do I? Lately it seems these thoughts just bring me some steps down the ladder.

The beauty of the India Pilgrimage for us was that it lifted our eyes upward and rather than discouraging us because of how far we need to go, it confirmed our faith in making a vow and following through. While we may be like dust in the constellations of spiritual giants, yet we are part of the constellations.

Our vow, as most of you know, is to finish the Great Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda, and toward that end we had much help in this past spring taming the wild brush that wants to claim our landscape and making the tangled mess look more like gardens. In the late summer and fall after promising for a year that it would get done, the staircase to the second walkway on the Peace Pagoda was built. At both work parties, great progress was made to fill repair and refine the beautiful stone carvings from India. Volunteers ranged in age from almost 5 years old to 82. No one had any professional experience with handling concrete nor building a landscape but that's never stopped any of us.

We wondered if when touring India, we would feel embarrassed or deflated by our efforts--meaning our mistakes--when comparing the Smoky Mountains to other Peace Pagodas, but quite the opposite was true. We felt proud of ourselves, of you, of the path we have all chosen to walk together. What we do is very, very little: take a weed out here, chop wood over there, pour concrete and hope to high heaven that the form will hold. It's not much, and yet somehow it adds up to something quite great, something well beyond our puny efforts.

However endless the Buddha's Way, I vow to follow it completely. Feet in the right direction and eyes on the Great Ones who've preceded us, let's all go forward in the New Year.

Gassho san pai [Palms together, bowing thrice]

Brother Utsumi

Sister Denise