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Walks Far Woman

by Louise Dunlap

It is late December, the darkest time of winter in one of the coldest spots on this continent—Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota, where 300 unarmed Lakota people were mowed down by U.S. cavalry 100 years ago. After a week riding across this frozen, windswept land, some 400 Native people on horseback are making the final descent to the massacre site for a ceremony called Wiping the Tears and Mending the Sacred Hoop.

A bitter, cleansing wind from the north brings stinging snow and a chill factor of 80 below as I walk the same road, behind a smaller group whose ancestors made the fateful journey on foot. With them, ahead of me, is a wiry Japanese-born Buddhist nun with a small prayer drum and a voice that carries. Honored with a white eagle feather and the Lakota name "Walks Far Woman," she is making this journey for the fourth year. Now she is fasting along with many of the riders and supporting their ceremony by chanting *Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo*—the opening words of the *Lotus Sutra.*

Jun-san in the early '90s. Photo by Skip Schiel

It is my first experience with Buddhism or chanting of any kind, but I find my voice joining in. These mysterious seven syllables steady my heart in the numbing wind and help me feel my own emotions more keenly as we approach Wounded Knee—pain and anger, and also the possibility of healing. The violence of the world has deepened steadily since the Wounded Knee Massacre. Our leaders now have the weapons to destroy the earth many times over, and the willingness to use them. This is certainly what the *Lotus Sutra* calls an "era of declined law." How do we live in such times? Jun Yasuda, the Buddhist nun walking at Wounded Knee, has an active answer.

Her order, Nipponzan Myohoji, is better known to activists in this country than to Buddhists, perhaps because it is not a "sitting" order. As her friend, Native leader Dennis Banks, puts it, "Most of us like to go to the movies, but their only mission is to walk and to pray for peace. Maybe when the last nuclear bomb is dismantled and the last treaty is signed, maybe then they can rest and quietly meditate." Nipponzan Myohoji's founder—dubbed Guruji by his friend Gandhi—developed the practice of walking and drumming with the *Lotus Sutra* to proclaim the message of nonviolence, as Japanese imperialism returned in the early 20th century. (Like his predecessor, the 13th-century Buddhist reformer Nichiren, he attempted to hold political leaders accountable.) The practice also includes fasting and hard physical work—all of it as public as possible, especially in times of crisis.

Jun-san (as she is called in the Japanese way) has fasted and chanted for days in rough weather outside the prisons of Leonard Pelletier and Mumia Abu Jamal. She has walked to challenge the root causes of nuclear weapons, the African slave trade, and many injustices to Native people. With community volunteers and scavenged materials, she has built a resplendent Peace Pagoda in the rugged mountains east of Albany, New York—the only woman-initiated project of its kind. Local people report that their first view of this huge white dome rising out of the forest brings mysterious tears to their eyes. (When she's not walking, Jun-san lives in an adjacent temple, where simple living includes woodstoves for heat and cooking and one cold water faucet.) And she has stitched together an intercultural network of friends and supporters. Her acute political sense; her creativity, wit, and charisma; and her deep connection to allies—especially Native Americans—are exemplary.

This past year alone, Jun-san has organized three major walks—four months across the U.S. carrying a live flame from Hiroshima (*Turning Wheel,* Fall 2002); two weeks from Albany into New York City linking Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, and Native American prayers for September 11; and three weeks from Hiroshima to Nara, site of Guruji's vision quest. In that walk she was joined by a family member of someone lost in the World Trade Center catastrophe.

In her widening circles, Jun-san has become a legend; yet, as one friend says, she manages to skirt the kind of attention given to other Buddhist leaders in America. Those of us who know her love to entertain ourselves with "Jun-san stories." How *Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo* kept an old car running. How people helping build the Peace Pagoda found her after a long day's work sitting in a deep hole with a spoon. "I was tired using pick," she explained later in her own evocative grammar. "I very always hitting stone. It hurt. I can sitting do something. Digging with spoon."

Jun-san herself will often dazzle walkers with rest-stop stories of fast motorcycles, artistic dancing, and radical student organizing against the Vietnam War during her twenties in Japan or dumpster diving in California when she first came to this country.

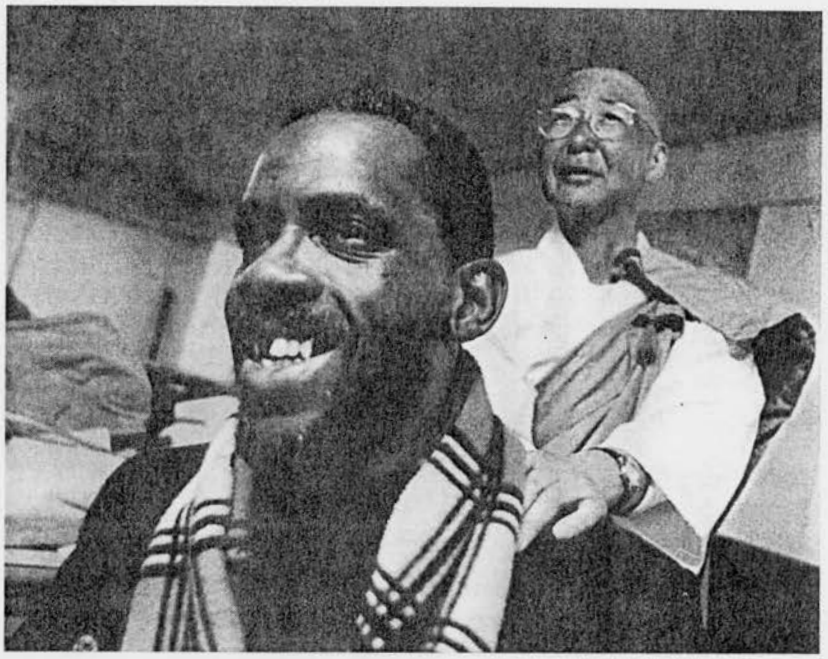
Many Jun-san stories are about her thoughtfulness, service, and dedication. On a midwinter walk into Canada, for instance, plans changed at the last minute and walkers headed into an unscouted area with few arrangements for hospitality. "You're going to learn the power of 'thank you,'" Jun-san told one uneasy young walker. Sure enough, he watched her honor those who stepped forward to help—with heartfelt bows and small gifts of paper cranes—and learned a life lesson from their joyous response. He also noted her "eye for people with a need they're not sharing." I remember her skillful shiatsu massage, especially with a proud but infirm African American man who insisted on limping every single mile of Schenectady pavement to honor the Underground Railroad. A walker with insomnia remembers lying awake among 50 pilgrims sleeping on a floor in Mostar, Bosnia, and seeing a small light in one corner. It was Jun-san, wide awake, sewing repairs on another walker's clothing. Someone else remembers a fabulous meal she cooked that same night for those same 50 walkers on one feeble burner with one water faucet in a war-torn city where there was virtually no food.

Other stories show Jun-san's uncanny intuition, the synchronicity that swirls around her as she "connects" with people and puts them in touch with each other. "I always do whatever she tells me to do," says one old friend, "even if I don't understand why." Jun-san once asked him to drive an hour out of his way to visit a couple recently arrived from Burma. No reasons were given, but the mission soon became clear. Forced to leave their country suddenly, without their children, the Burmese couple were desperate. The friend just happened to know an international agency that was able to reunite the family within days.

The walk atmosphere stimulates fairy-tale synchronicities. Hearing the drums, a Japanese friend from 20 years ago unexpectedly meets Jun-san on a suburban California street corner, and turns out to have information vital to the walk. Twelve years after the Wounded Knee experience, I find myself walking the streets of Manhattan to the World Trade Center with someone who was just a few steps ahead of me on that snowy day.

Stories also touch on the deep transformation possible on Jun-san's walks. Vigiling at one of New York's proliferating prisons, a friend (now ordained himself) told me how Jun-san bowed to a particularly tough-looking guard, who, to everyone's amazement, bowed back with deep sincerity. The one seen as the enemy may not be the enemy when we are tuned to the *Lotus Sutra*.

I asked Jun-san recently how she came to ordain. From the age of 10, she told me, she always questioned "where go after die?" From childhood reading in Buddhist philosophy, she realized that "everything moving. You cannot hold it." Unlike her friends, she was not attracted to material things: "Getting rich, getting boyfriend is not interesting to me. You cannot hold." On family outings, she was drawn to poor people, starving people—and always "wanting to change it." By the time Jun-san was 16, the pull of radical anarchist activism created a break with her family that has only recently healed.



Shiatsu for Underground Railroad walker, 1997. Photo by Skip Schiel

In deep confusion, with no thought of Buddhism, Jun-san went to India with her then-husband. "Sitting under trees, drinking tea in New Delhi," they met another young Japanese (who would later ordain also) and traveled to Bodh Gaya. A guidebook revealed that "If you have no money, you can stay at Nipponzan Myohoji," so they did. But it was only later that Jun-san's "religious mind started to grow." On one occasion she accompanied monks walking, chanting, and drumming in the slums of Bombay. There, extraordinarily poor people, people living in cardboard houses, came out bowing to the monks and giving precious offerings—"tiny rice, one cent, two cent." Their deep respect and their smiles were very beautiful to Jun-san. From that time, she "saw the world differently.... If people bow, then peace," she told me.

Without researching Buddhism or comparing her order with any other, Jun-san ordained in 1976. She was just under 30 years old. She is comfortable, now, with her "choice." Since Guruji's death (at age 100) in 1985, the order continues without a systematic hierarchy, a sangha that supports Jun-san's heartfelt

approach to justice without violating her innate sense of freedom.

The verb "to connect" is big in Jun-san's vocabulary. Perhaps her most profound connections—during her 24 years as a Japanese monastic in the United States—have been with the indigenous people of this continent. Not long after ordination, Jun-san found herself, less by choice than by a series of coincidences, crossing the Pacific to participate in the "Longest Walk." This fabled journey across the U.S. in 1978, from Alcatraz Island to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., brought urban and traditional Indian people from many tribes together into their own civil rights movement. Guruji had long realized the importance of Native American teachings and must have felt their congruence with Buddhism. When he learned of the Longest Walk, he urged his monks and nuns to be there—not to convert or spread Buddhism, Jun-san recalls, but "to support Native Indian people because they have a history of struggle, respect for the land, living things all in harmony.... If ever the world back to peace way—Indian people very important teacher." The monastics' role was to lend courage and strength to this process by "drumming and walking behind Native people." This assignment suited Jun-san perfectly. "I just become nun and I don't know Buddhism much. I feel I can do this job. I understand how Native people important."

Native Americans respect Jun-san's style of prayer just as she does theirs. On a long bus journey, people noticed her bowing to the sun. "Jun-san is praying," they said. "Let's stop the bus."

On that walk Jun-san became lifelong friends with Dennis Banks, cofounder of the American Indian Movement, who had carried a gun at the government's siege of Wounded Knee in 1973 but by 1978 was moving toward nonviolence as a long-term solution. (Banks has his own history with Nipponzan Myohoji, having once held a cocked rifle "defending" an expanding U.S. airbase against vigiling monks and farmers during the Korean War.) Sought by the law for his 1970s activism, Banks had to leave the sanctuary offered by a California governor who was stepping down from office and go underground on the Onandaga Reservation in New York. Jun-san accompanied him. It was there, during her monthly chanting vigils at the state house on his behalf, that a Native supporter offered her some wild mountain farmland for a peace pagoda.

Native Americans respect Jun-san's style of prayer just as she does theirs. She recalls a long bus journey with Indians to an antinuclear conference. At sunset, she looked out her window and bowed to the sun. People noticed. "Jun-san is praying," they said. "Let's stop the bus." Everyone got out so they could support her as she sat on the roadside drumming and chanting.

With this kind of solidarity, people don't need a translation of *Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo*. Guruji and Nichiren had taught that these syllables embody the teachings of the entire *Lotus Sutra,* making them accessible for ordinary people. Buddha nature is in all beings, even "evil" ones, and when the law of the Dharma is followed, even this violent world can become the Buddha land. Jun-san explains that "when you pray from inside your heart, many emotions come up. Each of us will feel it differently," but all of us will be praying for peace. "If you want to know [what the words mean]," she says, "please try the chant."

When Guruji brought it to India, Gandhi understood *Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo* immediately without translation and incorporated the chant into daily prayer at his ashram. Noticing big differences in chanting styles among the Nipponzan monks and nuns, I asked Jun-san once if Guruji had ever instructed them on how to chant. "He say best way—*loud,*" she told me, her eyes twinkling. Her own throaty voice I would recognize anywhere.

Of the 150 or so monks and nuns of Nipponzan Myohoji, many others besides Jun-san are also "free spirits" with interesting stories behind their commitment. This small number has spread out to the global trouble spots of our century, chanting the *Lotus Sutra* in this "era of declined law"—in Zambia, war-wracked Nepal, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua. I have seen news photos of Nipponzan Myohoji monks and nuns with their picturesque drums in the thick of violent post-apartheid elections in South Africa and outside the besieged Church of the New Jerusalem in Bethlehem. A friend says their presence at the Great Peace March of 1982 (where over a million people gathered to say no to nuclear weapons) filled the streets of Manhattan with the sound of their drumming.

In the U.S., where so much global violence has its source, 11 monks and nuns have put down roots (including four European Americans, two ordaining this past year). Besides the Peace Pagoda near Albany, there is a New England Peace Pagoda (in Leverett, MA), one under construction near the Oakridge Nuclear Weapons Lab in Tennessee, and another being discussed at the nuclear submarine base near Seattle. Temples also keep the practice going in Atlanta, Rocky Flats (Colorado), Bainbridge Island (Washington), New York City, and the nation's capital. Each temple, with lay supporters, is active in coalition-based peace and justice organizing in their region. We can be sure that Walks Far Woman and her brother and sister monks will keep on sounding the call to nonviolent social change in the hard times ahead. ❖

For more information visit *www.dharmawalk.org* and see Paula Green's essay, "Walking for Peace: Nipponzan Myohoji," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, edited by Christopher Queen (Wisdom Publications, 2000).

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