

Sunday, May 18, 2008

Reverberations of a step and a drum.

Where did I get on this calmness kick that I discuss in my May 16 blog entry? It predates my t'ai chi practice to reach to the late 1970's, when meditation was already highly popular in the United States. I learned meditation through Herbert Benson's *Relaxation Response* book. Calmness did not come overnight, but a calmer approach took hold. In 1991, I met my friend and teacher Jun Yasuda, as she fasted for thirty days on green tea, drumming for peace in Iraq. Bush I subsequently selected a date to end the war, which was the same date that Jun-san had had pre-selected to end her fast. Although I took this coincidence as a coincidence, when I mentioned it to Jun-san, she gave me a knowing smile. I learned by the time I started practicing t'ai chi in 1994 that a peaceful life is a powerful life, as I detail here. Jun Yasuda truly is peacefulness personified. Shown in the above YouTube video -- thanks to the video's creator, Tom Kearns -- is Jun-san's peace pagoda and temple off the beaten path of Grafton, New York, where I visited for a crossroads two-day visit in 1996 (experience more of her essence in this photo montage). It was a crossroads visit, because it gave me the first chance to be with Jun-san for more than just a few minutes, and during this time I asked many questions about how she reached the peaceful path, and learned Jun-san's Buddhist philosophy of death -- which is that death is only an artificial concept, as death is an essential part of life -- which helped me substantially progress from an utter fear of death to being more calm about its inevitability. In April 2005, I joined Jun Yasuda and other peace walkers camped out on the floor of a church social hall as a prelude to driving the next early morning from Charlottesville, Virginia, to Falls Church, Virginia, for a multi-mile leg of the seven-week International Peace Walk to Stop the Bombs. During the two-hours that I drove a few peace walkers to Falls Church, I had a long conversation with Jun-san, including my many questions about her near absolutist or absolutist approach to peace. For instance, I asked Jun-san what she would have done if she lived in the 1940's and bumped into Hitler, since I knew her response would not have mirrored my response of shooting him dead first and asking questions later. Whether or not I agreed, Jun-san explained that everyone has several personalities including good parts of their personalities; she mentioned Hitler's having been a painter. Jun-san would have asked Hitler why he was so angry. She said she might have started by offering him a massage, looking at it as soothing the soul of a savage beast, I suppose. On our walk, which covered many miles that I had only driven before, we stopped at the Iwo Jima memorial across from my old apartment building in Arlington, Virginia, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and Lafayette Park across the White House, where I first met Jun-san. At each place, if I recall correctly, Jun-san lit incense sticks, apparently to sanctify the activity, and led everyone in a respectful repetitious drumming prayer of the Odaimoku -- Na Mu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo, which graces my license plate in acronym form. Jun-san treats everyone with the same respect. It took me a long time to pick up on the benefit of all the miles of peace walking Jun-san does each year. At first, I thought Jun-san might be more effective if she obtained a public relations team to promote her for speeches, web appearances and book publications in the successful manner of the Dalai Lama. I believe the Dalai Lama's approach to spreading his message of internal and external peace is very beneficial. Jun-san's approach is to spread her message without much technology, by walking hundreds of miles annually, chanting and drumming the odaimoku nearly every step of the way. When Jun-san was doing a days-long dry fast, with just one drink at the midpoint, in 2000 for Mumia Abu Jamal on or near his prison grounds, an interviewer asked her on day five of her fast, in her very cold tent, how she expected to influence many people by doing her action so far from the nearest city and often with few people seeing her other than the prison workers. Jun-san responded: "Numbers don't matter. What matters is your commitment to peace. Gandhi was just one person, and he did very simple things. He walked to the ocean [in protest of a British monopoly on salt]. He fasted. He was one person. But he was very conscientious. We should be too. Think of one person fasting outside the White House. That act has spiritual power. More, maybe, than big numbers." This is a very powerful message. Jun-san and the other members of her Nipponzan Myohoji order collaborate with other groups -- involving other religions and interests -- with the goal of peace. In 1977, Jun-san joined the American Indian Movement's Longest Walk, which is described as follows at <http://www.dharmawalk.org/fujii.htm>: In 1977, the Order put this [outreach to other groups] into practice by joining the Longest Walk for Native American survival. [Nichidatsu] Fujii [founder of Nipponzan Myohoji] found the basis for a deep relationship with the Indian people. As he told Dennis Banks, "The daily life of your people is supported by religious faith . . . a way life identical to that of Buddhism." Banks had encountered the drums many years before. As a member of the armed forces in 1956, Banks was on guard as the Order joined farmers and students to halt construction of an air base near Tokyo, "The Japanese police beat many of the Buddhist disciples," he later recalled. "As I watched in horror I could not realize the strength of their prayers and the weakness of our weapons. Twenty-two years later, we met again at D-Q University [in California]. Only then did I realize the strength of [Fujii's] spirituality and I knew that his prayers would outlast the weapons of war." Fujii's work with Native Americans continued to grow through numerous walks and actions. A Buddhist temple was established at D-Q, a Native American controlled school where Banks served as chancellor. When he left the state, a Nipponzan Myohoji nun, Jun Yasuda, traveled with him. Banks pointed to the Order as an example of what religious respect could mean. The Sangha, he explained, had

not come to convert him to Buddhism, or to tell Indians how to do things, but to offer their support in times of danger. They had stayed constant through their own prayers and practices. Â The cross-country Longest Walk was a highly empowering event for Native Americans, and is well-detailed in Dennis Banks's autobiography Ojibwa Warrior. (A new Longest Walk to Washington, D.C., is nowÂ in progress; information on the walk and on how to provide financial and other support is here.) Such long distance walking is among the things the Longest Walkers had in common with the Nipponzan Myohoji folks. Â The next time I see Jun-san, I will ask her if she feels she is adding peacefulness to every bit of land she walks on while chanting the Odaimoku. I expect her answer will be yes.Â Jon Katz.Â

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:00