



## A Mindful Pilgrimage: Opening Up to the World on a City Walk



*All photos are from the April 2022 Pilgrimage.*



### Introduction by Jitsujo Gauthier

Gaps appear as Buddhism takes root in U.S. soil. There are gaps in culture, language, class, ethnicity, race, and worldview to name a few. There is also this looming idea of “Two Buddhisms,” i.e., convert temples and heritage temples. Being a professor of Buddhist chaplaincy at Taiwanese-founded University of the West and living at Zen Center

of Los Angeles, sometimes I think I live and work in dual worlds. Other times I see myriads of worlds in boundless complexity all around one another.

In this pilgrimage to Dharma Vijaya, a Sri Lankan Buddhist vihara (temple), we walked through various worlds and gaps together—bearing witness to suffering and joy. I was grateful to have Nem Etsugen Bajra as my co-leader to hold the complexities of these spaces. Those who engage in the Shikoku pilgrimage in Japan wear traditional pilgrim attire. We provided a pilgrimage hat so the group might feel unified. The hat was optional. While most participants wore it, some did not feel comfortable wearing a traditional Asian style hat for various reasons, e.g., cultural appropriation.

A view I did not consider was the public view, what those on the streets or passing cars by might think, the spectacle of it all, or “public statement.” Some participants experienced our group unity as Buddhist pride, powerful, emotional, some as unusual, a target for Asian hate, dangerous, uncomfortable, while others found a sense of belonging, inspiration, interconnection, a walk in peace. The following three reflections provide insight into some of the learnings and gaps that we pilgrimage through together.



### Lane Kyojin Igoudin

We started with a circle, hands in gassho, chanting “mu.” The sound first vibrated throughout my skull, like an inner bell inviting me to turn inwards, and then, when shared by a group of 30, it turned into a spontaneous vibration rising up to the morning sky.

Pilgrimage is a purposeful walk. Reasons for it, the ZCLA invitation explained, could be “as diverse as the people who make them. Some may want to embark on a spiritual journey, accumulate blessings, offer merit, or show homage to those that came before us, others may want to process grief, memorialize the dead, or mend a broken heart.” I set my intention on staying focused on the walk itself, and not letting myself be distracted by the sites of the city. The week had been hectic, frantic even. This pilgrimage would be a way to simply get out of my head, stop doing things, just walk. The plan was simple: walk 2.5 miles from the Zen Center of Los Angeles to Dharma Vijaya, make offerings, chant, learn about the temple lineage, traditions, and caretakers, enjoy the snacks, and head back.

We headed out of the gates of the center in a straight line. It was an early Sunday morning when most of the city was still asleep, and you could smell the ocean breeze and hear the birds, not just the traffic. The monks in orange robes rang the bells every 20 paces or so – a ding in the front, echoed by another in the back of the group – a helpful reminder to return to meditation. Our nón lá hats provided enough shade, which came in especially handy on our walk back from Dharma Vijaya, at noon, when the sun reached 90F in the shade.

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I chose to observe the sensation of walking, rather than breath, in part to make sure not to trip on broken-up pavement. Should my thoughts overtake me, I'd count the steps. After all, every step counts.

In a single file, we walked through the areas of some of the highest population density in the US – fortress-like 1930s brickstones rising next to brand new condos, crammed into former single house lots. We bowed silently to the people opening up the shops, rolling out recycle bins, hanging outside a corner store. A young Hispanic guy on a bike blocked the traffic as we were crossing Western Avenue to make sure we all crossed safely.

We walked past the stately mansions, the homeless tent camps, the boarded-up 'For Lease' signs; past the trendy, hashtagged coffeehouses, decaying couches and other urban refuse thrown up on the sidewalks; past botanica shops and strip-mall Pentecostal churches, panaderias, travel agencies advertising flights to Central America, and tearooms with signs solely in Korean. It was all so fascinating, I forgot about watching my steps. It's fine to be distracted, I realized. A pilgrim doesn't journey in some sensory-deprived bubble. Just note these new impressions, receive them, and move on.

I was walking through the heart of urban LA as if for the first time, seeing it without agenda, interacting with all that was around me. I became part of the landscape, not an erasure from it. I found peace not in withdrawing, but in opening up.

**Quynh (Thích Tâm Nguyên)**

Being a first-generation immigrant, Bhante Dhammajothi's childhood stories transported me back to my childhood in Vietnam. Sitting by the wooden doors waiting for my father to come home from work, the smell of the wet earth after the summer rain embraced me as I listened to the sound of the

great bell from the temple across our house. Sometimes



I could hear the sangha chanting during their evening service.

As a young girl, I used to walk barefoot across the half-paved street to the temple. Through the temple's gate, the sight of the dignified assembly in the Buddhist service intertwined with the burning incense, the gentle aroma awakened the curiosity about the monastic life in me. As an adult, wearing the monastic robes, adorned by the traditional Vietnamese nón lá, I pilgrimed through the streets of Los Angeles under the April sun.

Seeing those wearing nón lá and walking with others has made me feel connected to the community and being a part of the sangha. The connection was not merely formed by what we wear or where we are from, but through our collected intention and purpose, as diverse as they could be. For me, to cultivate a sense of community is being a part of a spiritual practice. One of my spiritual practices is dana. Dana is an offering from within, or from what I could offer. When I offered the Vietnamese vegetarian bánh bao (buns) at the beginning of the pilgrimage, a sense of openness blossomed in me. The vastness within helped me be more aware and attune to my surroundings. My heart opened as my mind held an image of the Buddha. I greeted those who greeted me along the path. I silently offered prayers in forms of mantras with every step I took.

The pilgrimage was a beautiful experience. One thing that this pilgrimage has affirmed in me was that as long as I have an image of the Buddha on my mind, a practice of dana in every step, and an openness in my heart, there would be a sense of belonging wherever I am.

**Jane Radiant-Joy Chen**

The pilgrimage was for me a deep learning in Dana Paramita, and at the same time, a painful reminder of a lifetime of racism.

Nón lá hats, which were offered on the pilgrimage, have a

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# Preamble to the Three Seats

by Wendy Egyoku Nakao

The Three Seats are the Abbot, Head Teacher, and Head Priest (Seat Holders).

The Seats are Seats of Service to The Three Treasures. While the Abbot Seat is the leader of the Three Seats, together the Three Seats hold the vision of the Circle of Life (Mandala) and history of the Zen Center of Los Angeles. This new organizational arrangement is an experiment in Shared Stewardship and in Collective Wisdom and Awakening.

The Seat Holders must situate themselves in the organizational and practice Circle of Life (Mandala) of the Zen Center. The Seat Holders function from the view of the Oneness of life, situating themselves in the Big View while taking care of their respective spheres. Seat Holders have a finely honed understanding of the Zen Center as a Zen Practice Center of the White Plum lineage, as a Zen Buddhist Temple, including as the Mother Temple of the White Plum lineage; and as an Organization of living Dharma. ZCLA is also a seminal Zen Center in the founding of Zen in the West.

The Seat Holders also situate themselves within the Zen Buddhist culture of today and have a good grasp of the evolution of Buddhism and Zen, the contemporary cultural issues of Buddhism in the West, and of the complex evolution of ZCLA. They should affiliate with peer groups both in the White Plum Asanga and the wider

Buddhist Sangha as appropriate. The Seat Holders should also cultivate relationships with Zen teachers/Buddhist teachers outside of the WPA lineage.

The Seat Holders are knowledgeable of the streams of practice that run through ZCLA, including the living Dharma planted here by its Founding Family and Founding Abbots and Teachers, Ven. Maezumi Roshi and Roshi Bernie Glassman. The Seat Holders maintain a respectful working relationship with Roshi Egyoku, the remaining “founding teacher” of ZCLA.

The Seat Holders will learn how to “read the field” of ZCLA to discern what is arising and what needs to be brought forth. They will cultivate the heart-mind of generosity, gratitude, and generativity. They will strive to be models of right relationship among themselves and with the Teachers and with the Sangha. They will always work to strengthen relationships and weave a resilient Sangha web with spaciousness and grace. They will regard the Seat Holder positions as a training vehicle for themselves and retain the spirit of a practitioner of Buddha Dharma.

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*Roshi Egyoku held all three seats for decades and was instrumental in helping to form this new model of leadership. As Abbot Emeritus, she recently stepped down as Head Teacher, Head Priest and Resident Teacher and continues to serve as Senior Dharma Teacher.*

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## A MINDFUL PILGRIMAGE *(Continued from page 9)*

history in the U.S. of being used to ridicule, blanketly label, or commodify Asian cultures. They are found in party stores around Halloween, thrown on characters in movies to signify “Asian person,” and capitalized on by companies like American Apparel who sold them as “Ching Chong Hats.” Recently a Korean-American friend while wearing a generic straw hat was asked by a white colleague, “What are you going out to the rice paddy?”

Although I did not wear the hat myself, I was, by default, part of that symbol of American objectification. During the walk, I felt fear, bracing myself for a passerby to shout, “Go back to China!” When we crossed the street and cars waited 30+ seconds for us to pass, I imagined their stares while looking away. When I saw a white person photographing us, I hid my face from view. Seeing photos of us afterward was more jarring, reminding me of the fetishization of Asian people and spiritual traditions, and the privilege white people are afforded, wearing other cultures’

traditions without suffering the dehumanizing consequences. Context matters.

I have spent my whole life trying to convince people that their caricature of me is not me. Still, to this day, I meet people who don’t think I’m “from” here, who are surprised that I speak English well, who compare me to ... I don’t even want to say. That’s why I feel that the perpetuation of these images in the United States, is not helping our cause of ending suffering for all, even when the intent is positive. Many more, vastly different portrayals of Asian-Americans, are desperately needed: This is my contribution.

How do I treat everything that happens in life as a gift? Truly accept what is offered in each moment, and respond without judgment? Dana Paramita continues, in the writing of these reflections, and in your reading them.

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*Jitsujō, Kyojin and Radiant-Joy are ZCLA members. Quynh completed the precept class with Sensei Myobo and is a graduate at the University of the West.*

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