

## Chapter 16. Traveler without baggage

Let us back up several years, and return to the period that Grothendieck spent in Villecun. His encounter with Buddhism, or more exactly with the Japanese sect *Nipponzan Myohoji*<sup>1</sup> (an approximate translation would be “Japanese Community of the Mystical Lotus-Sutra”) and its spiritual leader Nichidatsu Fujii, known as Fujii Guruji (1885-1985), took place during this time, chiefly between 1974 and 1978. To avoid all misunderstandings, let it be said from the outset that Grothendieck was never a Buddhist, and that fundamentally his spiritual world was alien and in many ways diametrically opposed to that of Buddhism. In spite of this, however, Grothendieck's encounter with Buddhism was a significant event in his spiritual life, which continued to influence him even when he later turned towards more Christian or esoteric ideas.

It is difficult to really portray his encounter with Buddhism, since it deals with an inner process that cannot be linked to clear-cut exterior events, in the way that his activities for *Survivre* can. However, Grothendieck did occasionally refer to the subject in his written notes and letters, and the author has also drawn on the testimony of two of Grothendieck's personal friends, themselves Buddhists, who were in close personal contact with Grothendieck from 1975 to 1990.

Grothendieck had already had a first encounter with East Asian spirituality, probably in 1972, when, as he himself recounts, he first read Krishnamurti (see *Notes pour la Clef des songes*, p. N560). At that time, he did not choose to immerse himself more deeply in this new world of thought, although he shared several common features with the way of life of Indian monks, such as his ascetic lifestyle, his regular fasts and his frugal diet, consisting mainly of cooked rice, bananas and tea. He later included Krishnamurti in his list of "mutants" (see Chapter 26).

Krishnamurti, however, was Hindu and not Buddhist. The decisive catalyst for Grothendieck's involvement with Buddhism took place in April or May of 1974. In the cryptic list of important stations of his spiritual life reproduced in Chapter 11, one finds the entry:

*1-7 avril 1974: "moment de vérité", entrée dans la voie spirituelle*

*7 avril 1974: rencontre Nihonzan Myohoji, entrée du divin<sup>2</sup>*

It is not clear exactly what the first sentence refers to, but the event mentioned in the next line can be established precisely. On that day, a Japanese monk from the religious

---

<sup>1</sup> Grothendieck writes "Nihonzan"; we will make use of the more common spelling.

<sup>2</sup> 1-7 April 1974: "moment of truth", entry into the spiritual path; 7 April 1974: meeting with Nihonzan Myohoji

community of *Nipponzan Myohoji* arrived unannounced and totally unexpectedly at Grothendieck's house in Villecun. Later on, Grothendieck was no longer completely certain of the exact date, placing it in May in the passage in *Récoltes et Semailles* where he gives the account of this meeting:

Since that memorable day in May when, beneath the midday sun, I perceived a bizarrely dressed person singing in the road while accompanying himself on a drum, and aiming (there could be no mistake about it) directly for my garden where I was busy with some solitary work - since that day, I have had the privilege and the pleasure of seeing many sympathizers and adepts of Guruji pass through my home. [R&S p. 759]

Before relating how this meeting came about, and how it developed, it would first be appropriate to give a short explanation of what it was that Grothendieck actually encountered. What was this sect, and who was its founder?

Nichidatsu Fujii was born in Japan in 1885, the son of poor farmers. (It is said that the honorary title of Guruji or Honored Teacher was later bestowed on him by Gandhi.) At nineteen years of age he became a monk and delved into the spiritual world of Buddhism. After the end of the First World War, he started on his mission as a preacher of world peace and non-violence, working for a spiritual revival of Buddhism. He founded the order *Nipponzan Myohoji*, which is consecrated to the teachings of the prophet Nichiren (1222-1282). He prayed for peace, fasted and organized peace marches, and his followers are responsible for building the first *Shanti Stupas* (peace pagodas). From 1918 until 1923 he traveled through Korea, China and Manchuria, performing the simplest and most basic form of missionary work imaginable: he journeyed from city to city, wandering through the streets beating a hand drum and chanting incessantly, like a mantra, the first lines of the Lotus-Sutra: *namu myōhō renga kyō* (essentially: “devotion to the mystic law of the Lotus-Sutra”). Everywhere he went he found followers, although few truly followed him in the literal sense of the word.

The disastrous earthquake of 1923 prompted him to return to Japan, in order to provide spiritual assistance to the survivors. After the death of his mother in 1930, he decided that Buddhism should be revived in the land of its origin, India, where it had almost died out. He began his pilgrimage in Calcutta, and traveled the entire sub-continent through to Ceylon (today Sri Lanka). Temples were patiently constructed by his followers in many of the larger cities, using only the most basic resources, at times even resorting to handcrafted tools.

Nichidatsu Fujii first met with Mahatma Gandhi in 1933, and was deeply impressed with his piety and sincerity. During the Second World War, he continued on with his mission of continually singing the mantra and beating his drum. In 1954 in Kumamoto, Japan, on the occasion of the dedication of one of the largest shanti stupas, he organized a large conference on world peace, and similar conferences were held in several countries during the following years. He traveled to communist countries such as China, the Soviet Union and Mongolia, constructing peace pagodas

everywhere, even in China. He was received by all the Indian presidents. In 1968, the president himself, Zakir Hussain, dedicated the peace pagoda in Rajgir, marking the accomplishment of the great goal of a Buddhist revival in India.

Fujii was already ninety years old when he first traveled to France, with the purpose of continuing his mission in Europe. He died in 1985 at one hundred years of age. It is largely thanks to him that Buddhism has gained a foothold in India<sup>3</sup>.

Fujii was aware that Christianity and Islam were spreading faster in Asia than Buddhism, but he was deeply convinced that only Buddhism could lead the world to peace (and there is some justification in this when one considers the aggressive attitudes manifested by Islam and Christianity over long periods of their history).

*Nipponzan Myohoji* is a religious movement which is reduced to the most simple goal: spreading peace and non-violence all over the world. In order to spread this message, its followers, laymen as well as monks in orange robes, march through city streets and country lanes beating their hand drums and repeating the holy formula *namu myōhō renga kyō*. Peace marches are organized regularly, and during the eighties these drew thousands of participants. Peace pagodas or stupas are constructed all over the world as a visible material testimony to their desire for peace.

\*\*

Let us now return to that “sunny day in May”, actually April 7, 1974. What actually led to the monk’s visit to Villecun? The author learned much of the following information from Jun-Ichi Yamashita, who had been an acquaintance of Grothendieck since the end of the sixties.

One year earlier, on March 17, 1973, the Japanese daily *Asahi Shinbun* (judging from its circulation the second largest of its kind in Japan and the world) published an article about *Survivre* that included a photograph of Grothendieck and two caricatures by Savard. Yamashita believes that this article was written at the instigation of Heisuke Hironaka. In *Notes pour la clef des songes*, Grothendieck adds that the monk Fukuda Shonin had apparently read the article, and was impressed by the close affinity between the radical-ecological and anti-war activities of the group *Survivre et Vivre* as well as the group’s attitude towards scientific research, and the main ideas of the sect *Nipponzan Myohoji*. [p. 199-200].

The decision was then made to send a young monk, a student of Fukuda’s, to contact Grothendieck in person. It is also conceivable that the monk Oyama had a hand in the making of this decision; indeed, he was a mathematician, and as such he may have already heard of Grothendieck.

---

<sup>3</sup> Fujii recounted his life in his autobiography *My Non Violence*. He also wrote the book *Buddhism and World Peace*. Grothendieck read both books.

It is obvious that in spite of all the cultural differences, there were indeed many common traits between the uncompromising anti-war movement *Nipponzan Myohoji* and Grothendieck's equally intransigent group *Survivre et Vivre*. Both were fighting for world peace, both considered that disarmament - in particular the elimination of all nuclear weapons - was an absolutely essential prerequisite. Hiroshima appeared to Grothendieck as the ultimate apocalyptic writing on the wall for humanity, more so than the Holocaust or Auschwitz. (Considering his personal experience and that of his father, a victim of the Holocaust who died in Auschwitz, one might have expected something different.) We quote a sentence from the *Notes pour la Clef des Songes* typed in the original with extra emphasis:

*Ce grand feu qui a embrasé Hiroshima, c'était le signe du grand Feu qui déjà embrase la Maison des Hommes!*<sup>4</sup>

There is not a lot of detail that is known about how Grothendieck's relationship with Nipponzan Myohoji developed after the initial contact. It is difficult to interpret Grothendieck's cryptic remarks about his "spiritual awakening", but when he writes "*entrée du divin*" one gains the impression that something crucial did come to pass in his life. What is certain is that very soon, Japanese monks began arriving, singly or in groups, both to the commune of Olmet and to Grothendieck's home in Villecun. They built a small temple in Olmet, which resembles - expressed a little irreverently - nothing so much as a wooden shack, of which pieces still remained in 2006. A large barrel drum was set up there for ritual beating (probably not usually by Grothendieck himself, although he maintained that he sometimes did). The monks tended to arrive and depart unheralded to continue their missionary work in other places.

Fukuda himself, who had initiated the first contact, visited Grothendieck twice, with the second time being around the turn of the year 1977/78. This is quite remarkable in that Fukuda was known to be extremely sedentary, *as* Grothendieck expresses it, and actually never left Japan on any other occasion. Moreover, according to Grothendieck (in a letter to his German friends), Fukuda did not speak a single word of any European language. It is thus not too surprising that the contact with Fukuda waned after 1978.

Considering the difficulties in communication, other people played a significant role in the association between Grothendieck and *Nipponzan Myohoji*; the aforementioned monk, the mathematician Oyama, and also another monk named Kunyomi Masunaga. The last one was the cause of legal proceedings against Grothendieck that took place in Montpellier in 1977 on the grounds of his "receiving and harboring an illegally present foreign national". We will recount this lawsuit in detail in a Chapter 17.

---

<sup>4</sup> This great fire which set Hiroshima ablaze was the sign of the great Fire which is already setting ablaze the House of Humankind!

In August 1975, Grothendieck was in Paris with his new Buddhist friends. There exist several photographs of this visit. Apparently the group's temple in the rue Polonceau was dedicated at just this time, and Oyama and his elderly mother subsequently became its caretakers. Grothendieck participated in the costs of furnishing the temple. At the dedication ceremony, as someone who was still a prominent scientist, he gave a speech. This was the occasion on which he first met his German friends G. J. and E. I., who remained his friends for many years, and according to his own testimony also Fujii Guruji himself.

Perhaps the disappointment over the fiasco of *Survivre* and the experience of the “disaster” (in his own words) of the the communes in Châtenay-Malabry and Olmet explain in part why these simple and often uneducated people made such a strong impression on Grothendieck, who was forever seeking spiritual purpose. One may well imagine that the Japanese mendicants who wandered the streets of big cities, beating their drums and endlessly repeating the sacred syllables *namu myōhō renge kyō*, who had no other mission on earth than to follow the teachings of Buddha, of the reformer Nichiren and of the revivalist Fujii Guruji, who demanded non-violence and peace, and who built peace pagodas everywhere, seemed to him like messengers from a different and unknown world. In *La Clef des songes* and in the associated *Notes* Grothendieck speaks several times of the powerful aura which surrounded these people, describing them as “travelers without baggage”.

After his first meeting with Fujii Guruji, the active spiritual leader of the sect always busy expanding his mission, at the dedication of the Paris temple, Grothendieck received him for a few days in Villecun in early November 1976, together with Fukuda, Ygii-ji Shonin and other monks and nuns. Grothendieck mentions this visit in the meditation *Les Mutants*, where he speaks of Fujii with great respect but gives no precise details. Grothendieck was very strongly impressed by Fujii's personality. He included him in his list of mutants, and lengthy sections of the meditations *La Clef des songes* and *Les Mutants* are devoted to him (see Chapter 26 for further information).

The most remarkable (though somewhat peculiar) occurrence during Grothendieck's “Buddhist phase” was that serious consideration was apparently given to the idea of making him the successor of the over 90-year-old Fujii. It would seem that this was the wish of the master himself. Naturally, there would have been no open discussion of a plan of this sort, but Grothendieck mentions it in a letter to his German friends dated August 4, 1976.

And what will become of me - dug up and thought up by Oyama, me, the (unsaintly) saint? As little as I am suited to the role which is intended for me, and as little as I submit to it - for the disciples of Fujii-Guruji the saintly image is as firmly established and as untarnished as ever, and my occasional efforts to shake things up seem hopeless. One could write a whole book just about this - but let's leave it unwritten, dear friends!

How such an idea could have arisen seems rather mysterious. Masunaga, the monk mentioned previously, was the caretaker of the peace stupa in Vienna for several years. In 2008 he told the author that Grothendieck had never been a Buddhist, and

that if he had wished to become one, he would have had to entirely change and re-order his life. Grothendieck's German friends add that Grothendieck's interest in Buddhism was somewhat one-sided and lacked basic knowledge; for example, he had never been very interested in the written works of the religion, in particular its foundation, the teachings of Buddha, and had not studied them much at all. He did receive instruction from a master for a certain time, and later in Les Aumettes he set up a "Dojo" for his own use, a room for prayer and meditation, which was also available to numerous guests as sleeping quarters except when Grothendieck was meditating and did not desire visits. He set up a large Japanese barrel drum there, and this was beaten by himself or by visiting monks during certain ceremonies such as the beginning or end of a fast. Fundamentally, however, there was an ineradicable contradiction between the message of Buddhism, in which the non-self<sup>5</sup> is a major focus, and Grothendieck's tendency to self-examination.

In relation to this, it is worth discussing the fact that Grothendieck devoted many years to "meditation". As has already been discussed (and will be discussed further), he himself was of the opinion that meditation was an absolutely essential part of his spiritual life. In regard to Buddhism however, it must be stated that what Grothendieck meant by meditation is largely the opposite of what is conveyed by the same word in the framework of Buddhism. For Grothendieck, "meditation" meant concentrated work of the mind with the goal of penetrating beyond one's own ego, searching for exposure, awareness, recognition and understanding of psychic processes which often reach back into the past. In Buddhism, meditation is completely different: a practice through which the mind should become calm and empty of thought, thus achieving a state of mindful inner stillness.

\*\*

The beginning of 1985 was unusually cold in the South of France. An icy wind blew off the Mont Ventoux, the olive trees froze in the gardens, and the pipes froze in *Les Aumettes*, the lonely house among the vineyards where Grothendieck lived. The cold winter reminded him of his youth in Germany, although there all things were gently enveloped and protected by the snow. Now the earth was as hard and stiff as scattered and splintered blocks of ice.

Grothendieck was busy writing *Récoltes et Semailles* when on January 8 he received a telephone call informing him that Fujii had passed away at the age of one hundred. The call reminded him of his contacts with the respected teacher and with the community of *Nipponzan Myohoji*, which had begun again after a pause of one or two years. The news led him to immediately begin writing down his memories in *Récoltes et Semailles*.

After the death of Claude Chevalley, that of Nichidatsu Fujii is the second death of a person who played a non-negligible role in my life. [...] With regard to this passing (which does not really come as a surprise) I am particularly happy that just last year there

---

<sup>5</sup> One of the major teachings of Buddhism is that the concept of "I" or "me" are nebulous and do not truly exist in spite of the strong impression that they correspond to something solid.

was a warm exchange of letters with him. I had been invited to the ceremony of the one hundredth birthday of the old Master, which was to take place with exceptional pomp in Tokyo. (A small book of testimonies about him had even published in great haste, in order to present it to him upon the occasion.) This had been an opportunity for me to write, (as I did every year, or almost), a few words of anticipatory congratulation, in which I excused myself for not being present at the ceremony of July 30, as I was more or less bedridden at the time of writing. [...] Fujii Gruruji himself had often been confined to his bed during the last year, which must have weighed on him, given his active temperament and his unusual energy. Seven years had gone by without my having received any personal communication from Fujii Guruji, so I was surprised to receive a letter from him, dictated by him while still bedridden. The letter (which I have just reread) is dated July 13, 1984. It is a letter filled with delicacy, in which he worries about my health, and expresses distress because he can not send someone to take care of me.

The little volume mentioned here was a small special edition in honor of Guruji. It appeared under the title: *The Wonderful Law: Universal Refuge*, published by Japan-Bharat Sarvodaya Mitra Sangha in 1984. The chapter “Messages from Europe” contains the short contribution by Grothendieck mentioned above, bearing the title “The Pleasure of Chanting O-Daimoku”<sup>6</sup>:

The first contact I had with a disciple of Fujii Guruji was ten years ago, and in the following three years there has been a strong relationship with a number of disciples and followers, and again since last year. I had the great privilege to meet Fujii Guruji in 1975, and to welcome him in my house the year after, with a group of monks and lay followers. It has been my joy many times since to play the drum and sing the prayer Na-Mu Myo-ho-ren-ge-kyo together with my monk friends and other friends who have enjoyed joining in. In remembrance of those friends and of their respected Teacher, I still sing the Prayer, whether alone or in a friend's house, before every meal. This I feel is something of great value that remains from my contacts with Fujii Guruji and his followers.

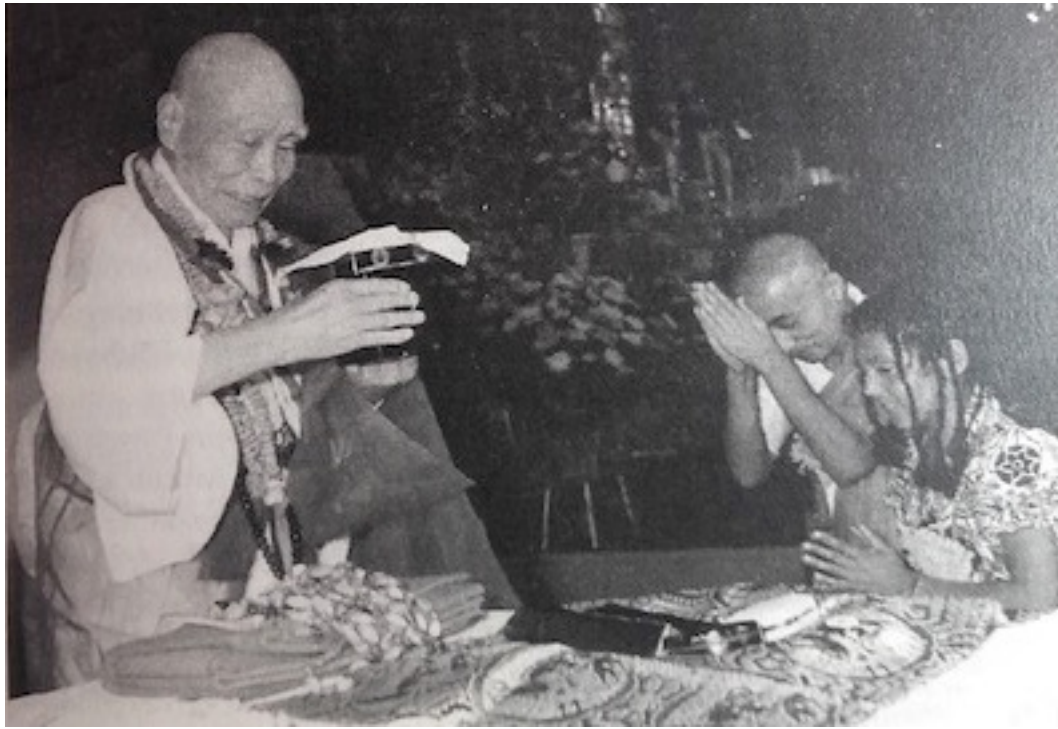
I also feel that through a close relationship with several monks and friends of Nipponzan Myohoji, and from my meeting with Guruji and from what I have learned about him through people close to him, I came to learn a great deal about life, about religion, strife and peace. This is another gratitude towards Fujii Guruji and several of his followers whom I came to love. It is my regret that I may have disappointed some among them, who may have expected me to share in their faith and join in their missionary work for spreading the prayer and Shanti Stupas. A number of times, however, I noticed that concern for the “success” of missionary work interfered with the joy of simply singing the prayer and sharing this joy with others, which is itself one way to propagate peace in oneself and in others. This is one reason why I have kept myself from joining in missionary work, and have contented myself with just singing the prayer, not worrying about whether others join in or not.

This text shows that the contact with *Nipponzan Myohoji* was revived in 1983, just when Grothendieck was working intensively on *Récoltes et Semailles*. No details are known, and there is no mention of Japanese monks in his letters from this period, although it is certain that his Buddhist friends did visit him in Les Aumettes. After Fujii's death, communication petered out again. But in February of 1988 Grothendieck received a surprise visit from Keijo Ishiyama, a monk who had grown up in one of Fujii's temples, where both his parents were also monks. This contact did

---

<sup>6</sup> I thank G.J. and E. I. for the references of this publication, and also for having made the book available to me.

not completely break off even after Grothendieck's voluntary disappearance in 1991. Indeed, Keijo travelled from Japan expressly for the purpose of seeing Grothendieck in 2005, and tried to visit him together with Max P. (see Chapter 11.4), but had no success. However, in 2008, Masunaga received a completely unexpected letter from Grothendieck. On the subject of the contents, however, he prefers to preserve a complete silence.



Fujii Guruji with Oyama, Dedication of the Temple in Paris



Kunyomi Masunaga in front of Grothendieck's house in Villecun

