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Place of Peace

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FURMAN RECONSTRUCTS A BUDDHIST TEMPLE IN A SETTING DESIGNED TO PROMOTE REFLECTION AND SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING.

BY LEIGH GAUTHIER SAVAGE

Photos by Jeremy Fleming

The Place of Peace that now graces Furman's campus is not found only in the wooden planks and ceramic tiles that form the impressive yet simple structure.

It's in the area all around the building — in the loose stone walkways that provide a rhythmic crunch beneath your feet, the cool breezes from the lake, the trickling waterfall in the revamped Asia Garden, the chirping of crickets, the dragonflies swirling across the rocks.

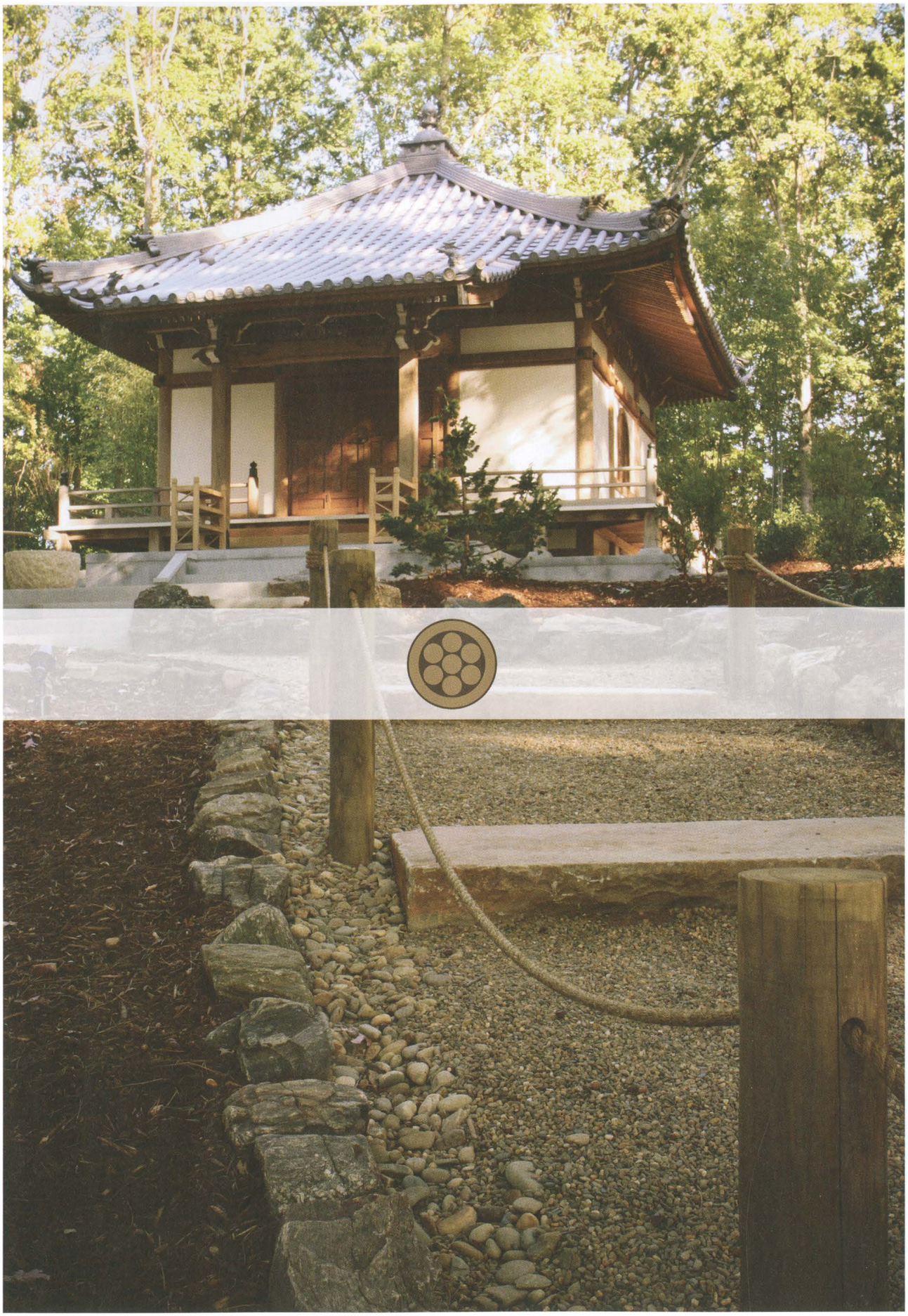
"The place is in your head," says David Shaner, Gordon Poteat Professor of Asian Studies and Philosophy who coordinated the efforts to ship the Buddhist temple to America and have it rebuilt, piece by piece, at Furman. "It's not a building to go into. That would be the Western way to look at it. The temple is perfectly empty. It's a mirror of your own mind."

The Place of Peace, or Hei-Sei-Ji, is the result of friendship, family, fortune, and hundreds of hours of effort by top craftsmen. Originally built in Nagoya, Japan, by the Tsuzuki family, it was painstakingly dismantled and shipped across the Pacific — with all 2,400 pieces individually wrapped and packed in custom-made containers. For three years it was stored in a warehouse in Gaffney, S.C. Then, beginning April 1 of this year, it was carefully reassembled on Furman's campus in a wooded area behind the Roe Art Building.

"To our knowledge, this kind of reconstruction of a Buddhist temple has never happened before," says Shaner, whose passion for Japanese culture and close ties with the Tsuzuki family fueled the almost four-year process.

A transoceanic journey

The Tsuzuki family built the temple at their home in Nagoya in 1984, using it for such occasions as birth celebrations and death memorials. Kiyohiro Tsuzuki and his wife, Chigusa, owned TNS Mills, a Greenville-based supplier to the textile industry, and began living part of the year in Greenville during the 1960s. The company was recently renamed Wellstone Mills and is now run by their son, Seiji.



Japanese craftsmen specially trained in working with wood, plaster and tile were flown in to do the painstaking reassembly.

The structure was rebuilt in its original state, and many details showcase Japanese customs and symbols.

The connection between the family and Furman began when Shaner became Chigusa Tsuzuki's Aikido teacher — and friend. Shaner, a seventh-degree black belt, has practiced Aikido, a Japanese martial art that focuses on unity and harmony, for almost 40 years. He says that the Tsuzuki family has a long history of civic involvement in Greenville, including donations to the Peace Center for the Performing Arts and the construction of Nippon Yagoto, a former Japanese cultural center.

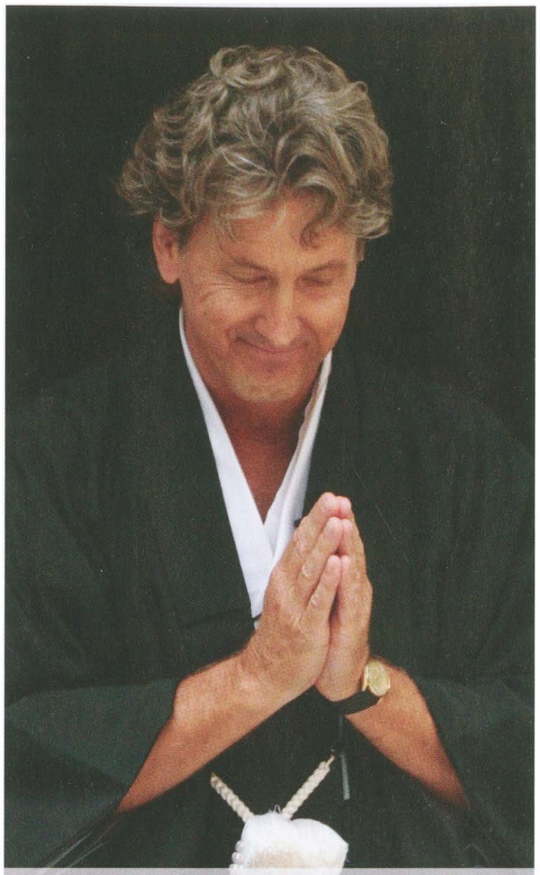
In the summer of 2004, when the family decided to sell some of their property in the States and in Japan, they approached Furman with the idea of bringing the temple to the campus. They had sold their home in Nagoya and had to dismantle the temple for the new owners by January 1, 2005, or it would be destroyed. Over Thanksgiving break in 2004, the executive committee of Furman's board of trustees agreed to the project, and the process began.

After being transported across the Pacific, through the Panama Canal and into the port of Charleston, four large shipping containers were trucked to a temperature- and humidity-controlled warehouse in Gaffney, where they remained until funds could be raised to support the rebuilding process. Finally, in the summer of 2007, Takayuki Nonoyama — the third-generation president of Daibun Co., which built Hei-Sei-Ji in 1984 — came to see the Furman site, inspect the 2,400 pieces in the warehouse, and make plans for the temple's reconstruction.

One major issue, however, needed to be addressed before the process could begin: the direction the temple would face. In Japan, says Shaner, temples face southeast, toward the sunrise. The proposed site at Furman, however, faced northwest.

When the Daibun president learned this, he expressed concern. But after he saw the setting — directly facing the waterfall feature in the Asia (formerly Japanese) Garden, with a view of the lake and, in the distance, the Blue Ridge Mountains — he realized the appropriateness of the decision. The building would be sited in harmony with the Earth, water and surrounding landscape.

"For this hillside, it's correct," says Shaner. "Turn around, and you're looking at a parking lot."



At the building's dedication September 5, David Shaner conducted a ceremonial blessing.

The calligraphy on the shomen *reads, "Blessed universal spirit, [our] connection is present in this very moment."*

Connections

When the 900-square-foot temple was built, the craftsmen followed Japanese custom by carefully observing the energy of each *keyaki* tree used. According to tradition, the wood columns must stand upright and face the direction they originally faced as trees in the forest. The craftsman, who owes a debt to the tree for its sacrifice, repays that debt by using his talents to do the best work possible.

The temple is also built without nails, instead using intricate joinery that corresponds with Japanese philosophy. "Everything fits nicely, like a puzzle," Shaner says. "There's beautiful symbology there — the pillars and beams fit together so seamlessly that you don't see the internal complexity."

The reassembly, which was overseen by the Aichiken Co., involved bringing various artisans from Japan to Furman, among them seven wood specialists, four tile specialists and two plaster specialists. "These people don't cross-train," Shaner says, which allows them to become masters of their individual crafts.

The entire structure was rebuilt in its original state except for some clay ceiling tiles, which were cracked when the building was disassembled. They were remade and shipped from Japan.

To commemorate their work on the project, the craftsmen held a Ridge Beam Ceremony in which they signed their names to a piece of *keyaki* wood shaped like a shield. The shield was then placed in the building's highest beams, just under the roof, and is accessible only by removing a secret ceiling panel and climbing into the rafters. Shaner and Jeff Redderson, assistant vice president for facilities services at Furman, were invited to sign the shield because of their contributions to the reconstruction.

Many details of the Place of Peace showcase Japanese customs and symbols, including two gargoyle features on top: one with its mouth open, representing life, and another with its mouth closed, indicating death. The Tsuzuki family crest, made up of seven circles, can be found in several places.

SHARING A FAMILY'S HERITAGE

An excerpt from the talk by Seiji Tsuzuki, chair of Wellstone Mills, at the Place of Peace dedication September 5:

My sister, Yuri, and I cannot even express in words how excited we are to see this moment become a reality. We are pleased to say the result is even better than we imagined.

Greenville welcomed our family and gave us a sense of belonging. That is why it is so special to both my sister and me to have brought a piece of our Japanese heritage to Greenville.

The temple was part of our family and brings many memories of growing up in Japan. I remember when I was 10 years old, raking the leaves off the stairs and cleaning the wood as part of my chores. Yuri would arrange the Ikebana flowers with my mother on the Tokonoma mantel.

This place has many personal memories close to the heart, and to have this now in Greenville is both remarkable and emotional. To us the realization of this project brings our two lives in Japan and Greenville together. My mother and father, who have passed away, would have been very happy to see the Place of Peace in Greenville.

The appreciation for this project by Furman and the people of this community shows the progressiveness and vision of this university and the maturity of this community to embrace the changing international world. This beautiful Place of Peace could have never happened without the support of the Greenville community — the same support that embraced our family in the beginning.

As students and visitors pass through, it is our hope that the Place of Peace engages their curiosity and energy to learn more about the culture and the world from which the Place of Peace originated. The first step in learning is to be intrigued and inspired. We hope that the Place of Peace continues to excite young minds, and that it can play a part in igniting Furman's commitment to Asian Studies and Greenville's spirit of internationalism.

An overarching theme of "connection" resonates throughout, according to Shaner. Not only does the temple help visitors connect to other cultures, each other and themselves, but it facilitates a connection with nature by offering none of the creature comforts, such as heating and air conditioning, to which we are accustomed.

"When it's dark outside, it's dark inside. When it's hot outside, it's hot inside," Shaner says. "So if you're inside doing breathing exercises or meditating, the point is not to create artificial separation between you and your environment, but to connect with your surroundings."

Shaner says he looks forward to holding classes in the Place of Peace — in all types of weather. "If it's cold, we'll sit there and meditate, because that's part of developing a strong mind," he says.

The front wall inside the building, called the *shomen*, is the singular place of honor within the temple. Visitors will discover that, looking back from the *shomen*, they are directly facing the waterfall feature in the Asia Garden, marking a straight line of connection between the calligraphy on the *shomen* and the waterfall. In the foundation beneath the *shomen* is a well that extends into the ground, enhancing the connection between the Earth and the temple.

The calligraphy is a poem by Shaner's Ki-Aikido teacher of 40 years, Master Koichi Tohei, who is now 88 years old. It reads, "*Shinpo uchurei kanno soku genjo.*" The phrase, which expresses sacred and symbolic wisdom, means, "Blessed universal spirit, [our] connection is present in this very moment."

A STRATEGIC FIT

Aside from the temple's beauty and cultural significance, its addition to the campus dovetails perfectly with several of Furman's strategic priorities.

One is sustainability, which, as Shaner points out, goes beyond the curriculum to the way the university is managed and buildings are constructed. *Keyaki* wood, for example, is extremely hard and durable, and should last for hundreds of years. "To have a temple that represents an ecocentric — or nature-centered — world view is exactly on strategy," Shaner says.

Furman is also expanding its focus on international education and, in particular, Asian Studies. This emphasis had its genesis in the late 1960s, when the university introduced an Asian-African course requirement for all students.

"For a Baptist school, that was hugely progressive," Shaner says, adding that it led to the hiring of non-Western specialists in programs such as history, philosophy, religion and political science. It's one reason Shaner himself was hired 26 years ago as a specialist in Japanese philosophy, focusing on Buddhism.

Now, he considers Asian Studies at Furman one of the top undergraduate programs in the country. The department is already the largest among private liberal arts colleges in the Southeast. Its 15 Asian specialists represent nine disciplines, and more than 60 courses are offered to meet student demand. The number of Asian Studies majors has tripled since 2004.

A third Furman initiative that will benefit from Hei-Sei-Ji is the university's commitment to the development of the whole person.

"We strive to focus not only on the intellectual, but also physical, social, emotional and spiritual fitness," Shaner says. The Place of Peace, he believes, is an ideal setting to introduce students and visitors to different paths to wellness and physical and mental fitness, including meditation, yoga and assorted Asian arts.

"I think this building offers a greater opportunity to share values and philosophies and different spiritual beliefs with different communities," Shaner says. "We can always find aspects of other cultures that we can relate to and thus make them our own. In the true spirit of liberal learning, this helps everyone open up their thinking."

He says devout Christians, Muslims or members of other faiths aren't abandoning their beliefs when they learn about such practices as meditation, breathing and healing. He cites yoga as an example of a cultural activity that people of all religions can use to improve health and wholeness without compromising their beliefs.

Given Furman's Baptist heritage, Shaner says he was initially concerned that there might be resistance to the idea of bringing a Buddhist temple to campus. But he was pleased with the positive response from "forward-thinking" leaders at Furman. One member of the board of trustees even compared the Place of Peace with the fountains at the university's front entrance, which are often considered an iconic centerpiece of the campus.

Now, Furman has another kind of iconic centerpiece — a place to pursue peace of body, mind and spirit while broadening one's awareness of an increasingly connected, global society. |F|

The author, a 1994 Furman graduate, is a free-lance writer from Simpsonville, S.C.

For a slide show of the project from start to completion, visit www.furman.edu/fumag.