

Profiling Jacqueline Myoko Jago:

A committed spiritual practice

by Craig Jones, LL.B 1998 and UBC Law Alumni Board Member

One of the most pleasant things about being involved in the UBC Law Alumni Association is reconnecting with those grads who have taken roads less traveled, particularly those who have found their calling far from Point Grey or from “conventional” legal practice. It’s probably fair to say that a disproportionate number of our alums practicing in foreign countries are graduates of the Faculty’s internationally-renowned Masters of Law program, which each year attracts a handful of students from all over the world. Even among that select crowd, though, few will have had six or seven post-graduation years as tumultuous, gratifying, and downright interesting as has Jacqueline Myoko Jago.

Myoko graduated from UBC’s LL.M program in 1998, where she studied and wrote on legal rights of Indigenous peoples and children in Canada and Australia, and has worked in public service almost without interruption since that time. But hers is far from the typical tale of a career civil servant, as she explained via email from her home in Brisbane, Australia.

After a brief stint “cleaning cutlery and dancing a lot in Cairns,” Myoko worked on issues of Native title briefly before landing what she describes as her “dream job” working as a policy adviser to the Minister of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy. The job involved designing a reparations framework for Indigenous people in Queensland who claimed collectively for work done without proper recompense in the course of the preceding century. Since there was no existing consensus in government that this reparation should even occur, Myoko’s role called on technical expertise about Indigenous legal issues (for which she found her work at UBC “crucial”) as well as what she describes as “a good deal of relationship-building and legal finessing.”

Myoko left her advisory role in mid-2000, when the framework she had helped design was approved, and set off to do a graduate certificate in Gender and Migration at the International Women’s University in Hanover, Germany. She returned to Brisbane for admission to the Queensland bar in March 2001.

The unexpected death of her eldest sister that same month sent Myoko on a more personal quest. Her longstanding interest in Buddhist meditation “turned to a deeper commitment,” she says, and at the end of that year she spent 60 days at a Buddhist retreat in Burma, returning with the ambition to ordain as a nun.

However, she says, the path to her goal was not at all clear: “I couldn’t have said at that point just what form ordination could take for someone with no intuitive calling to living permanently in a monastery – but the experience of letting go of my sister through meditation practice showed me the possibility of the deepest kind of joy.”

Since her time in Burma and reinvigorated commitment to the Buddhist path, the challenge for Myoko has been uncovering a path of committed spiritual practice outside a monastery – something she says “is in fact possible” for a lawyer in public service. Having worked in a range of policy areas, Myoko has recently settled into a position as a lawyer at Queensland’s Crime and Misconduct Commission, which monitors official and criminal misconduct in the State’s public service.

And becoming a nun? Yes, that too happened. A chance meeting with a Zen monk in January 2003 led to “a sense of instant recognition, and a choicelessness about

ordaining.” She writes: “I felt compelled, shaved my head (ouch, still vain), and ordained with a very beautiful Japanese Master, Hogen-san, in April this year [2004]. A very moving ceremony, and I felt afterwards as if I could breathe for the first time.”

Myoko, (her name translates as “subtle and mysterious light”) plans to travel to Japan to the monastery of Harada Tangen Roshi in March 2005 for a 10 week stay, and in the longer term to apply her life (and her lawyer’s skills) “to seeing our suffering, and to helping relieve it.”