



Savanhdary and Noriko taking rubbings at the Nigatsu-dō. Photo: Jamie Coates



FOOTSTEPS TO THE NIGATSU-DŌ

Savanhdary Vongpoothorn

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How did I get from the Mekong River to the Nigatsu-dō, Todaiji Temple, Nara? My first

encounter with the engravings on the stone steps leading to the Nigatsu-dō was on one freezing cold evening in March 2017. That day I was privileged to attend the 1162nd *Omizutori* (water gathering) ceremony at Nigatsu-dō with Noriko.

Noriko and I were two of the very few who were allowed to enter the Nigatsu-dō through the fenced-off stone steps. I immediately thought these steps must be sacred, but they are secular; they were fenced off only to stop too many people from entering the Nigatsu-dō during the festival. I was very surprised to learn later that many people don't realise the significance of the engravings on the steps to the Nigatsu-dō.



Savanhdary and Noriko taking rubbings at the Nigatsu-dō.
Photo: Jamie Coates



Noriko and I attended the festival until the very end—4am the next morning. While sitting on the floor on our viewing platform, I dozed off several times, then woke up with a jolt to the sound of a wooden plank hitting and bouncing off the floor in the hall's outer sanctum. Looking sleepily through the thick, latticed wooden wall—the only thing separating us from the ceremony—I realised the sound that kept jolting me awake was made by a monk performing prostrations by jumping up and landing on the wooden plank on one knee! I watched the ritual in awe. I heard the sound of the monks' clogs as they ran around the famous and rarely seen Small Eleven-Headed Kannon (*Avolakiteshvara*/ Goddess of Mercy), in the inner sanctum's shrine. I could make out the flickering of gold

on the Small Kannon through the dim smoky candlelight, and felt the night's icy coldness on my back.

The chanting of the eleven monks sounded so familiar and yet so different. I seemed to hear it in my belly, then felt the sound spreading through my entire body as I was transported back to the temple in my mother's village in southern Laos, to the Lao Ramayana—the Rama Jataka—being recited by the banks of the Mekong River.

A few days later, I could not stop reflecting on my experience of the *Omizutori*—the symbolic meaning of fire and water, of renewal and cleansing. Yet, what stayed in my mind's eye was the stairway. I had immediately been attracted to the geometric forms on the

Savanhdry installing the artwork in her ANCA studio in 2019.
Photo: Chaitanya Sambrani



steps' engravings and felt intrigued: what was the story behind these fifty-three stone steps? The fifty-three steps signify Sudhana's learning from fifty-three teachers, or fifty-three Buddhist scriptures, on his journey towards enlightenment.

I then made an outrageous proposal to Noriko—that I wanted to make rubbings of the ancient patterns on the stone steps. At first, Noriko was adamant that we would never be allowed to do this; the temple has a reputation for being very strict about outsiders and their activities. But I was persistent and Noriko gave in. One week later, we were very surprised to learn we'd been granted permission from the High Priest to make rubbings of the engravings on the steps.

There are three different patterns of engravings on the first three steps at the top of the stairs and another three different patterns on the last three at the bottom, but there is nothing in between. The very first step from the bottom is engraved with the pattern of moving water in a fountain. The second step from is engraved with hexagons and the third step floral or spirals. The next forty-seven steps are unadorned, representing emptiness and openness. The third last step is engraved with overlapping wave patterns then the final two steps are engraved with two different kinds of net patterns.

Armed with the tools of the trade—black ink, fabric ink blotters, a brush, a spray water bottle, and handmade paper from the famous





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Fukunishi Washi Honpo shop in Yoshino, Nara—we worked non-stop for two hours, our allocated time of 6am to 8am, closely watched by a temple guard, to copy the engravings.

With our precious rubbings rolled up and tucked under our arms we went back to Noriko's house. We unrolled the rubbings and laid them out on the floor. Inspecting our craft, Noriko and I felt the weight of those precious rubbings, thinking that we would never again get permission to make more. Before we began the next stage we shared a bottle of lovely dry sake from a famous factory in Nara. The sake was a good idea—it calmed our nerves. I began to write in Lao Pali script, *Amitabhud* ('may the Buddha protect you'), while Noriko composed her *tanka* on the rubbings with red ink. I thought to myself how wonderful it was to be collaborating with a poet and calligrapher.

Back in my Canberra studio, I worked on an art installation using our rubbings. I stenciled broken pieces of the fire sutra in Lao Pali onto the top and bottom borders of each sheet of rubbings. There are 195 sheets in total. The fire sutra is broken because the melody has been lost and its meaning has been broken because of our hatred, greed, pride and delusion. This is what the Buddha tells us in the fire sutra.

For the final installation, Noriko applied her *tanka* in gold kanji calligraphy on a burnt umbra coloured background. I then arranged them in five columns between the rubbings of the Nigatsu-dō steps. The completed paper installation took us three years to produce, from 2017 to 2019. Noriko composed these *tanka* during our collaboration (translated by Dr Carol Hayes and Noriko Tanaka):

天上と地上をつなぐ階の間をながき無の時がある

*within the long stairway linking the heavens and the earth
the timeless state of nothingness*

朝明けの階に響ける波音の遠き国より来る仏か

*the sound of waves breaking on the stairway of morning
did they come with Buddha from that distant land?*

夜の底の拓かれてゆく水音や時空の階に無のときがある

*the sound of water colours the darkness of the night
nothingness*

on the stairway of space and time ¹

¹ Tanaka, Noriko. *Darkness–Fire–Sutra* : 闇・火・経. Translated by Carol Hayes and Noriko Tanaka. Osaka: Miotsukuchi. 2019.



Savanhdy Vongpoothorn was born in Laos in 1971. She came to Australia, as a refugee, with her parents and siblings in 1979. After studying visual arts at the Universities of Western Sydney and New South Wales (COFFA), Vongpoothorn has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1996. She has received a number of prestigious awards and residencies in Australia and overseas. Her work is held in major public, corporate and private collections, including the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. She is currently a recipient of the Australia Council for the Arts. The author would like to thank Noriko Tanaka for sharing her research and insights into steps to the Nigatsu-dō.