



Scenes from a Spiritual Journey

Jan Willis is a traveler along many physical, intellectual, and spiritual paths.

To heal the deep wounds of racism, Jan Willis turned to Buddhism and is now cited by Time magazine as one of America's spiritual leaders. David Pesci talked with her about her journey from the crushing injustices of life in the Jim Crow South to the thin air of the shrine called Swayambhu.

The shimmering light dances and glows in her eyes.

Jan Willis is an earnest teenage girl from a small dirt road mining town who has just been awarded a full scholarship to an Ivy League university. It's an incredible opportunity, a bright shining beacon filled with promise and dream-like possibilities. It's a triumphant moment—an undeniable validation—not just for Jan and her family, but for her community. It's also the reason people have driven from miles around to her house one night. They've come to acknowledge Jan's achievement by burning a cross on her front lawn.

Jan's mother crouches inside their small house holding Jan's sister, Sandy, and a .22 caliber pistol. She tells Jan to get on the floor, get under the bed. But Jan keeps standing, peering out a corner of the window, spellbound by the sight. The cross, the familiar, safe symbol of peace and love and redemption that she has grown up with in her Baptist church, glows, completely engulfed in roaring flames. The hooded, hollow-eyed people, most of them in white cloth robes, but a few wearing red and purple satin, surround the cross and shout the racial slurs Jan has heard all her short life. Several children in miniature hoods and robes stand in the light of the flames, shouting as well. The cross burns brighter.

Jan's daddy is off at the local steel mill working the late shift. She stares out the window wondering what he would do if he were here. Her mother is hissing for Jan to get down. They know what will come next: the fire bomb the Klan always throws before driving off.

Jan thinks of fighting back, of Daddy's shotgun. She knows where he keeps it, but could she fire it? Even as she thinks this, deep down she doesn't want to fire it. What she really wants is to go outside and talk to these people. She wants to let them know that they are making a mistake,

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SUMMER '01



that inside we are all the same.

The cross burns. The Klanspeople shout. Jan stares at the hooded forms in her front yard. Does she get the gun and open fire, go outside and talk peace, or just stand by the window, waiting for the bomb?

If you look in Jan Willis's eyes today, you would be hard pressed to guess that she ever faced such a choice, more than once in her life as it turns out. This petite woman with *café au lait* skin, a quick smile, and an almost girlish laugh, not only learned to fire a gun, she took part in armed rebellion. Jan Willis, a peace-loving Tantric Buddhist, a highly respected scholar and teacher who was recently named by *Time* as one of the new century's spiritual innovators, also traveled out to California to join the Black Panthers *at their invitation*. How could she have been a part of all of this?

Willis smiles. Her voice, its Alabama twang leav-

“Destined for the same shelf as Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies* and Kathleen Norris’s *The Cloister Walk* and *Amazing Grace*, this is a powerful memoir of a ‘Baptist Buddhist’ who writes with courage, compassion, and forgiveness.” starred review, *Library Journal*.

ened by nearly 24 years in Connecticut, is filled with energy and warmth.

“Steps along the path,” she says.

Buddhism is all about finding the path. And as Jan Willis attests in her new memoir, *Dreaming Me* (Riverhead, 2001), this path can often lead to unexpected places fraught with terror, despair, love, friendship, and some very difficult choices.

“When I was growing up I was told I was worthless, dirty, and stupid more times than I can count,” Willis says. “And I was called *nigger* every day. It was soul crushing.”

Willis’s path began in segregated Docena, Alabama, a small mining town not far from Birmingham. The mine went bust soon after Willis’s family arrived there but her daddy held a job at a steel mill in nearby Ensley, so he escaped the unemployment that affected many of the town’s residents, black and white. The family lived in a small three-room house in the town’s “colored” section. Grandparents and cousins lived nearby. Sandy and friends from school were ready playmates. The segregated town, however, provided harsh daily reminders that life revolved around race.

Willis’s voice deepens, her words become measured as the memories bubble up.

“I used to get our mail every week at the local commissary. To get there I had to walk through the white section of town. Every time I did, *every time*, there was this white girl waiting for me in her yard. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed. She was never clean, always covered in mud or dirt, and not more than 5 or 6 years old. And she would yell: ‘Where you going you dirty nigger!?’ She always said it with such anger, such rage. I remember how hurtful it was.”

Willis recounts other images: Her parents exhorting the girls to roll up car windows while passing through the white section of town because white people were known to throw acid in the faces of black children. The demeaning treatment Willis received from the principal of the all-white school when he visited the all-black school. Accounts by friends and neighbors who had

been beaten or who had witnessed lynchings by the local KKK.

“It was so difficult for me to have any self esteem back then. It was a terrible time and place to be sensitive and African American.”

The house is filled with happy noise—laughing, good talk, smiling faces—the way it should be at an 11-year-old’s birthday party. Derrick Williams, the guest of honor, is just about Jan’s age, a nice boy. All the kids are eating cake and sipping soft drinks at the Williams’ house. The hot afternoon has drawn a few outside. Everybody is having fun but no one is being too loud or showy. They all know better.

But then the cars come up the road, going too fast, heading for the house. Jan sees them and knows everything is about to change. Faster than she can take a breath, the fear grips her.

The men pour out of the cars, some in the familiar white robes and hoods, others in street clothes, not bothering to cover their faces in the muggy daylight. They rush up the walk. People inside and outside the house freeze. The men burst into the house screaming, “Niggers don’t deserve parties!”

The men confront Derrick, screaming at him. His parents huddle in the corner. Things are broken. The men grab

Derrick, yelling louder. Jan realizes it’s not Derrick they’re looking for, it’s Joey, Derrick’s brother. But the men don’t know or they don’t care. They just keep yelling. Everyone is so scared.

And then they break Derrick’s arm.

His parents don’t move, still paralyzed by fear. Derrick cries on the floor. The men seem satisfied. Jan watches them leave. Derrick’s parents finally go to his aid. Jan feels hollow, shaken to her core. Home is supposed to be one of the few safe places. Parents are supposed to protect their kids...

A few years later, in the spring of 1963, Willis decides she will stand by no longer. Together with her friends and father, she joined the Rev. Martin Luther King’s Birmingham protests. Surrounded by barking police dogs and billyclub-wielding policemen, she watched police beat protestors. She was hit by skin-searing blasts of water cannons. Fear surged through her body throughout the experience, but after it was all over, a feeling of resolution and satisfaction resonated within her. For the first time in her life she stood up for herself and her race. She fought back.

Two years later Willis earns a full scholarship to Cornell University. Her award, and similar scholarships to a few other black Birmingham-area youths, spurred CBS to send down a news crew to profile these advances against segregation. It seemed like honest, righteous journalism. But instead of photographing her in front of her parents’ small well-kept home, the crew asked her to walk by an impoverished house with poor black people looking out the windows. The camera rolled, the reporter spoke of standards being lowered at the various schools to allow the black students in. Willis said nothing. These were northern reporters. They were being so nice to her, and they were supposed to be on her side, right? But inside she knew she was just being used, that this was just a different form of racism; perhaps not intentional, perhaps a bit more subtle, but still racism.

Willis believes it was the airing of this story that inspired the Klan to burn the cross on her lawn. But for some reason, that was all they did. They didn’t throw a firebomb. Neither she nor her mother fired shots. A few months later she made the long trip north to Cornell. It was the first time she had ever been that far from home.

At Cornell Willis meets her first white friends and becomes interested in Buddhism. With the Vietnam War on television every night, she is riveted by the sight of Buddhist monks and nuns in Southeast Asia who would douse themselves in gasoline, assume a meditation position, begin praying for peace and light themselves on fire. A philosophy major with a penchant for Wittgenstein, Willis is amazed that the monks can maintain such control over their emotions even as their bodies were consumed by flames.

She began reading about Buddhism, which focused on identifying the causes of suffering and finding a path to eliminate it. This intrigued Willis, as did Buddhism’s tenets, which were based on methodology rather than dogma. Contrary to the Southern Baptist religion she was raised on, and different from every religion she’d ever heard of, her readings made her wonder if Buddhism could help her with the emotional scarring she acquired in Docena.

“Buddhism seemed like a great equalizer. It offered distinct methods for growth, and it said all people are the same. This was something I had believed but hadn’t encountered before in a religion.”

An academic year abroad took her to Banaras Hindu University, where she studied Hindi, Buddhist philosophy, and music, and pursued a research project on contemporary Hindi poetry. But even in India, she couldn’t get away from the racism. When asked by an Indian shopkeeper what caste she was, Willis responded she wasn’t of any caste, that she was an American. The shopkeeper looked at her and said, “American Negro? I am so sorry for you.” After her studies concluded, she went to Nepal to observe Buddhist monks who had been exiled from Tibet.

Jan and her friend climb the steps that lead to the shrine called Swayambhu. The air in Nepal is almost painfully thin, the afternoon sun warm. Jan is breathless, gripping the railing as she takes the steps slowly, one by one. At the top they find a monastery. One door catches the attention of Jan’s friend. People are going in. Something is happening. Jan squeezes her small body into the narrow doorway. The room is tiny and can barely hold the 12 monks who are inside, never mind the pilgrims and onlookers trying to enter. Jan is pressed so close, her knee touches the back of one of the sitting monks.

At the center is a giant gold Buddha. She later learns it represents the Buddha of the future. It is beautiful. Two monks blow giant metal horns and the monks begin praying. Jan makes eye contact with the six monks facing her. They are in the room with her and yet they seem far away, transported by their chanting.

Jan watches. An incredible joy takes hold inside her, a feeling she would later term “utterly blissful.” She’s still standing, still watching, but she has joined the monks—wherever their chanting has taken them, she is right there with them. Time disappears. She does not know how long she stands there, enthralled.

The spell is finally broken by her friend who tells Jan it is getting dark, they must leave. But Jan doesn’t want to leave this place. She never wants to leave.

The experience at Swayambhu is one some might call enlightenment; Willis still refers to it as a moment of bliss. But the feeling that she must stay was reinforced later when a monk they met pointed to Willis

1952



1969



1972



1980



1987



1995



1995



1995



1995



and said—amazingly, in English—“You should stay here and study with us.”

“I wanted to stay, but I just couldn’t,” she says. “I’d been away for almost nine months. I hadn’t seen my family for so long. I had to go back.”

She turned down the monk’s offer, but every day for the next two weeks she went to visit him. She was intrigued by their practice of Tantric Buddhism, which was somewhat different than the Zen Buddhism she had studied. She knew she would return, but first she had to go home.

The Cornell University Willis returned to was markedly different from the one she had left just a year before. Racial animosity was running high. When someone burned a cross on the lawn of a house where 12 black female students lived, the Black Student Association responded with an armed takeover of the student union on parents’ weekend. Willis, a member of the association, was charged with managing a weapons cache. She was terrified.

“There were people in the town carrying guns in broad daylight, putting rifles and shotguns in their cars,” she says. “I thought we were going to war.”

Luckily, violence did not break out during the 24-hour takeover, but tensions remained high throughout the campus during the spring. At graduation, Willis marched with her fist held over her head—the symbol of black power.

Her involvement in the Cornell protests caught the notice of leaders in the Black Panthers, and she was invited out to Oakland to join the group. Willis decided she had to investigate the opportunity.

What she saw was intriguing, but also stifling. The Panthers offered an immediate way to confront the racism of the system head-on. Women, however, were treated as second-class citizens within the organization and excluded from leadership and decision-making. Willis chafed at the very idea of being in such a structure. At the last minute she decided not to attend a meeting with the Panthers leadership and, choosing another path, went back to Nepal, where she would be the only woman among 60 monks—with no interpreter.

Soon after, she met Lama Yeshe, who would become her teacher.

Her first meeting with Lama Yeshe was an informal one, and yet Willis found herself drawn to the man. During the next 12 months, she formed an unshakable bond with him. He instructed her in Buddhist methods and teachings, particularly in meditation. Willis quickly found that she was good at meditation, and the clear, concise methodology of Buddhism appealed to her logical sense. But aside from the methods, Willis found that Lama Yeshe offered her something she had not been able to find in great quantity anywhere else.

“Unconditional love,” Willis says, smiling. “He be-

lieved in me, he trusted my abilities, he had pride in my achievements. Except for my dad, I had never had that kind of affirmation, either from teachers or from my family. But Lama Yeshe offered it to me unquestioningly, as he did with all his students.”

Willis practiced meditation for several hours each day under Lama Yeshe’s guidance. She learned Tibetan and translated Buddhist texts into English. She met with the Dalai Lama (and has met with him several times since) and discussed Buddhist theory with him. She also made a startling realization.

“One of the basic tenets of Christianity is to love others as you love yourself. But what if a person *doesn’t* love herself? I really had a negative self image when I began studying Tantric Buddhism. Lama Yeshe said most westerners he had met were the same. A lot of my meditation was focused on this. It took a long time, and hard work, to effect a change.”

After returning from Nepal and earning a doctorate from Columbia, she accepted a one-year visiting appointment to Wesleyan, which was followed by an offer for a tenured position in the department of religion. Willis accepted and has been at the University for nearly 24 years. It is home.

A full professor of religion and the Walter A. Crowell Professor of Social Sciences, today Willis is earnest and energetic in her efforts to teach students *about* Buddhism rather than converting them or teaching them Buddhist meditation. She has never seen her role as proselytizing. When asked to characterize herself, she says she considers herself a “Baptist Buddhist,” one whose philosophical and spiritual outlook has been affected by both religions.

“I do not think it’s my place to preach to students,” she says. “But maybe they will remember that Buddhism stresses overcoming suffering through understanding how we play a part in constructing it, and

that compassion and wisdom go hand in hand. If students try to learn this, then I believe I have performed a valuable service.”

Recently, Willis has also been working to take her teachings outside the academic environment. She has long believed that, in the United States, Buddhism has been the domain of the affluent. But Willis believes Buddhist methods can have tremendous benefits to people who could never afford a six- week personal retreat with a Buddhist lama. That’s why she has begun

wise old person. Jan asks the women to take a good look at this person, what this person looks like, how he or she is dressed. What race? There is a pause, and then Jan tells them that this is their beautiful house, this person is their personal guide. She tells the women to enter.

The house is filled with color and the scent of flowers. It is safe, comfortable. Jan tells the women that this is a place where they can come anytime to unburden themselves from discomfort, guilt, hurt feelings, recriminations, pain.

The meditation exercise goes on. Jan guides the women

“With a whisper to Oprah, she could be the first African American Buddhist feminist guru to be embraced by reading groups across America.” starred review in *Publishers Weekly*

teaching Tantric visualization meditation at the York Correctional Institution for women in Niantic, Conn.

The introduction to Buddhism is a first for the women, and Willis’s first attempt at conducting such a program for inmates. She hopes the instruction in Buddhist meditation techniques will provide the women with tools to improve their confidence and coping skills, as well as give them the ability to rebuild their battered self-images.

The women sit in the room, eyes closed, their prison-issue clothes rising and falling in time with their deep breaths. Jan’s voice is the only sound in the room, other than the breathing. She asks the women to imagine a path that leads to a beautiful house. There they are met at the door by a

through the imaginary house, showing them how to gather up and jettison all their emotional baggage. At the end they open their eyes. There are tears and smiles among the women. Jan knows this is good, so very good. This is the first step on a path.

“It was so rewarding,” Willis says. “The women were great, and the administration liked what happened. I’ve been invited back for more teachings.”

Willis speaks with as much conviction as hope. It is not the voice of one who will just stand by and watch as a cross burns, or who will pick up a gun. It is the voice of a person who wants to go out to face the flames and hooded forms and talk peace, talk sense. Tell them how inside we are all the same. **W**

Seeing Is Believing



"Most athletes have always known about, and employed, the method of visualization," says Willis. "At the conclusion of the 1998 Super Bowl, Denver Broncos' running back Terrell Davis, who was voted the game's most valuable player, said that all week prior to the game he had visualized himself in the game, making his particular moves and plays. He had never visualized anything except the Broncos winning the game, and it paid off.

"Michael Jordan knows about the pay-offs of visualization, too. Former Chicago Bulls' head coach, Phil Jackson, learned meditation from Zen Buddhists and taught specific visualization techniques to his team.

"The heart of Tantric Buddhism is transformation, the idea that we can change our ordinary negative patterns of seeing and feeling into positive ones. And the method employed to bring about such a transformation is nothing other than visualization, in this case, deity-yoga. The deities of Tantric Buddhism are none other than the projections of our own innermost selves. Each repre-

sents an aspect, or specific quality, of our own enlightened mind—whether compassion, wisdom, tireless beneficial activity, fierce service to others, or universal love....The method of visualization is already quite natural to us since we think in images all the time. Usually, however, we spend most of time visualizing ourselves in negative ways.

"You don't have to renounce your own religion or become a Buddhist to incorporate useful Buddhist methods into your life," she asserts. "Just being more mindful in our daily interactions, for example, is a Buddhist principle. We often form our impressions about people the moment we come into contact with them. It is just a habit. That prevents us from ever truly meeting them. But if we can step back and become mindful when we meet people, just mindful, of how we form our impressions of others, that can be an important step toward eliminating misconceptions. That can create all kinds of new opportunities for communication and understanding."