

# Tribute to Myo Ji Sunim JDPS



*Myo Ji Sunim JDPS died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage on November 4, 2011. She practiced, taught and traveled tirelessly in Europe, Asia and North America. In recognition of the many lives she touched, we present the following tributes from her students and family.*

## TALK GIVEN AT MYO JI SUNIM'S 49-DAY CEREMONY

Zen Master Wu Kuang

In the temple rules of the Kwan Um School of Zen, it says that if you have received the precepts then you should know when to keep them and when to break them, when they are open and when they are closed. If one firmly and rigorously keeps the precepts, one is practicing the way of the saints, but if one clearly understands when to keep them and when to break them, when they are open and when closed, then one practices the way of the bodhisattvas. Now Myo Ji Sunim was no saint, but she surely was a great bodhisattva.

If we look at what we chant during the 49-day ceremony, a couple of elements stand out. There are several dharma speeches emphasizing the teaching that there is essentially no birth or death, no coming or going, and we entreat the deceased to listen to this teaching. Second, we chant mantras, dharanis and the name of Amita Buddha so that the deceased can hear them. If we were performing this kind of ceremony for a family member or close friend who was not a strong dharma practitioner, the hope would be that through hearing the teaching of no birth or death and through the mystic power of the mantras and the Buddha's name, the deceased might get a glimpse of their original mind and, in the next life, be inclined to take up practice. But for someone like Myo Ji Sunim, who was already strongly established in practice and certainly had opened to the original mind ground, the purpose is somewhat different. You could say that this ceremony is just a gentle reminder—"Myo Ji Sunim, hold firmly to your great question and great vow, rest in the

pure land of your original mind, recollect your nature as the Buddha of infinite time and infinite space, Amita, and come back soon to continue your work."

But even if you don't believe in the traditional Buddhist view of rebirth, if you want to see Myo Ji Sunim, just go for some walks in Central Park. An ancient poem by Zen Master Mumon says,

*Flowers in springtime, moon in autumn,  
Cool wind in summer, snow in winter.  
If you don't make anything in your mind,  
For you it is a good season.*

If you understand this poem, then you will meet Myo Ji Sunim's great wide original body that speech and words cannot hinder. Additionally, if you want to encounter Myo Ji Sunim's function body, then just look for a place in the world where "outrageous" acts of generosity and kindness are being performed. Look for fearlessness and unwavering determination. Look for the spirit of inclusion and a correct understanding of obligation. Myo Ji Sunim definitely understood the meaning of obligation to one's teacher. But if you are one of Myo Ji Sunim's students or sangha members, then you don't even need to look that far. Just look within for the spark that Myo Ji Sunim ignited in you and help it to burn brightly and nurture it continuously through your practice. That is your obligation.

I had three different relationships with Myo Ji Sunim. She was a close friend, a colleague and I served as her guiding teacher. As colleagues we would sometimes have lunch and share what it was like to run a temple or a practice center, and we would talk about the difficulties of being a teacher. You can only discuss these things with another teacher. When Myo Ji Sunim returned from Korea to become the abbot of Chogye Sa Temple, she had not yet finished her kong-an practice and had not received inka from Zen Master Seung Sahn. At that time, Zen Master Seung Sahn had "retired" and passed on the responsibility of kong-an teaching to his successors. So Myo Ji Sunim continued her kong-an practice with me. She would come regularly to the Zen center for interviews. Kong-an prac-



tice was not always easy for her, but with her well-known determination, she persisted and eventually received inka and started to teach.

Even after her inka, we would sometimes get together in a Korean restaurant and after lunch we would take out Zen Master Seung Sahn's book, *The Whole World Is a Single Flower* and I would ask her questions. The owner of the restaurant would sometimes walk by and see us looking into the kong-ans and he would say to me, "So you are studying the dharma with Myo Ji Sunim" and as many times as Myo Ji Sunim would tell him that she was in fact the student, he could not fathom that a monastic was studying with a layperson. Then she and I would smile

at each other about this somewhat narrow view. Myo Ji Sunim certainly knew how to be a proper monastic, but she was not bound by that and had a wide and open approach. But in fact in many ways I was studying with her. I admired her strength and especially her instantaneous warmth and friendship to all. I will try to emulate that for the rest of my life.

*Myo Ji Sunim, have a blissful rest and then soon come back.*

*As the old Zen masters said,  
We will meet again in five hundred years.*

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There was a bright blue sky over Donghwa Sa Temple and its huge white Medicine Buddha. I was sitting in the meditation space in front of it. Korea, in December 2007, on the third-year Seung Sahn memorial trip.

A voice came from behind my back:

"What color is the sky?"  
I turned around and saw Myo Ji Sunim laughing at me.  
"The sky is blue!"  
Obviously. Ha.  
"How do you know?"  
I was stuck.  
I had found my teacher.  
Martin Roell, Berlin

A few weeks before her death I walked in to the basement meditation Room on 96th Street. Myo Ji Sunim was working in the kitchen and humming Buddhist mantras. When she saw me she smiled and said: "How nice to see you, Ziggy! Long time no see. You have to keep coming. You know there is not too much time left, so don't waste it for chasing desires."

Ziggy Chodori, student of Myo Ji Sunim

The last time I saw Myo Ji Sunim I was visiting her at her temple. She was showing me all the work they had done. After viewing every room, I asked her where her room was. She laughed and showed me the altar again. She then opened a little wooden door on the side of the altar, I bowed down to look inside and saw a lamp and a sleeping bag and a picture of Kwan Seum Bosal.

Zen Master Soeng Hyang

## EULOGY FOR MYO JI SUNIM

*Given at the 49-Day Ceremony for Myo Ji Sunim  
on December 18, 2011*

Grace Kim Kanoy (Myo Ji Sunim's eldest daughter)

I had the unique and intimate position of being a witness to my mother's transformation. The story of Myo Ji Sunim is at once both tragic and triumphant.

Understanding who Myo Ji Sunim was before becoming Myo Ji Sunim will explain many of her actions and the challenges she faced to become who she was.

When Myo Ji Sunim first arrived in Canada, she was a newly married, beautiful, highly energetic, petite woman with long, flowing black hair, who had an appetite for high-heeled shoes, fancy

clothes, 1940s glam and Elvis Presley. She had a quick temper, could be incredibly obstinate and impatient, and she loved people.

When I was about 10 or 11, my mother met a Buddhist nun. They became fast friends, often singing together as they walked arm-in-arm through parks. And through this friendship, she discovered Zen Buddhism. And through this nun, my mother met Zen Master Seung Sahn.

When I was 12, she decided to visit Providence Zen Center and the New York Zen Center. It was not to be her last visit. By that time, she had begun to bow every night.

When I was in my teens, my mother partook in her first retreat, which I believe took place here at Providence [Zen Center]. That retreat made a profound impact on my mother.

During this retreat, she would wake up one hour before everyone else in the morn-



ing to put on her makeup, so no one would see her without it on. When she first experienced communal eating in silence, and had to wash her bowl with water and drink it at the end, it took all her willpower to stop from vomiting.

She returned home to Hamilton humbled and ashamed of the woman she had become.

My mother left our family in 1991. I was 21, my sister was just shy of her 15th birthday and my brother was 13.

There are many ways to look at her departure:

From a child's point of view, her departure was abandonment;  
from a husband's point of view, it was betrayal;  
from a community's point of view, it was shameful.

Her departure was all those things.

But from a woman's point of view, it was a mad and desperate crisis of identity.

*Who am I?* The most fundamental question of life.

My mother was 45 years old.

Her departure was met with anger, frustration and sadness. The community vilified both her and her family. Few people understood her, and even fewer showed her compassion.

My mother knew that leaving her children and her husband was wrong. She loved her children; she loved her husband. But what was worse is that she knew her children loved her, and her husband loved and adored her.

She had no real good reason to leave.

My mother carried this guilt for a long time. And I believe that initially, it served as the fuel that propelled her insane zeal for bowing. She needed to correct her action in the only way that she knew how. Through bowing.

I enjoyed visiting my mother at the temple. She told me stories of her training as a nun, and the guilty pleasure of receiving beautiful nun's clothes from the abbess [of the temple] where she trained. And with childlike, mischievous glee, she recounted how she was given her own private room to sleep in because her snoring kept all the other nuns-in-training awake at night. She was still the same woman, and I found great comfort in that.

I visited my mother every few years, and I made sure to visit during days and times when no one would be around so as not to complicate her new life. Despite her strong ideas and obstinacy, she loved to learn new things, and to learn new English words. She wanted to know better English words to help her accurately define not only Zen, but how she viewed life. She often used the Korean word *in-yon*, as she tried to explain life and Zen in half-English and Korean. "It was like destiny and fate, but not really," she would say.

The last time I saw my mother, it was three years ago. She agreed to watch my two sons for three weeks while I was away on a work assignment. Even though she was a Buddhist nun, I personally felt that she still had obliga-

tions as a grandmother, so I was delighted to have my boys spend that time with her. It was also the last time that my brother, sister and I were all together with her.

And for the first time, I felt that she no longer carried guilt for the decision she made many years ago. She had finally forgiven herself.

When I returned to pick up my boys in New York, I was happy to see that the boys and Myo Ji Sunim had had a grand adventure together. And of course, she was excited to tell me about a new word she had learned that "explained everything."

Myo Ji Sunim's final departure was equally as sudden as her first one.

A few days later after she died, I received a message from a Reiki-master friend of mine. She said, "Your mother has left you a message. I don't know what the message means, but she said you'd know."

So, I went over to visit my friend. She excitedly told me, "Your mother said to tell you exactly what happened, to tell you exactly what I was doing when she visited me. So here's what happened:

*I'm growing cayenne peppers in my greenhouse. All my organic farmer friends tell me it can't be done in the winter. Well, I'm proving them wrong. I went into the greenhouse. It was an unusually still day, and I only noticed this because it had been crazy windy the last few days. For some reason, I decided to use the back door and not the front. I never use the back door. As I was handling my cayenne pepper plant, the back door of the greenhouse suddenly slammed. I was surprised, but not scared. It was your mother. She said, "tell her what you are doing now in detail." I said, "I don't understand."*

*The back door slammed again. "Observation. Tell her what you are doing now." My cayenne pepper plant was full of tiny new blossoms. I was tying string from one pepper branch to another to create support for the peppers. And then your mother said to tell you, "All-encompassing."*

Three years ago was the last time I saw my mother. She was excited to tell me about her new word that *explained everything* . . .

*"All-encompassing."*

This is a quote from Jack Kerouac:

*The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue center light pop and everybody goes "Awwu!"*



There was a homeless woman who was living on the streets near Chogye Sa Temple. This woman used to wander by the temple sometimes, and from time to time she would randomly rip out some of the flowers Myo Ji Sunim was so carefully cultivating in front of the building. Myo Ji Sunim saw her doing this and asked her to stop a few times, but the woman didn't stop. After that, whenever Myo Ji Sunim saw this woman, she would give her whatever change she had in her pocket, a quarter or whatever. The woman never ripped any flowers out of the Chogye Sa flower boxes again.

Myong Haeng / Dave

I once brought my large black and white tomcat to her temple for an evening meeting. He had been sick, and I did not want to leave him alone. He was heartily welcomed and even signed in as a representative of our temple. Sunim accepted and loved all beings.

Swamini Sri Lalitambika Devi

## FOR MYO JI SUNIM



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After millions  
Of bows

Flesh and bones  
Become dust and air

What persists?

Blue sky  
White clouds

Tears of love  
And gratitude

Aigo! Aigo!  
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Who said  
You were done?

Nobody told us  
You were going

And we think  
You didn't know

Where did you go?  
Why did you leave?

Bowing is easy  
Wondering hurts more

(3)

Wondering is easy  
Practicing is hard

How did you learn  
Not to complain?

This gift of mind light

Buddha's face is gold  
Human eyes are wet

(4)

Human eyes are wet  
Human flesh is warm

What do  
Dust and air  
Become?

Sun and moon  
Bow to each other  
Cannot wake up

That's people's job

Eye to eye  
Face to face  
We only build something  
Together

*Ken Kessel JDPSN*



We argued constantly, but who could win an argument with such a saint? She focused her laserlike energy on my sad excuses, well-polished weakness and misplaced values. The poor "mountain monk" with her insurmountable energy could outlast us all, even in death. Frequently, when she saw the frustration in my being, she would say: "Binsentu, you are angry at me now, but someday you will miss me, right?" Well, I think she got that one wrong. I can't miss her because she is now and ever will be in my spirit, a little voice saying, "Don't think too much. If you know it is the right thing to do, just do it. All we can do is try . . . isn't it?"

Vince Conte

You came to one of Zen Master Seung Sahn's memorials and brought with you lots of goodies from Korea (apples, pears, persimmons, traditional Korean cakes), more than you could carry—that is a very touching teaching to us: Not-for-me teaching.

*Yours in dharma,  
Sister Dae Kwan and all the sangha members*

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To say that the death of Myo Ji Sunim has affected me is an understatement. But her life—her life transformed me.  
Alyson Arnold

