
my father's death a great vow

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Coming empty handed

Going empty handed

That is human.

Life is like a floating cloud which appears,

Death is like a floating cloud which disappears...

Tuesday the 16th of November, 1999, a beautiful, bright sunny day; crisp, clear mountains and blue sky. Our drive into the countryside was breathtaking. Bougainvillea in all possible shades lined the roads. Vineyards as far as the eye could see, were bright, clear green—with bunches of grapes hanging heavily beneath their canopies of leaves. This is life in the countryside! Unfortunately, a visit to the dentist was to follow!

Modern technology in hand, Rodney thought that the cellular phone (for emergency use only!) would surely not be needed at this point in time—who would phone us at the dentist? Just as I put the phone in my handbag, it rang! It was my brother-in-law's voice: "You obviously have not heard...?"

Heard what? My question to him. He asked if Rodney was with me (in a flash a feeling of dread appeared), then he said: "Dad was murdered!"

The sun was still shining, the sky still brilliantly blue—but just at that moment I could not see it, everything came tumbling down—in a flash! Our world was turned upside-down. In tears, torn apart by grief, not understanding the full ramifications of this news, we drove home.

At home, we had time to hold each other, to hug and cry, before Rodney started the onerous task of phoning our sangha, family and friends—Annie was first on the list. She must have jumped in her car as she put the phone down after talking with Rodney, because she was with us literally within minutes! Annie lit a candle for Dad. His light was shining bright! More phone calls made, shopping and preparation for our "padkos" (as only Annie can



prepare). A couple of hours later Ish and Cathy Patel arrived from Cape Town—we all hugged, cried, laughed and cried some more. It is this immediate support from our sangha and dear friends that enabled us to cope in the early hours after receiving the news of Dad's death.

As we lay in bed that night, unable to sleep, Ji Jang Bosal, Ji Jang Bosal, Ji Jang Bosal... why, how, who?—like a record that was stuck.

The journey to Kroonstad was long and hard. It was at this time that we fully appreciated the value of our cellular phone, because it enabled our immediate family and sangha to stay in touch, to feel connected and support each other in grief. Many a call was made and received to just ask: "How are you?"

Arriving at my parents house was dreadful—three months ago when Mum passed away, at least Dad was there to greet us. Our first night in the house—brothers, sister, their spouses and children—a family united in grief, sharing a pain that goes way beyond words. We reminisced. We laughed and cried a lot. But through the tears, for each of us the question "why?" was pounding in our heads. The bedroom where Rodney and myself would sleep on our visits remained closed. The mattress and bedding was removed by the forensic team. The finality of Dad's death was slowly dawning upon all of us as we started planning for a funeral service, and dealing with the practicalities that often and inevitably follows death.

One month prior to Dad's death, I was able to spend a week with him in Kroonstad. I will forever remain grateful for this very precious time that we were able to share. Dad's deep need to share his pain and grief, the loneliness and suffering, that he was experiencing after Mum's death, and which was part of every moment of the days and nights that followed her death, was woven into each day that I was with him—it was almost unbearable! He cried so much!

He was so very lonely! After some days I managed to convince him that a visit with us in Robertson would be therapeutic—we'd show him around, do things and have him do things at the Centre, etc., etc. Off to the travel agent we went and his trip to the Cape was booked—finally! He even bought a new handbag to hold all his personal documents. Dad felt so excited and alive. He collected his tickets from the travel agents, the day before he was murdered, just four weeks before he was due to travel to be with us. The time that we were due to share with Dad in Robertson was incredibly hard, and both Rodney and myself repeatedly caught ourselves saying: "Ah! Dad would have been with us now, Dad would have loved this so much." Silent repetition of the mantra Ji Jang Bosal at times helped to ease the pain, enabling some moments of clarity and peace in our loss; other times overcome by emotions, it was just too much, and the question "WHY, WHY, WHY?" triumphed.

Death is the only certainty in our human existence! Our teaching and practice serves as a constant reminder and support of this fact. Why, then, is it that we struggle so much when death comes knocking at our door?

Rodney, my one brother and myself were able to be with Dad's body just moments after the State mortuary had released it, following the autopsy. Cold, pale and scarred—but at least stitched up and cleaned—yet, not an easy experience, but incredibly powerful. I was able to silently talk with Dad—not his body—and in a small way release my own pain, knowing that now he was truly free.

The sorrow and pain that I felt—looking down on Dad's body, was compounded by the fact that soon after Mum's death I asked Dad how he felt about dying? He replied that he was ready and that he had made peace with the Lord, but was very scared of a painful, drawn out death. He made me promise that if it were possible, we would not let him suffer. He nursed and cared for Mum during the last months of her life, and found it very hard to see her suffer so much right up to the last hours of her life. Alone, with his killer(s), he was set free from his physical body—how much did he suffer? How long did he suffer? But a few of the many questions that afflict us and linger on. Ji Jang Bosal, Ji Jang Bosal, Ji Jang Bosal!

The priest from Dad's church came to visit. After prayers, a reading from the Bible and some words of encouragement—urging us to forgive and forget, he admitted to his own pain upon Dad's death. He told us that Dad was a member of the family, not just a member of the church, and that the last funeral that he conducted, was Mum's funeral. This funeral would be very difficult for him, and he asked us for our support and understanding at this difficult time. My heart truly ached for him.

Three days after Dad's death, we went to court. This first hearing was in the Magistrates Court for the first

appearance of the two people arrested in connection with Dad's death. Proceedings only started at 10:15, not 9:00 as we were told. Forty five minutes into the hearings—a recess! Packed, restless court room, some prisoners in chains, shuttled into the holding cell next to the court—then the two accused. Their court-appointed legal assistance, with not much seating available, came to sit directly behind us. He recorded their personal details, and informed them of the charge. How did we as a family feel? I surely cannot say how my brothers and sister were feeling. As for me—I felt tense, mantra surfacing occasionally between the emotions, looking directly into the two accused's eyes, probing, questioning—looking for an answer. None were forthcoming. Only empty, lifeless eyes—no emotions. They looked confused, not sure what was happening. Just in that moment I was filled with an awareness of what is happening throughout our country. It screams at us from the media. Yet, it's far away. Another rape, another murder. Hundreds, even thousands of cases unresolved. Suffering, suffering, suffering! Suffering for the victims, their relatives and family. The perpetrators of these heinous acts, too, are victims, they too have friends, family and relatives. The sad fact is, that my Father's death is now one of the recorded statistics in the history of violence in our country.

The case was remanded to the Regional Court a few days later. One accused signed an admission of guilt, the other denies any involvement, and reports from the witness stand that she was an observer. One accused has her mother in court. Nervous, and in pain she gesticulates to one of the police officers on duty, that that is her daughter. She started crying as bail was denied and had to leave the court room. I wondered at the time if our pain was any greater than hers? Outside the Court a stranger from the community approached us and expressed his condolences. He told me that we were not the only ones suffering, even though he understood that this was terrible for the family. His uncle (a man the same age as Dad) who worked in Dad's garden once a week, now has no job! Emily, who has done some domestic work, once a week since Mum and Dad moved in seven years ago, was devastated. Since Mum's death, she would come to the house every morning, even if she was not working—she'd ring the door bell, and when Dad appeared, she would say: "Oupa, hoe gaan dit vandag?" [*Grandpa, how are you today?*] If she didn't feel happy with his response, she would ask him to remove his spectacles, enabling her to see his eyes. It was Emily who alerted the neighbors and police, when she didn't get a response to her morning call. I can't even imagine her shock and pain when the police found Dad's mutilated body.

The "nitty-gritty" stuff of packing, cleaning, selling the house was a stark reminder of the reality facing us. Seventy-four years—a good ripe age and full life. Teaching, working, encouraging—coaxing, setting an example,

accumulating... preparing to "leave something for the children," and in the short space of one week, packed in boxes—the work of a lifetime!

Through the tears and sadness, we did share some moments of light and laughter. We reminisced, told stories, reminded each other of things long forgotten, and were comforted in the thought that though death took away our beloved Father, we could find strength in the memory of his love, honesty and integrity.

Aided by hundreds of messages of support, flowers and offers of Ji Jang Bosal chanting from across the globe, Dad's direction is clear and we, as a family, are humbled and sustained by the overwhelming support and outpouring of love throughout this period of mourning. Even now, more than two months after his death, we still receive messages of hope and condolences. One very recent one read: "I was so sorry to hear of your Dad's tragic death, and am very sorry not to have written sooner, but I was just so shocked, I didn't know what to say!" A supplier to Kensho Krafts—from the United States, whom we haven't even met, planted a miniature orange tree in a children's park—in memory of my parents. The list goes on and on. Thank you! Thank you!

Zen Master Seung Sahn, during his first visit to South Africa, in 1989 said: "Good situation, bad practice. Bad situation, good practice!" These words were a constant reminder to us in these days, weeks, months following our parents death. Our work continues. Our job ever bigger. The question *even* bigger: How do we as a family and sangha stop this cycle of violence? Dad's very violent death was a wake-up call to all of us. We only have this moment, this moment, this moment!

Our first vow:

*Sentient beings are numberless;
we vow to save them all.*

*Delusions are endless;
we vow to cut through them all.*

*The teachings are infinite;
we vow to learn them all.*

*The Buddha way is inconceivable;
we vow to attain it.*

May we live this vow.

May we have the courage and depth of insight to grasp this moment and maximize the treasure of the dharma. May all beings be well. May all beings be at peace. May all beings be free from violence and the results of violence. May we all attain the great heart of compassion and free this world from further suffering.

a trip to vietnam

Mu Shim Sunim JDPS

In December 1999, Zen Master Seung Sahn, Zen Master Dae Bong, Hyang Um Sunim and myself traveled to Vietnam to visit Dae Won Sunim Ji Do Poep Sa and do some teaching and sightseeing there.

Vietnam has very long Buddhist tradition going back almost 1700 years. Buddhism first came from India through Cambodia and then to Vietnam. Vietnam is interesting because it has both the northern Mahayana tradition and the southern Theravadin tradition of Buddhism. Some monks wear a Mahayana style robe—gray or dark brown—and some monks wear a yellow robe, like the monks wear in Thailand. The two groups also observe the precepts differently. The Theravadin style monks will not eat after noon and they beg for food. Even though there is influence from the north and the south, still every Vietnamese temple we went to had a big statue of Kwan Yin, the Chinese name for Kwan Seum Bosal. The Vietnamese Kwan Seum Bosal is always holding a child.

There is a very interesting story as to why the Vietnamese Kwan Yin is always portrayed with a child. A long time ago there was a young woman from a very good family background who eventually got married. She was always eager to please her husband. One time he came home from work very late and because he was tired he soon fell asleep. Looking at her husband she noticed he had one long hair on his cheek. Maybe he didn't shave this hair today so she thought, "Well, I have to cut this hair off of his cheek." So she took a scissors and approached her sleeping husband. Just as she held the scissors near his neck, he suddenly woke up. He was so startled he thought she was trying to hurt him. He got very worried and called his parents. "My wife she has gone crazy, she is trying to kill me!" Since she was a very shy girl she didn't say anything to defend herself. The husband got very angry and said, "You don't really respect me." Then he told her to leave the house.

When she left the house she had nobody to turn to. She always believed in Buddhism, so she cut her hair and disguised herself as a man. She went to a monk's temple and was ordained. Meanwhile there was a very flamboyant young