

# Tribute to Myong Hae Sunim JDPS

## Editor's note:

Many of those who wrote tributes are monastics and have omitted the monastic title *Sunim* from their names out of humility, as monks and nuns never use the title to refer to themselves. In these cases, we have included the title in square brackets following their names, in order to allow readers to know which of the writers are in the monastic community.

## A Poem for Myong Hae Sunim JDPS

To Bright Ocean

You carried a broken house  
all over the world.

How did you become  
so strong . . . and kind . . .

A friend to everyone.

Changing buildings,  
another challenge.

You went first  
to open the Path for others.

We meet soon ~  
Opening eyes, I see you.  
Hearing the wind and water,  
hear you.

*Dae Bong [Sunim] hapjang*  
*Phoenix Dragon Mountain, Korea*  
2020.08.27



## Dharma Sister Life after Life!

I came to Hong Kong in 2003 after I had completed haeng-ja training in Musangsa Temple in Korea. Something that really shocked me was the dharma sisters here, especially Myong Hae Sunim. She could wake up at 4:30 a.m. and keep working nonstop until 11 at night! After being together for a longer time, and sometimes having accompanied her to visit her Chinese doctor, I came to understand that her body was too weak that she just couldn't fall asleep in such short breaks during the day. In fact, bodily pain was never an obstacle for her perseverance of "only go straight, just do it"!

I remember there was a period when her body was very sick, and she needed a wheelchair to help for longer walks. By some chance, she got to know a qi gong teacher who was teaching Yi Jin Jing exercise. From that point, she dragged her painful body every day, step by step, heading to the park to learn the exercise. After she returned to the

## ► Biography of Myong Hae Sunim JDPS

Myong Hae Sunim JDPS was the first Buddhist nun from Lithuania. She heard of Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching for the first time in 1991 and sat her first retreat with Zen Master Su Bong when he visited Lithuania in 1993. Myong Hae Sunim moved to Hwa Gye Sa Temple in South Korea in 1996 to train as a haeng-ja. She then relocated to Hong Kong after becoming a nun in 1997 to train under Zen Master Dae Kwan. Myong Hae Sunim remained in Hong Kong for more than twenty years and served as head nun, vice abbot, and second guiding teacher of Su Bong Zen Monastery. After receiving inka from Zen Master Dae Kwan in 2016, Myong Hae Sunim became the second guiding teacher of Su Bong Zen Monastery and the guiding teacher of the Lithuanian sangha. She led many retreats in Hong Kong, Lithuania, and other parts of Europe before passing in her home country in August 2020.

Zen center, besides practicing the qi gong exercises, she did lots of mantra practice too. During that period, sometimes she would have some emotions, because of not being able to do together action and join practice with everybody, and also when outside people couldn't understand her situation. In fact, eventually she overcame all those mind obstacles, and later she got special permission from the qi gong teacher to teach us qi gong in the Zen center. Something amazing is, if she felt interested in something, she would really do it with 100 percent passion, make a deep investigation, and finally became proficient.

I learned a lot from Myong Hae Sunim all these years, especially when organizing activities. In Hong Kong, our teacher usually would perceive the timing and climate, location advantage, and human situation at that moment. In case the planned schedule wouldn't work well with the above criteria, all plans and rundown could be completely changed anytime. Usually people would just get shocked, feel strong emotions and helplessness with the sudden



Photo: Courtesy of Su Bong Zen Monastery

6]

change. But for her, she would just put down her own opinion, 100 percent trust Sifu's intuition and decision at that moment, try her best to find different solutions promptly, and rearrange all plans to go the same pace with Sifu, even if that might cause her to do ten times more work to cope with the sudden changes.

In many difficult situations, she would just come back to what she was doing at each moment and continue her responsibility, only keep her try mind, and adjust herself to be more flexible to help others. For Myong Hae Sunim, there is no "give up" in her dictionary, even when all other people would complain, give up, or leave, she would definitely stay with her obligation and her practice until the end.

My dearest sister, I believe life after life you will never be able to forget us; we will meet again. Best wishes to you, wishing you come back soon with a healthy body, again strong practice, become a great teacher and help all beings from suffering!

*Bon Sun [Sunim]*



### A Tribute to Myong Hae Sunim JDPS

I am looking at the picture on the altar. Her photo.

It was sent to us by the Lithuanian sangha with the caption, "Myong Hae Sunim JDPS—a bodhisattva of no rank—who walked with us for a while." It's really beautiful, very formal. But something is off; something is missing. I realize what is missing on this picture is her smile, the dimples on her cheeks.

It's this smile—a ray of light—that I remember whenever I think of her.

It was in Hong Kong where we met for the first time. Me, just after my ordination, and her, a very experienced practitioner and well-seasoned nun. She was so commit-

ted, really serious about practice and a little intimidating. Yet this forgiving smile would instantly break any barriers between us. I felt understood and accepted. I felt unconditional love shining straight from Ming Hoi Si's heart. This genuine smile was a sign of true humanity and her authenticity. It never seemed fake or forced. When Sunim smiled, it was so easy to forget how hard it was for her sometimes. All the pain, all the suffering . . . but she didn't give up. You could see all this in her eyes. Sad eyes, loving smile. Great sadness, great compassion.

I admired her sacrifices, her perseverance and dedication. But it's this smile that left the deepest imprint in my heart.

And when I look outside and see the rays of light, I know it may be just the sun shining. But it may be Ming Hoi Si smiling from her new destination. And then, tears in my eyes, I smile back. Thank you, Myong Hae Sunim!

With palms together,  
*Won Hyang [Sunim]*



### Why Not?

Myong Hae Sunim was one of those teachers who doesn't try to be a teacher, doesn't hold this kind of an attitude, and yet, just by being herself and through her daily behavior, she was giving the greatest teaching. I didn't know her for long, but even the short time we spent together has become a great teaching and a wonderful memory for me. Here I would like to share just one episode of practicing with her.

During the winter Kyol Che 2019–2020 in Gak Su Temple, during the work period I was assigned to help Myong Hae Sunim in the garden. One day we were walking down from the main building to the place where we had to do some work. We were laughing and joking about



something, and I don't remember why, but I started saying "No, no, no," in a funny voice. Myong Hae Sunim turned to me and, laughing, asked: "Why 'No'?" She did it in a very playful way, with a big smile, but this question suddenly hit me: "Really, why 'No'?" I switched to saying "Yes, yes, yes," and she looked back at me with a grin and didn't say anything else. And this question stuck with me: "Why 'No'?" Why do I like saying no so much? Not always with my mouth, sometimes with the attitude, sometimes just in thinking, but in many situations where it would have been better to say yes, which means just to accept the situation as it is, I prefer to say no. Why do I have to do that?

In monastic life, saying yes is very important. My Soto Zen teacher used to say that acceptance is the ultimate monastic practice. In Korea, before becoming a monk, a person has to go through a so-called haeng-ja training, which consists of working for the temple and always saying yes. Anything you are told to do, in any situation, just always say yes. It's not so difficult when you know that you are not given a choice. It's something that you consciously decide to go through in order to become monastic. The tricky part starts after you actually become one. "Do I still have to say yes to everything I'm told? Why? I've done it for a whole year, I'm not a haeng-ja, I don't want to do that anymore." This is something that I have heard so many times from so many people in the temple. I've heard it in my own head, too. There's some kind of pleasure in having the freedom to say "No!" It feels like you have power, control over the situation; you have a choice. But why choose "No"? This is a good question that, actually, can change a lot in life. It's a very gentle and deep teaching that Myong Hae Sunim gave me, just joking around, among many others. Thank you, Myong Hae Sunim!

*So Ya [Sunim]*



I was from the Myong family. I first ordained in 1997 at Tae Go Sa Temple in the Mojave Desert. By that winter the family name had changed to Kwan. I didn't know about Myong Hae Sunim until, on my return to the monastic life in the summer of 2013, I did haeng-ja training at Musangsa. At the end I was sent to Hong Kong for five days in order to process my visa. First and foremost it was Dae Kwan Sunim and the wonderful functioning of her Zen center, and her nuns. Myong Hae Sunim was her right hand, perfectly synchronized, a beautiful expression of dharma. Dae Kwan Sunim, great Zen master that she is, is known for being tough on her students. One thing I noticed right away about Myong Hae Sunim: she was completely immune, able to work with that energy quite well. She was energized by it because she was aligned correctly with the teaching. It was something remarkable to see. When you meet someone who has completely be-

come the path, you know them instantaneously. That's how I felt about her. I was completely in step with her. So healthy, so nourishing to have contact with someone like that. I wanted to see her again, to be part of her practice life, to support her. In those five days I made quite a deep connection to her—never expressed. And the way it often is on the path, I never saw her again. I'd planned to go back to Hong Kong, to spend time with them again. I was very moved by their sincere effort, the wonderful dharma of Su Bong Sa Temple. Human life. The lines don't always meet. I don't know why her time was so short. I don't know why I'm the one still alive.

*Won Il [Sunim]*



### Tribute to MHSN

Bum! Here we are left to ourselves. It is always like this when somebody we lived with either as a friend or family member passes. She was here; we expected to see her the next day and many times further on but no, and here we are. One day in my house garden I found a small bird lying on the ground. I picked it up still alive, and after a while the shiver went through it, and then it was still in my open hand. It is common to every one of us appearing in this world being young and vigorous, then changing, changing, and finally becoming bent by age and passing away. Seeing how much suffering it brings, I was pissed off about the law that governs this world, but later on by the means of Zen practice, I saw that this state of mind does not make it any better, and we have to see beyond opposites. Like Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, arrive at the checkpoint regardless of the track, yet nobody can guarantee your life. Myong Hae Sunim passed unexpectedly in her most fruitful time. How sad. I didn't know her personally, yet our minds connected when she picked from a choice of Zen sticks offered to her before the inka ceremony, and the one she picked was the one I was asked to make. It was plain and light just like I could see she was in photos and in how people described her. What happened a few weeks ago makes us look upon ourselves and ask about the strength of our own practice seeing Myong Hae Sunim's commitment to help others. And by this event, it is yet another impact of hers making our practice stronger. Leaving society, living in society, it is not easy, but that is the way of monastics, the way Myong Hae Sunim chose, and the way she was doing that is very inspiring. The Heart Sutra says no form, no emptiness—and yet the last line: arrived, arrived, to the other shore, Great Joy. Great Joy beyond opposites.

Na Mu Amita Bul

*Ji Yong [Sunim]*



I heard about Myong Hae Sunim for the first time from one Russian student who trained in Hong Kong.



*Photo: Courtesy of Su Bong Zen Monastery*

The student spoke only Russian, and Myong Hae Sunim was helping her with translation and giving advice from her monastic life. From that story, Myong Hae Sunim became a good example for me, as I also study Chinese. She learned Cantonese from scratch, and Hong Kong people said she spoke just like a Chinese. So I was inspired by her skill.

Later on, I met Myong Hae Sunim in Russia on a retreat. Everybody was excited, because we don't have so many Russian-speaking teachers. I remember that she was always smiling, and her energy was filling up everyone. That way, she taught us without using words.

One year later, I met Myong Hae Sunim in Lithuania. When we came to the retreat place, we had to set up the dharma room, and Myong Hae Sunim was first to spread the yoga mats. Also, even though she had a lot of body issues, she gave interviews seven days in a row, from morning until evening. Thus, she taught us through her actions. Myong Hae Sunim was a great bodhisattva!

During the retreat Sunim organized interesting practices, which I had never done before. We were walking in a field carrying bowls filled with water. She would come up to everyone, trying to poke us. To me, she said, "Want some ice cream?" If I got distracted, I would have spilled all the water. It's the same as our mind. When you do something and get distracted, you could lose concentration and screw everything up. It was good teaching from her.

Also, there was a chance to listen to our chanting from outside. A bunch of people would go out of the dharma room, and you could feel the energy of the chanting. This way, she got us interested in practice.

That time, Myong Hae Sunim also gave a dharma talk. She gave homework for everyone. Before going to sleep and after waking up, Sunim suggested we thank the universe for every day we lived, and the new day, thinking out new words of gratitude every new day. With such an attitude, no doubt, she lived a fulfilled life.

Another thing she mentioned was about meditation posture. When your back is crooked, it is called lax. When your back is straight—relax. I like that teaching. Nowadays, every time I notice my back is crooked, I remember Myong Hae Sunim's teaching, as if she was never separate from us. This talk really hit me, and Myong Hae Sunim became my favorite teacher.

After the retreat, we went to her house for lunch. Despite the fact that interviews were over, she believed that we still could bring up a good answer for our homework. I realized that she not only believed in herself 100 percent, but went further, and believed in her students.

Her last lesson to us was her death, which reminds us not to waste time and practice hard.

*Beop Il [Sunim]*





## A Lifetime of Giving

I didn't know how much Ming Hoi Si had touched my life until I received the news of her passing. When I first glanced at the message from Zen Master Dae Kwan, I had assumed that one of Ming Hoi Si's parents passed away—they were older and she was in Lithuania with them. When I read the message more carefully, I simply could not believe it. She was only forty-seven with no terminal illness—how could she die suddenly? I later learned on Facebook that a drunk driver had taken her life and that of her driver, Rasa Umbrasiene, a mother of two. What a tragedy! I'm not a crier, but I broke down when I saw via Zoom the sadness on the face of Ming Hoi Si's mother.

Ming Hoi Si came to Hong Kong about twenty-five years ago as a young nun who spoke no English or Cantonese. She struggled to learn the languages and understand the local culture, but she worked extremely hard and practiced with diligence, sincerity, and grit. After nearly twenty years of practice, Ming Hoi Si became a Ji Do Poep Sa, a guiding teacher in our Kwan Um School of Zen. She was the first Lithuanian to become a Buddhist nun, and then the first Lithuanian to become a guiding teacher in our school. The Hong Kong and Lithuanian sanghas, along with our global sangha, celebrated with great joy, and we all looked forward to seeing her blossom as a teacher. We never knew how little time we would have with her as a teacher—her passing and that of all sudden passings give us a deafening reminder that everything is impermanent. You never know when your last breath will be, so don't take it for granted. Take each breath with deep gratitude, and live each moment as though it's your last.

Ming Hoi Si means so much to me because she was someone who was kind to me without expecting anything in return—a true bodhisattva. When I was sick at one retreat, Ming Hoi Si gave me a packet of thirty vitamins—all to be consumed in a day! When I finished the first pack, and I felt better, she gave me a few more. There were so many vitamins that I started trying to get others to help me finish the packs. Later when I developed severe eczema, she gave me a bag of yellow chrysanthemum and told me to apply them to my damaged skin. As someone who had many health issues herself, Ming Hoi Si studied the tools of alternative medicine and shared her knowledge and medicine with anyone who needed them. She did so with compassion and with the singular hope that you'll get better. This is true love.

Since I traveled half the year for seven years in my previous job, Ming Hoi Si knew how hectic my life was. She said to me once, "Remember your practice." This simple reminder hit me hard and has reverberated within my mind until this day. Of course I should always remember my practice—breathing deeply and slowly and being completely present with my surroundings and those I'm with every moment, not worried about the past or anxious about the future, but rather just understanding the changing nature of my function, be it as a friend, a colleague, or a stranger, and doing it 100 percent each moment. Ming Hoi Si's one-time simple reminder of just three words has helped me to remember my practice for years.

Once Ming Hoi Si became a guiding teacher, she was authorized to teach kong-ans, Zen puzzles that Zen teachers use to test the minds of their students. Common ones include "When you die, where do you go?" and "How do you not step on your shadow?" When Ming Hoi Si first



Photo: Courtesy of Su Bong Zen Monastery

started teaching kong-ans, she would spend up to an hour with each student, not letting them escape until they've perceived the meaning of the kong-an and experienced the discomfort of true don't-know. And her persistence lasted beyond the kong-an room. One time when we were hiking, and all of a sudden I forgot what kong-an Ming Hoi Si had asked me, she did not leave my side for nearly an hour, poking and prodding until I gave her the correct answer. She wanted so much for me to grow as a student.

My last conversation with Ming Hoi Si took place about two months before she died. It was my birthday on June 2, and she told me from Lithuania that she had a present for me and asked if I wanted it. I said, "Of course!" She asked, "Are you sure?" I answered with confidence, "Of course!" "OK, I offer you a kong-an interview," she explained. We then had a short and delightful chat on Zoom. She told me she was very busy teaching in Lithuania and had hoped to return to Hong Kong for our winter retreat. And though I did not give her a correct answer to my kong-an, she guided me in a manner that allowed me to surprise Zen Master Dae Kwan with the correct answer at my next interview. Zen Master Dae Kwan astutely asked, "Did you work with another teacher?" Of course I had, and looking back, I'm so grateful I had said yes to this last birthday gift from Ming Hoi Si.

10]

Zen Master Dae Kwan told us that we're not Ming Hoi Si's students if we cry and don't smile. My practice is not there yet, and I can't help but be sad that Ming Hoi Si left us so suddenly and so soon. May we continue to walk this path of practice with Ming Hoi Si. May she continue to inspire us and teach us. And may we all yearn to follow her example of giving without wanting anything in return. May we become enlightened and live a life for others, just as Ming Hoi Si had done.

Thank you, Sunim, for all that you've done for us. We will miss you and will hold you dear in our hearts always.  
*Minh Ngan Tran*



### Sharing of Myong Hae Sunim, JDPS

My father passed away about three years ago. At that time, my mom was very sad. A few days after my father's death, one dharma brother invited Myong Hae Sunim and a few other dharma brothers to have dinner. I was helping out Sunim at the Zen center that day, so I was also invited to have dinner with them. However, I wasn't comfortable leaving Mom at home alone, so I asked both Sunim and that dharma brother if my mom could also join us. They both were happy about that.

My mom is not into Buddhism and is not an easy person. She sometimes also stares at monastics. Our family and relatives are all Catholic. I was a bit worried about what reaction my mom would have when she saw someone with no hair and dressing in "strange" clothing. I asked Sunim if I could call her *gwai por* ("foreigner" in colloquial Canton-

ese), so that it would be easier for my mom to accept her identity. Sunim was fine with that. I was touched that Sunim offered an easy way for others to approach monastics.

When my mom first saw Myong Hae Sunim at dinner, she did not look at Sunim in a weird way. (Myong Hae Sunim was also very smart, keeping her head covered with a warm hat!) Then my mom was amazed that the *gwai por* could speak fluent Cantonese and eat in a local style with chopsticks! After that it was my surprise that my mom did not find Sunim disgusting, but rather she was respectful to Sunim and kept pouring tea and picking out food for her. Several times Mom picked out some food that was not suitable for Sunim's health condition. I tried to stop her, but Sunim did not utter a word, and just received the food with both hands holding the plate or bowl and ate! I can still remember that some of the food she ate could really cause her body harm, when her body was so sick already. I was so touched. I understand that Sunim tried to make good karma with everyone in each situation no matter who they are. There was no "I," no "my body," no "my situation," and so on.

Definitely there is lots more to share. With this sharing, I believe Sunim's silent but strong practice and virtue can really soften or even connect with someone like my mom, and can even transform the situation and karma. Her compassion and bodhisattva actions are good teachings for me. I am grateful that I can encounter such a great teacher in this lifetime, even though I got to know her better only during the last two to three years.

Thank you very much again, Ji Do Si. Please pick up your Zen stick and give your teaching again soon!

With respect,  
hapchang and three bows to you  
*Monica Wong (Hye Won)*



### 4 September 2020

Thank you Myong Hae Sunim JDPS!

So lucky to know you in this lifetime, so good to have you be our Ji Do Poep Sa, but it was not expected that you would leave us with this big hit. Wow, such a powerful life teaching!

Many moments appeared in my mind when I started to write this note.

I still remember clearly on your big day becoming our Ji Do Poep Sa, many Zen masters, teachers, sunims, dharma sisters and brothers were there joining the celebration like a big party—everyone was so happy and excited because many of us were waiting for this day to come. We become one in the picture—one BIG smile—JOY!

From other people's sharing, I only know you were very sick for many years. I remember in recent years, most of the time you needed to sit in a chair when doing meditation, dharma talks, and in the interview room. Every time when I asked you, you always gave me a simple answer to comfort me: "I just sat on the mat too long for interview.





Photo: Courtesy of Su Bong Zen Monastery

I am OK, I'm getting better." Now I know you just didn't want us to worry. Your direction—bodhisattva way—is so clear with no hindrance.

Guess you forgot, a few years ago, one Sunday, we helped to clean up Wai Sau Yuen [one of the buildings at Gaksu Temple —Ed.], and you found a small, one-inch-tall bodhisattva statue in the temple and you gave it to me. Guess what? The statue is now with me whenever I do my practice at home—so blessed.

With your courage, thanks for using this life teaching to encourage us to make our direction clear and to keep our practice with no hesitation.

Miss you and hope one day we will meet again!

Namu Amita Bul!

Namu Amita Bul!

Namu Amita Bul!

Carmen Tse



I still remember that night when I first met Myong Hae Sunim. I was still a middle school student on summer vacation, and my dad took me to Su Bong Monastery to listen to Zen Master Seung Sahn's teachings. It was also the first time I met Myong Hae Sunim there. At that time, there were thousands of questions in my mind. I even shared my experience with my friends the next day.

"Why aren't the monastics Chinese?"

"Why aren't the foreigners Christian nuns, but are instead Buddhist nuns?"

"And why be a monastic when you look so beautiful?"

Over the past twenty years, we have been meditating, hiking, and growing together. She has accompanied me through all the ups and downs in my life. In addition to being a nun, Myong Hae Sunim is more like a friend and a big sister, and also a good friend of our family. She is a take-action type of person. I remember one time when I was standing at the door, about to leave after a three-hundred-bow practice, I said to her, "Myong Hae Sunim, the chocolate cake you made is so delicious. Is it difficult to make? Teach me next time!" She replied without a blink, "It's very simple. You go to the supermarket to buy Marie biscuits now. Don't do it next time. Let me teach you to make them now!" She truly lived out the just-do-it teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn! No need for "next time" at all.

August 2 is the Lotus Lantern Completion Day. Myong Hae Sunim has led students to make lotus lanterns every year for the past twenty years. So for Hong Kong students, Myong Hae Sunim is the representative of Lotus Lantern. When my family had dinner that night, my father received the news of Myong Hae Sunim's passing. Everyone couldn't believe it or didn't want to believe it, but after calming down, everyone said, "Is this the scene Myong Hae Sunim wants to see? She just wants to see everyone smiling!"

Since receiving the news, I am confident that Myong Hae Sunim has headed to a good place. I am grateful to Sifu for the forty-nine-day special chanting. This chanting is more important to us than Myong Hae Sunim. It provides an opportunity for the students to practice and to overcome this grief.

Becky Chu