

Online Sangha Q&A

Kathy Park JDPSN

Question: After the news that Myong Hae Sunim died unexpectedly, I see teachers and students respond with both *Ji Jang Bosal* and *Namu Amitabul*. When do you use *Ji Jang Bosal* and when *Namu Amitabul*? Are they interchangeable?

Kathy Park JDPSN: There is a little confusion about that so here is the clarification. *Namu Amitabul* is usually chanted when someone wishes to go to the Pure Land, especially in Chinese Buddhist culture when someone dies. Many people have been writing *Namu Amitabul* for Myong Hae Sunim, perhaps since they are Asian, and it sometimes just reflects the local culture. In Korea, we don't have strong Pure Land Buddhism, so either *Ji Jang Bosal* or *Amitabul* chanting are OK for the deceased. However, the chanting for Myong Hae Sunim JDPS that is officially being done daily hosted by Su Bong Zen Monastery in Hong Kong (her original home temple) and other Zen centers in our school is *Ji Jang Bosal*. That is because we believe Myong Hae Sunim has a strong bodhisattva vow and will want to continue in her next life to return and practice Zen for the benefit of all beings. *Ji Jang Bosal* is the bodhisattva of great vow. What really matters is our own sincere intention when we chant. Laypeople don't do different kinds of chants for sunims or teachers; what we chant is the same for all.

Question: Hello! I have quite a strange question, but still . . . What does our school think about tattoos in general? And especially about lettering of mantras?

KP PSN: Tattoos are not good or bad. Some Buddhist monks in Thailand make tattoos on their bodies, and even if they do that, they are very respectful of using Buddhist symbols or images, especially of having the Buddha's face on body parts. For example, you never put the Buddha or a bodhisattva's image on the lower part of your body. Also, in Buddhist cultures in Asia, one usually has respect for any Buddhist images or forms, so they do not wear pendants with Buddhas or have Buddha statues in the room where they have sex. To add, even in most of our Zen centers in the West, when we enter a dharma room, or see a Buddha statue or image or altar, we don't sit with both feet facing toward it, as a sign of respect. In Korea, having a tattoo is much more taboo, since historically, tattoos were brought into Korea by Japanese yakuza and samurai, so they represent gangster life. When someone who has tattoos wants to ordain as a Buddhist monk in Korea, they have to remove all of their tattoos in order to do it. These are some practices to be aware of if we encounter different Buddhist cultures. If we understand these things, then when we say we are Buddhist and act with respect in various situations,

they believe it. Tattooing mantras or Buddhist symbols for protection is not uncommon, but the question is why do that? For Zen students, one of Buddha's basic teachings is about impermanence. Everything goes—even this body—so you may feel that you get protected by tattooing some mantra, but eventually, you cannot keep it. These days tattooing is a fashion everywhere, so it's not outrageous to do it. But if you attain impermanence, then having tattoo, not having tattoo, all are no problem. More importantly: how is your own mind a refuge in itself? Use this precious human birth with great respect, love, and wisdom for all beings with complete freedom.

Question: I was just reading the Temple Rules for the first time. I'm a little confused and overwhelmed by them. Are they for everyday life? Or literally for when you are in an actual temple? I'm not a very good rule follower! All thoughts are welcome!

KP PSN: Good question. The Temple Rules were created hundreds of years ago by the renowned Zen Master Pai Chang in China for Zen practicing communities, and they have been useful ever since. They do apply to actual temple or Zen center life and how we practice, but the bone of the teaching in each of the guidelines points to our own attitude, speech, and actions in daily life, regardless of whether we live in a Zen center or not. Some rules may seem outdated or not applicable, but overall, they point to a set of guidelines that, when we know how to use them, can be of great benefit to ourselves and all beings. Keeping or not keeping rules is really based on our intention, our direction. Why do that? Any rule, if we attach to it or if we keep it for one person's selfish reason, may not be so good. But if guidelines can be useful for a community to create harmony and give direction, it's possible that it can help everyone to practice better. That is why precepts and temple rules evolved in the Buddhist tradition over time, to support the diverse sangha to practice more skillfully with a foundation of ethics for community life. Due to COVID-19, many of us are isolated, but still we have the connection of family, friends, and community all around us. Through these relationships we can see our own karma and develop compassion and wisdom for ourselves and others. We can reflect on these teachings and see how they might also work in our daily life. Here is a wonderful teaching from Zen Master Dae Kwang about the Temple Rules for Zen practitioners: <https://kwanumzen.org/teaching-library/1997/08/01/what-is-a-zen-retreat>

Question: [In response to a discussion about kong-an practice.] I have to admit, kong-ans are something I've

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avoided a little bit. I was told that I'd passed the first gate—the one about the dog—but since then I don't seem to have had the energy to sit with the next one, and I avoid it probably because I can't put down my anxiety about getting things wrong. I'm clearly a long way from don't-know mind!

KP PSN: Your comment reminded me of when I first started practice. It's the kong-an's job to get us to that uncomfortable place, when we are confronted with not knowing, not having an answer, not being smart like we'd like to be. I was always terrified of interviews for a few years. But every time I felt that fear, finally I realized that I didn't want the pain of suffering I experienced in life before practice. So each time the fear of going for an interview was becoming far less, and it actually started to get exciting. With a little bit of courage each time, interviews can deliver us the experience of becoming free of our innermost fears, and it's a safe place. I've always been so grateful for kong-an teaching as a unique part of our tradition.

Question: What are the shamanic roots and influences of our tradition? The story of Zen Master Seung Sahn's enlightenment is full of chanting and magic, and so must be many other stories like that.

KP PSN: The realm of magic is 270 degrees in the Zen Circle, after you have attained the absolute (180 degrees), and it then allows you to connect with universal energy. Then you can get a lot of power. Shamanism as a belief system exists in many cultures, because people have been able to access that energy, and it helps them connect with the earth, nature, and invisible realms. That's not good or bad. It's been a way for humans to understand the world we are in, to connect in the relative realm. Shamanism was practiced in Korea long before Buddhism was introduced. In Korean Buddhist history, it is evident that the dharma integrated naturally into the existing shamanistic culture, as well as with Confucianism and Taoism, which were already practiced there long before. People generally pray for protection and good fortune to the mountain gods, so Buddhist temples naturally built a small mountain god shrine for local people to come and continue to pray. Then the mountain god also protects the temple. Then as people understood that Buddhism does not reject anything but accepts and harmonizes with them, they started to understand what is Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. When the Korean alphabet Hangul was first invented by King Sejong in the fifteenth century, since common people love to chant and sing, the

very first text written in Hangul was a Buddhist song, because people were chanting it all the time, and it was the easiest way to help people learn a new alphabet. Whether it is shamanism, Buddhism, or any other practice, it all boils down to intention. Why do that? If a person's intention is selfish or ill-willed, then even universal energy can turn you into a demon. If someone has a pure intention to help all beings, that energy can help you to become a bodhisattva.

As you know, Zen Master Seung Sahn chanted the Great Dharani all day with very little food or sleep for a hundred days during his solo retreat when he got enlightenment. The Great Dharani is the mantra of the bodhisattva of compassion, Kwan Seum Bosal. Zen Master Seung Sahn was chanting this with only one intention: "What am I?" He had a great vow to understand himself and help this suffering world. Even with this sincere vow and strong try-mind, nine times he packed his bag to quit and leave, and then again the next day started all over again. Just like the Buddha, his greatest obstacles were the maras, or demons, that appeared before him just before he got enlightenment. That's how difficult it

was to keep clear, keep going, and not give up on his direction. When you get more energy from practice, then the 270 degrees is the experience of freedom mind. Zen Master Seung Sahn was seeing Kwan Seum Bosal, mysterious little boys, and lots of odd things during that time, and they were testing him. Are they real or delusions? After Zen Master Seung Sahn finished his retreat, a few years later another monk went to his hermitage because it had be-

come a famous place, and he also did a hundred-day retreat. He wanted to get enlightenment just like Zen Master Seung Sahn got it there in that same place. He was practicing hard and got lots of energy and one day Kwan Seum Bosal appeared and told him to jump off from the cliff in front of the hermitage. He did, and fortunately he didn't die, but was severely injured and had to stop his practice. Anything is possible. So 270 degrees is very attractive, but also the most dangerous moment, and many people fall down. As Zen students, our practice is to not attach to anything. Then who is the master of energy? So we must become more clear, and use that energy just as Zen Master Seung Sahn did to try, try, try and transcend from 270 to 360 degrees, and attain the realm of truth. Then one more step is necessary. Jump out of the Zen Circle altogether, and attain the correct function of our life. That's our job. ♦



Photo: Courtesy of Musangsa