

# Tribute to Myong Hae Sunim JDPS

## Myong Hae Sunim's Funeral

I attended the funeral for Myong Hae Sunim JDPS in Vilnius, Lithuania. I arrived on Saturday and went from the airport directly to the funeral home. The funeral home was new and beautiful, and I was told that Myong Hae Sunim was the first to use that room. It is a spacious place with a wide-open entrance hall, wood floors, and soft gray colors.

I bowed three times to the floor to Myong Hae Sunim, whose urn sat among hundreds of white roses and lilies, and then I went to her mother, who had spent a vacation in my home in Vienna some years ago with her daughter. What could we say . . . no words.

During that day I greeted the members of the sangha, and we also visited the family of Rasa, the other woman who was in the car with Myong Hae Sunim during the accident. The sangha and I chanted for Rasa and her family.

We chanted for Myong Hae Sunim and sat together silently for hours, contemplating the incredible difference she had made in our lives.

In the morning, I visited Myong Hae Sunim's room alone—silently remembering her, and softly touched her gray clothes. She did not have many things. Hanging on a doorknob was a little bag—her teaching bag. All Zen teachers have their little bags with the kong-an books and pens and notepaper ready to go for interviews. Her suitcase was propped there for trips to lead retreats. Her computer was sitting silently waiting for her to come and write emails to sangha members.

In another room, she had been drying great quantities of herbs and flowers. She was making tea this year for all the students and monastics in Hong Kong. It was a room filled with a thousand colors and the rich fragrance of fresh herbs. It smelled heavenly.

Sunday was the burial day. In the morning we went again to the funeral home and sat with the family and friends. The Catholic bishop was also invited by her father. I greeted the bishop and told him that I hoped it

would be OK for him if we chanted for Sunim. He was a very special bishop—the best bishop in the world. He respected the path that Sunim had taken, and of course we could chant! Later I told him I would vote for him to be the next pope.

We chanted *gate gate paragate parasamgate* on the way to her new earth home. As we lowered the urn with her ashes into the ground, it suddenly began to rain. A cool rain poured over all of us. It rained only as we put the urn into the earth—neither before nor afterward. It felt like a rain of purification, and it felt that the pain and sorrow was being washed away. It was a rain pointing to the very moment. In that moment there was only rain upon our bodies and upon the earth. Nothing else.

When our beloveds leave us, we can choose to celebrate their lives. We can choose to remember them joyfully and lovingly even though we feel sad. It is up to us. That is Zen.

*Zen Master Hyon Ja (Alma Potter)*



## Letter to Myong Hae Sunim (Wherever You Are)

*I would like to say a few words in the form of a farewell letter to our dear Myong Hae Sunim, thanking our sangha for their help, and recalling anecdotes from her stay in Palma.*

—Tolo Cantarellas JDPSN

Dear Sunim,

I have to thank you for the opportunity to meet you at a retreat in Borisa Temple, where I appreciated your genuine way of teaching kong-ans. Then you visited us in Palma de Mallorca in the summer of 2018, together with two students (Nicole and Raquel). We visited our beautiful island, and I could appreciate how every moment was savored by you, as if it were the last one. You enjoyed and honored every flower, every landscape, our Mediterranean Sea.

When you visited the Caves of Drach in 2019, you were so amazed that you did not stop taking pictures of the shapes, colors, and shades of that underground and unreal world, so much so that you even went behind the guards, who respected your enthusiasm and let you take a closer look as they were leading others out. You promised to take these photos to your parents as soon as you could.

At that time, I was preparing myself for the inka ceremony. We didn't waste a moment in dharma combat then, but your advice at that time was useful to me



*Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Europe*

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much later.

You returned the following year to visit us for a retreat, and my situation had changed. Months before, my sister had suffered a cerebral vascular accident from which she had not recovered, and she died after fifteen days. I had physical problems also, and all of this was aggravated by my being the main breadwinner for my family. For all of those two months before the inka ceremony, it was for me an insurmountable mountain. You told me that you were there to help me, that somehow my life had led me there, and I had to take this opportunity.

The next time we met was at Borisa, during the inka ceremony. I again gave you reason to advise me that I would not be alone, that I would feel the help of buddhas and bodhisattvas. It then seemed to me that in that situation I was just another protagonist, and as a result, I was very clear, calm, focused, and enjoyed the ceremony. It was for me a great learning experience.

“think differently” and try to free themselves from suffering and help others. Sunim was helping us, and after we got a Buddha statue, she said, “If you want your Buddha statue to be not only a piece of metal, we should do a ceremony.” We started to prepare, and she was constantly in contact with her teacher, Sifu Dae Kwan Sunim. Actually, Sifu visited the center with Sunim a couple of years ago and liked the place very much. Myong Hae Sunim had never done such a ceremony alone, so she was preparing and consulting with Sifu carefully.

At the same time, seven monks from Tibet arrived in Vilnius to perform sacred Tibetan Buddhist rituals and to create a mandala there. Organizers called me and asked if they could stay in Zen Forest. I agreed and invited them to participate in the ceremony. When Myong Hae Sunim found out that seven Tibetan monks were going to participate in the ceremony as well, she had doubts. Actually, other sunims from Korea and Hong Kong also thought that monks from Tibet might want

to do a ceremony themselves and would not be happy if they had to participate in the ceremony led by a sunim from Korea. It was an interesting and unique situation. However, the monks accepted the invitation without any hesitation. They came to the ceremony dressed in their beautiful robes and special hats and even brought their horns, which added a mysterious touch to the beautiful ceremony’s importance. Myong Hae Sunim gave a beautiful dharma talk based on the story about a thief who, after robbing a monk, became a monk himself, and everybody was touched.

A sunim from Hong Kong and monks from Tibet. Different Buddhist schools met in the small Lithuanian village of Čiobiškis. Tibet, Hong Kong, Korea, Lithuania. The world is one. There are no differences if mind is clear.

A few years later at Myong Hae Sunim’s funeral, a Catholic bishop participated. He was asked to visit her family. At the very beginning, the situation was quite awkward. But the bishop was so modest and wise. With his body language he was kind of offering condolences. His talk at her urn was subtle, wise, and touching. Later, when we arrived at the cemetery, the rain started. Right after the ceremony, it stopped. Many years earlier, in the video of Master Seung Sahn’s funeral, we can see young Myong Hae Sunim standing under an umbrella.

After the funeral we all, including the bishop, went to Sunim’s home. Her mother and Sunim herself are perfect gardeners. We all were picking bilberries and talking about how all religions become one when you are a loving person



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Europe

Myong Hae Sunim, I wish that you continue to be happy where you are, but if you have not yet crossed the threshold of the Pure Land, remember the vow of the Buddha, not to cross into nirvana until the last sentient being has done so. We need you, Sunim.

With Respect and Admiration.

Hapchang,  
Tolo



## Myong Hae Sunim: Uniting Religions

Some years ago, I asked Myong Hae Sunim to do a Buddha’s eyes ceremony in the Zen Forest Meditation Center, the spiritual center we are creating in Čiobiškis, Lithuania. This place is meant to be a meditation and cultural place not only for Buddhists, but for all faiths, for people that

and have a lot of compassion. The bishop was old and wise. And he already was retired from all official Catholic business. Otherwise, the officials would not have let him go to a Buddhist nun's funeral and do all the procedures that they do only for Catholics. But it only proves that when you forget about ranks and official status and so on, and you look at the essence of the situation in front of you, then you see many more things in common than differences.

One more interesting thing: At the Buddha's eyes opening ceremony there was a woman who had cancer. She and Sunim had a talk. The woman looked happy afterward. In about a year the woman's daughter called me and said that her mother was in the hospital dying. She asked if Myong Hae Sunim could visit her. While she was still conscious, she asked her daughter to find Sunim for her. When Sunim arrived the woman did not show any signs of consciousness. Neither doctors nor relatives knew whether she heard or understood them. Sunim took her hand and started to chant the Great Dharani. After a while the woman opened her eyes and smiled.

*Linas Ryškus*



## The Playful Bow

I first met Myong Hae Sunim (or rather Ming Hoi Si, as she was known in her Hong Kong sangha) in the late fall of 2016, the year I decided to finally pull up the anchor and set out to make sense of life, death, and everything in between. I had just arrived in Hong Kong in time to join the winter Kyol Che at Su Bong Zen Monastery, after having spent much of the year traveling around Southeast Asia, indulging in all the merrymaking that a backpacker's life so abundantly offers—only to realize that my perceived situational freedom, far away from the chains of conventional life, was not really as liberating as I had imagined it would be.

Enthusiasm is hardly something that an average backpacker would bring into a three-month silent, winter confinement, inside a somewhat secluded monastery on a mountainous island, away from all the fun and games that bustling cities usually offer. Yet that is precisely what I brought. And what a transformative, liberating experience that was!

At that time, my exposure to Buddhism in general, and Zen in particular, was limited to a couple of books I'd read, a dozen YouTube clips, a few Wikipedia articles on the topic, and a ten-day retreat I had done earlier that year. Needless to say, the notion of the beginner's mind did not only thoroughly apply to me, but it reached such levels of perplexity that even a few weeks into the Kyol Che, I found myself still

struggling to make sense out of who this so-called "Sifu" was (Cantonese: 師傅 meaning "teacher"), and when was the actual Zen master going to finally join the retreat.

I'll leave it up to the reader's imagination to picture the look on my face when Ming Hoi Si skillfully enlightened me by pointing out that, in fact, Sifu and Zen Master Dae Kwan are not different, but rather the same person who I had been seeing in the Dharma room for a while now. An open jaw, a look to the side and a short "aha" revealed a subtle mix of shyness, embarrassment, and a profound sense of relief. The first "same or different" kong-an had been attained.

This "realization" marked the beginning of a student-teacher journey that lasted until just recently, when on August 2, 2020, a fellow practitioner relayed to me the news of Ming Hoi's unfortunate passing.

I cared deeply for Sunim. Words fall short in trying to express the magnitude of the impact she had on my life, despite the relative brevity of our rapport. From her first teaching, up to the last one (and in my mind her passing is the greatest



*Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Europe*

dharma talk she ever delivered), she had been more than just a teacher. She'd been almost like a family member—a senior, wiser sister I could turn to in hardship, a friend if you will. She was a trusting companion through the treacherous waters of samsara, always one WhatsApp or Instagram message away, ready to make time for an online kong-an interview long before online interviews were a thing.

Her selfless, kind, and generous support over the years, coupled with her warm approachability, wisdom, and dedicated, compassionate teaching, begets in me a sense of dharmic indebtedness, in which her passing is not to depress, but rather, inspire and fuel my commitment to practice and the resolve to realize my own deathless nature. Just as an athlete passes the baton to their teammate at the end of their run, so too, I feel, Sunim is passing the light of her dharma to each of us.

People say that in moments of great tragedies, the situ-

ation in which one finds oneself upon observing the fact becomes permanently stored in one's memory. This rings true for all the deeply impactful events and news I've witnessed and received in my life, and certainly applies to this one too.

I received the sad news of Ming Hoi Si's passing while dog-sitting for a friend. With a broken heart and tears in my eyes, a deep, deep resounding *noooooo* echoed from the roots of my being—giving rise to a feeling of gross unfairness, a feeling I know all too well to want to evoke it often.

As the dog kept performing its playful bow, nudging me to throw him the toy, I closed my eyes, wiped away the tears, gathered my hands in *hapchang*, and bended in a half-bow to mirror that of the dog.

In our global sangha, and especially my dear friends and fellow practitioners in Hong Kong and Lithuania—there are those who certainly knew Myong Hae Sunim far longer and better than I ever could, which is something I have the deepest, most humble respect and appreciation for. I hope that in sharing these sentiments, I am doing justice in paying tribute to Myong Hae Sunim / Ming Hoi Si, in a way that is not only honoring your own deepest sentiments but perhaps even reflecting them. May you all be well, happy, and free.

*Woof Woof, the dog is wagging his tail.  
Myong Hae Sunim just threw him a bone.  
Gaspar Sopi*



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## Myong Hae Sunim—Remembrances from the Spanish Sangha

We met Myong Hae Sunim only three years ago when we invited her to Borisa Temple on short notice, and she just said “Sure, how can I help you?” And that's what our relationship has been like since that day—she was always ready to help, always joyful and completely selfless. Myong Hae Sunim JDPS was both a dharma friend and a great dharma teacher to us, teaching us in the best way possible: through example. Finally, she gave us a powerful teaching: this could be the last day of your life, maybe the last moment. Are you giving your very best, like Myong Hae Sunim did? Because after all, it is not so much about how long you live, but how much you live. How do we use our limited time here?

In her honor, we named our little hermitage for solo retreats Bright Ocean, which is what her name translates to. After some time we realized that is exactly the view you have from the window on many mornings: a sparkling sea like a silver mirror. May everyone who sees this bright ocean be truly inspired by Myong Hae Sunim, practice strongly like her and continue her work, and in this way never be separated from her.

Myong Hae Sunim, like the flowers you loved and cared for so much, you helped so many of us to bloom. You yourself bloomed as a great bodhisattva. Flowers blossom and fall, but your fragrance will be forever with us.

*Barbara Pardo JDPSN and Tonda Horak*



Her always smiling and tender face and the unexpected kong-ans that she sometimes asked in our “free” time during retreats shook me and brought me straight to don't-know mind. She was and she is a great inspiration to me. I am very grateful.

*Hector Mediavilla*



I met Myong Hae Sunim very recently, at a retreat during lockdown due to the pandemic. A small group practiced at Borisa Temple, and some others practiced at home. We all had one online interview with her. She spent a lot of time explaining to me how to practice with kong-ans. She was very patient, and her smile was always present on her face.

She told me about her experience of being confined. Through her room's window every day she could see some birds, from their birth until they flew free. She witnessed how the parents made the nest, how they fed them and how they encouraged them to fly. When the baby birds could fly, they no longer gave them food in the nest, but they flew a little bit out, thereby encouraging them to come out of their comfort zone, since they had acquired enough maturity to leave the nest.

Myong Hae Sunim then told me that I too was mature and that I also had wings, and that the experiences you have in the nest are different from those you have flying. She then encouraged me to get out of my comfort zone and to go to the next retreat in person. After that, I attended a two-week retreat at Borisa, keeping her teachings in mind. Since then, I practice every day online with the sangha and have sat several retreats in our retreat center. She is always present on my flights.

*Carmen Gonzalez*



One day during retreat, a Zen student complained that silence was not kept 100 percent. Myong Hae Sunim replied, “Do you prefer people to keep silence and hate each other or talk a little and love each other?”

*Anonymous*



A very nice, strong and serious sunim went for a kong-an interview with Myong Hae Sunim JDPS. She asked him a question. He answered, “Don't know,” and was ready to go back to sit in the dharma room. She looked at him and said, “I know you know the answer, and I will not let you go until you give it to me.” After an hour staring at each other, he gave the correct answer and could return to the dharma room.

*Anonymous*