

Separated, Yet Connected

Minh Ngan Tran

COVID-19—an invisible virus that brought our world to a halt.

In Hong Kong, when Myong Hae Sunim JDPS, our beloved second guiding teacher, died suddenly in Lithuania last August, the pandemic prevented our shaken sangha from gathering in person to support one another. Our astute Sifu immediately told us to convene on Zoom every night from 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. to practice together and chant Ji Jang Bosal for forty-nine days straight. Our global sangha joined us, especially our dearest dharma brothers and sisters in Lithuania.

Every night, on the way home from work, at dinner, on my evening runs, I listened to the chanting and appreciated especially all the sharing at the end. Sifu called on different people she saw on the screen and asked them to say something. Before we logged off each night, Sifu reminded us to smile as we waved our greetings to Myong Hae Sunim's mom in Lithuania.

Following Chinese Buddhist traditions, we held a special memorial ceremony every seventh day for seven Saturdays—still all on Zoom. Every Saturday morning, I was so happy to go buy fresh flowers for the virtual memorial. It gave me so much joy to be able to honor our dear teacher with this shared love of flowers—Myong Hae Sunim always enjoyed tending to gardens wherever she went.

Most nights I was alone, but every night I was happy to see and hear everyone on Zoom. By then our Zen center had been closed for more than half a year, and we had been Zooming all along. I was grateful that our teachers, sunims, and sangha members around the world had adapted to practicing together online so quickly. This constant virtual support and together practice have helped many of us through the trials and tribulations of life amid COVID-19.

Another source of dharma joy and connection for me has been a virtual study group that came together spontaneously more than a year ago. Hungry for more sangha time, a small group of us has gotten together every Thursday on Zoom to discuss an appointed chapter from *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*. We begin with the content of a given chapter, but that content is just the springboard for wider and freewheeling conversations about our individual and collective experiences with the practice. We discuss our struggles and triumphs with kong-an interviews; we recall favorite encounters and exchanges with different teachers; we share how we've used the practice in our daily life, from fights with loved ones to difficult colleagues at work. All the while we laugh and encourage each other to return to this beautiful training of putting it all down,

removing our ego, and gaining greater clarity in each moment so that we can be more useful to those around us and this world.

What underpins these conversations is our shared passion for the practice and our loving friendship built from more than a decade of practicing together. Gathering with these dharma friends in this manner has revitalized my practice and reinforced my commitment to this path. No matter how busy I am at work, for more than sixty weeks already I look forward to every Thursday night for our *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* study group.

This invisible virus is like our karma. We cannot see it, but it's always there and controlling us when we are not clear. How can we use our karma to benefit others? I am grateful that this pandemic has brought together our global sangha in the most unexpected ways, from solemn events of memorials



and funerals to celebratory events of inka and transmission ceremonies. My sincere thanks from the bottom of my heart to all of you who have taken the time to click on a Zoom link so that we can connect and practice together.

May we continue to keep the strongest don't-know mind in these uncertain times. May we continue to help one another to stay on the path. Wherever you are, know that your dharma brothers and sisters are here for you. ♦

Minh Ngan Tran was born and raised in the Chinese Mahayana tradition. He encountered the Kwan Um School of Zen as a student at Yale University in 2005 and has practiced with the school ever since. He relocated to Hong Kong in 2011 and took five precepts in 2012 and ten precepts in 2014 at Su Bong Zen Monastery under the guidance of Zen Master Dae Kwan.

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