

The 2008 Crazy Wisdom Interview with Haju Sunim ~ Zen Teacher and Resident Priest at the Zen Buddhist Temple

Interviewed by Bill Zirinsky
Photographs by Charles Boyer

Haju Sunim has been the guiding light and Resident Priest for the Zen Buddhist Temple on Packard since the early 1980's. During these years, the Zen Temple has grown and thrived. She is an important spiritual teacher and leader in Ann Arbor, and she lives into her role with grace, intelligence, and kindness. Certainly she also possesses great spirit, resilience and steadfastness to have shepherded her flock for more than a quarter century!

The Crazy Wisdom Community Journal previously interviewed Haju Sunim back in 1997, when she still went by the name "Sukha Murray". Because of her special role in this community as Ann Arbor's only Zen teacher and Priest, we wanted to bring our readers up-to-date on life at the Zen Temple, and her life at the Zen Temple.

Asked what the name Haju Sunim is about, she answered, "Haju is a word that comes from the Diamond Sutra meaning "how to dwell" and Sunim is a Korean word that is an honorific for all Buddhist monks, male or female, an egalitarian title."

Born and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, Haju is very much an Ann Arborite at this point, and she raised her two daughters here. Her daughter, Karima, is 29, and her daughter, Komani, is 23. What follows is our recent interview with her. This interview will also be available online at www.crazywisdom.net starting May 8th. (The 1997 interview, which was somewhat more in-depth, and covered some different terrain, will also be available on our website starting May 8th.)

Bill Zirinsky: Thank you, Haju, for letting me ask you some questions. It has now been eleven years since I first came to the Zen Temple to interview you, and I know that our readership is interested in you, and in the Zen Temple. Rereading the original interview with you, I remain grateful for your kindness back then, because it was the first interview I had done for the *Crazy Wisdom Community Journal* with someone I did not already know well, and our interview went swimmingly, and was quite interesting. That encouraged me to keep doing interviews for the *Journal*. So, you helped me to get started doing interviews, and I appreciate you for that!

It has now been more than 25 years since your arrival in Ann Arbor in 1982. You are a Canadian transplanted to Ann Arbor. It would appear that you have set down deep roots here, would you say that?

Haju Sunim: Ahh yes, Ann Arbor and the Temple are my home, the center of my universe these days. I feel an intimate connection in particular with the plants and trees and their seasons, even the buildings on our Temple property with all of their idiosyncrasies. I am touched by friends in many parts of the city and beyond and feel we form a vibrant network, sometimes invisible but nonetheless there. Now and then when the wind blows fresh & almost breath



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taking and when it rains, I remember Vancouver, where I grew up and I am in regular touch with our Temple folks in Toronto, which is where I first began my Buddhist journey.

Bill Zirinsky: The Zen Temple has grown so much over the years. Tell our readers, how are things at the Zen Temple?

Haju Sunim: Vibrant. It's quite wonderful how people of all ages and persuasions have become interested in Buddhist teachings and practice, how many have stepped forward to provide support in a myriad of ways, even to be trained to be Buddhist teachers, and more. We are learning how to support our growing children & family program, how to better provide Buddhist education and practice for our members, how to care for our four buildings... given modest people and financial resources?

BZ: I know that you opened a very spacious new Hall last year, and that many community organizations, such as the Kirtan Yoga group, are enjoying using it very much. Can you tell us about the building of the new hall, and whether it is working out nicely for the Temple?

Haju Sunim: Renovating our Sangha Hall doubled our size building-wise and was an exhilarating effort. Those men, women, and children who participated will always remember digging two 40 ft long trenches in our crawlspace, with rigged up lights, bucket by bucket, almost filling two huge dumpsters. This was to provide space to install two long steel beams required to support the floor.

We employed tradespersons to do the skilled work and we cleaned up the construction site over and over again, hauled bricks, made trips to the landfill, had weekly meetings to brainstorm & troubleshoot and fundraised. At one point it didn't smell like the old bike shop anymore and I always remember that Margaret Mead said, something like, "It's amazing what a small group of dedicated people can do!"

So far we have been using the Sangha Hall for Sunday morning public services, our children's services, yoga classes, for special speakers, several concerts, our Zenefit (benefit auction), and for some community use.

BZ: Please tell us, also, about the Buddhist Peace Camp which the Temple has been sponsoring for many years?

Haju Sunim: Ven. Maha Ghosananda, a Cambodian monk, always said, "A peaceful person makes a peaceful family, a peaceful family makes a peaceful neighborhood, a peaceful neighborhood makes a peaceful city, a peaceful city makes a peaceful state, a peaceful state makes a peaceful country, a peaceful country makes a peaceful hemisphere, a peaceful hemisphere makes a peaceful world, a peaceful world makes a peaceful solar system..." This inspiring concept and variations on it have become a central focus

for Peace Camp.

It all started as half days for a week in the summer with two moms and 10 or 12 young children, a couple in diapers, in the backyard of the Temple in 1985. I remember a huge downpour and all of us running joyously in the rain and also dousing each other with buckets of water from a tiny kiddies wading pool. We did beginning meditation, yoga, arts & crafts, had snacks and lunch on tables covered with red and white plastic tablecloths and sometimes went to Buhr Park Pool or a nearby lake in the afternoon or to pick blueberries in Dexter.

I fell in love with Long Lake and Friends Lake Community just past Chelsea after camping there with my friend, Barbara Brodsky, and her boys in the early 90's and thought, "It would be quite a leap to pull off a full day weeklong

overnight camp but why not give it a try?" And we did, schlepping almost all of the Temple kitchen out to Friends Lake picnic shelter, setting up our yard sale canopies and sleeping in tents. Camp has flourished at Friends Lake with attendance at 75-100 children, parents, counselors, resource people, and other interested folks. Now there are programs for both children and adults as well as times together for all ages. We share the cooking of our meals and all the upkeep details of camping together. Activities include arts and crafts, swimming, boating, campfires, skitnight, "in the woods activities", an overnight across the lake, morning circle – meditation, stories, singing, dancing, peace hour after lunch, and more. We still go blueberry picking together! Counselors, staff members, and families regularly join us from our Temples in Chicago and Toronto and from other parts of the country including Montana, Nebraska, Massachusetts, and New York, and within a few days of being together we gel as a community. One of our counselors, a U of M student, once said that she had never experienced community like this and hoped this spirit would be contagious!

I love working directly with people especially doing a long retreat, transforming winter garden in early spring, cleaning out and cleaning up, taking a load to the landfill site, etc. When we throw ourselves into manual work, really anything that isn't particularly comfortable or clean, we often become fresh and bright eyed!

We are happy to say that 22 or so years later a parent committee very effectively plans peace camp, and our on-site program co-ordinator is one of our original campers!

BZ: What other children's activities are happening these days at the Temple? I have a five-year-old, now, and so I'm interested to know what is offered, and whether the offerings are for "members only".

Haju Sunim: We offer a children's service with parents along on the second Sunday of each month at 9:30 am. We start with singing, have a short "formal" service and then the children meet in age groups for special stories, discussions, arts and crafts, garden activities weather permitting etc. At the end of this time we have a snack and fellowship. On each 4th Sunday we have an all-sangha service when parents and children have some time together singing, listening to a story, doing a very little meditation, and then they join the main adult service.

We now are in the process of organizing special activities and care for our children on the first and third Sundays. On Sunday, May 4, 9:30 – 5 PM we will host a Mindfulness Retreat at Howell Nature Center for families, and also our children and families are an integral part of our Buddha's Birthday celebration May 17 & 18 here at the Temple, and the Liberation of Life service on June 22 at Delhi Park.

While the Sunday services are for children are for members, everyone is welcome to join in all the other programs. (E.g. Mindfulness Retreat, Buddha's Birthday Celebration, Peace Camp, etc.) And we always welcome new members.

BZ: At an earlier time when I came to visit with you,

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you were growing kale and collards in the Temple garden. What will you be growing this year?

Haju Sunim: We will be growing kale and collards once again plus broccoli, cauliflower, beans, carrots, daikon.... We haven't missed a year with the kale and collards and happily eat these with our quinoa, amaranth, or millet and a little homemade gomasio sprinkled on for breakfast through most months of the year. We gather frozen kale even in winter. For all these years Frog Holler Farms in Brooklyn has generously provided us with seedlings, and

this year our children recently planted some seeds which will eventually be planted out in the garden.

On a pilgrimage to Korea in the early 1980's I collected cosmos seeds from the gardens of monasteries and from the roadsides and these have been reseeding themselves in various parts of the garden each year...beautiful white, pinks, and mauves, very hardy.

A few years ago, Temple Residents initiated the planting of a native plant area, which is beginning to flourish, and in one corner a group of members established a small meditation/memorial garden. Pathways are made from chips from our oak and ash trees that have come down over the years and serve for walking meditation.

Working in the garden is part of our practice. Originally our main garden was a gravel parking lot and over the years the parking lot has been transformed into a very fertile vegetable plot, where worms abound and members clear, dig, compost, plant, weed, and harvest.

Eventually we will build a labyrinth and carve a tall wood standing Buddha from a 14-foot high tree stump in the back of the Hermitage.

Volunteers are always welcome.

BZ: Are there currently other ordained dharma teachers at the Temple, or others in training? If so, can you tell us about them?

Haju Sunim: Kobul Marie Kuykendall is an ordained Dharma Teacher here and there are five other members enrolled in our Maitreya Buddhist Seminary for the training of dharma teachers. Kobul brings strength to our community

with a wonderful joie de vivre, great common sense, and 11 years as a young woman in a Catholic monastery. She is also a hospice chaplain. Our seminary students come to us for monthly practice and seminars from Jackson, Mount Pleasant, New Hudson, Kalamazoo, and Grand Rapids. These dedicated folks help as much as they can with the programs, classes, and work projects, given their distance from the Temple. There is more information about the seminary at www.zenbuddhisttemple.org

BZ: You have been the Resident Priest at the Temple for a long time. How old are you now, and how have your daily and monthly challenges and rewards changed and evolved?

Haju Sunim: I am 64 now and continue to feel most fortunate to be here at the Temple. The challenge over the years is how to adapt our Korean Son (Zen) Buddhist tradition for this American soil. This ultimately comes down to how do I effectively deepen and cultivate myself and thus others so Buddhist teachings and practices will be relevant to people in our very outward looking society.

Originally we were a tiny residential community with a handful of people joining us for practice. There were no public services on Sunday. We formed Peoples Carpentry and everyone pitched in to work on renovation and repairs in the surrounding community to meet our monthly Land Contract payment, renovation of the Temple and living expenses. We put on a new roof, lifted part of the roof and transformed the third floor attic, built the wall in front of the Temple when the hedge died during a very cold winter, changed the stairways, put in new plumbing and electrical, opened three rooms for a meditation hall (sonbang), made our typical Michigan basement into a kitchen and dining area, laundry room, resident space and much more.

Twenty seven years later we have four buildings to take care of and offer two Sunday services and many programs like our introductory meditation course, retreats, study of the Heart Sutra, and vegetarian cooking classes for our members and the public. There always has been much coming and going as people explore, but over the years our membership has been slowly growing and deepening.

I have been here full-time, our Dharma Teacher is present as often as her work and family schedule permit, residents share their time between the Temple and work or school, we always have a very wonderful cadre of volunteers, and we have had a part-time bookkeeper/office assistant for ten years. I am always looking for those who would like to train and make a lifelong commitment.

Over the years, three of the four of our members who have been ordained as Dharma Teachers have taken their training to other parts of the country. Currently two members are working with men in prison, one regularly takes meditation practice to small pockets of people in our com-

munity: senior citizens, caretakers for the mentally ill, and disabled and low-income folks.

Our Temple is open to residents, people who would like to undertake a time of regular practice in a Buddhist community, following the morning and evening schedule, helping

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with upkeep and programs, cultivating themselves. Over the years we have gone from 2 or 3 in residence regularly to now 7 or 8.

After truly enjoying a wide range of Temple responsibilities over the years, I am in the process of taking more time for study and teaching and learning to share the rest with others.

BZ: I had heard that you were in a serious accident a few years ago? If that is so, can you share with us anything about that, and how it has affected you, and your teachings, and your path? And have you fully recovered from the accident, and are you feeling well?

Haju: I was thrown into the air and into the edge of the sidewalk when hit by a car while crossing Packard at Wells. It turned out not to be so serious, no permanent damage. I was fortunate to have many people in the sangha and community come to my aid and to take care of the Temple while I was recovering.

For all these years, Frog Holler Farms in Brooklyn, Michigan has generously provided us with seedlings, and this year our children recently planted some seeds which will eventually be planted out in the garden.

BZ: When we spoke 11 years ago, you said that as a "young person in this culture, one wouldn't probably career plan to be a Buddhist priest". Are young people still finding their way to the Temple? You had said to me that although the students who came to the Temple were not plentiful, that each one was precious and valued. Please talk about the Temple as a place for young people, as a refuge from the storms of young adulthood?

Haju: Oh my gosh, Bill! As I am older now, everyone seems young, very young to me these days! Bill, young people (20 – 40) are more plentiful here now and each is still precious and valued. It seems that they are interested in Buddhism, in learning how to meditate, in connecting with a spiritual community in order to have a more focused inner orientation to take into the complexity of their lives at school, at work, as artists, as parents, etc. They enjoy meeting like-minded people. Our choir was recently formed by several of our young people. Most of our Temple residents are young.

BZ: Your own daughters are now about 22 and 28. How are their relationships with Zen Buddhism these days?

Haju: I think that my daughters are more appreciative of their Buddhist upbringing now than they were when they

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lived at the Temple. While growing up they resented that I took so much time with the Temple and not enough with them. As a single mother I had my hands full and their complaints were valid.

Now grown up, they are warm, compassionate & intelligent, wonderful young women, and I notice when they are writing applications for jobs and schools they almost always write quite positively about their upbringing at the Temple and how it has affected them.

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cess from their environment and the people in it. As small children, my daughters had the benefit of being with many wonderful people and being exposed to all the formal and informal aspects of Temple life.

Of course they really loved it when other children came to their house, the Temple... for Sangha gatherings at the turn of the seasons, for Buddha's Birthday, for Peace Camp, for the Yard Sale, for our annual Liberation of Life service.

We try to live simply and frugally, and my older daughter notices how she has picked up some of this, and I notice that my younger daughter who recently purchased a home in Buffalo is quite a renovation site manager! One is taking a break from graduate school and working in

health care, while the other is an administrative assistant with strong leanings to working with musicians – booking, road trips, etc.

Neither of them is planning to follow in my footsteps and become a Buddhist priest anytime soon, but they do embody much virtue and 'life' which rubbed off on them here.

BZ: What do you love about your work these days as the Resident Priest at the Zen Temple?

Haju: I love working directly with people especially doing a long retreat, transforming winter garden in early spring, cleaning out and cleaning up, taking a load to the landfill site, etc. When we throw ourselves into manual work, really anything that isn't particularly comfortable or clean, we often become fresh and bright eyed! I deeply appreciate the experience of helping people with the transitions/ ceremonies of their lives: marriages, blessings, funerals, and memorials.

Of course, I also enjoy introducing people to formal Buddhist practice and teachings and endeavor to be a catalyst in people's direct experience with the Three Refuges:

1. I go for refuge to Buddha, my deeply awakened mind, which must be cultivated to be known fully.
2. I go for refuge to Dharma, truth manifesting everywhere, which must be cultivated to be known fully.
3. I go for refuge to Sangha, deep friendship and interconnection of all beings, which must be cultivated to be known fully.

BZ: What do you dislike about your work these days?

Haju Sunim: I don't dislike my work, any of it. What I dislike is that I have some old habitual patterns still hanging around which hinder me. As our community grows I am learning to/I have to learn to let others take on more responsibility, to step back more, to stop micromanaging habits, to open my arms and heart more fully, etc. My identity is tied up with doing 'everything' so to speak and this is not healthy for me nor is it helpful for our community.

BZ: Do you take vacations away from the Zen Temple occasionally? How is that for you?

Haju Sunim: Yes, I do...usually to visit my daughters and other family members and to visit and conference with Zen teacher friends. There aren't so many people who are Zen priests so I always appreciate sharing time with others who are as well.

Being away allows for perspective and change of pace. It's nice not to be 'the priest' all of the time.

BZ: What is your favorite outdoor place to go to, in the Ann Arbor area, to be in nature?

Haju Sunim: There are some trails through swampland and oak savanna at the west end of Long Lake where Friend's Lake Community is located.

These are little walked and

I love to get through the swamp by jumping the creek or balancing on a log someone has put across and then walk the trails and eventually end up in hilly terrain that glaciers must have formed thousands of years ago. Sometimes I go with a friend and we stop for sandwiches & water and write a little poetry and then hike on over hill and dale, past the prison, taking it all in.

I always enjoy the neighborhood around the Temple, and have come to know which tree drops its leaves first in fall, where the first flowers are in spring, where flocks of crows hang out, etc. If I'm attentive I pretty much enjoy wherever I find myself!

BZ: Are you still involved in interfaith activities in the

community, with other Buddhist teachers, and/or with other spiritual and religious leaders in the community?

Haju Sunim: Yes, with other religious leaders, I meet monthly with the Science and Ethics Committee at the U of M, and occasionally attend Interfaith Roundtable meetings & special occasions like InterfaithThanksgiving. At present, other Temple members are more active than I am

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in these activities. We try to respond when we are asked to be a Buddhist presence at various community events. Some years ago several of us women who are Buddhist teachers began meeting. Some have moved elsewhere but three of us cherish our almost monthly time together.

BZ: Your own teacher, Samu Sunim, would be about 66 now. Is he still teaching, and actively leading your Zen Buddhist lineage?

Haju Sunim: Yes, Sunim is still going strong. He is currently in New York City looking to perhaps establish a Temple.

BZ: Thank you, Haju, for taking some time to bring our readers up to date.

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