

Geshin Myoko Prabhasa Dharma

A biographical story by Jiun Hogen roshi



This moment

In 1999, on May 24, my master, Geshin Myoko Prabhasa Dharma, Zenji, died at the age of 68. Ever so present as she was in life, so unspectacular was her passing away: with a very soft and peaceful outbreath whereupon just no inbreath followed. The last two weeks before her death were a celebration of life in the way she always celebrated life as long as I knew her: together with others, intensely breathing in the sea-air; listening to music, looking at the moon, watching flowers, but above all pleasing others. Like always she watched everything closely and helped us to learn to give, endlessly giving.

I met her for the first time in October 1982 in the Kosmos in Amsterdam. In the almost seventeen years we were together, we got to know each other through and through. Out of that experience I will try to draw a picture of this woman, who not only was an outstanding Zen master, but also a many-sided artist. She was a painter, calligrapher, poet en and was very creative with everything that came her way. I made a very discreet selection from the rich amount of teishos we have of her on tape.

"You all know that I come from the Zen Buddhist tradition. But when we enter on a spiritual path, and we follow it all the way to its origin, to the root of things, then we all arrive at the same source:

the source of everything. That is the way of Zen. Zen just means meditation, but it is a particular way of meditation. It is the way to find the realm of consciousness in which things are not yet divided into past, present and future. When we realize that, it liberates us from the notion that we have to do something to get there or get it.

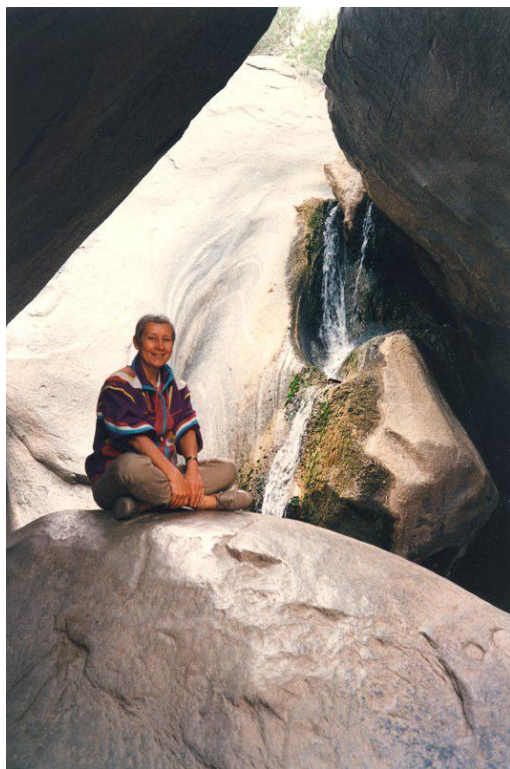
Have you ever tried to catch a moment? I think we try it all the time with our instant cameras, machinery and technological instruments. This very moment, right now, where are you? Which one of these moments do you call yourself?

Realize the suchness of this moment right now, before the craving, thinking, desiring mind can come in and say, "Yes, but I wish it were like this. I wish it were warmer, I wish it were colder, I wish it were more sunny, I wish I had more money." This is our daily sutra! See how we can laugh about ourselves. Once we look at it and catch ourselves in doing that, you just stand there and laugh. That moment you have already become free. You have become liberated, and that is all you need. Only THIS moment; it's ALWAYS only THIS moment.

The universe has no problem, the clouds have no problem, birds and flowers have no problems. Only we human beings have problems. Why? Because we THINK we have problems! So all you have to do is stop thinking. Not possible? Then don't try it! Just let your thoughts go, like the clouds go through the sky. Just see them, let them go, and stay with your breath, instead of running with the feelings and emotions. And when you have to think about something, then stay with your thoughts. When you eat, stay with the eating. Don't think. Quickly you'll realize only THIS; just always say to yourself, "ONLY THIS, just now."

(From a talk for students of Sri Gurudev in the United States in 1987)

It doesn't matter



1990

Wherever Prabhasa Dharma zenji gave a talk, she always felt at home: at the many "Women in Buddhism" conferences as well as at countless oecumenical gatherings; in the ashrams as well as at Rollins College where each year she attended to a college week for students; at the Zen meditation meetings she conducted for fellow cancer patients as well as just in the living room. Always she was the master, she never lost sight of the Dharma.

"It doesn't matter whether you wear nun's clothing or not; IT is not part of your clothing. IT is not part of having hair or not having hair on your head, but in realizing reality in yourself. The beautiful thing is that the practice is individual. The individual realizes him- or herself and recognizes that we are not independent of each other. We even are mutually dependent on each other and nevertheless full of

self confidence. That means we trust the common ground of the self. When this common ground manifests itself, an enormous variety of forms appears. Brilliant forms, all manifestations from this one and only spirit, in essence one and the same. But in the phenomenal world it is not one and the same. But we should stop comparing. As a woman you shouldn't compare yourself to a man or with anyone else. Stop comparing and just be the way you really are in every moment and let that moment unfold itself. That is the free mind, the liberation for which we are born."

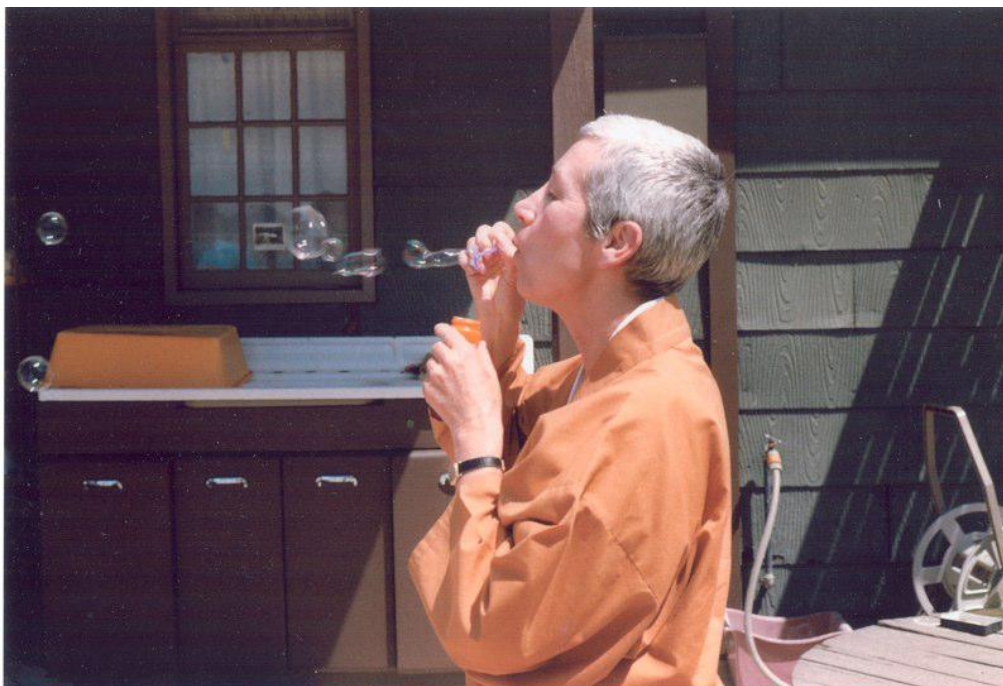
(From a talk given at the conference "The role of women in Buddhism" held at the Tiltenberg in 1989 in the Netherlands)

The artist

Neither good nor bad
the honey
that rots my teeth

"A flower is not something to be understood and explained. At the instant we see the flower, self is inevitably unified with the flower, penetrating the dimension 'flower' and entering a state of mutual interpenetration from where flower flowers forth and from where self is revealed as flower. Here for the first time flower is experienced in its true state of flowering. Naturally to enter into that dimension of pure experience requires surrender of one's whole self to the object, in this case the flower. It means to look at the flower, to look and look until self is forgotten. It is like falling in love and being utterly absorbed by the other.

There is a popular German song: "Die ganze Welt ist himmelblau, wenn ich in deine Augen schau." It means, "the whole world is sky-blue when I look into your eyes." Or the American song: "In the morning mist two lovers kissed and the world stood still." How was it that the world stopped? There is a lot of truth in these popular songs, truth that appears when we perceive correctly.



Prabhasa Dharma zenji illustrated her dharma talks with texts from American teabags; she transformed texts of commercials into zen slogans, for instance: "One sitting is worth more than a thousand words", referring to an advertisement for a lounge suite. Or she started blowing bubbles. Sitting next to her in the car, shopping together, accompanying her to the hospital, always she was focused on the Dharma and time and time again she surprised me. Once we were drinking something in a restaurant. We sat in front of the window when suddenly a car raced by. "Udaka, that's just like in the koan of the ox passing through the window. Head and horns go through, but why not the tail?"

Humor

Roshi not only loved to treat her students to serious aspects of Buddhism. She often told funny Zen stories.

One day a priest received twelve very nice tea cakes from a disciple. The master had to go into the city. He hid the tea cakes under his bed and told the young monks not to touch them. But, you already know what is coming, the boys found the box and ate all the cakes except two. When the master came back to the temple, he made tea and wanted to eat his cakes. He brought out the box, and to his astonishment he found only two tea cakes! He called the two boys and scolded them, "I'm outraged. How could you have done that?" Without hesitation they each took one of the tea cakes, ate it on the spot and said, "That is how we did it, Master!"

*The mosquito on my nose
I wonder how
she will spend my blood*

Once, when I returned from a long trip with my master Joshu Sasaki Roshi. Before my departure I had put three onions on the kitchen counter. As I entered my cabin that evening, there was a sudden flash of lightning and the entire kitchen was filled with onion sprouts. Can you picture it? Darkness - a sudden flash of lightning, paff - onion sprouts everywhere! I knew immediately, this is a haiku. But it took, however, two years before I could express it simply as it was.

*Winter evening
a sudden flash of lightning
the whole kitchen is filled
with onion sprouts.*

And I noticed something else. The sprouts were a measurement of time, the length of my absence.

*Onion sprouts!
the length of time
I have been away.*

I didn't want to write a biography of Prabhasa Dharma, Zenji. Neither am I capable to fully portray her as Zen master. Perhaps I succeeded in transmitting that Roshi was completely there. Also I cannot express my gratitude to her in words. The only way I can express my gratitude is to walk the Way as she showed me to. Finally, I cannot help but to pass on the words she gave to her first dutch 'grandchild in the Dharma'.

"You might as well be happy, because the alternative is to be unhappy, and who wants to be unhappy? You might as well be kind, because the alternative is to be unkind, and who wants to be unkind? You might as well be peaceful, because the alternative is to be angry, and who wants that?"



With Udaka (Jiun roshi) in 1999

Thank you for everything!
Udaka Jiun Hogen

A longer version of this story has been published in the Dutch magazine Kwartaalblad Boeddhisme, volume 5, number 2, winter 1999