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DAH N HAK: KOREAN SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT CLAIMS TO HAVE “KI” TO GLOBAL ENLIGHTENMENT

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The New York Supreme Court, in September 2005, dismissed an \$84 million wrongful death lawsuit against Seung Huen Lee (AKA Ichi Lee), the founder and “Grand Master” of Dahn Hak (AKA Dahn Yoga). This New Age group, started in South Korea in 1985, has gained influence in the United States and support from world leaders, despite allegations that it is a dangerous cult that brainwashes members for their money.

The lawsuit was filed by Veronica Siverls-Dunham, in July 2005, on behalf of her sister Julia Margaret Siverls, who died July 12, 2003, during a Dahn Hak retreat in Sedona, Arizona, where Dahn Hak is now based. The retreat required members to take part in dangerous rituals to become Dahn Hak “masters,” according to the complaint filed with the court.

An autopsy, the complaint claims, revealed that Julia Siverls—a 41-year-old professor from Queens, New York—died a heat-related death while taking part in an endurance hike. The hikers were unknowingly drugged and forced to climb a mountain in over 90-degree weather, with little food and water, wearing backpacks holding 40 pounds of rocks, according to the complaint. It claims Siverls collapsed several times, but was forced to continue.

The president of the Dahn Center Association in Arizona, Seung Bae Chun, denied the allegations in a letter sent to the Journal regarding the facts of the case. He said there is no requirement to hike or carry rocks to become a master, adding that “Ms. Siverls signed up voluntarily for the optional hike,” and that the hikers had an adequate supply of water. The letter also emphasized that Dahn Hak “does not advocate any use of illicit drugs let alone lacing someone’s food with drugs.”

The court dismissed the lawsuit after determining that the statute of limitations on the wrongful death charge had passed and that the plaintiff had “no standing to bring the action.”

Dahn Hak’s Reach. Siverls joined the Queens Dahn Hak Center in 2001—one of more than 600 Dahn Hak centers worldwide, including 147 in the United States, 12 in Canada, 6 in the United Kingdom, 1 in Brazil, and the rest in Japan and South Korea, according to a Dahn Hak Web site (www.dahnyoga.com).

The U.S. centers are located in upscale communities, where employees recruit members with free yoga classes that promise health benefits. Dahn Hak claims more than a million members in South Korea and about 100,000 in the United States. Dahn Hak is also extending its influence in the United States through a magazine, *Body and Brain*, that is sold in Barnes and Noble, Borders, and other bookstores.

Lee has authored 28 books, including *Human Technology* (Healing Society, 2005). The *(London) Guardian* also endorsed Dahn Hak in a December 7, 2004, article titled “It Works!”

Global Enlightenment. Lee’s goal is to help 100 million people attain spiritual enlightenment by 2010, which, he says, is the critical mass needed to create world peace. This enlightenment includes recognition of human beings’ divinity and their oneness with each other and the earth. Lee believes that the only standard that is all-encompassing enough to unite human beings from every culture and religion is love for, and protection of, the earth, which, he said, Korean tradition calls “Mago”—similar to Gaia, the earth goddess from Greek mythology.

Lee claims he experienced enlightenment on a mountain in South Korea after going 21 days without food or sleep. He says he created Dahn Hak, which he claims is based on an ancient Korean practice, to make enlightenment more accessible for others.

Brain Respiration. The essence of Dahn Hak is a guided meditation practice named “Brain Respiration,” which helps people master their energy or *ki*, in Korean—the same “cosmic energy” that flows throughout the universe, according to Lee. (*Dahn Hak* means the “study of energy.”) People can then create their desired realities, including physical health, happiness, and a peaceful earth, Lee says.

Lee teaches that people must learn to tap into the divine powers that lie in the 90 percent of their brains that he asserts goes unused. He claims he has healed people of incurable diseases, communicated with spirits, and exhibited superhuman strength.

To provide a scientific basis for Brain Respiration, Lee started research centers, including the Korea Institute of Brain Science. Dahn Hak promotional materials, including the Brain Respiration Web site (www.brainrespiration.com), claimed that the research centers were collaborating in a study on Brain Respiration with well-known schools including Weil Medical College of Cornell University and the University of California, Irvine (UCI).

A Cornell spokesman, Sean Kelliher, told the Journal that Cornell has never partnered with Brain Respiration researchers, but that a former professor did in an unofficial capacity on his own time. “This group latched on and said we’re doing research with this Ivy League college, which they’re not,” Kelliher stated. He said Cornell officials requested that all references to Cornell be removed from Dahn Hak materials.

Regarding the claim that UCI partnered in Brain Respiration research, Julie Newman, assistant to Carl Cotman, the director of UCI’s Institute for Brain Aging and Dementia, told the Journal that there was never any collaboration with Lee. She said Cotman invited Lee to present a seminar at UCI several years ago, but when Cotman heard the information, he regretted the invitation and has not invited Lee back.

Lee uses the title “Doctor,” but he does not state in his books or promotional materials where he received his degree. Steve Kim, the director of communications for the Dahn Center Association told the Journal that Lee received honorary degrees from alternative medicine schools in Southern California, Yuih University and South Baylo University.

A Blueprint for World Peace or a Multi-Million-Dollar Scam? The wrongful death complaint suggests that Dahn Hak is a scam, pointing to Lee’s ownership of several Dahn Hak–related corporations that operate under a myriad of names. Many of these corporations list the same two Arizona addresses in Mesa and Sedona, according to the complaint. It alleges that Lee has secretly linked for-profit and non-profit corporations to hide Dahn Hak’s size and to shield its financial earnings.

The monthly fee for Dahn Hak classes is about \$100, depending on the location. Lectures, workshops, and retreats can cost thousands of dollars, according to former members. Dahn Hak has a line of products as well, including a \$90 “Power Brain”—a small, vibrating, brain-shaped device that is supposed to help members visualize a healthy brain. Lee also manufactured and sold a health supplement without a license, for which he was arrested and sentenced to time in prison in 1993, according to an August 7, 2005, article in the (*White Plains, New York Journal News*).

In the letter sent to the Journal, Chun denied allegations that Dahn Hak is a high-priced, dangerous cult: “Nothing could be further from the truth. Dahn training is a combination of physical exercise, stretching, visualization, and meditation and is, in fact, the complete antithesis of a cult or any kind of authoritarianism.” He said the monthly fees are in line with many health clubs.

Chun also stated that Dahn Hak founder Lee has no ownership or control over the Dahn centers. He said the U.S. centers are operated by two corporations, Mago Earth Inc. and Bell Rock Development Co.

Friends in High Places. Lee was among about 50 spiritual leaders, chosen from about 1,000, to offer a prayer at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, held at the United

Nations headquarters on August 28–31, 2000. During the prayer, he requested the creation of a “Spiritual United Nations” —an alliance of nations that share his vision.

Lee also cohosted a conference in Seoul, South Korea, on June 15, 2001, called the New Millennium World Peace Humanity Conference. The keynote speaker was former U.S. vice president Al Gore. A document outlining Lee’s vision, titled the “Declaration of Humanity,” was signed by attendees, including Maurice Strong (senior advisor to the secretary general of the United Nations) and Seymour Topping (administrator of the Pulitzer prizes and a former managing editor of the *New York Times*).

In 2002, Lee founded the International Graduate University for Peace, in Mok-chun, South Korea, which offers advanced degrees in Dahn Hak and Brain Respiration. Faculty members include Oscar Arias Sanchez (1987 Nobel Peace Prize winner and former president of Costa Rica) and guest speakers include Kim Dong Gil (former member of South Korea’s National Assembly) and Neale Donald Walsch (author of the *New York Times* best-selling book series titled *Conversations With God*). Lee hopes the university’s graduates will advance his movement.

— Holly Pivec