

The following is an edited transcript of a teisho given by Bodhin-sensei on September 16, 2001, at the Rochester Zen Center.

Chaos and Karma: Struggling with the Events of September 11

This is September 16, 2001, some five days into a reconfigured world . . . a reconfigured collective mind.

I'm going to wade into the almost overwhelming fact of what happened on September 11th, and try to come to terms with what the implications are for our world, for our country, and for our Sangha in the future. This will take two teishos. I've been scribbling down thoughts, reflections, notes . . . things I've heard on the radio, things I've heard on TV and read in the paper. It may not be the best organized teisho, but it may be the most important one *I've* ever given.

A few days ago I had started revving up my engines to relate all this to basic Buddhist teachings such as karma and dependent co-arising. But now it seems a little early yet to approach this from a doctrinal angle, which would inevitably involve a somewhat conceptual treatment of it. I think that is important stuff for us as Buddhists. But it'll have to wait until next week. I think we are all still in quite a raw state emotionally. Speaking just for myself, I'm really quite astonished at how vulnerable I've felt since Tuesday, more so than ever except for when my closest friend died unexpectedly while I was with him many years ago. I haven't experienced such a feeling of grief and mourning since then. It is important that we allow ourselves to feel this kind of grief. Every grief counselor knows that it is absolutely vital when working through a terrible shock like this - whatever it may be in your life - that you open to the pain and allow yourself to cry and experience the full brunt of it - as much as you're able to, that is. And this is no less true with this collective loss of at least thousands of innocent people in New York and Washington, and in Pennsylvania.

It is painful, of course, to experience - *pain*. It's hard, since we've all been conditioned to block pain. The challenge in this first stage of dealing with this crisis is experiencing what *is*. What is, now, is painful. Most often we take flight into thoughts. And words. This is a way of sealing off the anguish of it all. Instead of opening to the heartbreak, we prefer to conceptualize it, to explain, to interpret, to brandish our opinions. Or we cling to the dreadful images and stories that are everywhere - anything but the terrible, bare reality of the loss.

In the last two to three days we've seen a growing wave of patriotic fervor in our country. Hundreds of thousands of American flags are being sold, the President's popularity is soaring. America is being trumpeted - by Americans - in the usual ways,

but even more loudly. And desperately. I'm afraid the flag waving and the chest thumping are really an "out" at this point. A kind of whistling in the dark. And things are looking darker than ever now. I'm filled with dread about where this will lead us. The early signs are not reassuring.

It's understandable to want to come together at a time of collective crisis. There seems to be a reflex to huddle at such times, to pull together. When reports of the attacks first reached us here at the Center that day, we were stunned, like everyone else. First we had a chanting service, and then just sat down together in the dining room. No one had any agenda. We were just trying to cope with what we'd heard on the news. There was some talk, and there was some silence.

Our urge to unite when threatened must be a survival instinct. And so is the anger. Yesterday, President Bush declared to the world, "This nation is peaceful, but fierce when stirred to anger." That's the really classical escape route from the experience of loss: to assign blame and give way to anger. Talk of retaliation and war is growing more vociferous, more self-righteous all the time. We can be sure that underneath the anger, as always, is fear. But if we don't allow ourselves to fully experience the anguish of our loss, and our anxiety, by escaping into these forms of posturing and rage, then it's going to come back and bite us, sooner or later.

I have some recollection, which I couldn't quite nail down, of a parallel situation involving the family of a murder victim. The murderer is convicted and sentenced to death, and the still-hate-filled family members of his victim go to his execution with a passionate wish to see this "monster" executed. But afterward, I heard, they were left feeling empty. Bereft. Their lust for revenge had been a way of blocking out the unspeakable pain of having lost their child or sister or spouse. Only when the perpetrator had been snuffed out did they realize that they had a lot of unfinished work to do.

Probably the most basic way of opening to this anguish that we have suffered, whether individually or collectively, is to do zazen. Counseling, too, could only help things, but first and foremost, for us, would be to sit more than ever. Because in doing that we are letting go of the stuff of the mind – our mental armor – and opening to things-as-they-are. In sitting we clear the space that we need to work through our pain so that we can move on to the spiritual demands that lie ahead for us.

What is wrong with retaliating now in a vigorous and sustained campaign against the enemy? Well, just for starters there is the problem of ascertaining *who* the enemy is and *where* the enemy is. In the past few days I've heard many experts on international relations and on terrorism, as well as military experts, speaking of the almost impossible task of locating the supporters of these mass killers and somehow neutralizing them without taking a huge toll in civilian and other lives along the way. If

the mastermind is indeed Osama bin Laden and he remains in Afghanistan, we will face a guerilla army of fearsome resolve – and experience. In the 19th century the British empire was defeated in Afghanistan not just once but twice, and then in the 1980's the Soviet Union waged ten years of war before having to withdraw in humiliation. "These guys," I heard one expert darkly warn, "are one tough mother." Much of Afghanistan is mountains, and the guerillas are very much at home – literally – in these desolate, inhospitable mountains. It's worth recalling what Colin Powell himself once declared, long before last week: "We do deserts. We don't do mountains."

Osama bin Laden has become our latest Satan, but according to an author of a recent book on the Middle East, he is the most popular person in the Islamic world. These days the two most common names that Muslim parents give their children are Mohammed and Osama. That means that he has enormous support in Afghanistan, where he has been sheltered, while on the move from one hiding place to another, for years. Experts talk about the near impossibility of infiltrating these cells of terrorists, but agree that that really is the only way to root him out.

But even if we did locate bin Laden and killed him, or he killed himself as we were closing in on him, or even if we brought him back alive to stand trial, what effect would that have on the thousands – millions? – of young men and others on that continent who idolize him? We would be creating an army of religious terrorists, more of them than ever eager to become martyrs.

This so-called war would be a whole new ballgame. In Vietnam we had to adapt to a form of warfare we'd never known before, but that was manageable compared to the invisible, suicide-inspired global threat we're about to go up against. As soon as we start the bombing, we are right away creating all kinds of new martyrs who will be ready to strap on their bombs or do any of these things that we saw done last week. All right, there will be massive new security measures instituted here, air marshals in the planes, strict vigilance at airports, better-paid people on duty . . . okay. But that still leaves about a million other ways that desperate, ingenious terrorists can strike. Terrorists who've already shown themselves to be patient.

Already now we've suffered the fury of people desperate enough to sacrifice their lives to hurt us. So imagine what we'd have on our hands if we killed the most popular figure in the Islamic world, as we are basically promising to do, and in the process wreaked death and destruction on innocent Afghans and other Muslim people. And this is just looking at it from the side of strategy, never mind the First Precept. Presidents and other politicians almost invariably denounce terrorist acts as "cowardly," apparently because the victims are unarmed civilians. But how cowardly can these men be if they are willing to sacrifice their lives? This is the mentality we are up against – people who will stop at nothing, so eager are they to bring honor to their families and glory to Islam. Total commitment.

Furthermore, any massive, prolonged retaliation would inevitably cause the deaths of civilians – probably many of them – no matter how “surgical” we tried to make the strikes. That in turn would magnify and broaden Muslim rage and provoke future attacks, and, by the way, radicalize moderate Moslems, who are now still the vast majority. This is why I’m filled with dread at what now seems inevitable: a murderous retaliation by our government. This may be bin Laden’s ultimate goal: to provoke us into igniting a global holy war. Do we want to play into his hands?

My wife saw a British pundit on TV who was describing how a retaliation by their government against IRA terrorists boomeranged there once. She couldn’t remember when it was – it may have been the 70’s – but it came after a particularly vicious bombing, in London I think. The government, understandably angry and frustrated, launched an especially fierce crackdown, running roughshod over civil liberties and going “over the top” in brutality toward suspects. And guess what it did – it only galvanized the terrorists, and brought a flood of new volunteers, and a heightened urge for revenge.

Even someone with no interest in religion or spirituality, then, could find plenty of practical, strategic reasons not to undertake this reckless adventure. The cycle of violence will surely spiral upward, and what we’ve experienced this past week will be just a foreshadowing of what would lie ahead for us.

But now leaving aside practical reasons not to engage in a full-scale war against Islamic terrorists, let’s consider the case against retaliation in principle. We can start by turning to our Buddhist tradition and the six paramitas. “Paramita” means “perfection.” The six perfections are the qualities, or virtues, that we all possess in our True-nature, and which are developed and actualized through Buddhist practice. They are: giving, morality, forbearance, effort, concentration, and wisdom. Forbearance is the one to focus on here. It’s not commonly used, but it’s a rich word. It is often translated as “patience,” or “patient restraint,” but also includes love, humility, endurance, and an absence of anger and desire for revenge. But basically it means patience in the face of harm inflicted by others, either through words or actions.

In some other Buddhist schools they have practices for evoking and mobilizing forbearance. (So do we – it’s called zazen. But they break it down more.) One is to view the harm, as well as the pain you experience from it, as a manifestation and ripening of your own negative actions. In other words, karmic retribution. I’ll get into that a lot more next week.

Another way of getting in touch with our own capacity for forbearance is to understand that the attacker is acting out of utter confusion. And ignorance. This is when we need to use whatever concentration or attention we have developed through our practice to

keep this in mind. It's difficult to do so when everyone around you is waving flags and gearing up for a glorious war against the infidels. It's difficult to maintain our commitment to this basic article of faith. But maintain it we must – because it is the truth! As evil as these attackers were, and as barbaric and unconscionable, still the Buddhist experience is that they, too, are equally endowed with this mind of virtue and wisdom and compassion. It seems impossible, doesn't it? The Buddha said, "This mind is bright and self-luminous, but it is stained by adventitious defilements." It is contaminated by the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion – but these are not essential to our nature.

The Buddha famously said, "Those who retaliate against harm inflicted by others are not my followers." Why should we strive to uphold forbearance? Because, again, striking back only fans the flames of hatred and suffering. All the proof of that that we could ever need is laid out before us in the Middle East, where Israel's standard, reflex policy is to retaliate. How well has that worked? Well, we know. Beyond that, though, we don't retaliate because it makes no sense to attack ourselves. Fundamentally we are all one. We've heard this a million times, but now we have to put it into practice. This is where the rubber meets the road, folks. This is where we have to stand up and be counted and really find our convictions and our faith and have put them to work for us.

It's certainly understandable, the impulse to strike back. And most of all in a case like this: a crime against humanity. And those looking to justify retaliation can always point to the weight of history. Ordinary human beings have always defaulted to ancient, ignorant patterns of reactivity. It's so *common*. But wait – the heartbreak we've felt this week, the horror – do we really want to visit that on others? Who among us who has truly felt the full experience of this tragedy would want others – and especially innocent civilians – to suffer the same way? In our ignorance we are conditioned to see others as separate from us. The Afghans, the Palestinians, Muslims, blacks, whites – to the extent that we see them as "other" we will find our innate compassion blocked. The illusion of separation – this is our real enemy.

One of the most eloquent testimonies to the realized mind of oneness that I've ever heard came from Ramana Maharshi, the great, enlightened Indian sage of the last century. He and his followers were attacked once in his ashram. Some robbers had broken in, but there was nothing for them to take. So as they were about to leave they took a stick and clouted Ramana Maharshi, just out of spite. After they had fled, and his disciples saw the large welt on his leg, they became enraged. How could they have harmed their beloved master, this legendary saint? "Let us teach them a lesson!" one cried, and was about to give chase with an iron bar. But the master forbade it, saying, "They are only misguided men and are blinded by ignorance, but let us note what is right and stick to it. If your teeth suddenly bite your tongue, do you knock them out to get even?" This is the perspective we have to find refuge in: the indivisibility of all people. This is where it counts, more than ever in our history since Vietnam. This is

when we have to really walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

Over the past few days, millions in our country have found themselves in a state of shock. Where does this come from? From the assumption that we've held in our minds, mostly unknowingly, that "it can't happen here." Yes, we have been blessed with geographical security, with vast oceans on two sides and friendly neighbors on both the north and south. But beyond that stands the myth of America: a people so favored by God, rewarded for our goodness with prosperity and abundance, obliged as the lone superpower to provide moral leadership for the rest of the world . . . We've had this garbage dished out to us forever, by politicians, teachers, ministers. It seems that we have come to feel *entitled* to our good fortune, our power, our safety. And now these dream images have been punctured, and the myth of America the Invulnerable is shattered. Or at least disabled. We have to acknowledge now that we will always be vulnerable to some degree, no matter how much we fortify our borders and tighten our security. In that regard we're in the same boat with all other countries. We've lost our illusion of specialness, and it hurts.

Another casualty of last week's mayhem was the religious assumption that goodness always prevails. In Buddhism we don't say that in our True-nature we are "good." That would be a wrong view, because it is not seeing things wholly. Neither can we say that our nature is evil, of course, which would be another incomplete understanding.

In struggling to maintain forbearance in the face of this or any other attack we really have to try to *understand* how these men could have committed such a horrendous act. That's the most enlightened approach. To merely condemn them gets us nowhere. If we have the faith that all beings are whole and complete - and we all believe that, at some level, otherwise we wouldn't be here together in this room, or listening on tape - if we have this faith that terrorists, too, have these qualities and equally share in this Buddha-mind, then what must come from that is what we call in Zen "doubt," "questioning." How is it that they could have been driven to this maniacal hostility?

Without presuming to answer that, we can still say this much: the reason lies in their own suffering. It's not because they are some kind of vermin or insect or monster. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, "If we would read the secret history of our enemies, we would find in each man's life a sorrow and a suffering enough to disarm all hostility." If we inform ourselves of what life is like for the Palestinians and for much of the Third World, it would go some way toward neutralizing our hatred toward these demented killers.

Another way of calling up our capacity for forbearance is to recognize that retaliation produces a kind of blindness that causes us to see only the faults of others and not our own. This is a time for every single one of us to turn the mind around, as we do in *zazen*, and reflect on how we have contributed to this, how we may have caused it to

come about, not just in the last ten years or fifty years but long before that. We have a collective karma, as a people. But I'll hold off on this until next week.

There is a story from China about a high government official who was visiting a Zen master and asked him if it was all right to eat meat and drink wine. The Zen master replies in a typically indirect Chinese way, and we can paraphrase that reply in terms of retaliation: "Retaliating is our people's right. Refraining from retaliating is our bliss." Forbearance is the way to peace. It is the way of peace. That is our primary responsibility now as Zen Buddhists: to BE peace. That means sitting, now more than ever, in order to stay centered and be examples of stabilized awareness and compassion.

I had about another hour's worth of material – just for today – but our time is nearly up. I'd like to close by reading a little-known work by Mark Twain called "The War Prayer."

The War Prayer by Mark Twain

It was a time of great and exalting excitement. The country was up in arms, the war was on, in every breast burned the holy fire of patriotism; the drums were beating, the bands playing, the toy pistols popping, the bunched firecrackers hissing and spluttering; on every hand and far down the receding and fading spread of roofs and balconies, a fluttering wilderness of flags flashed in the sun; daily the young volunteers marched down the wide avenue gay and fine in their new uniforms, the proud fathers and mothers and sisters and sweethearts cheering them with voices choked with happy emotion as they swung by; nightly the packed mass meetings listened, panting, to patriot oratory which stirred the deepest deeps of their hearts and which they interrupted at briefest intervals with cyclones of applause, the tears running down their cheeks the while; in the churches the pastors preached devotion to flag and country and invoked the God of Battles, beseeching His aid in our good cause in outpouring of fervid eloquence which moved every listener.

It was indeed a glad and gracious time, and the half dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness straightway got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way.

Sunday morning came – next day the battalions would leave for the front; the church was filled; the volunteers were there, their young faces alight with martial dreams – visions of the stern advance, the gathering momentum, the rushing charge, the flashing sabers, the flight of the foe, the tumult, the enveloping smoke, the fierce pursuit, the surrender!

Then home from the war, bronzed heroes, welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory! With the volunteers sat their dear ones, proud, happy, and envied by the neighbors and friends who had no sons and brothers to send forth to the field of honor, there to win for the flag, or, falling, to die the noblest of noble deaths. The service proceeded; a war chapter from the Old

Testament was read; the first prayer was said; it was followed by an organ burst that shook the building, and with one impulse the house rose, with glowing eyes and beating hearts, and poured out that tremendous invocation:

*“God the all-terrible! Thou who ordainest
Thunder thy clarion and lightning thy sword.”*

Then came the “long” prayer. None could remember the like of it for passionate pleading and moving and beautiful language. The burden of its supplication was that an ever-merciful and benignant Father of us all would watch over our noble young soldiers, and aid, comfort and encourage them in their patriotic work; bless them; shield them in the day of battle and the hour of peril, bear them in His mighty hand, make them strong and confident, invincible in the bloody onset; help them to crush the foe, grant to them and to their flag and country imperishable honor and glory –

An aged stranger entered and moved with slow and noiseless step up the main aisle, his eyes fixed upon the minister, his long body clothed in a robe that reached to his feet, his head bare, his white hair descending in a frothy cataract to his shoulders, his seamy face unnaturally pale, pale even to ghastliness. With all eyes following him and wondering, he made his silent way; without pausing he ascended to the preacher’s side and stood there waiting. With shut lids the preacher, unconscious of his presence, continued his moving prayer, and at last finished it with the words uttered in fervent appeal, “Bless our arms, grant us the victory, O Lord our God, Father and Protector of our land and flag!”

The stranger touched his arm, motioned him to step aside – which the startled minister did – and took his place. During some moments he surveyed the spellbound audience with solemn eyes, in which burned an uncanny light; then in a deep voice he said:

“I come from the Throne – bearing a message from Almighty God.” The words smote the house with a shock; if the stranger perceived it he gave no attention. “He has heard the prayer of His servant your shepherd, and will grant it if such be your desire after I, His messenger, shall have explained to you its import – that is to say, its full import. For it is like unto many of the prayers of men, in that it asks for more than he who utters it is aware of – except he pause and think. God’s servant and yours has prayed his prayer. Has he paused and taken thought? Is it one prayer? No, it is two – one uttered, the other not. Both have reached the ear of Him who heareth all supplications, the spoken and the unspoken. Ponder this – keep it in mind. If you would beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! Lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time. If you pray for the blessing of rain upon your crop which needs it, by that act you are possibly praying for a curse upon some neighbor’s crop which may not need rain and can be injured by it.

“You have heard your servant’s prayer – the uttered part of it. I am commissioned of God to put into words the other part of it – that part which the pastor – and also in your hearts – fervently prayed silently. And ignorantly and unthinkingly? God grant that it was so! You have heard those words ‘Grant us the victory, O Lord our God.’ That is sufficient. The whole of the uttered prayer is compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary. When you have prayed for victory, you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory – must follow it, cannot help but follow it. Upon the listening spirit of God the Father fell also the unspoken part of the prayer. He commandeth me to put it into words. Listen!

“O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle – be Thou

near them! With them, in spirit, we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of the patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of their guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their offending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it –

“For our sakes who adore thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!

“We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him who is the Source of Love, and Who is the Ever-Faithful Refuge and Friend of all who are sore beset and seeking His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.”

(The old man paused). “Ye have prayed it; if you still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most High awaits.”

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It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.