

The following is an edited transcript of a teisho given by Bodhin-sensei on September 23, 2001, at the Rochester Zen Center.

Chaos and Karma: Struggling with the Events of September 11 (Part II)

This is September 23, 2001, and today will be Part Two of a teisho we started last week on understanding the events of September 11th. There won't be time for me to review the main points of last week's teisho. What I want to address first today is what our responsibility might be for these attacks. The natural human tendency, which has been replayed for millennia, is simply to look outside ourselves, blame some "other," and retaliate. That's the dominant mood in the country right now. But a more enlightened approach, which is open to anyone, is to first try to understand what would have prompted this crime against humanity. It was really a horrendous act of madness and violence. Remember, as Buddhists we have the burden of understanding this in light of our basic faith that all beings are Buddhas. So it is incumbent upon us to try to understand how it is that people could perpetrate such a crime when in their true nature they are endowed with complete virtue and purity of mind.

The words that come to mind first of all are anger and fear. Clearly these terrorist attacks were an expression of rage. And anger arises from fear. What in the background of these terrorists would have caused them so much fear, and why are they so angry at us? I'm going to have to cite data in this teisho that reflect what a violent people we are. This is not done to flog ourselves as Americans, but to understand what would have driven these terrorists to such an act of hatred.

First let us look at what violence by the U.S. government might have bred resentment in Muslim countries, in particular. Near the top of the list we'd have to place our ten-year campaign against Iraq. One of our members is a very close friend of a woman highly placed in the British government, a woman who has more than a few times been to 10 Downing Street. And in a conversation with that woman, our member was told by her that the bombing of Iraq has gone on continuously to this day. You don't hear much about it anymore, but there it is. Estimates run from hundreds of thousands of civilians to a million civilians who have died through this decade of bombing and the U.S.-led embargo. Many, many children have died, too.

Other Muslim countries we've bombed, just since World War II, are Indonesia in 1958, Lebanon in '83 and '84, Libya in '86, Iran in '87, Somalia in '93, and Sudan and Afghanistan, both in 1998. All of these resulted in civilian deaths. Some would insist that our own country has been guilty of terrorism, and many times over. Let me read

from some articles that forcefully argue just that. A writer by the name of Robert Jensen says, "For more than five decades throughout the Third World, the United States has deliberately targeted civilians, or engaged in violence so indiscriminate that there is no other way to understand it except as terrorism. And it has supported similar acts of terrorism by client states." In Chile in the '70s, we had the CIA assassinate the democratically elected President Salvador Allende in order to have our man, Pinochet, put in power there, and that led to many years of civilian killings and disappearances. He says, "If this notion of U.S. terrorism sounds outrageous, ask the people of Vietnam or Cambodia or Laos or Indonesia and East Timor, Iraq, Palestine. Timorese civilians killed by a U.S. ally with U.S.-supplied weapons." A writer by the name of Edward Herman cites the explanation sometimes offered in the media these days for these terrorist acts—"a distaste of Western civilization and cultural values"—and comments, "It doesn't have to be that at all when you consider their grievances." He then mentions our support of Suharto in Indonesia as he killed and stole at home, and our long, warm relations with Philippine dictator Fernando Marcos, who plundered his country with the support of the United States. He also says, "Iranians may remember that the United States installed the Shah of Iran as an amenable dictator in 1953, trained his secret services in methods of interrogation and lauded him as he ran his regime of torture. And they surely remember when the United States supported Saddam Hussein all through the 1980s as he carried out his war with Iran, and that we turned a blind eye to Hussein's use of chemical weapons against Iran."

And now focusing on the main conflict in the Middle East, Herman refers to "the unbending U.S. backing for Israel as that country has carried out a long-term policy of expropriating Palestinian land in a major ethnic cleansing process, and has produced intifadas, uprisings reflecting the desperation of an oppressed people. But these uprisings in this fight for elementary rights had no constructive consequences because the United States gives the ethnic cleanser arms, diplomatic protection, and carte blanche as regards policy."

Can you imagine the frustration of the Palestinian people? I'm not taking sides here—it's a conflict that is way beyond my understanding—but am trying to empathize with the sense of desperation and powerlessness of the Palestinian people and those who are sympathetic to them. Like the September 11 terrorists.

Someone sent me an article by Steven Niva, who teaches International politics and Middle Eastern studies at Evergreen State College in Washington state. Let me go into this because it really sheds light on an area that probably most Americans, including myself, have been largely ignorant about. In this country now, everyone is focusing on Osama bin Laden and his supporters as the culprits behind the terrorist attacks. Niva

says, “these militants were recruited by the CIA and Saudi Arabian and Pakistani Intelligence Services to fight against the Soviet Union during the 1980s.” I remember at the time thinking, “Great. Arm those Afghani’s. Get those Soviet’s out of there.” I really felt, I think like most Americans, supportive of what we were doing there. I thought it was clever how we were secretly providing those Afghani militants with arms. Well, you know we can seldom foresee all the consequences of our choice to follow the path of anger and aggression. How difficult it is to know just how it will all play out over time. So, the CIA recruited these guys that came largely from the poor and unemployed classes or militant opposition groups from around the Middle East, including Algeria, Egypt, Palestine and elsewhere, in order to wage war on behalf of the Muslim people of Afghanistan against the Communist-led invasion. We wanted the Soviet Union to go through its own Vietnam War. Niva says, “The clear aim of the United States’ foreign policy was to kill two birds with one stone: turn back the Soviet Union, and create a counterweight to radical, Iranian-inspired threats to U.S. interests, particularly U.S. backed regimes who controlled the massive oil resources.” At that time Iran was the great evil foe, and so that’s why we sided with Saddam Hussein and also with these Afghan and other Islamic militants. After the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan in 1989, this militant network we had been arming became expendable to the United States. We didn’t need them anymore, so we abandoned them. Then, later, we turned against them in the Gulf War, when they opposed our establishing military bases in Saudi Arabia, where the Islamic holy sites Mecca and Medina are. “The primary belief of this loose and militant network of veterans of the Afghanistan war is that the West, led by the United States, is now waging war against Muslims around the world, and that they have to defend themselves by any means necessary, including violence and terrorism.”

Well, it’s understandable that they don’t believe they really have any options to violence and terrorism. Referring to the terrorists’ perception that the West is waging war on Muslims, Niva writes, “They point to a number of cases where Muslims have born the brunt of violence as evidence of this war. The genocide against the Bosnian Muslims, the Russian war against Chechnya, the Indian occupation of Kashmir, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, the U.N. sanctions against Iraq, and the U.S. support of brutal dictatorships in Algeria, Egypt or Saudi Arabian, for example.” Here, Niva joins with the other authors we were just reading, saying, “There is no question that the U.S. support for Israel and its support of the devastating sanctions on Iraq, as well as U.S. support for brutal dictatorships across the region, have created a fertile ground for sympathy with such militancy.” He continues, “The U.S. appears to have no long-term strategy to address the sources of grievances that the radical groups share with a vast majority of Muslim activists who abhor using violent methods.” Such a strategy, he says, “would include a more balanced approach to the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict, ending the sanctions on Iraq, or moving U.S. military bases out of Saudi Arabia." One final paragraph by Niva: "The present U.S. strategy for ending the threat of terrorism through the use of military force will very likely exacerbate these problems. When innocent U.S. citizens are killed and harmed by blasts at U.S. embassies or bases, the U.S. government expects expressions of outrage and grief over 'brutal terrorism.' When U.S. cruise missiles kill and maim innocent Sudanese, Afghanis and Pakistanis"-he's referring here in part to Clinton's bombing of Sudan's single pharmaceutical factory, which our government has since admitted was a mistake--"the U.S. calls it collateral damage. Many of the world's 1.2 billion Muslim people are understandably aggrieved by double standards. The U.S. claims that it must impose economic sanctions on certain countries that violate human rights and/or harbor weapons of mass destruction. Yet the U.S. largely ignores Muslim victims of human rights violations in Palestine, Bosnia, Kosovo, Kashmir and Chechnya. What's more, while the U.S. economy is propped up by weapons sales to countries around the globe and particularly in the Middle East, the U.S. insists on economic sanctions to prevent weapon development in Libya, Sudan, Iran and Iraq. In Iraq, the crippling economic sanctions cost the lives of 5000 children under age 5 every month. Over one million Iraqis have died as a direct result of over a decade of sanctions." And needless to say, Saddam Hussein's hold on power today seems just as strong as ever, if not stronger. Finally, "The U.S. pro-Israel policy unfairly puts higher demands on Palestinians to renounce violence than on Israelis to halt new settlements and adhere to U.N. resolutions calling for an Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian lands."

All of these informed observers and experts agree that it's an extremely small, fringe minority of Muslims who support terrorism. We might wonder why there aren't more. On September 14 the *Wall Street Journal* published a survey of opinions of wealthy and privileged Muslims in the Gulf region (bankers, professionals, businessmen with close links to the U.S.). They expressed much the same views: resentment of the U.S. policies of supporting "Israeli crimes" and blocking the international consensus on a diplomatic settlement there for many years while at the same time devastating Iraqi civilian society, supporting harsh and repressive anti-democratic regimes throughout the region, and imposing barriers against economic development by "propping up oppressive regimes." And these are the sentiments of *privileged* Muslims. Among the great majority of people of Islamic countries, who are suffering from deep poverty and oppression, such feelings are far more bitter. Why should we be shocked that such conditions would breed the fury and despair that lead to suicide bombings?

So far I've limited my inventory of violence to U.S. engagements in Muslim countries. Now let's consider other countries where U.S. aggression has cost civilian lives, again just since World War II: We bombed China in '45 and '46, Korea from '50 to '53,

Guatemala in '54, '60, '67-'69, Cuba from '59 to '61, the Congo in '64, Peru in '65, Laos from '64 to '73. And then there was Vietnam. We killed millions there, and according to a 1997 report in the Wall Street Journal, there are perhaps 500,000 children now suffering in Vietnam from serious birth defects from the United States' use of chemical weapons there.

We bombed Cambodia in '69 and '70, Grenada in '83, and El Salvador in the '80s. There was Nicaragua through much of the '80s, where we ran a "proxy war," arming the Contras to do our dirty work for us. There was Panama in '89, Bosnia in '94 and '95, and most recently Yugoslavia. As one of our members, Casey Frank, said in an e-mail to me, "It's not terrorism when you have your own Air Force, but the victims are just as dead."

But the many ways in which our country has sown the seeds of violence in this world is not limited to war and other bombing campaigns. To trace back the roots of what we just experienced on September 11th, we have to go back more than fifty years. We can look at the long, sorrowful history of U.S. exploitation of Latin American countries (there are books on this that just make you weep with shame at the crimes the CIA and other arms of our government committed to protect and enrich United Fruit, Dole, and other American companies). We can recall our bloody conquest of Hawaii and of the Philippines, where it cost hundreds of thousands of lives. We also have to go back to our government's genocide of the American Indian. And we have to acknowledge our barbaric history of slavery in this country—300 years of it. Martin Luther King once said, "My government is the world's leading purveyor of violence."

Can we wonder why, after centuries of violence against other countries and peoples, we would finally become the victims of violence ourselves? Thomas Jefferson himself said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." With so much aggression in our history, our country's extraordinary peace and prosperity would have to end sooner or later. What goes around comes around. But you don't need to believe in karma, actually, to understand why these forces of violence that we saw on September 11th would have finally been unleashed against us. We have created a whole lot of suffering for others—and hatred. And now in our outrage that *we* would have to suffer violence at the hands of others, we're about to up the ante and just inflame the cycle of violence. This is what I'm afraid of—not only more terrorist attacks within our country, but what our country itself is going to do, to other countries.

The other day I talked with Sevan-sensei, who is friends with an Imam there in Chicago, the head of a Muslim mosque. He learned some things from him that shed light on the current standoff between our government and the Taliban, in which they refuse to hand over Osama bin Laden. First of all, there is the understanding of "guest" and "host" in the world of Islam. It means about a million times more there than it does to us. If you

have a guest in your home, he could stay a week, he could stay a month, but you just would never ask him to leave, much less force him out. No doubt this custom grew out of the inhospitable nature of the desert environment. Now, this does not in any way excuse the Taliban for harboring bin Laden. But it reveals the cultural gap we're up against here, where we're demanding that they turn him over in three days.

Sevan-sensei also heard from his Imam colleague that the term "Muslim cleric" is a misnomer. They don't have clerics in Islam. A more accurate translation would be "scholar" but even that is misleading because a Muslim scholar may be illiterate except for their ability to read the Koran. Every Muslim is expected to memorize as much of the Koran as possible, but they may never read anything else in their life. So, their perspective on the world would naturally be somewhat tunnel-like. We're trying to reason and deal diplomatically with people who are not equipped to begin to understand these things in our terms--or we in theirs. One last thing: suicide is explicitly forbidden in Islam, in the Koran. So we have to be careful about the generalizations that we may have about a culture and a religion that we have little understanding of.

There's an old saying that "there's a silver lining in every dark cloud." Well, even the terrible dark cloud that has hung over lower Manhattan for so long has a silver lining. First, the terrorist attacks will require our government to rejoin the international community. Look at what we've seen happen this year under the Bush administration: It has vowed to withdraw from the ABM treaty, which limits ballistic missile defenses, and instead proposes a national missile defense shield that would cost kajillions of dollars. The administration has also abandoned the Kyoto treaty on fighting global warming. It has rejected rules to enforce a ban on germ warfare. It has scuttled an accord on illegal sales of small arms. It has skipped the recent international conference on racism, and it has rejected a stronger interpretation of the accord banning biological weapons. The "going it alone" mentality of the current administration will have to be moderated, at least, by its need for coalition building.

Speaking of arms.... Should we really be so shocked to have this violence come back around on us after our longstanding status as the number one arms exporter in the world? On TV and the radio we keep hearing people talk about these terrorists as "pure evil." People seem to relish denouncing them in those terms, perhaps because in demonizing them we don't have to consider the causes of their crimes, and can wash our hands of our contributions to those causes. Yes, such wholesale murder is truly barbaric. Despicable. But what about the evil of weapons commerce? American weapons manufacturers have reaped incalculable profits by arming the world everywhere we can, just cranking out those bombs and missiles and jet fighters and

every other conceivable dispenser of destruction to anyone who will buy them. What kind of terrible karma have we wrought in doing that? To be fair, we can go back to before the Bush administration to find ways in which we've thumbed our nose at the rest of the world in order to maintain our military might. In the last administration, Clinton rejected the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty, which was adopted by the United Nations 158 to 3. The same administration refused to ratify the ban on landmines. And for years, long before the Bush administration, we've refused to pay our dues to the United Nations. Gee, why are bad things happening to us? So this foreign policy of "cowboy swagger," doing whatever we want for our own self-interest while ignoring the cooperation so badly needed in international relations, this is going to have to be moderated as we reach out to the friends we've turned our backs on and plead for help. And as for this most colossal of all military-industrial expenditures, the missile defense shield, well, let's just hope its history. A woman writing for the London Observer said, "One of the pillars of Mr. Bush's program has been blown as effectively to dust as the World Trade Center."

Here's another little silver lining: Our nationalist pride in our great material achievements has been punctured a bit. It's always helpful spiritually to have your pride punctured. Achievements like towering skyscrapers. Of course, no sane person would ever want something like that to happen, but now that it has, we're forced to consider the nature of achievement, the nature of secular accomplishments. This can pave the way for reflecting on what transcends the world of success and fortune.

Another, very slight silver lining to this terrible black cloud: it seems that violence and sex in the media and on computers have at least temporarily been put in their place. There was a Schwarzenegger movie about terrorist attacks on Los Angeles that was going to be released very soon that has now been shelved. And I heard that on the list of Internet search words, "sex"—which I suppose really means pornography-- has dropped way down since the attack.

Another thing that we can take some solace in is that Americans are now going to be less self-absorbed. It will be harder for us to be indifferent to the calamities of other peoples, especially to victims of aggression. Perhaps many of us will become more aware of our role in global violence. I believe that we have long taken our geographically protected security for granted--maybe even as a kind of entitlement--and our extraordinary wealth and power as our God-given privilege. But such smugness has been dealt a blow. Certainly we can't feel quite so special now. People keep saying that "the world has changed forever." But the terrible violence we have just suffered is nothing new to the world. Middle Eastern peoples, and other Muslims, and really a very sizeable proportion of humanity has long experienced the anguish we just

experienced. What's new is only the target: us.

These terrorist attacks have really been a kind of awakening. And as people following a spiritual path we need to reflect on the significance of this wrenching turn of events. We need to look not only to the perpetrators, but to ourselves, our complicity in all this, and what we need to *change*. What we need to change in ourselves individually and nationally. I'm not wildly optimistic that much is going to change very soon, but now there is at least an opening for change.

Those who do want to see our government retaliate against the sponsors of terrorism might very well have a question for those who don't: "Alright. You don't want to retaliate—then what *do* you suggest doing? Nothing at all? What do you propose?" Number one: Do no harm. It will only make things worse. I agree with the commentators who have said that this should not be treated as a war. It doesn't meet the accepted definition of war. Instead it should be regarded as a mass murder. What do we do with mass murders? We don't start dropping bombs. We try to find the culprits who did this, using all the resources available—with wreaking havoc on civilian populations. But even more important than prosecuting those responsible is for us to address the underlying causes of terrorist rage. We have to look hard at the economic, political, and social conditions that breed such maniacal hatred toward us, and we have to own up to how we contribute to those conditions through our government's foreign policies. After last week's teisho, one Sangha member said, "Can't we just go to them"—"them" meaning those who support terrorism—"and say, 'What is it that you need?'" This may sound Pollyannaish, and 9 out of 10 people in this country would hoot at such an approach. But that doesn't mean it's wrong. We have to start listening. We have to try something new. Otherwise, we are in for a long, dark period.

On September 11th we saw the gates of Hell open *a crack*. Now we have to decide whether we went to barge in through that door all the way and get embroiled in who *knows* what. Who knows what catastrophic, unforeseen, unpredictable consequences will spin off from our retaliatory action? Already, just in the last week, we have seen what is being called a "humanitarian crisis," on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. As we sit here now, there are hundreds of thousands of poor, starving people in a desperate

state of fear just as a result of the saber rattling by the United States. Did we expect that to develop so quickly? There it is. That's item No. 1. What else? It's just starting.

Let me take just a minute to talk about how those of us who are pleading for restraint can respond to those who want to retaliate. and who say that's the only sensible thing to do. In the last few days I've heard from several people who report that they have felt at a loss when in groups of people who are crying out for war and revenge. So, I made some notes. The predicament might be framed this way: "How do we maintain our integrity and our commitment to non-violence, and maybe even steer people away from violence, without getting into arguments?" We might also ask, "How do we avoid falling into judgments of those people and reacting out of anger towards them?" If we do that, we just fall prey to the same primitive instincts that the "hawks" of this country are talking about.

Well, we can apply the same approach to them as to the terrorists, beginning with trying to understand their wish for revenge. Where does the anger of these people come from? Again, the anger comes from fear, and anxiety. And our own anger toward these war mongers also comes from fear. Some of that fear is well-grounded: their retaliatory impulses promise to provoke later violence against us. But there is also the anxiety that comes from the prospect of conflict with those other Americans. Many of us, and especially those of us on the spiritual path, have anxiety about conflict. We're afraid to get into arguments because they threaten to reveal our own hostility.

If you're facing a potential confrontation with people who have strong opinions that are at odds with yours, to just start barking your own opinions isn't going to get you anywhere. Even citing statistics and well-reasoned arguments that you consider compelling is not likely to get them to listen. What *may* work--at least there's a chance of this--is to ask questions. Questions do not provoke the same kind of reaction and retrenching that statements do, much less opinions. Ask questions. "So, you want to bomb Osama bin Laden and his supporters. How would you do that exactly? How would you go about finding them? What do you suppose will happen when you do?" And just walk them through it. And, "You actually think that this will solve the matter for good?" Of course, many people would give angry, stupid responses to these questions, but others might reflect more deeply on terrorism and its causes.

It is the awareness we develop through daily zazen that will grant us a degree of detachment in situations of potential conflict, whether that conflict is between individuals or countries or religions. Ultimately we have to recognize that we really can't do much at all about changing the minds of others. But what we surely can do is listen to them. We can be models of listening. You can't expect them to listen to you if you're not listening to them. What we have now is a tremendous opportunity, an

opportunity for a spiritual renaissance in this country. We can no longer maintain our

illusion of special immunity. We are not separate from the rest of the world. We have to cooperate and each one of us needs to be a model of peace and stability. This will have the most profound effect, not just on people close to us, but on the whole world.

I'd like to close with a poem, a prayer really, from a book called "Prayers for Solidarity and Justice," by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amaden. This was given to me by Sunyasei, and it is so *on the money* that I have to share it. It's from chapter called, "Life Prayers."

May our eyes remain open even in the face of tragedy

May we not become disheartened

May we find in the disillusion of our apathy and denial
the cup of the broken heart.

May we discover the gift of the fire burning in the inner chamber of our being,
Burning great and bright enough to transform any poison.

May we offer the power of our sorrow to the service of something greater than ourselves.

May our guilt not rise up to form yet another defensive wall.

May the suffering purify and not paralyze us.

May we endure.

May sorrow bond us and not separate us.

May we realize the greatness of our sorrow, and not run from its touch or its flame.

May clarity be our ally and wisdom our support.

May our wrath be cleansing, cutting through the confusion of denial and greed.

May we not be afraid to see or speak our truth.

May the bleakness of the wasteland be dispelled.

May the soul's journey be revealed and the *true* hunger fed.

May we be forgiven for what we have forgotten, and blessed with the remembrance of who we really are....