

## “Taking Responsibility”

An Address<sup>1</sup> delivered by Robert Aitken Roshi  
to the Buddhist Peace Fellowship Membership Gathering

June 23, 2006

Hi everybody: I am pleased to be able to address you, and thus have some part in your convocation. It is appropriate that we should be meeting, high time, in fact. It is a point in our religious history, indeed in our secular history, for us to understand, to grasp and to internalize and make our own.

Make no mistake. The Neo-Cons are in power and are betraying us and our political heritage. In just a short period, the ideals, groundwork and bulwarks of social justice set in place by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his supporters seventy years ago have been wiped away so that our very Constitution is called into question. Even trees and deer, protected by another Roosevelt a generation earlier ago, are endangered. At the same time, our nation has been launched on a ruthless course of murderous imperialism.

We are in an important place in our religious history as well. Scandals rock the Catholic Church; Protestant churches are popular here and there for what seem to be superficial reasons, and here and there for what seem benighted reasons. Buddhist founders in the West are either dead or on the point of dying, and their successors seem just to be finding themselves, to speak generously in some instances. Muslims and Jews are mired in a bloody war.

Spengler called such historical points as the one we have reached, “epochs,” giving appropriate weight to turns that might otherwise seem just to be part of the scene. I

view the present political and religious crisis in Mahayana terms, but we in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship are made up of many kinds of Buddhists. Those of you who find your home in the Theravada or the Vajrayana tradition will have to reach for an analogy. You are stuck with someone brought up in the Zen tradition of the Mahayana, and I trust that you will be able to use my words in correspondence to points that are more familiar, and to realize that the present moment is indeed an epoch for us all.

It is possible to show that in the course of history, epochs have marked the Mahayana with an unfolding of the religion steadily toward the intimate. Beginning with the Buddha's experience under the Bodhi Tree, the movement has enabled students to take the twinkle of the Morning Star and the universe of its implications more and more to heart. You and I would not be here without the blood shed in the efforts of work horses of the past to take the steps necessary to make, for example, this gathering possible and appropriate.

Scanning our heritage tree, important names stand out. Baizhang Huaihai stands out for me. Born just seven years after the death of Huineng, the Sixth Ancestor, and a Dharma heir of Mazu Daoyi, he was thus a part of the great flowering of early Chan that was also fertilized by such illustrious figures as Yunyan Tansheng and Nanquan Puyuan.

Classical Buddhism evolved along in parallel with the teaching of those early figures. Disciples of the Buddha and their successors over many hundreds of years have kept the teaching of their founder as a closed system, with lay followers looking forward to rebirth as monks who have the true word—meantime supporting the fortunate monks of their time by taking care of their upkeep. Western Theravada teachers are breaking new ground in this field, and I would invite them to speak for themselves.

When Baizhang was active, in the late eighth and early ninth centuries of our era, there were still Mahayana monks who applied the ancient precepts to their exclusive limit:

A monk asked, “In cutting down plants, chopping wood, and digging the earth, will there be any form of retribution for wrongdoing?”

Baizhang said, “One cannot definitely say that there is wrongdoing. How can one definitely say that there is no wrongdoing?”<sup>2</sup> Wrongdoing is not something out there. It lies in your intention, if it is there at all. Somebody has to clear the brush and chop the firewood. Your question is literally Classical. It is time to open the system. You are not a special fellow who can hold himself aloof from bad karma by getting somebody else to do your evil deeds.

Baizhang clarifies his point in a dialogue with Yunyan, who went on to be an ancestor of the Soto School:

Yunyan asked, “Everyday we have hard work. For whom do we do it?”

Baizhang said, “There is someone who requires it.”

Yunyan said, “Why not let that person do it?”

Baizhang said, “He has no tools.”<sup>3</sup>

What is the antecedent of the pronoun “he?” It could be “she,” of course, depending on who is asking. The Mahayana rises with this question. He or she is already embodied, of course, embodied but not acknowledged. It is only when he or she is acknowledged, once and for all, that the Dharma can manifest. It is only as he or she *under-stands* that the Chan Buddha Dharma can manifest.

Some of the contemporaries of Baizhang simply occupied wings in esoteric or Tiantai monasteries. According to tradition, it was Baizhang who formulated the first monastic code for the independent Chan monastery, the code that still under-girds the rules and regulations of Zen monastic living.

When Baizhang was in his eighties his monks felt that he should rest, and not turn out with the others at *samu* time. They hid his garden tools, and this gave him a chance to deliver himself of his most famous dictum. At the next meal he locked himself in and refused his food, saying, “A day without work is a day without eating.” This led to the expression in connection with *samu*,: “all invited.” Everybody turns out.

This puts responsibility for the Dharma on each individual student, where it belongs. It has taken millennia of process and more to bring this change into being, and the end is by no means yet. The process is laicization. I remember thirty or so years ago when I visited the Zen sanghas of Los Angeles and San Francisco. In question periods I would be asked about lay practice. This was a bit like asking a fish how it is there in the sea. The question simply never came up in the exclusively lay Diamond Sangha.

It was, however, entirely natural in the SFZC and the ZCLA where there were dual tracks of training, lay and clerical. The lay track was inferior to that of the clerical, and at the same time the upward path sometimes excluded realization. I remember the modest expostulation of a new director of the San Francisco sangha that she had not had a glimpse of the Great Matter. That is, she had not a glimpse of what the Buddha saw, sitting there under the Bodhi Tree long ago. All of the Mahayana has evolved from that glimpse, the emptiness of everything, the inclusion of everything in each being, and the precious nature of each being in itself—all a closed book to the new executive whose

successes rested on her being a really nice person with administrative skills that were sharply honed through a lifetime of experience of interaction in the sangha.

I run the risk of another kind of conceit here. While it is important that our Mahasangha be salted with realized people, there are some who see the point of jokes of Hakuin and Dogen, who at the same time don't feel comfortable in a rope-bottom chair as teachers. These are the luminaries to whom the Dalai Lama, for example, turns in his dilemmas. Fulfillment in the Dharma does not require a certain social position.

Furthermore it is important not to be caught up in false tradition. Tracing our history back through the Far East, it is clear that we inherit the presumption that students of the Dharma do not involve themselves in political action. I am convinced that this is a kind of hold-over like sexism that is not essential to the Dharma. The movement of the Mahayana clearly has enabled us to touch the Iraq and the Darfur in ourselves and me, and a concern for those parts of ourselves surely is shared in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. It behooves us to keep up with our reading of Robert Fisk and Antonia Juhasz and to speak out and act out accordingly.

The folks who feel they must continue to search for connections should do just that, but it is in reading and in conversation with friends and teacher that such searches are fulfilled. These undecideds must recognize that they will water down the function if they insist that the Buddhist Peace Fellowship slow up and serve as a means for their search. Our process is slow and equivocal enough as it is.

Just as the United States is still seeking to live up to the proclamations of Abraham Lincoln, so Mahayana Buddhism and its followers still seek to live up to the visualizations of Eighth Century Buddhist genius, which really rest on the Buddha's own

proclamations. The ancient vows taken for us are no more than profound common sense. The fact that Iraqis are my sisters and brothers doesn't need to be swathed in saffron robes.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship is our vehicle, just as the other various modes of Buddhism are vehicles. Let's use it as a vehicle for the most common sense we can conjure up. Our model can be the Dukabors, who burn down their houses and parade stark naked by way of making their commonsensical human points. Don't dismiss them as Dukabors. They are brothers and sisters, bare dicks and tits and all. They are their own vehicle and can teach us something.

The "Three Bodies of the Buddha," the *trikaya*, can be proved in the dimension of bare dicks and tits, otherwise what are we doing here? Just rallying behind a banner and beating tambourines? *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo!* We've all done it and it was fun. But now with human culture going down the drain, with Sessho and Bach and Shakespeare going "glug glug," it's time to take off our saffron robes and set forth our naked, vehement resistance.

Okay, the *trikaya*. To begin with there is no essential self, no soul. The *Dharmakaya* is not made up of angels chanting "Hail Mary," the *Nembutsu* or whatever. Right away we are faced with the difficulties of comparative religion. It is hard to reach harmony with Muslims by a study of the Koran and its Bronze Age kind of social justice. The Muslims themselves have reached harmony by judicious use of accommodation and metaphor in the Perennial Wisdom movement. Even as leaders of that movement. This is a large constellation extending from Theosophy to include such luminaries as Mercia

Eliade and Ananda K. Coomaraswami. It is a formidable constellation, and not always completely convincing.

It is much easier to find harmony in bed, murmuring “Goojee goojee goo.” Ask the many couples in Thailand who are Muslim and Buddhist. They won’t tell you about their pillow talk, but their smiles and the smiles of their children make the point.

Then there is the *Sambhogakaya*. You want “soul?” There is only one place where there is soul, and that is where it is shared, and not just with folks. Progressive biologists conjecture that every leaf of every tree contains universal memory. The child is ready to be assured that the horned toad and the rattlesnake are good mothers until adults persuade her otherwise. The whole universe is jumping with intercourse as well, in a fascinating montage of union. The birds do it; the bees do it—because the union is already there, impelled to be confirmed again and yet again, each momentary touch another confirmation of the Buddha’s own vision of how things were at the beginning.

Finally, the *Nirmanakaya*. This is the point—not the empty point or the all-inclusive one—the point itself:

One day Baizhang and Mazu were taking a walk. Suddenly a wild duck flew up. Mazu said, “What was that?”

Baizhang said, “A wild duck.”

Mazu said, “Where did it go?”

Baizhang said, “It flew away.” Mazu laid hold of Baizhang’s nose and gave it a sharp twist. Baizhang cried out in pain. Mazu said, “Why! When did it ever fly away?”<sup>4</sup>

This is Baizhang's *kensho* story, but as with most students, *kensho* was only the beginning for Baizhang. [Turn to the endnotes of this paper and follow through for the continuation.] Turn to your own experience. There is nothing be-all and end-all with *kensho*, and those who imply to the contrary know not whereof they speak. Point-after-point arise out there, and in the mind as well. How lucky it is to be a human being!

Most people have learned to treat the points as a continuum. They elide the spaces between the dots, and end up with just a line that smears the dots and the spaces too. What a great pity! It is this point! *Ouch! Ding!*

Some points can be turning points, and I'd like to think that this convocation is such a chance. Everything is on the table. It was put there for us. As a nation we are on a downward path, invading the world, as Antonia Juhasz says, one economy at a time.<sup>5</sup> Are we in a place where we can speak out?

If we are a tax-exempt organization, we are not in a place where we can speak out. We are constantly on guard to protect our status, and therefore we don't say or do what we mean, and after a while we actually do say and do what we mean, and it is something benighted the evil conspirators in charge can live with. Anarchist base communities become centers to train people to be volunteers in tax-exempt organizations, for example. What to do?

In preparing this talk, I asked myself, what would Emma Goldman do? What would Dorothy Day do? What would Kathy Kelly do? What would Baizhang Huaihai do? That's easy. I can't conjecture about Baizhang, of course, but the others wouldn't be



tax exempt to start with. But if they were tax exempt (as we are), what then? I devised a scheme in my head of subdividing the Alcatraz Avenue property in Berkeley and a bunch of us chipping in and buying a little piece. Then we would rent our lot to folks who don't want tax exemption anyway.

No, that would be pretty devious and contrived, probably subject to question at tax time. It is better for a bunch of us within the Fellowship to call ourselves the Buddhist Anarchist Caucus or something like that and just meet for coffee around somebody's kitchen table somewhere. Why "anarchist?" Because we're Buddhist.

Buddhism is anarchism, after all, for anarchism is love, trust, selflessness and all those good Buddhist virtues including a total lack of imposition on another. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and even early 20<sup>th</sup> century, European and then American anarchists occupied respected podiums on lecture circuits from Boston and New York and across the continent to Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles At length that roster of distinguished speakers included the anarchist Har Dayal, author of *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Sanskrit Literature*, an important text that belongs in all our libraries, who came to the American lecture circuits from India by way of London to edify our grandparents and their parents.

Today we're up against the iron face of carefully crafted public opinion. From the Haymarket tragedy in 1886 to the trials of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1921, there was in the United States almost half century of concerted, bloody minded, and ultimately successful endeavor to erase anarchism and its devotees from civilized discourse. To this day, even in a gathering like our own, the very word "anarchist" evokes an unkempt foreigner with

a bomb about to go off in his back pocket. It might seem better to keep the two words in separate little boxes.

That doesn't work. Go to Google, type in the words "Buddhist Anarchism," and stand back. The number of hits will surprise you. Moreover, except for references to Gary Snyder's article by that name in the first *Journal for the Protection of All Beings* back in 1962, all the hits will be in Classical Buddhism, in the Buddha's own words. Gary's piece referred to the *Huayan Sutra*—well taken, but there is a world of other possible Mahayana references. The "Three Bodies of the Buddha," for example. Everything really is empty, personally interconnected, and precious in itself. We don't need some guy in saffron robes to tell us so. Apart from Google hits and from any kind of Buddhism, our ordinary common sense tells us so. Anarchism makes sense, for all the iron faces, for all the nooses of the Haymarket tragedy and all the subsequent ruthless persecutions and prosecutions and executions. The lonely, quavering voice of Lucy Parsons puts us to shame.<sup>6</sup>

It's time to put ourselves in a position where we have nothing to protect. No group ego. No name, no slogan. Like King Christian X of Denmark we can all wear the yellow star. We can all wave the black flag, no color and no design. It is design that does us in. There is only one thing that works in the face of the iron faces, and that is decency. By being decent, I don't mean being nice. I mean Mahayana responsibility. It isn't nice to block the doorway. Decent Mahayana conduct means behaving appropriately. It is surely appropriate in these days of justifying torture and white phosphorous as weapons, to hold up an inexorable mirror to the fiends who are raising hell in our name—and then following through with an essential agenda that is not necessarily legal, like smuggling

medicine to Iraqi people—the program of Voices in the Wilderness until the situation became too dangerous—or setting up a half-way house for recently released prisoners, like the Olympia Zen Center, or feeding the poor, five days a week, week in and week out for years and years, like Catholic Worker houses across the country. The essential agenda is not a hobby, after all.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> To the Buddhist Peace Fellowship by closed circuit TV, June 23, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Cleary, trans., *Saying and Doings of Pai-Chang: Ch'an Master of Great Wisdom* (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1978), p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson Foster and Jack Shoemaker, *The Roaring Stream: A New Zen Reader* (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1996), p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Antonia Juhaz, *The Bush Agenda: Invading the World One Economy at a time* (New York: Regan Books, 2006). This is a concisely written book, meticulously annotated, that cries out for reading, assimilation and action.

<sup>6</sup> Lucy Parsons, the widow of Albert Parsons, carried on his work against great odds after his execution in the Haymarket affair. I am glad to report that to this day the Lucy Parsons Center, a collectively-run book store and community center, is open to visitors and customers in Boston's South End.