

Dai Bosatsu Zendo Harvest Sesshin 2008

Day Five Teisho

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This morning we heard wonderful news: that Senator Obama was elected our next President of the United States. I say that it is wonderful, because it seems to me that the United States of America became enlightened. I would like to say something about the karmic connection between Dai Bosatsu Zendo and this historical event.

I have noticed that this Sesshin we have so many people from foreign countries. Japan, China, Vietnam, Canada, Poland, Holland, France, Austria, and Switzerland. I believe most of you are quite familiar with the history of the United States, but I would like to convey something about the karmic connection between DBZ and the history of this country, as well as my personal karmic connection with President-elect Obama, though we have never met face-to-face.

In February of 1971, for the first time, I drove up to this Beecher Lake property. It was a beautiful cold day. There was no monastery of course, no gate house, no garage, and no woodshed. Only Beecher House. When I came to that bridge by Sangha Meadow (DBZ's cemetery), I thought "At last – we found the place for us to build the monastery." So I said to Mr. Johnston, "This is it." This was even before we negotiated with the property owner. At that time, I had no idea that this frozen place we had driven past was a lake called Beecher Lake. Later I found out that the name "Beecher" came from the Beecher family, and that one of the members of the Beecher family was Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle*



Tom's Cabin. Those of you who have not yet read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, please read it. This novel boldly criticizes slavery, and President Lincoln was immensely moved by it. As you all know, President Lincoln signed what is known as the "Emancipation Proclamation" in 1863. I will return to that subject in a moment.

On the last Thursday of November, we celebrate Thanksgiving Day. If my understanding is correct, Thanksgiving in America began in 1621. The Pilgrims from England left their country as a result of increasingly hostile religious persecution. The Protestants became *protestants*, really 'in protest.' So they came to this new continent, and were called 'Pilgrims.' From their point of view, it was a religious pilgrimage. But Native Americans were already here. This particular spot by Beecher Lake was one of the spots the Native Americans discovered and lived in. They had some special intuition that this place has *ki* (spiritual energy) and would be a good place for them to live. From their

point of view, the Pilgrims were not welcome – it was an invasion. In the early days here, the Pilgrims struggled to survive, and when the first harvest took place, they thanked God by celebrating Thanksgiving Day. At any rate, because these pilgrims were from England, and because they were white, and Protestant – they are called WASPs – White Anglo-Saxon Protestants – and they became the most influential group of people in this country.

During the American Revolution, on July 4th, 1776, this nation declared her Independence. Two hundred years later, on July 4th, Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji was dedicated.

The Civil War was between the northern part of the United States, such as our New York area, where industry and business were the essence of livelihood; and the southern part, like Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, where agriculture was the essence of livelihood. Unlike nowadays, use of machines was limited, so human energy and human power were indispensable. And this is how slavery came about. There are still such terms existing; “slave-trade” and “slave-ship.” In other words, human beings were purchased or traded from Africa and the West Indies. They were brought to the United States for agricultural labor. The Civil War, to state it briefly, was the disagreement between two parts of the United States – the North, where slavery was unnecessary, and the South, where slavery was considered essential. So they fought.

The Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the

Emancipation Proclamation, and later that year in the Gettysburg Address, he said, “A government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” which still is considered the foundation of Democracy. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865.

1963 – exactly one hundred years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation – was a year which I shall never forget. Two important events took place. I was already in America, and the Civil Rights movement was quite active. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the head of that movement, and in August 1963 his well-known “I Have a Dream” speech was delivered in Alabama. Later that very year, in November, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. He was not a WASP. He was the first Catholic President of the United States; and he was also quite active in the Civil Rights movement.

The Martin Luther King speech, “I Have a Dream” is quite poetic, and of course, addresses lots of political and sociological issues, but some part is relevant for me to share with you now:

“Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of

discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society, and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have to come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.”

Dr. King speaks about how black people were unhappy victims of discrimination, and he describes this very powerfully and accurately. Then he says to the audience:

“Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today my friends – so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children

will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

And it goes on. It's a really wonderful speech.

Forty years ago, a few months before Shobo-ji was dedicated, the Buddhist Church in Chicago invited me to come and give a talk on Buddhism – on Buddha's birthday. So in April of 1968, I went to Chicago, and it was upon my return that I heard the news that Martin Luther King had been assassinated.

Later, while Dai Bosatsu Zendo was being built, it became clear in my heart that the dedication day for Dai Bosatsu Zendo must be on July 4th, 1976 – because each of us has our own slavery-conditioned heart. It does not have any color; it does not have any visual form, but we all know that our minds and our hearts are not yet emancipated. So, our own personal “emancipation proclamation” was declared on July 4th, 1976; because just two hundred years before that, America declared her independence, and a Buddhist monastery is a place where each participant strives for spiritual emancipation. That's why that particular date and that particular year were selected.

Actually, to say so is not quite right. Even though we wanted to open DBZ on July 4th, 1976, if the circumstances did not allow us – for example, if we lacked the building funds – nothing could have happened. But somehow the Mandala web connects all things; nothing is disconnected. The Mandala web made it possible for us to open on that day.

As you know very well, many people laugh at me and say, "You are like Don Quixote, why do you sing 'The Impossible Dream' again and again?" Because this is my "I Have a Dream." Martin Luther King's dream was what I have just read to you. And my "Impossible Dream" came from the Broadway musical, *Man of La Mancha*. There is a verse which goes:

*This is my quest, to follow that star
no matter how hopeless,
no matter how far;
to fight for the right,
without question or pause;
to be willing to march
into hell for a heavenly cause.*

This part is just like our zazen practice; our emancipation training.

*This is my quest.
No matter how hopeless ...
Sometimes you feel despair; as
Martin Luther King said.*

*No matter how far ...
Ten years, twenty years, three lifetimes,
five lifetimes.*

*To fight for the right
without question or pause;
To be willing to march
into hell for a heavenly cause
And I know if I'll only be true
to this glorious quest ...*

This is what *Man of La Mancha's* "Impossible Dream" is telling us: this is the attitude for us to take in our practice. Not only people from Africa, but many Latinos and Asians also came into this country. The WASP is becoming a

minority. When Martin Luther King made his speech "I Have a Dream," Senator Obama was two years old; he was just a baby! Forty-five years later, Martin Luther King's dream is starting to come true. At last, citizens of the United States are truly enlightened, knowing that if we were to continue under the present circumstances for four more years, or eight more years, we'd be like hundreds of people crammed into a small room without oxygen. And so, we elected Obama.

Two days before the election – Nov. 2nd – his grandmother passed away in Hawaii; and when I heard that she passed away not knowing whether or not her beloved grandson will become the President of the United States, I thought "Obama will win." Not because some sympathetic votes would go in his favor – in fact, her death was not widely publicized. Nevertheless, I heard it from someone, and I was convinced that her death is the birth of a new United States of America. For this reason I was really happy when I heard the news yesterday.

As all of you are quite aware, all those outstanding leaders – Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King – were assassinated by someone who didn't like change, and I sincerely hope that that won't happen to Senator Obama, our President-elect. If that happens, 'despair' is really the only word I can think of. For some of you, despair becomes stimulation or encouragement for your practice; and some of you may simply lose hope and may give up your practice. This is the reason why such a ... almost *messiah* ... came to this nation at the most appropriate time, with such

charisma, virtue and intelligence. And I'm so glad that American citizens, or a substantial part of us, supported him – thus he will become our President on January 20th, 2009.

In his acceptance speech in Chicago, Obama said, "We made it. We shall overcome." After nearly two years of campaigning: We made it. We shall overcome. And he was not only speaking to black people: "We" means all of us. We made it. We shall overcome.

So this is the connection between Dai Bosatsu Zendo and the "Emancipation Proclamation." And we – not I – we have a dream. We *must* have a dream.

Dogen Zenji said,

*Setsu ni omou koto wa
Kanasazu toguru nari*

Which means: "Whatever it may be, if you think of something desperately, sooner or later it will become true."

Martin Luther King's dream took place forty-five years from the day he spoke it – nearly half a century has passed. But, "No matter how hopeless, no matter how far; to fight for the right without question or pause ..." Though Barack Obama is not the descendant of slaves, through his dedication to break down racial barriers, he made Martin Luther King's dream come true by becoming the President of the United States.

Now let me tell you my personal connection with President-elect Obama. I came to the University of Hawaii in August, 1960. That year, Barack Obama's

father came from from Kenya to Honolulu to be a student of that university. His mother, originally from Kansas, moved to Seattle, Washington with her parents before moving to Honolulu. Seattle is the city where Nyogen Senzaki first landed in 1905. It is also the city where Chester Carlson was born that same year. After moving to Honolulu, Obama's mother became a student at the University, and this is where she met Barack Obama Sr. They met on campus. The following year, on August 4th, 1961, Barack Obama Jr. was born in Hawaii. After finishing high school, he went to Occidental College near Pasadena, California. Because Pasadena and Mishima (where Ryutaku-ji is located) are sister cities, I had the opportunity to travel to Pasadena several times during the mid-'60s. Obama attended Columbia University in New York in the early '80s. After graduation he moved to Chicago. This is the city where the World Parliament of Religions took place in 1893, where Soyen Shaku introduced Buddhism for the first time to the West. In my opinion, Barack Obama is part of the Dai Bosatsu Mandala web.

This nation was made by Native Americans, WASPs, Africans, Jews, Europeans, Latinos, and Asians. Now we are really becoming more and more diverse. I am so glad that Senator Obama was elected, and so glad that American people, with enlightened eyes, have chosen him to be the next leader of this nation. At last we realize the injustice of this unreasonable discrimination. Whether black, white, yellow or red, we all have two eyes that are horizontal and one nose that is vertical. ❖