

# A Buddhist Response to 9/11

## Three Teachers Comment on Recent Events

*Questions keep coming up in my mind—and, I assume, in yours—about terrorism, and violence, and the war we find ourselves in. So, in late October, I called three Buddhist teachers and asked each one a different question. I was hoping they would bring a dharmic perspective to these troubling times, and I was not disappointed.*

—Susan Moon

### Pat Enkyo O'Hara

**TW: Your Zen Center is right there, close to Ground Zero. How do you, as a Buddhist teacher, respond to the violence of what's going on now?**

**Pat Enkyo O'Hara:** It's devastating. I find it very difficult to talk about. We still smell the destruction—we're just a few blocks away. We couldn't get into our zendo for a week after the attacks and we had to sit in the park.

Right now, the window's open, and there is that smell—it's a peculiar smell, kind of like burned insulation, or rubber. And smell is such a primary sense. You can't *not* know, even if the sky is blue, that something dreadful has happened not very far away. The ash and dust gets onto the zafus and everything. And you're aware that all this dust is—well, guess what happened to those four thousand people...

We were very fortunate that we didn't lose anybody directly, but some sangha members did. This kind of brutality goes on all over the world all the time, but now it's here, and now we know what it's like. It's not an idea that we talk about on Sunday morning; it's not like AIDS in Africa. It's like AIDS here in the Village, only it's a bomb. There's nothing abstract about it.

One of the things we do is that right after our regular service we read the names of those who are dead and missing. We got the list of names from the *New York Times* Web site, and we pass the list around, and each time we read a certain number of names. We're gradually making our way down the list. We always include the name of at least one of the perpetrators, so that we don't forget the humiliation and despair of these people. Interestingly enough, the *New York Times* list does not include the perpetrators, as if they weren't on the plane, too. We have their pictures on our altar for deceased people, along with pictures of all the others, and we have some ashes that I picked up down there.

People here are traumatized, and very frightened. We're doing a lot of meditation that's very physically oriented, around whatever is coming up for us, whether it's sadness or numbness. And after we medi-

tate we do council work: we sit together and each person will talk a little bit about how they're feeling. And, you know, not all Buddhists are on the left.

It's important to let people speak on a regular basis, even daily, about how they are feeling about all of this. And we need to teach ourselves to bear witness to that, so that we don't begin to demonize either the Muslim fundamentalists or the people in this country who are afraid, and who are being warmongers. Essentially the practice is to be able to trade places with everybody as we go along, and to continually bear witness to our own pain.

In our council circle we talk about unexpected feelings, too. For a time you couldn't come into the Village without an identity card, and suddenly the Village became a very pleasant place to live. There were no cars, just the people who live here, walking in the streets. You feel like you shouldn't have these feelings, in the midst of all this suffering.

The sangha has been bonding closely as a result of this. And we have a lot of therapists and bodyworkers who have been doing volunteer work with people who are very angry, or very destroyed, like firemen and policemen. They have had such a loss.

We've also had new people coming to the sangha looking for spiritual sustenance. The place is packed.

I'm reminded of that classic story of the Buddha. He said that when someone in the next village is hurt, a really aware practitioner will start to practice, and to realize the truth of life and death. But when someone in your own village is hurt, then *most* people will begin to realize the truth of impermanence. Well, that's what's happening here; I'm seeing lots of people I haven't seen for years. And we're all being reminded that this suffering is bigger than any of us; we're being reminded of our interconnection. I've got my light on right now, and I'm using oil, indirectly. I'm part of the whole thing.

Constantly sharing feelings with one another, and hearing things you didn't want to hear from other people—that's been a rich practice. We do not know how to respond, really. We try. If somebody needs help we'll take care of them, but there's no set ideology to fall back on.

Just walking down the street, you walk by the firehouse, and you see all the photographs. You feel it—it's in the air, and in people's faces. And so we really try to use this experience as a way to get in touch with the suffering that's going on all over the world. ❖

*Pat Enkyo O'Hara is the Zen teacher at the Village Zendo in Manhattan, New York.*

We still smell the destruction—we're just a few blocks away. And smell is such a primary sense. You can't *not* know, even if the sky is blue, that something dreadful has happened not very far away.

## Caitriona Reed

When I see bumper stickers that say, "God bless America," I want to roll down my window and ask the people who have them, "What would you have God do for the rest of the world?"

**TW: How do you talk to people with whom you disagree about the current crisis?**

**Caitriona Reed:** I haven't had any serious disagreements with people I'm close to, but I make a point of talking to strangers. I feel it's our responsibility to keep talking. We must keep this dialogue going and encourage people who are afraid to speak up. I started out by suggesting to people I meet that if people in other parts of the world are that angry at the U.S., maybe we should find out why. My attempt is to open up some kind of political discussion. I engage strangers in stores with, "How're you doing? How're you feeling?"

I said to somebody in a grocery store the second week after 9/11, "People seem pretty subdued. Do you notice that?" She said, "I can't tell because I'm feeling so bad myself." And I left it at that.

When I see bumper stickers that say, "God bless America," I want to roll down my window and ask the people who have them, "What would you have God do for the rest of the world?" But I don't. The traffic light always changes before I have time.

I feel that it's important to engage in dialogue because—as we know if we have traveled much, or if we come from outside of the country—the level of geopolitical/historical information in this country is excruciatingly awful. And isn't it also the work of a teacher of awareness to engage others on that level of geopolitical awareness? I hope so.

Engagement is very human and straightforward and on the heart level. But I know that to launch into a dialogue with a stranger takes a little extra energy. It's bodhisattva work. Fortunately I've become fairly gregarious in recent years, so it's not that hard for me to do.

I also talk with my Iranian, Afghan, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi neighbors in Los Angeles and elsewhere on my travels. I will check in and ask, "How're you doing? Are you okay?" I wear a pendant around my neck with the opening lines of the Koran on it.

The Indians at my local coffee shop told me that the Bangladeshis at the 7-11 have been harassed. This is on Westwood Blvd. in West L.A. where you would not expect racism, or nationalism (or whatever it is we are experiencing), to raise its head.

Across the street from my office there's an Iranian grocery store where I often go, and the man who works there is an elderly, distinguished Persian gentleman. I told him, "On behalf of my fellow Americans, I want to apologize for any hassles you might have had." There was something gracious in the way he received that. With his daughter I have had conversa-

tions in which we both disclose our grief and fear as well as our discomfort with the U.S. response.

**TW: Here's another question: Is kindness a tool with any usefulness or relevance in dealing with terrorism?**

**Caitriona:** There's so much unkindness behind us already, and it's too late to expect the U.S. to start being kind in this situation. My feeling is that U.S. foreign policy has been the very epitome of unkindness for decades. Our work now must be to help avert or lessen the impact of the next crisis. To work on a personal level, to speak and live with kindness.

So for me kindness has to do with bringing economic and social justice issues into my dharma teaching and asking questions. My hope is that those who hear what I say will become part of a greater collective awareness and will influence what we do collectively.

We always have to default to kindness, whatever the circumstances. And of course, it's important that we're kind to ourselves, that we pay attention, that we take time out for ourselves, and don't just go about furiously organizing things.

Perhaps our kindness is also in not using our meditation practice merely to distance ourselves from difficult feelings and responsibilities. To look at causes and consequences. I would hope that this is always so, but certainly now more than ever.

Kindness isn't a warm, fuzzy feeling, but it is deeply rooted in the basic teaching of interdependent co-arising. Any action we might take toward the Taliban, for example, should be informed by knowing that the cadres of the Taliban were brought up as children in all-male refugee camps. They never had a mother or a sister. They never learned to read. They never could read the Koran. They were indoctrinated. They are broken people who were deprived of a childhood, like the Khmer Rouge, the children of Iraq, or the children in the inner cities here in the U.S. who are given guns at the age of eight. Understanding that is the beginning of kindness.

Perhaps there is a certain kindness, for those of us so ignorant of it, in studying the Koran. Anyone who loves the Buddhadharmā would surely be moved by the beauty of the Koran and the exquisite expression of nonduality that is found in it. The all-pervading radiance of Allah corresponds to the dharmakya. And many of us already have a taste for the devotional nondual spirit of Islam through the Persian poet Rumi, now that he is so popular in the West.

As I understand it, every chapter of the Koran begins with, "In the name of Allah the Merciful and the Compassionate." Let's feel that visceral spaciousness that opens up in the name of God the Merciful and the Compassionate, that tells us that no matter

what happens, no matter what the challenges we have to face, each moment of our lives is a gift. ❖

*Caitriona Reed is a Buddhist teacher rooted in both the Vietnamese Zen and Theravadin-Vipassana traditions, and a longtime BPF member. She and her partner, Michele Benzamin-Miki, are the founders and directors of Ordinary Dharma in Santa Monica and Manzanita Village Retreat Center in San Diego County.*

## Jack Kornfield

**TW: How do we think about our personal safety in these scary times, and what do we say to people who are thinking about buying gas masks and Cipro?**

**Jack Kornfield:** The Middle Eastern poet Hafiz says: “Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I’d like to see you in better living conditions.” The whole of Buddha’s teaching is an instruction for how we can step out of the small sense of self, the body of fear, and remember who we really are.

The insecurity that naturally comes from the terrorist attacks and the media frenzy that has followed them touches everyone. In particular, it touches the trauma that we carry, and our deepest fears. But the truth is that life *is* insecure, and has always been so, independent of what happened at the World Trade Center. The reality of existence is that it changes—that it is born, transforms, and dies. This is the central realization of the Buddha. So when people ask me about their fears, I remind them to breathe. I remind them to touch that place within that is timeless and compassionate, that can hold all the current events, and all the events of time. Otherwise we get lost in the small stories.

The real security is not found in gas masks or guns. Those amplify our fears and lead us down the road of insecurity. Real security is in returning to the understanding that—yes—there is

suffering and danger, and—yes—there is tremendous beauty and tremendous possibility for compassion. When Mark Twain said, “My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes—most of which never happened,” he was describing the false suffering of fear. Fear is always about something that hasn’t happened yet. Of course we need to care for ourselves responsibly, and even to defend ourselves and those we love when necessary. For example, we live in an earthquake zone, and it’s appropriate to get your house fitted for earthquakes. But from the information that I have, it seems that citywide poison gas is extremely unlikely at this time, and that a gas mask is not going to make you safer. To live a life of fear is to lose the freedom that is our birthright.

So much trauma has been touched off by this outer trauma that this now becomes more than ever the place that we have to practice. Our practice is to deal with our fears and our sorrow with tenderness, so that we don’t project them out into the world. To the extent that we’re willing to face our own pain, and only to that extent, can we be a source of peace for the world around us. So this is a really important time to do the inner work on the pain that has been activated:

collectively, in our communities, through our meditation practice, through the support of trauma and healing work in whatever form it takes.

A lot of vulnerability has been activated by these events. I sit with people and I say “Breathe. Can you hold your fear with a tender compassion? Can you let the vulnerability be a place that invites presence and freedom, rather than closing up and looking for a gas mask and Cipro? Can you stay with what Alan Watts called ‘the wisdom of insecurity?’”

Let’s breathe. Let’s look at how fear operates within ourselves, and then we can learn how it operates in the world outside us. This is the source of true compassion. ❖

*Jack Kornfield has been a dharma teacher for more than 25 years. He is the founder of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California. His most recent book is After the Ecstasy, the Laundry.*

**Our practice is to deal with our fears and our sorrow with tenderness, so that we don’t project them out into the world.**

### THE SAME SUNTAN

Burn  
Every address for  
God.  
Any  
Beloved  
Who has just one color of hair,  
One gender, one race,  
The same suntan all the time,  
One rule book,  
Trust me when I say,  
That man is not even  
Half a god  
And will only  
Cause you  
Grief.

—Hafiz

From *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky (Compass, 1999)