

# VOWING PEACE IN AN AGE OF WAR

By Alan Senauke

The following essay is based on an address delivered at the Dogen Symposium at Stanford University in October 1999. Eihei Dogen (1200–1254), poet and scholar, was the founder of the Soto school of Zen in Japan.

*Awake or asleep  
in a grass hut,  
what I pray for is  
to bring others across  
before myself*

—Zen Master Dogen

San Quentin Prison sits on a bare spit of land on San Francisco Bay. This is where the state of California puts prisoners to death. The gas chamber is still there, but for the last five years executions are done by lethal injection in a mock-clinical setting that cruelly imitates a hospital room. About 550 men and 11 women wait on California's death row, usually for 15 or 20 years. The voting public supports this state-sanctioned violence. In fact, no politician can get elected to higher office in California without appearing to support the death penalty.

On a stormy evening in March of 1999, several hundred people came to a vigil and rally to protest the execution of Jay Siripongs, a Thai national and a Buddhist, convicted of a 1983 murder in Los Angeles. Sheets of rain and a cold wind beat on everyone gathered at the prison gates: death penalty opponents, a handful of death penalty supporters, press, prison guards, and—right up against the gate, gazing at San Quentin's stone walls—75 or more Buddhist students and meditators bearing witness to the execution, sitting in the middle of anger, grief, painful words, and more painful deeds.

My robes were soaked through and my zafu sat in a deepening puddle. Across a chain link fence, 10 feet away, helmeted guards stood in a wet line, rain falling as hard on them as on ourselves. I felt a moment of deep connection: black-robed meditators sitting upright in attention in the rain, protecting beings as best we know how; black-jacketed police officers standing at attention in the rain, protecting beings as best they know how. Is there a difference between our activities? Yes, of course. But recognizing unity, even in the midst of difference and turmoil, is the essence of peacemaking. I imagine there were guards who were aware of this unity.

Our witness at San Quentin is part of a great vow that Zen students take. Bearing witness is the bodhisattva's

radical act of complete acceptance and non-duality. In this time and place it leads me to active resistance and social transformation. We vow to bear witness where violence unfolds. We vow to recognize the human capacity for violence within our own minds. We take true refuge in the Buddhadharmā, and seek to resolve conflicts. We vow never again to raise a weapon in anger or in complicity with the state or any so-called authority, but to intervene actively and nonviolently for peace, even where this may put our own bodies and lives at risk.

Who will take this vow? Am I ready? Are you?

## Carrying Forth Realization Into The World

Meditating on peace, echoes of Dogen ring in my ears. In "The Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance" Dogen writes, "You should benefit friend and enemy equally. You should benefit self and others alike." His radical language cuts to the heart of peace. His thirteenth-century world was different from our own, but the conflicts and twisted karma of suffering beings are the same.

In every age, the dream of peace and the practice of peace arise together with war and conflict. They are deeply related. In every age, war compels people to cover their hearts and act in unimaginably cruel ways. No other animal is capable of such cruelty. The color and shape of the victims, heroes, and perpetrators may differ, and the landscape itself, but the face of war is always ugly. The victims need our help. So do the perpetrators.

"Because there is the base, there are jewel pedestals, fine clothing." This is Shakyamuni Buddha's great teaching of

Dependent Origination: Because this is, that is. In an age of war this is an encouraging fact. Because there is war, I know there is also peace. But if I create a concept called peace and cling to it, conditions for war arise. So what am I to do? How can I sustain upright sitting in the midst of grief and conflict?

Let me offer three approaches to Buddhist peacemaking: Giving, Fearlessness, and Renunciation.

## Giving

The essential practice of peace is giving, or *dana paramita*. Giving attention, friendship, and material aid. Giving spiritual teachings and community. Giving is the first perfection and the first of the bodhisattva's four methods of guidance. It includes all other perfections. In "Bodaisatta Shisho-ho," Dogen advises us that:

Giving means non-greed. Non-greed means not to covet. Not to covet means not to curry favor. Even if you govern the Four Continents, you should always convey the correct teaching with non-greed.

*Across a chain link fence,  
helmeted guards stood in a wet  
line, rain falling as hard on  
them as on ourselves.*

Giving begins with oneself. I give myself to practice and practice offers itself to me. In my search for peace and liberation, I find there is always the smell of war. The taste of tears, corrosive doubt, and decay fall within the circle of my own body and mind. The war is here, right where I hide behind a mask of self-attachment, a shelter of privilege, cutting myself off from others. True giving is receiving the gift of zazen mind and passing it to others in words and deeds. It means not hiding.

We offer gifts and guidance in many forms. Dogen's four methods of guidance—giving, kind speech, beneficial action, and identity action—expand on the Buddha's own teaching of peace and the Foundations for Social Unity: *dana*, (generosity), *piyavaca* (kindly speech), *atthacariya* (helpful action), and *samanattata* (impartiality or equal participation). At the heart of these teachings is the understanding that peace is making connection. On a simple level,

material goods are given. On a higher level, teaching is shared. And on the highest level there is just connection, the endless society of being, the vast assembly of bodhisattvas. In Lewis Hyde's wonderful book *The Gift*, he describes dinner in a cheap restaurant in the South of France:

The patrons sit at a long communal table, and each finds before his plate a modest bottle of wine. Before the meal begins, a man will pour his wine not into his own glass but into his neighbor's. And his neighbor will return the gesture, filling the first man's empty glass. In an economic sense nothing has happened. No one has any more wine than he did to begin with. But society has appeared where there was none before.

When we really embody the bodhisattva vow to save all sentient beings, then zazen itself is a quiet and transformative gift. We receive it in gratitude from the buddha ancestors and from our all-too-human teachers, and we pass it on. Again, Lewis Hyde:

I would like to speak of gratitude as a labor undertaken by the soul to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. Between the time a gift comes to us and the time we pass it along, we suffer gratitude. Moreover, with gifts that are agents of change, it is only when the gift has worked in us, only when we come up to its level, as it were, that we can give it away again. Passing the gift along is the act of gratitude that finishes the labor.

During the NATO bombing in Serbia last year, a friend of mine proposed that the U.S. offer a four-year univer-

sity education in the United States to every Serbian and Albanian youth of military age. This would provide them with intellectual and technical tools for peace. It would be much cheaper than the billions of dollars spent on weaponry and death.

Such proposals are usually dismissed as naive. They fail to reckon with the power of arms dealers, the greed of corporations, and the fears of politicians that are sold as truth to ordinary people. But shouldn't we dare to be naive?

What is there to lose in speaking obvious truths? Can we skillfully speak the truth of *dana* to those in power?

### **Fearlessness**

The practice of peace is fearless. Again this comes back to *dana*—giving and giving up. To give anything to an enemy or opponent, one must be fearless. There is a story in "The Tiger's Cave" that has stayed with me for years:

When a rebel army swept into a town in Korea, all the monks of

the Zen temple fled except for the Abbot. The general came into the temple and was annoyed that the Abbot did not receive him with respect. "Don't you know," he shouted, "that you are looking at a man who can run you through without blinking?" "And you," replied the Abbot strongly, "are looking at a man who can be run through without blinking!" The general stared at him, made a bow, and retired.

Peace is not just quiet words and gentle demeanor. There is strength and sinew in it. I often think about Maha Ghosananda of Cambodia simply deciding to walk across his country in the midst of a violent civil war. His saffron robes were both refuge and target. I also think about Thich Nhat Hanh, whom Richard Baker described as "a cross between a cloud and a piece of heavy equipment." I have met these inspiring teachers and felt the steel of intention at the heart of their actions.

In meditation we become intimate with all kinds of fear. We come to see that fearing death or great loss is not so different from fearing more humble events like meeting one's teacher face to face or performing a new ceremony. Fear itself provides an opening into the unknown. If we continue to make peace in awareness of our own fear, there is room for everyone's fear to fall away. Mutual respect arises.

### **Renunciation**

A third element is renunciation, or relinquishment. Of course this is also inseparable from giving. Dogen writes, "If you study giving closely, you see that to accept a body and to give up the body are both giving."

Renunciation is a difficult principle for today's Western



*Vigil at the gates of San Quentin Prison.  
Photo by Alan Senauke*

Buddhists. The Buddhist path, as it exists in our materialistic world, gives mere lip service to renunciation. After mind and body drop away, the work has just begun.

The second bodhisattva precept is “not stealing,” or “not taking what is not given.” For people in the so-called developed world—America, Europe, Japan—this is almost impossible. Many of us, even priests, lead privileged lives in rich countries whose economies are built on stealing the limited resources of the earth and the labors of poor people around the world. The injustice of poverty and wealth is itself a kind of violence. Really, we can’t step outside of this system. But if each of us cultivates awareness of the links between consumption and violence, we can begin to make choices about what is of true value in our lives and how much we value the lives of others. Just at that point of relinquishment, renunciation is possible. But our efforts need to go further.

There is an old Quaker adage: “Speak truth to power.” The truth is that global corporations and armed nations further theft and oppression in the world. As renunciates, we must link up with each other, just as we join with and support each other in the zendo. Together we can deconstruct institutions built on greed, hatred, and delusion, and build new structures of liberation and spiritual value that belong to everyone. I honestly don’t know what this will look like, but I know it is the responsibility of all communities of faith to be present right in the middle of these changes.

### **An Army of Peace**

There is a movement among socially engaged Buddhists and people of all the faith traditions to create a nonviolent army of peace. How many lives might have been spared in Serbia and Kosovo if we had provided 10,000 witnesses instead of billions of dollars of bombs? How many people would benefit if we stood up to corruption, violence, and drug dealing in our own neighborhoods? The practice of “active nonviolence” includes bearing witness and peaceful intervention. In the midst of local, regional, religious, and national conflicts and wars, this peace army could replace armed soldiers, land mines, tanks, and jet fighters.

A peace army’s tools would be ears to hear, words to share, arms to embrace, and bodies to place in opposition to injustice. This army would be trained in meditation, mediation, reconciliation, and generosity. Its discipline would include patience, equanimity, selflessness, and a deep understanding of impermanence. Its “boot camp” would be very different than military training, but every bit as rigorous. Its social organization would include supply lines of food and medicine and clothing that could be shared with others.

A peace army might sit down on the battlefield, right in the line of fire, in order to save others. It is necessary to take risks in Buddhist practice. It is just as necessary to take risks in peacemaking. I think of this as a true

expression of identity action: identifying with soldiers, guerrillas, and displaced people, identifying with the bombed and shattered earth itself. Is this suicidal? Maybe so. In an extreme way Thich Quang Duc was practicing his vision of identity action when he publicly immolated himself in Vietnam in 1963, while his fellow monks and nuns were being targeted for repression and his country was in flames. Even today, this image shocks us and raises challenging questions. But I am not advocating suicide. Peace is the point. Identity action, as Dogen renders it, is the peace army’s rule of training.

### **Bodhisattvas Walk Among Us**

In any single breath each of us can become an enlightening being. In the next breath we might fall into our old habits of thoughtlessness and violence. Our meditation reveals that this choice is always with us. Our deluded actions contain seeds that can flower as either wondrous peace or terrible harm. Our vision can sustain the world if only we dare to look deeply. Our great ancestor, Layman Vimalakirti, described the bodhisattva path this way:

During the short aeons of swords,  
They meditate on love,  
Introducing to nonviolence  
Hundreds of millions of living beings.

In the middle of great battles  
They remain impartial to both sides;  
For bodhisattvas of great strength  
Delight in reconciliation of conflict.

In order to help the living beings,  
They voluntarily descend into  
The hells which are attached  
To all the inconceivable buddha-fields.

Two thousand years later we are still living up to the challenge, falling short, and vowing again. Let us take our vows seriously and be bodhisattvas. Respect our Dharma traditions and buddha ancestors, but be truly accountable to all beings. Please bring peace and zazen mind right into the middle of our messy, grieving, wondrous world. Watch your step. ❖

A number of people knowingly and unknowingly helped with the writing of this essay: Robert Aitken, Santikaro Bhikkhu, Laurie Senauke, Helen Schley, Greg Mello, Ken Jones, and Diana Winston. Nine bows to them.

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