



Mountains Talking

Lotus in the Flame Temple, Zen Center of Denver

Fall 2005

American Apartheid

By Danan Henry Roshi

What are the lessons of Hurricane Katrina? As Katrina mustered winds of up to 145 miles an hour and came ashore on the Gulf Coast, moving into Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama devastating everything in its path, my first feelings were in response to the nature of random chaos, ever present insecurity, and impermanence. Our homes, our family and friends, our possessions, and even our lives can be wiped away in an instant. Can we accept this; experience empathy for those who are in the grips of this experience, and lend a helping hand to victims of the hurricane?

After the “evacuation” of New Orleans, followed by the collapse of levees in two places, the city, which is situated entirely below sea level, filled with water. As you know, all power failed and the water was soon drastically polluted. Temperatures were in the nineties with a high humidity index. Some of the people who could not or did not evacuate were rescued or forced from their homes with no food or drinking water or adequate shelter, while others died in the rubble of collapsed apartment buildings and houses, or drowned and floated in the polluted waters.

The next day the television screen revealed to us, and to the whole world, a dimension of the tragedy beyond the fact of the destructive power of natural forces. What we were staring at on our TV screens was an American tragedy of race and class. We were watching tens of thousands of impoverished African-Americans left in the city in the clutches of disaster. We did not see white, affluent Americans, except an occasional few who chose not to evacuate. The federal government and state and local governments, supposedly prepared through the mechanisms of Homeland Security and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and with three days warning by meteorologists and predictions by engineers regarding the strong possibility that the levees would fail, made no effort to provide evacuation for the most vulnerable segment of the New Orleans population - poor black children, women, and men. They were left there to die. Many did die for lack of food, water, and medicine. And the grief of those who

were unable to find their children and other relatives was overwhelming. What we, and the world were and are witnessing, is American apartheid.

I am grateful that the cameras began rolling before Katrina’s landfall and have continued to the present, showing us, and the world, exactly what is happening. With the exception of Fox, the media woke up to our American apartheid and held up the mirror. Jason DeParle began his first *New York Times* account with, “The white people got out. Most of them anyway...it was mostly black people who were left behind. Poor black people, growing more hungry, sick and frightened by the hour as faraway officials counseled patience and warned that rescues take time.” Brian Wolshon, a consultant on the state’s evacuation plan, told the *Times*, the city’s evacuation plan paid little attention to its “low-mobility” population – the old, the sick and the poor with no cars or other way to get out of town. African-American Aaron Broussard, president of Jefferson Parish, said on *Meet the Press*, “We have been abandoned by our own country.” In an interview with House majority leader Tom DeLay, African-American MSNBC anchor, Lester Holt, asked, “People are now beginning to voice what we’ve all been seeing with our own eyes – the majority of people left in New Orleans are black, they are poor, they are the underbelly of society. When you look at this, what does this say about where we are as a country and where our government is in terms of how it views the people of this country?” When DeLay responded with. “We’re doing a wonderful job, and we are an incredibly compassionate people” – Holt refused to back off. “Those people at the Superdome, those people at the Convention Center. [with no power, sanitary facilities, food and water] They’re largely black, and they’re largely poor, and they’re largely left behind. What does that say about our country right now and how it treats our citizens?” CNN’s Chris Lawrence, described “babies 3, 4, 5 months old, living in these horrible conditions... These people are being forced to live like ani-

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Sangha News

Membership Structure Change

Last April, the Center implemented a new policy of opening all sittings, ceremonies, and talks to the public, with zazen instruction being offered at evening sittings and Sunday talks. Previously, it was necessary to attend an introductory seminar to attend most events at the Center, so this has been a major change in how we interact with the public and introduce new people to the practice.

As a consequence of this change, our membership structure, which consists of friends, associate members, and supporting members, is no longer suitable for our present situation. The distinction between friends and associate members is vague, while the demands of supporting membership are prohibitive for many. To address this, the Board of Directors is in the process of developing a simplified membership structure that better addresses the current realities of our Sangha. At the time of press, a few details are still being worked out. The following is an overview of what has been agreed upon so far.

Rather than having a multilevel membership structure (associate and supporting membership), those who are members of the Center will simply be referred to as members. The basic requirements for membership are attendance at an introductory seminar; applying for membership, including an initial and final membership interview; being able to execute zendo forms and sit properly; and paying monthly dues. *Everyone who is currently a supporting member of the temple fits this designation.* It is not necessary to be a member to practice at the temple, as most events are open to all. Members have distinct privileges with regard to training opportunities (such as dokusan, Monastery Without Walls, ordination, etcetera) and reduced fees for sesshin.

As the category of associate member is being eliminated, those who are currently associate members will need to decide whether or not they wish to become a member, or practice as a friend of the Center. To become a member, simply fill out a membership application and mail it to the Center, or drop it off in the donation box. You will then be contacted by the Head of the Zendo to schedule a membership interview. Following the meeting, you will begin paying dues, and sign up for one of the monthly "New Member Reviews" to provide further instruction and answer questions. An Entering the Gate ceremony is then scheduled for the next teisho to formally welcome the new member into the Sangha. There is no longer a "membership track" of practice requirements to complete,

but prospective members must learn Zendo forms and how to sit properly.

Friends of the Center are welcome to attend all sittings, ceremonies, talks, discussions, and social events. They are requested to make a donation of their own choosing each time they visit. They are welcome to go to daisan, but are only allowed one or two dokusans with Roshi.

A complete text of the new membership policy will be sent out when it is finalized and approved by the Board. If you have any questions or comments, please speak with Shonen Dunley or a member of the Board.

Dues Increase

At the September 7 budget-planning meeting, the Board decided to raise monthly dues by \$10 per month, effective on the first of October. This means that in-town supporting members will now be paying \$45, and out-of-town members (those living more than 100 miles from the temple) will now be paying \$30 per month.

The last time the Board raised membership dues was in 1997. Since that time, the Center has moved to a much larger facility and has greater expenses, particularly heating costs. Additionally, income from dues, donations, sesshin, and seminars have all decreased in the past year.

It is hoped that this increase in dues will not be an undue burden on anyone. When adjusted for inflation, the relative cost remains nearly the same as it was in 1997. As is our policy, dues can be adjusted or even waived for those facing financial hardship. Please contact the Office if this is your situation.

Board of Directors Election

An election for the Board of Directors will be held at the upcoming Sangha meeting, scheduled for Sunday, November 6. The first terms of two members of the Board, Karin Kempe and Ken Morgareidge, will be expiring at that time. Both of

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The Lotus in the Flame Temple, Zen Center of Denver:

3101 West 31st Ave. Denver, CO 80211
303-455-1500 (Tel.), 303-455-1062 (Fax)

E-mail: office@zencenterofdenver.org

Website: www.zencenterofdenver.org

Spiritual Director: Rev. Danan Henry Roshi

them are willing to serve for a final second term if it be the will of the Sangha.

At the same time, anyone in the Sangha who wishes may run for these seats. A nominating committee, consisting of Joel Tagert and Becky Wethington, has been formed to take names of candidates for the election. If you would like to nominate yourself or another person, please contact them at tagert@mscd.edu or rlwethington@chdmeridian.com, or speak with them personally. Nominations may also be taken from the floor at the meeting.

Candidates for the Board must have been a supporting member for at least one year, be at least 21 years of age, and not be a spouse, partner, or family member of an existing Board member.

Silent Auction

On Saturday, November 5, from 4-8:30pm, the Center's Prison Dharma Project will hold a silent auction to raise funds for the legal defense of Lupe Rodriguez, a student of Roshi who is currently serving a life sentence in Texas and will be up for parole in mid-2006. The event will feature guest speakers, delicious food, and many fine goods and services to bid on. Everyone is encouraged to come, and to bring family and friends. The committee will be contacting members in the near future for items and services they might like to offer for the auction. More information about Lupe and the work being done on his behalf can be found at Jann Griffiths' website: www.twocompassionatehands.com.

Zendo Forms Talk and Discussion

Two talk and discussions on the subject of zendo forms have been scheduled for October 11 and December 13. During these discussions, we will take a closer look at the various forms we use in the zendo, such as where they come from, why we use them, and how to do them. Newer members and friends are especially encouraged to come.

Kyudo Workshop

The Denver kyudo (Zen archery) group that has been meeting on Wednesday evenings at the Center will be offering an introductory workshop in November. The workshop will take place on two consecutive Saturdays, November 12 and 19, and will introduce beginners to the fundamentals of kyudo. More information about the workshop will be forthcoming. Please contact Yushin (Greg) Cicciu if you have any questions.

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mals." And Paula Zahn of CNN to Michael Brown (FEMA Director), "...You said that part of the blame for the – what you think will be an – enormous death toll in New Orleans rests with the people who did not evacuate the city, who didn't heed the warnings. Is that fair to blame the victims, many of whom tell us they had no way out, they had no cars of their own, and that public assistance wasn't provided to get them out of the city?"

I do not think it is enough for us to simply feel sorry for those impoverished African-Americans, and other impoverished Americans, who had no means of escape and thus suffered and died in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. It's not enough to donate \$20 to the Red Cross and go about our business as privileged Americans unconcerned with the tragedy of race and class in our own country. We are a country divided by race and class. I think it is a real part of our Zen practice to investigate and search out the causes of racism and poverty with a clear, compassionate, inquiring mind and to expose the causes of racism and poverty in ourselves and in our institutions.

Political analyst and social issues commentator Earl Ofari Hutchinson writes, "New Orleans is the classic tale of two cities: one showy, middle-class and white; the other poor, downtrodden and low-income black. It was a city that didn't wait for a disaster to happen; grinding poverty and neglect had already wreaked that disaster on thousands. . . There is an enormous disparity between the rich and the poor, with people of color at the bottom of the economic totem pole. Tax cuts have redistributed billions to the rich and corporations. The Iraq war has drained billions from cash-starved job training, health and education programs. Increased dependence on foreign oil has driven gas and oil prices skyward. Corporate downsizing, outsourcing and industrial flight have further fueled American's poverty crisis, which has slammed young blacks, like those who ransacked stores in New Orleans, the hardest of all."

I believe what is once again being revealed to us, this time by Katrina and its aftermath, is that our government is not primarily concerned with the majority of US citizens, but is focused on the support of the industrial-corporate-military complex and the rich. And this is not a matter of this particular administration or of one political

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party as compared to the other. It is simply the story of our nation, how it emerged and continued to develop over a period of 225 years.

There will now be congressional and independent investigations revealing and investigating the wholesale irresponsibility of our government before, during, and immediately after the hurricane. Many are deeply ashamed of our government, and numerous pundits insist that there is a very strong possibility that President Bush will become politically impotent and finish out his term in disgrace.

But our government cannot carry on irresponsibly without our collusion. It is the way we think and feel and talk and buy – the way we live - that enables our society and government to marginalize others, to make blacks and other poor ethnic minorities less valuable and even invisible, to the point that we don't really see them and thus leave them helplessly in the path of a hurricane. When President Bush was looking down on the Gulf Coast from the air, he said that it looked like it had been hit with "the worst kind of weapon." "The President is right," responded Representative Dennis Kucinich, "Indifference is a weapon of mass destruction." Indifference is born of the Great De-lusion of humanity, the notion of a self-apart. Each of us is

responsible. We must take responsibility and do what we can to eliminate racism and class discrimination by becoming acutely aware of how we contribute to them, and by changing our conduct, including speaking out against our government when it wages war on the poor in our country and abroad with its cruel and mean spirited social, economic, and military policies. Our spiritual practice cannot be only for the purpose of addressing our personal distress and anxiety. It is up to us to bring a spiritual perspective of ahimsa (non-harming) to the heart of social, political, economic, and environmental problems of the world as well.

May all beings be happy. May all beings be free from strife and disease. May all beings be free from suffering. May all beings attain peace. When we realize the deep import of the Buddha's words here, that is, when we intuit the interdependence or oneness of all existence, then no one or no thing is excluded from our hearts, and the source of racism and class discrimination comes to an end, and we are able to more easily act decently and responsibly toward all that breathes and does not breathe. But we can't wait for that experience of full enlightenment. Imperfect as our understanding is, we must act to end racism and class discrimination now.

Zen Center of Denver
3101 West 31st Ave.
Denver, CO 80211