

Living in Chicago in 1966, I had marched with Dr. Martin Luther King and served as a housing tester. A white person (usually a college student or young professional) would look at an apartment available for rent -- but not commit to rent the apartment. That white tester was followed in a very short time by a black tester to see if the apartment was still available. The income and other data were the same so that race would be the only clear reason for acceptance or rejection by the realtor, thus revealing racial bias.

During those heady times, I embraced the political ideals of Dr. King, but it was not until some fifty years later when I heard Hozan Alan Senauke speak at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe that I begin to learn, study, and appreciate the spirituality that formed the true bulwark of Dr. King's social action. Thank you, Hozan, for that gift.

After Hozan's presentation I read Dr. King's famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in which Dr. King observes, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." I use the present tense when talking about Dr. King's words, for his words are as meaningful today as they were some fifty-six years ago.

Today I look at Dr. King's work and words both as a Buddhist and as a citizen. Now some fifty years after marching with him, I have begun to understand and appreciate the ecumenical essence of spirituality that is found in Dr. King's Baptist faith and see the similarity with the tenets I follow as a Zen practitioner.

Dr. King's statements and our Zen practice can both be seen from inter-religious and social activist perspectives. Dr. King's Christian theology is reflected in his earlier 1962 sermon, "The Levels of Love" delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia as a part of its regular Sunday worship. In this everyday not-for-the-media sermon, Dr. King states that the highest level of love is best described as *agape*, the Greek word for "love" used in Greek translations of early Biblical writings.

*Agape*, states Dr. King, is an unmotivated, spontaneous overflowing that seeks nothing in return. "The greatness of it is you love everyman, not for your sake but for his sake. It becomes the love of God operating in the human heart." I strongly recommend going online and reading this wonderful sermon.

As a preacher, Dr. King fervently called us to come to God through each other. We are tied to each other by God's love and the Divine spark that dwells within each of us. We are not separate, but bound to both God and to each other.

As a practicing Buddhist, I see this same theological theme in Mahayana Buddhism and specifically in Soto Zen practice. Products of our corporeal senses in the physical world of phenomena, we appear as separate beings, but in the actuality of greater consciousness we are one being expressing our dependent co-arising. Ultimately, we are never separate. Thus, as Zen practitioners, we chant not for ourselves, but for the benefit of all beings. Thus, as Zen practitioners, we vow to uphold the second and third pure precepts; "I vow to embrace and sustain all good" and "I vow to embrace and sustain all beings." From both theological perspectives, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality."

From a social activist perspective, Dr. King, along with Rosa Parks, Roy Abernathy, and John Lewis (among others) studied social activism and leadership at the Highlander Folk School (later changed to the Highlander Research and Education Center).

Founded in 1932 by an activist, academic, and Methodist clergyman, Highlander's philosophy was shaped by the ideas of Josiah Royce, a prominent American philosopher in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. It was Royce who created the term “Beloved Community” – a term Dr. King later used during the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. This was a philosophy based on the premise that all people err. Since we are all imperfect, Royce believed that rather than floundering in our individual senses of righteousness and misunderstanding, the purpose of the beloved community was to find the *commonality* we all share and to bring out the best in each individual. To “agree to disagree” misses the point – what was truly needed was the search to find the common threads in each of us as we wove our social fabric.

Off the cushion, what does this mean to Zen practitioners as we live in a social system where some people benefit at the expense of others. The seeds of exploitation are the grasping nature of our desires, which is hallmark of the second Noble Truth. In the Christian ideals of Dr. King this is proclaimed in Romans 13:8-10 – “Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandments are summed up in this phrase, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Justice and exploitation, by definition, are incompatible. The Christian themes of God’s love of all and of the Divine within are not expressed or realized through exploitation. As Zen practitioners, our Mahayana tradition is not compatible with exploitation. In accepting the underpinnings of these two perspectives, justice can only be achieved by acknowledging our inherent mutuality and theologically based social interdependence. This is the legacy of Dr. King; this is the essence of our practice.

The challenge in manifesting these ideals, however, is harder. It is easy for many of us to hate Donald Trump and his extremist followers. But as Dr. King himself says, “Hate begets hate.” There are times when some of Trump’s statements or policies seem so hateful and biased, racially or otherwise, that I react emotionally and literally want to tear him limb from limb. But in so doing, I let dependent co-arising fall by the wayside. I violate the sixth, seventh, and eight grave precepts – not dwelling on the faults of other, not praising self at the expense of others, and not harboring ill will. I confuse the actions of Donald Trump with his being.

These actions of Trump’s come out of his fear, pain, and delusion. He plays on the fears and illusionary desires of others to soothe his own pain. But in so doing, Trump incites others into actions of harm that inflict pain on others. Both Trump and his followers are attempting to soothe their own pain. Such actions are harmful – nor do they do truly soothe the source of their pain. In their delusion, Trump and his followers do not embrace and sustain all beings – and in so doing are captive to their desires. They do not see the connection and equanimity which bring the end of suffering. They do not see the second and third Noble Truths of the cause of suffering and its end. The question is within our own hearts: are we doing the same thing, are we missing the connection and praising ourselves for being just, being better than those who support Trump?

The men who killed the innocents in the Thousand Oaks, California bar and at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh were isolated men with no sense of connection, no sense of dependent co-arising. Their motivations may have been different, but their pain was the same. The question then becomes how each of us can live up to both the tenets of our practice and the ideals of Dr. King. How can we create a beloved community? How can we bring out the best in each other? How can we fulfill our vows to embrace and sustain *all* beings?

These are the demands of both Dr. King and our practice. The work for us each as individuals will be different, yet it will be the same. It may not be easy, but as practitioners we must look inside and see the Buddha nature in ourselves and in everyone, to see our ultimate connection. To not do so, to stay in our

illusion of separateness can only result in a conclusion Dr. King himself stated – “We must all learn to live together as brothers or die alone as fools.”