

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CHILDREN OF BODHI

May everyone everywhere be bountifully showered by the Great Dharma Cloud of Life-Giving Wisdom! May we children of Bodhi be of true heart!

Dear Friends:

Surely our generation has a vision. We could say it is a timeless and universal vision, but each generation and each individual must give it a different expression. It seems to arise more from the heart than the mind, and expressing it is not easy, since no verbal formula is near at hand. But express it we must, and I intend to here take my turn in giving it a good try.

The way I would put it is that "We are all children of Bodhi," or to use slightly different words, "We are all Bodhi brothers and sisters together."

It seems to me that is the spirit of our generation, even though it may be an ideal only dimly perceived, and our words may vary. I might use a Buddhist terminology here, but others might prefer to say "children of God," "children of the Light," and so on. But I think at heart the spirit of it would be the same.

Sometimes, however, our vision seems so far away and unattainable that we begin to have our doubts about the "children of Bodhi." We begin to wonder why we are so isolated into a million and one rivaling sects and organizations, and why at the personal level we are so callous and blind towards each other. Then again it may be true that Bodhi is actually almost everywhere, if we but have the eyes to see it. At least then, let us not be too hasty in our judgment.

In all our confusion, I think this much is clear--It may not happen very often, but to meet another child of Bodhi and to realize we are truly brothers and sisters is surely a beautiful thing.

Sometimes such relationships last a lifetime, but more often it is a fleeting thing, as when two pilgrims' paths cross for a moment. Certainly there is that dimension to all of our lives, and in spite of our best planning we don't really know what the next step may bring.

On our pilgrimage through life, we may meet our Bodhi fellows in surprising ways. For example it might be the fellow sitting next to you on the bus. Or take the old man I met in the park the other day. A simple and unpretentious fellow he was, but I felt an immediate and deeper sense of brotherhood with him than with many who go around giving professional speeches on the subject.

It is difficult to say why that sense of kinship happens. At root it doesn't seem to have much to do with belonging to some particular group or religious organization. It might help somewhat, but something deeper is involved. Nor does it seem to make much difference whether one is a file-clerk, a monk, a landlord, or other of our disguises.

I for one have finally become convinced that what we most need to do is to truly open our hearts to each other. In a world of confusion and doubt, I think we need more the language of the heart. I think we would then find our true brothers and sisters, maybe not everywhere, but at least now and then. Then too, when we children do truly meet, I'm certain we will instinctively

sense an alliance hitting the mark so deeply and surely that it will put all else to shame.

I don't think we are nearly bold enough in our vision. We seem to have become defensive, and are so timid and cramped. Sometimes we don't even dare to guess that we are all really children of Bodhi. We seem to prefer to limit such to a few saintly types, and how could that be you and me.

Saint Francis on the other hand was a bold one. He would preach not only to the likes of you and me, but to animals and birds as well. I dare say it was something about how we all, birds included, are children of God. He would not have us doubt ourselves so much. Surely we ought to at least be as good as the birds, although we can't help but occasionally wonder about the merit of our own species.

Saint Francis seemed to have a sense of a deep kinship with all life. In such a spirit then perhaps we should also include robins, raccoon, and deer in our vision. In Buddhism too there is a similar attitude towards nature. I must confess though, I have never seen a temple that truly welcomed raccoon and deer. Usually it is much worse than that, and only members of a certain sect, race, or class are really welcomed, although there may be pretensions to the contrary. Nor are children especially welcomed, except as future contributors to the church, and of course not hoboes and bums. Now I ask you, what kind of "kinship with all life" is that?

Maybe we robins, raccoon, deer, children, hoboes, and bums ought to all get together and make the great open sky our temple. That would be a real revolution for you.

I'm not being just playful here, I'm being quite serious. Furthermore I'm quite convinced that we should make some special effort to include hoboes and bums. After all there were some really great ones in the old days, and it is often rather difficult to tell the difference between a bum and a saint. Someone may look like a bum, but, who knows, he might turn out to be a great Zen Master or something someday, although I do hope he wouldn't then promptly start strutting around like a peacock and giving long-winded speeches.

I find it quite amazing how in the old days so closely intertwined were the meanings of the terms "monk," "hobo," "bum," and often "saint." Go back far enough, and a monk is a homeless wanderer or hermit, a beggar with all his belongings in a sack over his shoulder, and often wearing rags sewn together in some roughly presentable way. His virtue was poverty, and hopefully humility, and both monk and hobo willingly depend on the kindness of the great open sky and their fellow human beings for their physical well-being. And for both too it is an inner nobility that makes all the difference, and nobody can quite explain how it is so.

I keep on thinking about the old "beatnik" days. The name of one of Jack Kerouac's books is the "Dharma Bums." It seems to be a term which so rightly names our own generation of the children of Bodhi, and in its own way blesses us all. I might prefer to say "Bodhi Bum," or "Bodhi Hobo," but that is a minor point.

I must confess I am somewhat enthusiastic on the subject. Indeed I do honestly believe that "Dharma-

bumming," or "Bodhi-hoboing," relates in a very real way to our roots way back when. Take Buddhism for example. Back in the old days in India and China it was possible for Bodhi children to go "hoboing" from one end of the country to the other, and be most welcome to stay at almost any temple as long as they had any kind of room. Hinduism and Christianity have a similar tradition, and many other religions as well. These days, however, such an open and free spirit seems to have just about disappeared in an ocean of restrictive and clannish sectarianism, to my immense regret.

I think we Bodhi children ought to stay closer to the origins of things. These days we are far too civilized. We have all these temple systems to support, moral codes to abide by, dogmatic theological systems, orthodox standards to be met, vast hierarchies of priestly rank and power, endless ceremonies and ritual to be performed in only the most exact and professional manner, missionaries to support, and we are all drowned in endless appeals for more and more money to keep the whole thing going. Furthermore, we are becoming so stuffed with the trivia of such it is beginning to come out of our ears. Obviously it is all too much for us, and we can't handle it at all well. We don't need yet more of that kind of thing; on the contrary, what we need is more children of Bodhi, hoboos, and bums.

Now that would be a real brotherhood and sisterhood for you, and a real egalitarian fraternity. For example, have you ever heard of one hobo charging another money for some good counsel even when of the profoundest nature, or charging rent merely because he has enough extra roof to keep the rain off of some poor soul's head? Have you ever heard of a hobo so busy with very important projects that he doesn't really have time for anything or anyone else any more? No of course not. What we need is more hoboos.

I don't claim there is any direct correspondence, but it is certainly interesting that in Japanese the word "hobo" is a compound of "Dharma or Truth" (Ho), and "Treasure or Jewel" (Bo). Thus "Ho-Bo" means "Dharma Treasure" or "Dharma Jewel." Surely we would all agree, what we need is more hoboos!

Another thing in favor of hoboos is that they have a way of sticking up for each other. Perhaps they need to since they do not belong to some powerful or prestigious group. Our own situation is not so different and we might well follow their example. I suppose some would say we ought to be some super-organization or something, but I am inclined to think we ought to thank our lucky stars that we are not. Think of all the trouble it saves us. If we can only stick up more for each other, it ought to work out just fine.

I think in some deep sense we are all "Bodhi pilgrims," or if you prefer, "hoboos." In some way we are all "loners." Someone may be leading a quite settled and successful life, crowded with people and friends, yet in a more inward sense feel quite alone, like a pilgrim not quite knowing where one's true brothers and sisters may be. Another way of putting it is that "We are all born alone and we die alone," as is often said in Buddhism. A simple truth, but actually it takes quite a fellow to really face up to it.

It is surprising too how often the lives of the saints have such a lonely quality. One would think that they would be surrounded by a host of brothers and sisters in the truest sense, but in actuality they so often lead the life of a hermit, and to an amazing degree are wanderers and loners. Yet they are the ones most remembered and loved, perhaps because not far underneath we too are pilgrims and loners.

Herman Hesse's novels here come to mind, for example "Siddartha" and "Steppenwolf." So well do they convey the sense that life itself is a holy pilgrimage. I think too that in essence that is what Jack Kerouac is trying to express in his novels the "Dharma Bums" and "On The Road."

I'm not trying to say that one is completely alone as a pilgrim. On the contrary, there is the deepest kind of friendship, although it is often a momentary thing. We all meet a fellow pilgrim now and then on our journey through life. When it happens, let us open our hearts more to each other.

Indeed what a joy it is to meet another child of Bodhi! Sometimes it even seems to call for a shout of surprise and delight, not that we then need to go around blowing our conch shells or something, for usually it is a much more subtle and gentle thing. But even so, upon occasion let us give in to the urge to hail a fellow pilgrim in some special kind of way. Let us call each other for example "Brother" or "Sister." If it comes from the heart, I'm sure it will go a long long way.

Of course it is the spirit of it all that really makes the difference, and the words we use do not matter so much. We might too hail each other as "Friend," as the Quakers often do, although they seem to be rather stiff about such these days. The Baptists on the other hand are doing quite well, and I am continually amazed at how they call each other "Brother" and "Sister" with such a free and easy warmth and grace, often to the envy of my more pompous and cumbersome soul. I would hope that we Bodhi children might do half as well. I might add that I for one sometimes find it quite easy and natural to say "Hi Pilgrim!" although I am not at all the outgoing type.

Each generation seems to have the right to have a few special vocabulary items that uniquely express its own characteristics. "Children of Bodhi" might be such a term for us. Ideally we might even have some special kind of sign of recognition of our own. Since I have been maintaining that we should all be more bold in our vision, a few of us then are so bold as to propose such a sign for your consideration. In searching for a special word, we have discovered one we feel is quite appropriate, both as a way we might hail each other and as a kind of nickname for the "Children of Bodhi." We propose then that the word "Bo" be our sign. It happens to be a short form of "Bodhi," and it has a range of meanings that seem to fit us amazingly well. Webster's unabridged dictionary offers the following three meanings:

Bo 1: A short form for "Bodhi," as in "Bo Tree."

Bo 2: Used in informal address, meaning "fellow" or "buddy."

Bo 3: A short form for "hobo," and perhaps "bozo."

All three meanings could then be combined to form our own definition of "Bo." The plural would be "Boes." Depending on the context it might then variously mean "Bodhi-buddy," "Bodhi-friend," "Bodhi-hobo," "Bodhi-pilgrim," "Bodhi-bum," and so on.

Such a sign of recognition might be thought of as the beginning of a kind of "ritual" for us. But if we are going to have any kind of ritual it had best be of the most primal sort, and very very simple. Otherwise it will soon require a special class of professional priests to manage the whole thing and, as I see it, that would be the beginning of the end for us.

Fortunately the word "Bo" does have a kind of primal quality. It is often an interjection of surprise, being an alternate form of "Boo!" It even has a sense of

sudden awakening. It also has a scary sense to it, as meeting a hobo is sometimes a little bit scary. Indeed, meeting one face to face is often quite startling, and we might stand a little in awe of them. But we Boes don't really mean to scare anybody. On the contrary, we wish that everybody would join in the fun.

Anyway, we are all children of Bodhi, so let us not be so tight lipped. Let us give in more to the urge to hail a fellow pilgrim with such as "Bo," "Brother," "Sister," "Friend," and maybe even "Pilgrim."

At first glance one might think of us Boes as some new idea, and at least a little bit odd. Actually, however, we are a very old tradition, and have a rich heritage of our own. That may not be very obvious initially, and it requires some personal investigation, but I think it can be very rewarding. For example there may be some true Bodhi-child of long ago with whom one may feel a very special sense of kinship, almost as if he or she were one's "patron saint." Usually we leave such intuitions neglected, perhaps because our rational side is somewhat skeptical about it all. On the other hand the heart knows such realities full well, and here as elsewhere I'd rather trust in the heart.

Indeed, what a joy it can be to discover a true Bodhi-child of some distant century. Take Han-shan and Shih-te for example, what a marvelous discovery they were for me. Two playful lunatic Bodhi-fellows they were, and holy bums. It seemed to me they breathed the very spirit of the Buddha Dharma. Although they were way back in ninth-century China, I feel closer to them than to many of those presently around me. So maybe they are my "patron saints." Anyway the least I can do is to follow my heart and honor them in some special way. I'm sure that almost everyone who knew them would love them.

For me another great discovery was Pu-tai. Who says a wandering hobo need be so dreary and glum, on the contrary, he is a marvelous and happy-go-lucky fat fellow. Just looking at him alone ought to give you happiness and good fortune. He is often called the "Happy Buddha," and is portrayed with a big hobo sack over his shoulder, not filled with his worldly possessions as we more stingy-minded fellows might think, but with a wondrous assortment of goodies and toys for children. He passes them out on his wanderings through the countryside, often pausing to join in the fun himself. It seems to me he might even be the original model for Santa Claus. Children of Bodhi, let's not miss out on this one. Rub his belly, and it will bring you good luck.

We need to open ourselves more to our heritage. I think of it as a kind of voyage of personal discovery. Of course for each one of us it would be different, but that is as it should be.

If we turn to Christianity, I'm sure there would be many more discoveries awaiting. Saint Francis for example might be one that many of us would share, and love. There is a universal quality about him that seems to transcend the boundaries separating different religions. Take us Bodhi-children of San Francisco for example. I and quite a few others are Buddhists, yet we are quite proud and tickled-pink that our city is named after him, and that he is in a way our "patron saint." It is with a real joy that we add a candle or two in his honor. True Bodhi Child!

One way of thinking about our heritage is that it is handed down to us from the past to the present, and only in the most orthodox and official manner, as in apostolic or patriarchal succession. But I have in mind here something quite different. Rather it works backwards from

the present to the past. It arises in the present from one's own heart and is "bestowed" upon the past, spontaneously and naturally. It is akin to an act of love, rather than some legalistic system. In this way then we could each find our own sense of kinship with the past, and I'm sure it would be far deeper than any dogmatic formula fed to us on a spoon. Surely it is clear that the "True Children of Bodhi" can indeed be a glorious pantheon.

In one way such a heritage would be universal, since we all can't help but share in such figures as Christ and Buddha. At the more individual level of our own lives we of course differ. But I don't think this is some great problem. I find that if I here listen to my own heart, it willingly leads the way, and I find a deep urge to bow and light a candle or two in honor of Alan Watts and Shunryu Suzuki, who must have been kind and great teachers indeed to be able to penetrate my thick skull. My own heritage would go on to include D.T. Suzuki, Nyogen Senzaki, Miguel Molinos, and more recently two poets, Jack Kerouac and Lew Welch, who were to me Bodhi brothers in the truest sense. Such is my heritage, and to deny it would be to deny my own heart. Why should we deny that we love.

What a joy it can be to feel a sense of kinship with such fellows as St. Francis and Pu-tai. I sometimes even feel an irrational urge to shout to them across the centuries. Here again I think some primal ritual is involved. Again I would hope we could keep it very simple, and not get trapped by some verbal formula. Fortunately, instead of shouting, I find that simply lighting a candle in someone's honor, maybe accompanied by a bow of some sort, to be more deeply expressive of the heart than mere words. Done in a spirit of gratitude and love, it seems a good way for us.

Like any ritual, however, it could also so easily turn into a lifeless formula at any moment. My only answer to that problem is to simply stop when it happens. It is better to wait until the moment again seems right, and then start again from the beginning. That may upset one's schedule, but it is far better to follow the inner spirit than some lifeless form.

One of the things I'm trying to suggest in all of this is that we stay closer to the beginnings of things, and closer to some primal level of reality. That would also imply that we should be more like children. What we need is more children, not professionals.

There is another area of ritual in which I think we should be more direct and childlike, although it usually seems to be a more professional kind of concern.

How does one become a "child of Bodhi"? Traditionally this would involve some rite of initiation, ordination, or such. But since we children are not some kind of organization or religious sect, what are we going to do? There isn't any "place" we can go to for such. Furthermore we are all already children of Bodhi, so there really isn't anything to "join." Yet we need something here. The way I would put it is "we need a ritual that would confirm and deepen the truth that one is indeed a child of Bodhi, and that we are all Bodhi brothers and sisters together."

The trouble with ordinary rituals of this nature is that it all seems to happen so mechanically. Maybe it wasn't always so, but these days the focus seems to be mostly on externals, and not on one's very own life. Often they even stuff you into some uniform and tell you what to think every step of the way. Worse still it may be all gibberish and you are supposed to keep your mind blank, if you ever had one in the first place. Most of us

then have the good sense to avoid the whole thing from the start, although I admit for some it is a beautiful thing.

I think we Boes are looking for something deeper here, although it may be a vague and mostly hidden urge. Anyway it should be something that opens us up more fully to life, not something that closes us down. It should be more harmonious and natural, maybe like a flower blooming.

Well Lo and Behold, we Bodhi children are not lost in the wilderness here, for there does seem to be such a ritual, and it fits our needs almost perfectly. Furthermore it is in a sense a universal tradition existing in Christianity and Buddhism, and in one way or another, in many other religions as well.

What I am referring to here is usually called "self-ordination." In Buddhism for example it is usually found in association with awakening of Bodhi-mind and the great vows one would take as a Bodhisattva. I would call it a primal ritual, naturally and spontaneously arising from one's very own heart, and with one's very own vows. One might take the Buddha as one's witness, or sometimes instead the Great Earth and the Open Sky, which should have its appeal for those among us more naturalistically inclined.

I think many of us in essence have already done something like that in the course of our lives, only in a more natural and less dramatic kind of way. It might be not so focussed, and more scattered into a rare moment here and there, so we might not then think of it as "self-ordination," but that is what I would call it.

All of us take vows too in one way or another, maybe especially as children. For me such an occasion was when my dog Jerry died. I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday, but it is so personal a thing I don't quite dare or know how to speak of it. Such vows too often seem to be of the silent kind, going beyond mere words. We may not remember them very clearly, but even so they may shape our entire lives.

It is this kind of thing that I think self-ordination is all about, but with an added dimension of ritual. It seems a natural for us children, although I must admit the hardier souls among us don't seem to really need it. I'm of a bit more tender variety myself, so I would much appreciate a little help from somewhere, even if only a little hint and a nudge in the right direction.

One place one might turn to, for such a nudge, is the "Queen Srimala Sutra," which Prince Shotoku Taishi used as a model in introducing a self-ordination tradition to Japan, later coming to flower with Dengyo Daishi. It seems to bridge the gap between the priesthood and the laity, and is equally appropriate whether one is a monk, a grocery clerk, or a bartender. Here the emphasis is on individuality and a freedom from outer forms. In this sense a professional priesthood might not really be necessary to regulate everything, so it soon encountered their opposition, which proved to be quite effective.

An interesting example of self-ordination, in a somewhat modified form, is the "Universal Life Church," founded recently by Kirby Hensley. The ULC will ordain anyone by mail with no questions asked and no obligations, free and irrevocable. The "content" then is very much an individual responsibility. Although much criticized by establishment circles, they now number well into the millions, and with little doubt constitute one of the most amazing collections of dreamers, malcontents, visionaries, squares, kooks, saints, poets, bums, boes, and ne'er-do-wells to ever assemble under one sky. Their goal is to ordain everyone, while leaving one quite free to be a Methodist, Sufi, Socialist, Nembutsu Zen, or whatever. --Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!

I think that self-ordination, whatever its form may be, is a natural for us children of Bodhi. It almost seems made for us. What are we waiting for, what do you say we go ahead and do it. You can count me in for sure. Let's go! Yahoo!

Some of you might reply "Surely you must be joking, you can't be serious about this 'Boes' thing, self-ordination and all." Well you durn tootin I am! What does a fellow have to do to be serious around here anyway, stand on his head or something?

As a matter of fact I'm probably too serious about it all. I really worry about being a good Bodhi-bum. It was with great relief that I finally figured out that it didn't really have much to do with wearing rags and letting one's teeth rot out. The inner spirit of it all is what matters, and I think the key here is humility. Bums often have this quality with great sincerity. We need a "humility before all," maybe here capitalizing "All." As a Zen priest, I find this particularly difficult, since we tend to be such proud fellows and even elitist snobs.

I think an old rabbi put it perfectly. He was asked why there never seem to be any great prophets or holy men anymore, as there were in the old days. He pondered on it for a while, and then replied "These days nobody bows low enough."

That's the spirit, and in my "nembutsu zen" that is what I'm trying to do, to bow down low before the immeasurable radiance and nameless-name called Amida Buddha. Nor do I think Amida is in essence different from the Goddess Prajnaparamita, who is the Great Mother of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and without doubt of us Bodhi-bums as well. Or call it Bodhi if you will, and so off I go merrily abumming.

It seems to me too that is in the spirit of Jack Kerouac and the old beatnik gang. By the way, for me "beatnik" has always meant "to bow down low enough," to be utterly "beat" before God, or Amida.

This brings me to one other area about which I'm seriously concerned. I'm getting along in years now, and naturally think quite a bit about death and a final resting place for my bones. Ordinarily hoboes and bums are excluded from the classier of such abodes, and come to a very humble end in such as a potter's field, which all is admittedly as it should be in some deep sense. In a way we Boes belong with them, so perhaps we should join our fellows in such a humble end. At least then we would not be tempted by pride. Nevertheless, maybe an exception could be made here, so that we children of Bodhi might somehow establish a special "potter's field" of our own. Several of us feel maybe somewhere in the mountains would be best. We would welcome your suggestions on the subject.

We children of Bodhi are spread out all over the world, and form a kind of homeless brotherhood. We may belong to this or that group, but at heart we are all brothers and sisters. Maybe then at the end of our journey, at least our bones might somehow rest together, if not in place, then in spirit. And if we are here touching the dimension of myth, so much the better.

On a much less somber note, let me close with a quote that adds an interesting facet to our term "Bo." The following little gem is taken from the "Chicago Record," as cited in the Oxford English Dictionary:

"An' den, wen ye meets one uv yer own kind, ye feels like old pals, 'cause he calls ye 'Ho,' and ye calls him 'Bo.' See?"

Ananda Bo (or Ho) Dalenberg