

A Ceremony Honoring Mr. Obama's Inauguration
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Good evening, everyone.

It's wonderful to meet on such an auspicious occasion as this inauguration. Inauguration is from an old Latin word and it means 'to bring in with auguries; to do the divination's work'. Tonight we're going to hold our own small inauguration ceremony to greet properly this event that has happened.

Before we do, I want to speak about how in the past few days there have been some things that have happened that connect us deeply to our practice and to our lives as meditators. To quote Dr. King : "The arc of history is long but it bends toward justice." That's always been a source of hope and consolation to me. It also matches my experience. The arc of history, the arc of our lives as a culture, the arc of our individual lives may be long — sometimes painfully so, but it *does* bend toward justice. Certainly that was a part of what happened this week.

That's the first thing : remember to have this big view. I spoke before I left on my last retreat about how Mr. Obama may be our first Buddhist president, in the same way that Toni Morrison said Bill Clinton was our first black president. One of the things that strikes you about him is that he has tremendous equanimity. One of the sources of that is that he has a really big view. You can watch stuff come at him and see him not react in the moment. He does not have a narrow, tightly wound relationship to things, but is much more spacious. He seems to be loping in a marathon rather than running in a hundred meter dash. That's tremendously important.

A funny thing happened with time this weekend. I've had the sense that there was a big movement and simultaneously the sense that it happened quickly. It was a quantum jump. We were on one ring of quantum circles and then we were in the next ring. Everything just instantly changed. It's interesting to me that both of those things can happen at the same time. It made me remember something I hadn't thought about in a long time.

Thirty years ago, when I was living in southern California, I made lunch for a group of six little girls who were sitting at my dining room table. I had been listening to a radio piece about great conflicts in the culture. This was the 1980's. Some of you may remember the question as to whether the great literary canon ought to be opened up to authors from different continents, of other colors and religions. This was a huge matter of controversy, which upon reflection seems like the theological arguments of the middle ages. It was quite serious at the time. I was disturbed by what I'd been listening to and the exchanges that took place. I walked in to the dining room and there were six little girls sitting around the table. Not only did they all have names like Columbine and Athena, but also every single one of them was mixed race. I looked at those little girls and I thought, "Gentlemen, whether you know it or not, you have lost this war. It's over." I remember thinking that it may take thirty years for it to become apparent, but it will become apparent. Here it is thirty years later, vividly apparent. We made such a profound shift in the moment of the election.

Another message for meditators : we never know the outcome of the story. We don't know how it's going to turn out. We can hope and fear and be anxious about it and long for it, but we don't know. Can we be comfortable in that not knowing? Can we be comfortable in waiting and seeing, allowing ourselves to move in that long arc along with everything else?

I also thought about how sometimes we get it wrong, we make mistakes. This is just my own perspective, but when it was announced that the Reverend Rick Warren was going to give the inaugural prayer, I found it really painful. I struggled with that. It felt like a mistake to me, I'm not saying that's what it was, but that's what it felt like to me. I didn't understand it and I didn't understand it because it seemed uncharacteristically unkind of Barack Obama. I experience him as a deeply kind person and right after the passage of Proposition 8 in California that Warren had worked for, it felt unkind and I was surprised. But while watching the inauguration I was struck at how entirely inconsequential that prayer seemed. In the context of what was happening it seemed so small. In thinking of bringing that experience here tonight I tried to remember something Warren had said, and I couldn't remember a single phrase from that prayer. I went back to listen to it today. I came away with the feeling

of listening to someone who was in over his head. The events were so much larger than he was and it was fine to just let that be the case. At one point in the prayer he talked about wishing for justice and equality for all and the tremendous hollowness of those words coming out of his mouth was apparent. There it was, no need to comment.

With a couple of exceptions, like Rachel Maddow, nobody's talking about it. It's not what caught people's attention. It's not what persists from the inauguration. It was interesting to me that again there's this view of karma that our Daoist ancestors had, which is that karma is streaming by us all the time. We are in a sea of karma. We can choose whether to reach out and grab it or not. I felt in myself the decision not to reach out and grab for that karma. I felt that maybe this was the decision in the country, not to reach out and grab that karma, but to let it be what it was and to let it have its own place and proportion. This is something else I would commend to you as meditators: to not always reach out when can we let it go by with very skillful means toward whatever is happening.

Also, remember that we are here because people were restless and they moved from country to country in search of things. They were migrants and immigrants and emigrants. This tradition has moved all around the world and come to us here. Sometimes there were just a few people who moved it. There were about two dozen people who brought Chan from China so that it could become Zen in Japan. That's all — two dozen people who crossed that difficult ocean and rooted Zen in a new place. Over and over again it's been this movement of a few people from place to place and so I want to put a plug in for that kind of mixing, that kind of mestizo culture that's on glorious display this week in Washington. That's important to us. The sense of rootedness that comes from being from a place and caring about a place and having history in a place is tremendously important. It's also important to have some restless people who go off in search of things and carry things with them and move around the world. We've all benefited greatly by that. So let's hear it for border crossings and mixing it up and coyotes and all of those things — Hermes who crosses back and forth between borders and makes things happen which wouldn't otherwise happen. This inauguration is an example of something that could not have happened if people hadn't

been restless and hadn't wandered around and hadn't gone looking for something new, something else.

One of the most powerful moments this week was a very small one that took place during the concert at the Lincoln Memorial. Mr. Obama walked up to the podium and the first thing he said was, "Welcome to Washington." I realized that for the first time in my entire life I felt welcomed to Washington. I felt as if there was something that I was part of there and I was being allowed in, not just behind surveillance and police, but was actually being welcomed in to the Lincoln Memorial. That made me think of something that the Cuban writer, Reinaldo Arenas, wrote that changed my mind in the same way that Dr. King's words inspired me so much.

Arenas spent a lot of time in Cuban jails for subversive writing and for trying to escape the island and for being gay. In one of his books, *The Color of Summer*, he presents a great twist. While reading I realized that I had always thought of myself as part of a counterculture. I and a lot of people I knew were part of this counterculture. My whole life I was part of it. Arenas talked about how, in the Cuban context, the Castro government was what he called "the counter-country". All the rest, everything that was not part of that regime, was the country. He completely flipped it on its head. Suddenly I thought, "we are the country and that other is the counter-country". Remember that he's talking about Cuba in the 1980's (you can see how counter-countries are the same wherever they are, whatever form they appear in, they have the same qualities). He said: "It was superficial, monolithic, rigid and vulgar." Which is a great list! : Superficial, monolithic, rigid, and vulgar. Without saying anything too obvious, there's a way where we can feel a shadow of that passing off of us these days.

He said that the country, the rest of the folks, "... is all that's diverse, luminous, mysterious, and festive." Diverse, luminous, mysterious, and festive. If we can live up to those adjectives, then we're doing a pretty good job. I think that's the invitation that's being made to us. We are welcomed to Washington. So much that has remained underground for a very long time is being invited back into the sunlight.

That's something else I want to say to us as meditators: We don't always get the sunlit surface of things. We don't always get to walk above ground. We spend long passages of our meditations, of our lives, of our cultures and our histories together

underground, walking in the dark passages. And that's ok. There's something that can happen there that can't happen in the sunlit world. We need both. We need that ability to move from one world to the other and to bring the riches and the wisdom of one place into the other place.

One of the most exciting things about it is to look at how we step out of the dark caves, we step out of the underground places as best we can in our lives, in our meditations, in our families and our friendships and our volunteer work in the communities we've built. We have been keeping something alive; nourishing something underground and working to bring it back out into the light. I am so excited to see what happens and what becomes possible when we do.

Let's see if any of you can recognize this : A couple of months ago my meditation was so alive and so full of stuff happening and now it's flat and dead. Flat and dead. That's underground, that's what we can't see. That's when we have to trust that what happens then is as important as when it's full of fireworks and great revelations. We have to root it. We have to make it ours. We have to assimilate it, integrate it and hopefully make it ours before we go on to the next thing.

Norman Mailer said of John F. Kennedy when he was elected that he was "the edge of the mystery." It's funny to think of a politician that way now. But again, I feel an invitation to do that, to pick up Arenas' description of us as all that's "diverse, luminous, mysterious and festive" and to think of this change that's happening to us in our politics as the edge of the mystery. We don't know what's going to happen, but let's see, let's find out. How great is that?

I want to close with another poet, Langston Hughes, a poet of the Harlem Renaissance. He wrote a poem called "Let America be America Again." He was writing during the Depression, from the depths of that great difficulty. He was talking about how, as an African-American, all this "letting America be America again" had an edge to it because America had never really been America for him. It hadn't been what it had promised to be.

He begins the poem :

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.

Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.
(America never was America to me.)

He goes on with a litany of the ideals of America and the ways in which it's fallen short for many people. Towards the end of the poem he writes :

O, let America be America again
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free ... O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

I will close here and am glad for any comments.

Q1: I was struck by that image of karma streaming by and not reaching out. I'd not thought of it this way before, but I think it's correct—that we've just made a quantum leap. We're all in this state of dislocation. From a practice standpoint, what does it mean to take hold of positive karma? Not just sitting back and waiting for the same story to end, because we're all called to participate, and hopefully believing in the myriad of positive possibilities, but what does it mean to not take hold of positive karma, especially from an altered state?

JIS : I have a simple, provisional answer for this : One of the koans I was translating during the break is quite poignant to me. It's about a teacher who was literally on his deathbed with no successor. He sort of crawled to the hall one last time, and said, "I want to ask you about something. Please consider an answer." He got a lot of lame answers. He crawled back to his room and ordered one of the monks to him later that night.

He said to him, "There was something in what you said today; there was something really true in what you said. Can we keep going with that? Can we keep trying?"

The monk replied, "I've got nothing else."

The teacher said, "I don't care, just give me something, and let's see what we can do with it."

The monk said, "I can't say anything. I have nothing to say to you. It's not complete in me."

And the teacher roars, "I don't care if it's not complete. Give me what you have!"

That's my answer for right now. It doesn't matter if we are complete or if we are perfected. It doesn't matter that we don't know what's five yards away, eight years down the road. What do we have now? Let's start there and see what can happen. Let's each of us bring our glorious incompletenesses and see what happens when we put them all together.

Q2 : I was struck when I was looking at all the people at the inauguration. Everyone was small, there were so many. When Obama came out he was just as small as everyone else. I thought, "He's just one of us. And look what one person did!"

I've been feeling lots of change bubbling in people. Today my sister called. She's a real devout Christian. She only wants to talk about God. She was very enthusiastic about going to the dentist and that began a conversation about how illnesses are caused by past lives. She started to ask me about Buddhism. She was completely open to all these topics! I just really couldn't believe it. Then I hung up and I thought, "This is really happening."

Half an hour later my mother called. She had to apologize for leaving me at the shopping mall when I was four. I couldn't believe it; it was so weird.

JIS : That's good!

Here's how our ceremony is going to go : We're going to begin with our traditional purification chant. It's a one-note mantra that some of you are familiar with. The sense here is that this is happening to all of us; this is not happening somewhere else among other people. So let all of us accept the karma for what has happened in our country.

Then we're going to have a chance to put things down. If there are things that have happened that we want to firmly and deliberately put down, that you just will not do anymore, you will have a chance to speak that if you want to. We will do this until it's exhausted, until we've put everything down.

JIS : Many blessings on this auspicious occasion.