

December 2016
From The Abbot

“Hineni: Here I Am”

As the seventh night of Rohatsu became the morning of the eighth day, we sat in the zendo in candlelight listening to Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*; before dawn, we commemorated Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment with *Jodo-e* chanting of *Ryogonshu* (the *Surangama Sutra*), and then returned to the zendo for *sozarei*, formal tea and closing remarks. I said a few words, and then, as the light of the new morning poured in, Jikan Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” filled the room.

Cohen’s most recent album, *You Want it Darker*, had come out just before his death, and the title song’s refrain is, “You want it darker/ We kill the flame/ Hineni hineni/ I’m ready, my Lord.”

“In a time of deep darkness and confusion, it is easy to run away,” wrote Ilana Rubenstein in an article on Cohen. “But there is a light that is calling to us. It starts with saying, ‘Hineni, here I am.’

“Hineni is an openness to be with things as they are to find ourselves in a world steeped in darkness and stay awake to our reality. To read of unthinkable destruction and experience our own ‘I can’t go on’ moments and continue to say ‘here I am.’ When the world is busy numbing out, trying to forget or at least take the edge off, we can choose to stay awake; even if, and especially when, reality is painful. But it is not enough to encounter the darkness. Our mission is to find the light.”

My final teisho of Rohatsu had begun with an homage to Cohen, who had died exactly a month before, on November 7. Several sesshin participants had practiced with him for years under the late Ven. Joshu Sasaki Roshi at Mt. Baldy, California, including Dokuro Osho and Shuko Jaeckel. Cohen was Best Man at their wedding in 1995. He was ordained the following year.

“When you stop thinking about yourself all the time, a certain sense of repose overtakes you,” he said of his time at Mt. Baldy. “It happened to me by imperceptible degrees, and I could not really believe it.”

Leonard Cohen grew up in a comfortable Jewish family in Montreal; his grandfather had been a Talmudic scholar and rabbi. In addition to my admiration for Cohen’s poetry and songs, I’ve always felt a special kinship with him, not only because he too was both a Jew and a Rinzai Zen monastic, but because my father had the same name and was born in the same city. The Leonard Cohen who was my father was a poet too. He was killed at the age of 26, in World War II’s Battle of the Bulge. He would be 97 now.

The Leonard Cohen who died this past November at 82 was, one might say, the Rumi of North America. His poems sing of his love of women, his love for his teacher, his intimacy with God, and the hard-won and often ambiguous truths of his spiritual experience. His own nature drew him naturally to Rinzai Zen’s uncompromising, exacting qualities. After his death, his son Adam wrote of his “unique blend of self-deprecation and dignity, his approachable elegance, his charisma without audacity, his old-world gentlemanliness and the hand-forged tower of his work.”

During his final decade, Cohen studied Lurianic Kabbalah with a rabbi in Los Angeles. Just as he sang in “Anthem”: “Ring the bells that still can ring/ Forget your perfect offering/ There is a crack, a crack in everything/ That’s how the light gets in,” God’s creation is seen in Kabbalah as unfinished, imperfect; our task is to repair, restore, and heal the world. In describing the

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inspiration for creating “Hallelujah,” Cohen said, “I wanted to stand with those who clearly see God’s holy broken world for what it is, and still find the courage, the heart, to praise it.”

This spirit of courage and praise defines what we have been experiencing and cultivating at the Zen Studies Society. More than ever, we are filled with gratitude for the rigorous yet encouraging practice offered at our city temple and mountain monastery. Many old-timers have been contributing their quietly inspiring presence; enthusiastic young people, some who started through Dai Bosatsu Zendo’s Internship Program, have been growing in sincerity and dedication.

A high point of the year was the 40th Anniversary of DBZ, the 50th memorial commemoration of D. T. Suzuki, and the 60th Anniversary of ZSS, with 50 people attending Anniversary Sesshin and another 100 or so coming up for an exquisite day of celebration, featuring talks by the Ven. Shunan Noritake Roshi, abbot of Reiun-in at Myoshin-ji in Kyoto; acclaimed Buddhist author and activist David Loy; and renowned D.T. Suzuki scholar Ronald Jaffe; tea ceremony by `Urasenke Sensei Todd Frey; and performances by shakuhachi Grand Master Nyogetsu Ronnie Seldin, guitarist Anthony Bez, and Genmyo Atsundo and Koshin Yuka of the Aikawa Jazz Duo. A grand feast was prepared by Seppo Ed Farrey and a team of Sangha assistants. Seppo, author of *Three Bowls: Vegetarian Recipes from an American Zen Buddhist Monastery* and a James Beard finalist, returned to DBZ from Seattle to be tenzo for the event and for Anniversary Sesshin as well.

The year came to a resoundingly affirmative and grateful close with a Thanksgiving celebration attended by nearly 60 Sangha members and friends, including ten children, and Rohatsu Sesshin, with 34 participants including six Dharma Teachers.

Many have expressed how their heartache following the national election has caused them to feel profound gratitude for the Three Treasures manifesting at New York Zendo and DBZ, as well as a deepened sense of purpose and motivation to actualize their Bodhisattva Vow—to see this “holy, broken world, and still find the courage, the heart, to praise it”— to work for the liberation of all beings.