

DHARMA MESSAGE

Thoughts on the Haitian Earthquake

By Reverend William Briones

Blossoms come about because of a series of conditions that lead up to their blooming. Leaves are blown away because a series of conditions lead up to it. Blossoms do not appear independently, nor does a leaf fall to itself, out of its season. So everything has its coming forth and passing way; nothing can be independent without change.

It is the everlasting and unchanging rule of this world that everything is created by a series of causes and conditions and everything disappears by the same rule; everything changes, nothing remains constant.

On January 12, 2010 a catastrophic earthquake hit Haiti. The epicenter was approximately 16 miles west of Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. It is estimated that three million people were affected by the quake and tragically over 200,000 deaths were attributed to the earthquake.

Haiti is now struggling to recover from the devastation with the help of aid workers from across the world. More than 20 countries are now in Haiti assisting and pledging aid and money to Haiti. The outpour of donations and assistance has been unprecedented.

Yet, as Haitians struggle to recover from this catastrophic event, Pat Robertson a Christian televangelist, recently highlighted on his television program that the Haitian people were to blame for the earthquake. Robertson said the Haitians had made a "pact with the devil" and "ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other*". I seriously doubt that Mr. Robertson has a clue as to why the earthquake occurred nor does he care.

As Buddhist it is our understanding that it is nature's fundamental lesson in life of impermanence and change that life is nothing but a flux of cause and effect that is constantly happening. Nothing in life remains forever. Everything is in constant flux.

The reading I began with, comes from the "Teaching of Buddha" and it is a vivid reminder of nature's fundamental lesson of impermanence and change.

And like the life of blossom, life too is unpredictable, for it may pass away with a gust of wind.

This is the first characteristic of Buddhism, the doctrine of Impermanence. Impermanence means nothing is stationary, static, or unchanging. All things are moving and dynamic. Without an awareness of this fact of nature, there can never be any true insight through which we can see things as they really are.

The 7.0 earth quake that occurred below the surface of Haiti, killing over 200,000 people, leveling cities and destroying families, has given people an opportunity to reflect on impermanence of life and nature.

The cataclysmic event overwhelmed the world with grief and horror. Yet in the midst of this wave of destruction, a wave of compassion swept the world. Change of nature, as with the change of one's life, may bring encouragement or discouragement, it may create happiness or unhappiness, it may give us joy or anxiety. In any case change is change. It is reality.

Earthquakes are neither good nor bad. The earthquake in Haiti occurred along a slip fault: two adjacent plates moving in opposite directions slipped and tragically took with it many lives and changed the geography of the Island of Hispaniola, changes that have existed since the beginning of time.

The Buddha teaches us that acknowledging the nature of impermanence helps us understand our suffering. Suffering arises when we try to cling to what is impermanent. Thus, the second Characteristic of Buddhism ... life is suffering.

A lack of this understanding will no doubt result in obscuring our perception of reality. Anxiety and frustration in everyday living originates from our ignorance of the law of nature, which is change or impermanence. Therefore it is very important for each of us to understand the nature of impermanence so that we can face our problems realistically, so we may accept things that we cannot change. For when tragedy does strike, or misfortune occurs in our life, our understanding gives us an opportunity for self-reflection. From self-reflection we consider what is truly important to us, and to realize that ultimate truths remain constant in spite of ever changing conditions of our everyday world.

Many of us cannot even begin to understand the scope of this devastation ... it is beyond our comprehension. Yet, it has given us an opportunity to truly reflect on what is most important in our life and it has opened our hearts to feel compassion for our fellow human being.

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Our thoughts go out to the countless victims, to the family and friends of Haiti that were affected by the earthquake. In response to the catastrophic events in Haiti, the Buddhist Churches of America has initiated a fundraising drive. All temples are encouraged to begin collecting funds earmarked for HAITI RELIEF. If you have not already made a donation or would like to make another donation, please remit a check to the BCA by March 1, 2010. Checks should be made out to BUDDHIST CHURCHES OF AMERICA, with a notation For Haiti Relief. Funds received will be forwarded to the appropriate agency or agencies.

Namu Amida Butsu

**Excerpts from the 700 Club aired January 13, 2010: “[S]omething happened a long time ago in Haiti and people might not want to talk about it. They were under the heel of the French. Napoleon the Third and whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, “We will serve you if you get us free from the prince.” And “... ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other, desperately poor.”*