The murder of skittles-and-iced-tea-packing Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his murderer George Zimmerman, which effectively sent the message that a black male life is expendable if any armed person happens to feel threatened by his presence, is only the most recent example of this toxic environment. When I think back to why I started rapping in the first place, it’s clear that hip-hop was the one and only way I could fully express my outrage at social inequity. Yet, for inasmuch I fancied myself in righteous opposition to “Western” conventions, my underlying belief in the improbability of the human condition was actually thoroughly Western. Under Gautama’s tutelage, this fundamental assumption comes into question. Is it truly possible to transmute human nature in a way that is reflected in systems and institutions? What is absolutely possible is the transmutation of the self. Whether or not enough transmuted selves can achieve critical mass necessary for structural transformation remains to be seen.

—Kyva Holman (aka Bezi), Oakland, CA

Read the full version of Kyva Holman’s important letter, plus many others, at tikkun.org/letters.