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It is the 6th and final day of sesshin. The morning sitting period, which began at 4 a.m., and its subsequent chanting service, have concluded. The scent and promise of nourishment -bacon (!) – met us as we descended the narrow twisting staircase, one body in silent slinky lockstep, emerging into the dining area of the Main House. The warmth from the intensely blazing woodstove ignited my homestretch giddiness. I felt physical relief. I was going to make it.

Covid had silently swept the zendo through the week, each sitting period a steady march of emptying zafus, so that we arrived at day 6 far fewer in number than we’d begun. Shugen, too, had been snatched - day 4, I think it was? - along with many of the black-robed bedrocks of practice.

I remember emerging into the dining area surprised to find, alongside my relief, a sweet internal and unprecedented state which had arisen from the intense vulnerability of the covid-wracked practice. What a gift it felt to me, oddly, how the week had unfolded in a moment by moment, real-time, experience of *the truth* of our frail human lives. It was unique, this elevated degree of raw *not knowing* within a ritualized schedule which I have always experienced as carefully prescribed and predictable.

I remember being tearful as I stood at one side of the room, speaking quietly with Kien, a monastic I was close to. I was listening as he caught me up on how folks were: who was sick and who had left the retreat as a precaution.

I remember the conversation shifting as I started to share my experience of the week with him. I remember how eager I had felt, finally able to make audible what had been held entirely inside. I was glad for this small window of time for ‘speaking softly’, a ZMM breakfast tradition of day 6, a first step of reentry prior to the final stretch of silent work practice and the disciplined closing hours of Sunday service.

I was beginning to speak, when ---

My body froze and everything went blank. It was an experience, today, I can only describe as “total absence”. *No eyes no ears no nose no mouth...* No thought.

Absence. A near neighbor of Emptiness. But not.

Then, as if in slow motion, a tumble-dry, head-over-heels disorientation as my brain struggled back online, efforting to make sense of the towering bulk that had teleported close – too close - to my right shoulder; sound, lashing out at my ear; my heart rate hammering. Confusion. *What is happening? Who is this? What are they saying?*

I remember my eyes landing on Kien, our eyes locking. *You’re not alone*, it seemed to assure me.

And then pieces clicked into place. [REDACTED]. My reporting to Shugen. Shugen talking to him in dokusan.

[REDACTED]'s words, telling me what to do and not do, what to think and not think. A garbled tirade. I was trying to make sense of it: not knowing if it was him or me, the not-making-sense-ness of his words.

I remember my first two clear coherent thoughts, though. Verbatim. *"If he would do this with a witness, what would he do if I were alone?"* and *"Why the FUCK is Kien just standing there?!"*

From where I sit now, almost 2 years to the day from [REDACTED]'s video, I am also clear about this: it would have been better – I would have had less to process through - had [REDACTED] assaulted me anywhere but there. The character Vivian from *"Pretty Woman"* comes to mind. Her pain and anger mirroring my pain and anger. "In my own clothes, when someone like that guy Stucky comes up to me, I can handle it! I'm prepared!"

I am a 57-year-old cis-female raised in and living in the United States. I'm a mother who has raised 2 children into adulthood as a single parent. [REDACTED] is nothing special, he is just one more in a long line of Stucky's.

But this encounter, it didn't happen "in my own clothes".

And what ensued within the institution and community where it did happen, left me to reckon - alone - with the fact that it's not *actually* about the *individual* Stucky's.

January, February, March 2023

Days turned to weeks which turned to months.

With my practice life constrained by those with whom I'd consented to have my spiritual life guided, I threw myself whole-heartedly into the restricted practice they afforded me. I had yet to feel I was 'hanging on by a thread'; that came later. But I had begun to wonder whether I actually - and ultimately - had only two choices: (1) Get over it, or (2) Leave. There were increasing moments following interactions with leaders, where I wondered if they were just biding their time, waiting for me to make the choice. What felt to be a performative offering of agency, *my* choice. Get over it (stop requesting accountability, abandon my needs) ...or leave.

I practiced. I sat with the intense pain of my droning narrative: *I'm a mature woman! I called out harm perpetrated on a young woman by a male resident! The women of sangha publicly called out – two weeks ago! - for teachers to begin addressing misogyny and sexism in the community; Shugen just stated their commitment to do so!! And they are imposing consequences on me, **the victim** of a verbal assault; a victim of retaliation for reporting harm perpetrated on a young woman by a male resident!*

This. Is. So. Textbook. I kept thinking. So, *what, about their way of dealing with this, am I not getting?!*

I practiced. I dropped deeper.

I sat with my anger when triggered by each new pressure to prioritize the well-being of my perpetrator.

I sat with the shame I felt, isolated by the claims I made as a victim of harm; isolated by exposing my pain, told to ‘keep sitting’ – literally, metaphorically.

I sat with my expanding awareness of how I reflexively pulled my punches when one of the leadership team said something I found untrue, or misogynistic.

I sat with my body’s heaviness, what became a chronic inability to sleep.

I came to understand the cost to my body of what, in the accruing and small interactions and deference, I came to see as self-abandonment. I slowly began to see myself as subtly complicit.

What am I afraid of? Became my mantra.

When Shoan said to me, “I want you to know that [REDACTED] is also upset, he’d wanted to come to every morning zazen too” ... and I didn’t speak what I’d thought: *Wait, is this you comforting me about the restriction you’ve imposed on me, telling me my perpetrator is also suffering?*

What am I afraid of?

When Shugen, as Abbot, at our first meeting, said: “You practice, and [REDACTED] works around you” ... and I didn’t speak what I’d thought: *Wait, that’s not what Gokan and Shoan structured. That is not what is happening!*

What am I afraid of?

When Shugen said to me, “We leave these things between the two people to work out” ...and I didn’t speak what I’d thought: *But you didn’t ‘leave it’, you were involved! You involved yourself by speaking to him during dokusan of sesshin!*

What am I afraid of?

In conversation with Gokan, when I shared how his tendency to go silent (on this topic) impacts me, he said “I get afraid of saying the wrong thing” ...and I didn’t speak what I thought: *But you hold a position of power, so when you go silent you take the power with you.*

What am I afraid of?

I sat, uncovering the deep internal contraction which precipitates my reflexive habit to self-silence. I found what I was afraid of. I got to know it. My fear that speaking will cost me *belonging*. My fear that speaking will cost me being perceived as (and perceiving myself as) the *good student*. My fear that

speaking, here and now - at ZMM - will cost me, when all is said and done, my love for and commitment to the Dharma.

And so, my fear began to transform.

I sat with the budding clarity that, while I am *choosing* to belong here, while I am *choosing* to be a student of Shugen's, this experience I am having related to my practice life *is* my practice.

I began practicing what it is to bring all of me: my fear; my compliance... *and* my complaint; my discipline and respect for the form... *and* my challenging of it. I began to feel more human, have a deeper experience of my own humanity and theirs. I began yearning to experience their humanity in action and in return.

More subtleties unfolded. Confusion. An overarching form of confusion which would arise as I'd experience what I began identifying as their stance of distance; their remaining at a tangible remove. I'd leave the campus puzzled by the pervasive and continuing lack of *curiosity* and the lack of *humility* by the leadership team about my experience. About me...about what this was costing me.

I began actively reflecting on – rich terrain for me, being a professional spiritual caregiver – what “care” is; what it is “to care”. A memory of PD Eastman's children's book Are You My Mother? came to mind. I began following my interactions at ZMM with the image of that baby bird looking for its mother (and asking a hen, a dog, and -apropos of my situation- a steam roller: Are you my mother?... Are you my mother?) My version, with my teacher, leadership, community: *Is this 'care'?* ...*Is this 'care'?* ...*Is this 'care'?*!

My questioning grew in sophistication. When I'd be confronted with statements from leadership, such as “It's in our care” and “We are caring for you like we are caring for him”, I'd reflect: *Who gets to say whether an action is 'caring'? Does the **giver** get to define an action as “care”? Or the **receiver**: “this feels caring” or “I don't feel cared for by that”?*

I remember when the idea of ‘spiritual bypass’ entered my mind. *Is this what spiritual bypass looks like? Is this how it feels to experience someone spiritually bypassing?*

I remember when the concept – which surprised me, as I'd never given the term much attention - ‘gaslighting’ entered my mind. *Is this what gaslighting is? Is this the feeling of being gaslit?*

I began turning to folks outside the Dharma, writers and activists like Audre Lorde, Gloria Steinem, Kate Mann, bell hooks, the Combahee River Collective, Gabor Mate, M.D., Judith Herman, M.D. I remember, time and again, an experience of profound relief when I encountered, within an author's written word, my experience reflected back to me. *You're not crazy*, these ‘teachings’ from non-Buddhists assured me.

And I remember vividly, after weeks and months of prostrating my way out of the dokusan room, carrying the visceral, searing heat of my triggered shame, the time I returned to my cushion without a question, but rather with one clear thought:

This is spiritual gaslighting.

I didn't know if that was a thing, those two words had not been strung together in any of the books I'd read. But I did trust myself – maybe even completely, and for the first time. The simple fact that those words had strung together inside of me meant that they mattered.

April 2023

I reached out to Shoan in her role as Training Coordinator to plan what ZMM calls a 'reparative conversation' with Shugen. Fearful of losing the relationship I was building with him as my teacher and experiencing increasing distress in the face-to-face meetings during zazen, I knew it was time for Shugen to hear the impact his words were having on me. I also knew that I needed the witness of others, I needed to not be so alone, which is what this formal process of intervention provides.

However, I also wanted to personally invite Shugen into the formal process with me, so I mentioned to Shoan that I was thinking I would ask him in dokusan. She immediately challenged my plan: "Do it outside of all *that*", she'd said. I don't recall if she'd said 'without the candles, the robes, the prostrations', but I understood her to be advising me to hold this conversation outside the container of spiritual authority and deference.

I valued this wisdom and appreciated her recommendation. We agreed she would schedule a preliminary meeting for me with Shugen outside of zazen practice. She got back to me with the day and time, followed by the instruction to go to the Abbot's room at the conclusion of the morning zazen and service.

Morning Zazen, April 2023

The day of my scheduled meeting, I am sitting in morning zazen. I am nervous. I still feel my conviction that, by inviting Shugen personally, I am holding our shared humanity in the foreground. I am an adult woman in addition to my role as his student; he is an adult man, not solely my teacher and Abbot. But I notice I feel a sticky, heavy, edgy energy in my chest. All the interactions with Shugen in our roles of teacher/student; all the pain and shame that has accrued in my system, they're here with me now.

...The time I presented: "All this time, you've never asked me to tell you what happened. I need you to hear what happened to me"; then detailing the aggression and its impact on me. His response: "you know, this will not last; this will change".

My guffaw (which I've come to discover is my signal to myself that I'm feeling patronized), "I am a 55-year-old woman! I understand the teaching of impermanence!"

...The time I presented my activated distress at arriving in dokusan with him as Roshi, while also struggling with the impact of his decisions and words to me as Abbot. His response: "But I'm the same person".

"Yes, clearly, I know that you are not two people!"

...The time I presented my distress that he was continuing to not acknowledge the role he played in my verbal assault, that his talking to [REDACTED] in sesshin was connected to [REDACTED]'s anger being vomited at me. His response: "We can't know he was aggressive with you because I spoke to him in dokusan".

My sudden realization that, had I been a black man sitting before him in personal pain over police profiling, Shugen might have said just as placidly, "We can't know you were pulled over by the police because you're black". Shugen could not acknowledge my wisdom as a woman; in this space only one of us could be the holder of knowledge.

...The time I presented him with "I need you to stop talking, every time you talk it just gets worse". His response: to talk. And continue talking. Talking the entire dokusan; and then, just before ringing his bell, saying, "But I can stop talking".

No amount of effort could communicate the degree of hopelessness which descended on me. I felt so exhausted in that moment.

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The bell rings in the zendo. I sit with all of it, the conviction, the nervousness. Then there is silence.

My row is going to be called for dokusan, bubbles up, a sudden thought. I am struck by the oddity of that. Interesting, too, I think. For the first time ever, a wave of dread has seized my throat.

Agency. Okay, if that happens, I won't go. It's enough for me, meeting with him after.

Shugen's attendant calls students to dokusan. She calls my row. I am glad to have thought through how I feel and what I want. I remain on my cushion.

Amidst the rustle and rush of bodies, bare feet hemmed by a black robe slowly appear in front of my down-cast eyes.

"Shugen wants to see you in dokusan", the attendant, leaning down to me, whispers. My nervous system instantly revs. *What?!* I've never been summoned before. My mind frantically scans, *Can I not go? What happens if I don't get up to join the line, will the attendant return? Will we end up in a whispered conversation? Will this turn into a scene?* I am discombobulated. I know what I want, I'd made my choice!

I take a deep breath, regroup. I connect to my sense of agency. *This is ridiculous, I am an adult. Of course, I can choose to not go to dokusan. Even when summoned.*

Clear as a bell, my internal turmoil quiets as I affirm my choice. *I am still Shugen's student. While I am choosing this, I am choosing all of it*, and I got up.

Activated in a way I hadn't anticipated, feeling raw, the issue at the center of my suffering these past months rises with me as I get up, get in line. Power. His power. Also, mine. *This is my practice*.

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I enter. I prostrate. I sit before Shugen. I immediately present the distress I feel at being summoned; that I am uncomfortable being in the room with him; that I am feeling uneasy, in general, meeting alone with a male in a position and context of authority. I name feeling the same with Gokan.

I don't remember if Shugen acknowledges what I'd presented. What he does say, quite quickly, is: "What is it you are wanting to talk with me about this morning?"

That oh so familiar sensation of everything slowing down...my body, already sitting erect and still, goes numb. My mind becomes - cautious? careful?... *deliberate*. I am in a sudden state of watchfulness. And there, in what otherwise feels frozen, I hear Shoen's words enter my mind. I am no longer alone, frozen – or rather, even frozen, she is with me, speaking in my ear like a friend sitting just behind me.

"I prefer to talk to you outside of all '*this*'", I say, channeling her voice, her calm, her assuredness.

I am aware of the monotone quality of my tone; of my hands gesturing to the larger space as my eyes scan the room to indicate the candles flickering, the Buddha statues, the painted screens.

He responds, I don't remember with what. But he circles right back, asking: "Why won't you talk to me right now?"

I am in disbelief. *He is pressing me. I can't believe he is not accepting what I have just said*.

Shoen's words, my anchor. I repeat, forced into the mantra. Monotone, slow, deliberate; again gesturing with my hands, pointing with my eyes. "I prefer to talk to you outside of all '*this*'".

A pause, and then Shugen: "Well. I can't".

The tumble-dry, head-over-heels experience floods me. I stammer, "But...Shoen set this up...she told me...". I'm off-balance, looking to him. *Help me. What is happening here?*

"I'm busy", his mundane reply.

And then, my familiar friend Shame is beside me, whispering in my ear. "Down, Girl", she says. And I know, in an instant, what I had not understood before. More body-sensation than thought, I realize that, had he reached over and fondled my knee, I would not have felt more violated.

"I can do tomorrow", he went on. "Will that work?"

Without hesitation, "Absoluuutely!", I reply, my energy and inflection supercharged. I am no longer numb. I am taking the most direct path out.

Revoking the consent given this very human man, I initiate: “Last dokusan, when I asked for your permission to begin seeing a different teacher for a while, you didn’t answer. I’d like to see Hojin moving forward”.

He pauses. We were looking at each other, eye to eye. Unflinching.

“Alright”, he replies, ding aling-ing, me out of the room.

★★

When I arrived home from this, my last dokusan, I emailed Shoan that something problematic for me had occurred; that the meeting she’d arranged for me with Shugen had not happened. I asked her to let Shugen know that I would not be meeting with him the next day; told her I wanted to pause the planning for a reparative conversation; told her I would wait and see the results of the ZMM Ethics Committee process; and asked her if I could talk with her about what had happened.

While I assumed that Shoan acted on all the other items, she never followed up on my ask to share with her what happened, so I never got to tell her of that final – and liberating -- gift: her voice, her words, her wisdom. That I’d experienced her, literally, ‘having my back’ in that dokusan room. That for the first time out of the previous 5 months, I had not been alone.

But I also had learned or deduced or projected, that no one – ever, in that 5 months – had asked me to share because one simply doesn’t ask for what one isn’t ready to hear. Shoan’s presence in dokusan with me that day, it was a gift to me. And her presence there, in her role as my Training Coordinator, showed me that I was not the only one being schooled by Shugen and his relationship to power and authority. “Down, *girls*”.