



May 16, 2010

ROCHESTER ZEN CENTER
A BUDDHIST COMMUNITY

Dear Sangha,

It is with heavy heart that I must inform you that Sevan Ross has offered his resignation as a Zen teacher and that I have accepted it. This comes as a result of recent disclosures that his relationship with one of his students, to whom he was married briefly last year, began much earlier than he had announced to the Chicago Zen Center Sangha, and disturbingly close to his divorce from his previous wife of nineteen years.

When Sevan revealed, in 2008, that he was falling in love with one of his students, [REDACTED] whom he had ordained as a priest, he didn't have to be told that before going any further he needed to dissolve their teacher-student relationship. This they did, formally, in a ceremony attended by several senior members of the Chicago Zen Center (CZC), and [REDACTED] ceased going to dokusan with Sevan. They also recognized the need for her to resign from her position as a member of the CZC Board of Trustees to avoid that dual relationship as well. With these two actions it seemed the coast was clear, but once they were married, last summer, they recognized that it was not to be, and divorce followed within weeks.

Only this spring did [REDACTED] realize, with the wisdom of hindsight and the help of therapy, that their relationship had been handicapped from the beginning. Why? First, because it had been steeped in deceit for so long. Although Sevan and [REDACTED] both report that they did not become physically intimate until Sevan had separated from his previous wife and moved into the CZC, they did keep their relationship secret from the Sangha (and from me) for some 1½ years.

Second, the teacher-student relationship, like any other professional relationship of trust, is by definition one of power imbalance (heightened in this case by an age difference of twenty-nine years). Such relationships are always at risk when they become sexualized. Hence, the widely-held prohibitions against physical intimacy between academic teacher and student, psychotherapist and client, clergyman and congregant, physician and patient, lawyer and client. The bond between spiritual teacher and student may be the most sensitive of all because of the nature of the teacher's power and the tendency of the student to idealize him or her. Any romantic involvement between Zen teacher and student is suspect, and especially so when it is kept secret for a long time.

[REDACTED] is the first to acknowledge her share of responsibility in this sad story (and as the man who authorized Sevan to teach, I played a part as well). But it is Sevan, as the teacher, who must assume the blame – as he does – for the poor judgment of having conducted an intimate relationship with a student for so long in secret. To his credit, he is offering no excuses or rationalizations. In this regard he distinguishes himself from most other teachers I am aware of who have landed in similar straits.

It will be a loss to no longer have Sevan giving dokusan and teisho. As many of his students know, he is a gifted teacher – creative, dynamic, sure-footed, and skillful. But in our lineage we have to trust a teacher to embody upright conduct as well – not to cause harm, which in this case resulted from what strictly may be called abuse of power.

Since these events came to light some ten days ago I have been talking with both Sevan and [REDACTED] who have read and confirmed the factual accuracy of this letter. [REDACTED] just moved to the Boston area, where she will enroll in graduate school. Sevan is living outside Pittsburgh, where he moved last year to start a small Zen center after authorizing Yusan Jim Graham and Elie Jishin Nijm to teach in their own right and to succeed him as co-directors of the CZC. He wants to remain a priest, and I see no reason why he shouldn't. As of today there is a chance that Sevan will rejoin our staff in Rochester, where he dedicated years of outstanding service and could again, though not in a formal teaching position.

In the Dharma,

Bodhin Kjolhede

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(Also, in my teisho this morning, "The Teacher-Student Forbidden Zone," I spoke at length about the teacher-student relationship in Zen. An edited recording of the teisho will be posted on our website later this week.)

P.S. Here is the text of Sevan's resignation letter to me:

My Dear Roshi,

It is with regret that I offer you my resignation as a Zen Teacher. As our conversation on the phone just now fleshed out, I feel unqualified at this time to sit on the wall side of the dokusan room. My subterfuge about and mishandling of a relationship with a woman who was my student disqualifies me as teacher in this lineage at this time. Though, as you know, the relationship was a sincere one which lasted some time and even ended in marriage, it still sidetracked her training, my teaching, and the direction of the Sangha in harmful ways. This is indeed regrettable.

As I said on the phone, I need time to heal and look deeper, and in doing this I need to not be a teacher.

I offer my services in any way you see appropriate as a priest.

And I offer my deepest apologies for my mistakes.

Always yours in the Dharma,

Sevan