

Friday, May 28, 2010

Dear Sangha,

The news of the covert history of Sevan's and my relationship has taken everyone by surprise, and it stirs up a multitude of emotions. In the few conversations I have had with Sangha members about this, I can hear there is a lot at stake in understanding what has happened. Previously, I felt unable to speak to the Sangha, because my personal need for healing eclipsed my ability to be responsive to the Sangha's needs – but now I am seeing the confusion about what actually happened may be greater if I stay silent.

Sevan has insisted both to the CZC board and the Sangha that the details surrounding the start of the personal relationship are irrelevant, because they happened long ago. Personally, it is only through my recent acknowledgement of these details that I have been able to understand how the relationship happened and start the process of healing.

I know in my heart that the personal relationship between Sevan and myself would not have happened were it not for abuses of power that occurred in the student-teacher relationship in the summer of 2006. Early that summer Sevan and I started having conversations about my being ordained that turned into what I now see as spiritual hazing. I felt pressured into disclosing details about my personal life and history dating back into childhood. Following my confessions would come Sevan's interpretations, which often painted me as intensely pathological. In these many-hour daily conversations, I felt shamed and grew to distrust my own judgment. The history of my life was spun into a history of abuse, neglect, boundarylessness, immorality, and depravity. Not only did I come to see myself as broken, I also, with Sevan's prompting, became convinced that nearly everyone in my life had a self-interested and abusive stance toward me and that I had never really been loved. I have now come to see that was all patently untrue. At the end of this process, however, Sevan was the only person left standing in my life who claimed he not only supported me in this difficult work of self-reflection in the name of Zen, but loved me as well.

We were supposedly having these conversations to prepare me for ordination, so that I would be in touch with my darker human impulses and would be sure never to seek fulfillment of my personal needs through my work as a priest.

By the end of the summer my lack of trust in myself and utter feeling of brokenness was overwhelming. I wanted the shame to stop, and I resolved to cut ties with everything that I had been. With Sevan's prompting, I resolutely threw away sentimental personal items, all the journals I'd written, and ended most of my longtime friendships with people outside the Sangha who I now saw as unhealthy in an effort to devote myself fully to this new path of ordination. I told loving and devoted friends that they were not doing enough fearless self-reflection or spiritual

work. I even felt I had to distance myself from my family. I started more and more to act and do as Sevan would suggest or directly instruct. When painful conversations stopped toward the end of the summer and turned more positive, Sevan's growing personal attention toward me completely caught me off guard. This was the basis of the personal relationship that followed.

At times, this progression of events feels like a set-up for Sevan to have won my devotion. On more balanced days, I see that Sevan was painfully trying to meet his own emotional needs in a maladaptive way.

It has taken me a long time to admit that this was abuse. I have neither wanted to see myself as a victim nor see Sevan as an abuser. I have battled considerable guilt in exposing the illness of this relationship.

I have heard that Sevan cited Kyoki Roberts' authority as a mediator and Zen teacher in saying there are no victims in this situation, and that both parties were capable of making adult decisions. No one wants to see that someone has been victimized; indeed, it is stunning to think that cult-like behaviors can coexist with deep and healthy spiritual seeking. And as painful as it is to admit one has been abused, it may be even more painful to admit one has abused another. To say that there are no victims trivializes the experience of powerlessness and uncertainty in the face of a trusted authority that I certainly felt and others who have undergone this kind of experience have felt. Ultimately, there is a time to look objectively and say, "There are truly no victims," but now is not that time. To recognize the power imbalance of a 30-year age difference (25 to 55) and the convincing authority of spiritual leadership is necessary in learning about our vulnerability as students and our responsibilities as teachers. It is my hope that the tragedy of this experience can be useful for all of us to avoid both misuses of power and secessions of judgment. I also feel, as painful as it is to discuss, that it is better to be educated on matters of spiritual abuse than to write off this relationship as another loving relationship that didn't succeed.

I do not write this letter to demean Sevan. I feel he has been a great and honorable teacher and a helpful and selfless guide to many people. His contribution is enormous and cannot be disregarded. My intention is not for this letter to provoke people to mistrust their own positive experiences with Sevan as a teacher. I hope that Sangha members will be able to continue to feel benefited by the great gifts that Sevan's teaching offered. I am still grateful for the years prior to 2006 I spent as his student and the positive changes I underwent as his mentee. This gratitude, however, later worked against me when he was blinded by his personal needs and began to misunderstand his role as a helper.

Moving forward, I am also asking myself a lot of questions about the role of authority in Zen. During what felt like invasions of my privacy I kept telling myself to trust that Sevan was acting impersonally for my benefit in his role as a spiritual teacher. However, it is very important to me that I try to understand what it was in

my psychological make-up that allowed me to play the part that I did in this tragedy. With help from a therapist who is an expert on spiritual abuse, I am coming to trust my own intuition and also my own experience, which I was systematically pressured into discounting. I subverted my better judgment not to allow Sevan into my personal life out of a desire to do the right thing for ordination. An article, written by Demaris Wehr, about the dynamics of spiritual abuse, called "When Good People Do Bad Things", has also helped me greatly in understanding how this situation unfolded.

My choice to cede my own judgment to his on numerous occasions, both during the summer and afterwards in the personal relationship, came directly out of our history of dokusan interactions. As complicated as this story is, I feel the journey toward understanding it is worthwhile, for it points to issues of trust in religious systems, our need to seek guidance, and the proper role of authority in Zen training.

I know many people were upset upon learning that Sevan and I had a relationship prior to our talking publicly about it. Spanning the time of this relationship I had barely been able to recognize myself, much less the lack of integrity in this arrangement of secrecy. I believed for a long time that this was a loving relationship that needed to be protected, when really it was an abusive relationship with loving moments that was being hidden for fear of exposure. By the end of 2006 I was utterly confused between trusting and condemning my judgment. It is only with time that the fog has cleared enough for me to rediscover self-reliance and intuition and see that I needed to tell the Sangha the full story.

Although the practice of zazen has been the backbone of my life and my heart is dedicated to the mission of ordination, I have a long personal journey to understand the institution of Zen training in light of my experience. Maybe some day I will return to the CZC to practice.

I wish everyone the best in their own quest for understanding and healing.

