

December 22, 2019

To the San Francisco Zen Center Leadership:

I'm writing this letter not yet sure who it will reach, whether it's people who know me from my years at Zen Center, or people whom I've never met, so I'm not sure how much background to give. Let me just start by saying that even though I haven't been at Zen Center for many years, I am deeply grateful for the time I had there. I no longer have a formal practice, but my experience of practice, of life as practice, is part of who I am and how I think and live. It's because of this feeling of gratitude and connection that I'm writing.

I left before 1983 and before Zentatsu Baker Roshi resigned. Although I came back briefly to share my experience, I didn't live through the turmoil and wasn't part of the long, difficult process of separation. Looking back, what I find so deeply encouraging – despite all the distress, anger and confusion – is that both Zen Center and Baker Roshi continued to practice, each utterly committed to continuing Suzuki Roshi's way. Baker Roshi has spent the last thirty years establishing The Dharma Sangha's two lay monastic practice centers, one in Crestone, CO and one in the Black Forest in Germany, but the separation, and the long semi-silence seems to have continued.

I decided I should write this letter because I've learned quite recently that Baker Roshi's relationship with me – at least the public depiction of it - is still an issue affecting attitudes toward him and his role as a teacher. What disturbs me is how inaccurate these descriptions feel – the ones I've seen or been told about. I don't think I can do much about public perception, but within Zen Center where it matters most, I want to make sure that misinformation about this relationship isn't still affecting Zen Center's relationship with him.

I am not trying to defend this relationship, and I'm not discounting the seriousness of crossing the teacher-student boundary. There are inherent problems, including the ways it can undermine the teacher-student relationship itself. It was a mistake for me, and it had negative consequences, but this was never – in any way - the dark, abusive relationship it has sometimes been portrayed to be.

Some years ago, Richard wrote me to apologize, and to reach for understanding. It was the beginning of an ongoing correspondence which has become surprisingly meaningful for me, and, I think, for him too. Among other things, he has come to understand and acknowledge my experience in a way he totally didn't get before. I hadn't imagined how much coming to a more mutual understanding would matter, but it does.

I also want to say, very clearly, I don't regret the time I spent as Baker Roshi's student; I don't regret the time, and the amazing experience, working as his assistant; and I'm very glad of the renewed relationship and friendship we have now. He was, and is, one of the most important influences in my life.

It's been 36 years since Baker Roshi resigned as Abbot of Zen Center. He's now 83 and has just retired from formal teaching. Because it's such a natural time for reflection, I find myself hoping the time could finally be right for some renewed contact, however exploratory, between Zen Center and Zentatsu. I think of Suzuki Roshi's lecture in ZMBM in which he told us to bury the weeds we pull out, back into the garden soil to nourish the flowers. Maybe the process of re-finding relationship, or cultivating new relationship, would be a way of composting the weeds. In whatever way the understanding and relationship between Zen Center and Zentatsu evolves, it will have consequences. If nothing happens the semi-silent, mostly negative cloud remains. But maybe there is another way. That is my hope and the reason I've written this letter.

Respectfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lucy Calhoun". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end of the last name.

Lucy Bennett Calhoun

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