

March 24, 2011

Dear Sangha,

First, I want to thank the Sangha Stepping Forth Members for sharing your reflections on the meeting of March 20. The topics you explored are very much in my mind as well. I, too, am assessing my own responsibility over the years, and I, too, feel an acute sense of pain and loss, and want to extend my compassion to all who have suffered. I'd like to schedule another facilitated meeting, with the Zen Studies Society board's support and participation. I'm sure Soun Joe Dowling, president of the board, will be in touch about that very soon, but I wanted this to be a personal letter from me to all of you.

It is my strong wish that we support and encourage each other in the difficult process of healing, a process that requires us to acknowledge openly the turmoil and pain of the past, while trusting in the life-giving profundity of our timeless Zen practice. I know that healing is required on both a personal level and on a community level; one cannot take place without the other. Our work toward restoration of trust and renewal of spirit will not be easy, but it is essential. Of this kind of work Pema Chodron says, "The off-center, in-between state is an ideal situation, a situation in which we don't get caught and we can open our hearts and minds beyond limit. It's a very tender, non-aggressive, open-ended state of affairs." I believe our hearts and minds are indeed open and beyond limit as we listen deeply to each other, as you have together on March 20, and as I hope we can continue to do, without suspicion or skepticism.

I have frequently used Buddhist psychotherapist John Welwood's term "spiritual bypassing" to warn against the seductive and insidious way our practice can be used to avoid, paper over, and transcend unresolved personal issues. I was glad to see him interviewed in the spring 2011 issue of Tricycle, and was particularly struck by the relevance of the following passage: "When we are spiritually bypassing, we often use the goal of awakening or liberation to try to rise above the raw and messy side of our humanness before we have fully faced and made peace with it. We may also use our notion of absolute truth to disparage or dismiss relative human needs, feelings, psychological problems, relational difficulties, and developmental deficits. . . . The core psychological wound, so prevalent in the modern world, forms out of not feeling loved or intrinsically lovable as we are. . . . It damages our capacity to value ourselves, which is also the basis for valuing others."

Let's get real, we often say. And what we mean is, hey: I'm human, and you are, too. No need to pretend to be otherwise. It's because we're in this human form that we can realize our buddha-nature; we're humans in the process of becoming buddhas, and we're buddhas shining our light as humans.

Change is never easy. I remember when my son, who is now 30, was a young child, and would have days when nothing seemed to go right—and then would master a new skill. Those growth spurts (crawling, walking, using language) always seemed to be preceded by unaccountable and ear-splitting crying jags.

Mindful that significant change and growth can be met with resistance and reactivity, nonetheless there are some fundamental changes that I envision for the Zen Studies Society and its temples, beginning with cultivating an atmosphere that is warm, open, and respectful of everyone. The Buddha emphasized the importance of harmony in the Sangha. As far as I am concerned, there is no place for fear, ridicule, humiliation, or any kind of harassment or abuse—sexual, psychological, or physical.

Although I hold the position of abbot, my way is relational rather than hierarchical. I want to work with all Sangha members, past and present, to rebuild the foundation of our practice. While maintaining the rigor of formal training, we must support and encourage each person in appropriate ways, taking note of individual needs and talents. This, I believe, is Rinzai Zen in an American setting.

Please let me know how I can help you, and please consider coming to Dai Bosatsu Zendo. I look forward to meeting with you, and to working together to envision and bring about a healthy, strong Zen Studies Society.

With loving wishes and deep gassho,

Shinge Roko Sherry Chayat

