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JOHN TARRANT ROSHI
"Sangha and teacher relationship" - a letter to SZC.

[This is a copy of 1991 letter sent by John Tarrant to Sydney Zen Center.
In
this electronic document the name of a particular person was replaced
with
characters "XYZ" to protect his privacy - coombspapers archives, Sept 93]

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Board of Directors,
Sydney Zen Centre

Dear friends,

This letter is in reply to yours and is intended to clarify the Zen
teaching
situation in Sydney and, in particular, XYZ's status. It is not a private
letter
and you may share it with the rest of the sangha or not as you see fit.
First,
it 's fine to ask questions of me as often as you want. If I am slow in
responding that is not the fault of your questions and there is not
necessarily
a deep significance to it. My life is busy; I like to mull things over
before I
answer and. If I don't have a response I feel happy with I wait until I
do. Many
questions have been raised: if some are not answered by this letter
please ask
further.

There was some initial confusion about responsibility since Sydney Zen
Centre
and its teachers began as Aitken Roshi's area of concern and became mine
before
we had considered quite what this meant. I consult Aitken Roshi on
important
matters but, essentially, the decisions and the blame are now mine. One
of my
tasks is to supervise the three apprentice teachers in Australia.

My decision is that XYZ may currently teach in Melbourne and Brisbane, but that it is best that he not teach, publicly or privately, in NSW. The matter has been discussed with XYZ, with Aitken Roshi, and with some other Diamond Sangha teachers and there is firm agreement that this is the correct course. Private

Dokusan may need some special mention. From the sangha's point of view it doesn't usually work. I can think of a number of examples where it has been divisive. Yet most teacher candidates break a rule or two in trying to adjust to their local circumstances and I remember that I did. Mostly the rules are good ones, set up to support the sangha and the candidate but sometimes the candidate has to find this out for himself. In such cases I usually watch and wait a little, asking myself if this new development is in the Tao. So I watched and waited in this case. And this is how we all learn. We suffer and, as Sophocles said, grow wise.

I believe that I owe you some account of the way I came to my decision. It is not traditional to explain such things but we are a people whose traditions are in a certain flux and moreover Confucian ways are alien to us. So I try to make decisions conscious and, where they are important, to be inclusive and to seek general agreement. This method is often messy but so far has proved valuable in the Diamond Sangha. Aitken Roshi and I among others, are committed to it.

Becoming a teacher is a process not a sudden event. As the supervising teacher I may put any limitations or requirements I wish on the new candidate although in general I try to support her and do my best to make sure that she succeeds. Each candidate has an unique course. I begin watching and pondering the possibilities long before someone becomes a teacher. I consider the insight of the candidate, her dedication and her contribution to the Dharma. The sangha is consulted for an assessment of the candidates's character and leadership capacity and general acceptance as a possible teacher. I consult Aitken Roshi. I consult other teachers too, not so much for an assessment of the character of the candidate but for a check on my own motives and degree of consciousness. So I meditate and dream and worry about the decision for some years -- till everything seems to be in harmony. It's a grave decision and I too am changed by the process. Meanwhile the training of the candidate is going on -- nothing keeps still.

Now to consider the particular situation of XYZ. The point here was give someone who had shown a sincere dedication to the Dharma over a long period of time and who had already some success in teaching in a related tradition, a place to begin. He has my support and trust And we are in frequent contact. Yet he does not have the entire acceptance of the Sydney sangha. I don't think that we should look at this as a pathology. No one needs to be to blame here. He was made a teacher to see what he could make of being a teacher. That is his koan. Any teacher is still developing and a candidate especially needs to be interested in how his own character work takes place. We are shaped by our adversity and we teach by the generosity we bring to our constrained circumstances. Teacher needs the ability to face and hold contradictions without prematurely jumping to one side or another. And what a teacher candidate needs so too a sangha. We are all in the crucible.

I have seen and in one case overseen other situations like this. The best outcome seems to appear when the candidate accepts that the time is not right and takes the task of working with the sangha as his own Zen practice. This is a deep practice and a part of training in insight as well as in character. The sangha needs to be curious in a steady kind of way -- not necessarily knowing what the best outcome will be but embarking on an inner questioning and deepening about what it truly wants in a teacher and what it can provide itself, and, especially, what it is right to do. Candidate and sangha both, we cannot ask others to change -- we must change ourselves and trust that others will recognize and follow.

Our enduring conflicts are often with those who are good but imperfect in ways particularly tempting or distressing to us. Such conflicts take on their own life after a while and give us a mission and a sort of identity. I have had my own share of quarrels in Zen. The only way I have found to heal old wounds is when hoping for nothing I release the other person from my animus against them and, incidentally, from my opinions about them. Forgiveness is hard but has actual consequences and a magical power of blessing. It is a way -- more commonly like farming than like getting struck by lightning. I have not seen it come about by lobbying. Whatever decisions you come up with, as a board, it is

of the utmost necessity that your hearts are in it. So, right now any change from the current situation would mean, not just a grudging agreement, but a heartfelt willingness to have a new situation. And do not be afraid of waiting if this means doing it right. If the foundation is good the rest of the building is easy.

The Sydney Zendo is in its own fashion a grand undertaking. I imagine that there will be eventually a collegium of teachers in Sydney. If we are in the Tao when we make these decisions then other good things will naturally appear. We need to live in harmony not because it is easy or even always possible but because it is our work and our work reveals us to be something greater than we thought we were, with more hope and more possibility. I encourage you to persevere and to be tolerant of and curious about what you may discover.

John Tarrant

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