

19 April, 2011

Dear Mr. Merzel,

We are a group of Zen teachers, affiliated with all of the major schools of Zen in the west. We write as individuals, however, not as representatives of any group. We are deeply concerned at your apparent turning away from your own stated intention of stepping back as a teacher in order to take care of your habitual abuses of power with students and others. We are addressing this letter to you with the heartfelt wish that you read and heed our counsel. We are also sending this letter to various Dharma journals and websites because we have deep doubts that the letter will convince you and we feel that the greater sangha needs to be made aware of the problem and our views.

On the 15th of February forty-four teachers sent you a public letter, in response to your admission of serious misconduct, expressing deep concern both for you and for the sangha you serve. The letter recommended that you take a leave of absence from teaching and enter into counseling with people qualified to work with clergy sexual misconduct. We know others including close colleagues and friends offered similar counsel.

On February 6, you published a confession of unethical behavior, adultery and sexual misconduct with students. You called this statement, "Owning My Responsibility: A Personal Statement from Genpo Merzel." In it you say you will disrobe as a priest, "as just a small part of my response." You describe yourself as having engaged in "dishonest, hurtful behavior as well as sexual misconduct." Earlier in the year, in at least two meetings, you acknowledged having engaged in a long affair with one of your students. You claim you will no longer give the Buddhist precepts, that you will spend the rest of your life integrating the precepts into your life and practice so as to regain "dignity and respect" and characterize yourself as having missed "the mark of being a moral and ethical person and a decent human being." Finally, you stated that you have entered therapy and plan to continue indefinitely. A copy of the entire statement is attached to this letter.

This was not the first occasion such behaviors were revealed. Your response this time was to disrobe as a Buddhist priest and to resign from the White Plum Asanga, the only organization that may have had sway over your future actions.

We write again because you seem to have decided to ignore your own best impulses and to return to your path of denial. The page on your website that contained your statement a few short weeks ago now reads: "This page does not exist."

On February 6, you said you would spend the rest of your life "integrating the Soto Zen Buddhist Ethics into (your) life." Many of us read this and understood your intention was to cease representing yourself as a Zen teacher and instead to give future energy to the Big Mind project you've developed.

In fact, you continued to use the titles of a Zen teacher (Zen Master, Roshi) and to act in every way as a Zen teacher, just no longer as a priest or as a member of a larger Zen organization. Initially, your Kanzeon Board of Directors committed to a process of separating from your “Big Mind” organization and to bringing in new leadership for the Center. You were to take an indefinite leave from leadership at Kanzeon, of at least one year. Yet, a few weeks later, your Board at Kanzeon now says you have “retired” as a priest only and that they will sell off the assets of Kanzeon. Your Board’s statement also says that you will now teach nearby and offers your teaching to all members of Kanzeon, in the new location. The statement reads, in part, “The sale will also allow Kanzeon to pay off its obligations and sustain its existence, with Genpo Roshi continuing as its Abbot, outside Salt Lake City at Solitude in Big Cottonwood Canyon.”

We sincerely hope you will eventually find in your heart a way to genuine repentance, and out of that follow a course of remediation that may actually lead to healing. Others have acknowledged misconduct and have made appropriate amends in the past, and been rehabilitated within the mahasangha. May you be encouraged by their example?

However, at this point we see no evidence of good faith action on your part. It seems you continue to hold yourself out as a religious leader, a Zen Master and that the Kanzeon Board has turned and followed your lead. We are concerned for people who may come to you as a Zen teacher. Those among your current students who choose to continue with you have made a conscious decision, aware, we assume, of all the facts regarding your repeated history of exploitative behaviors.

Therefore, as members of the Zen teaching mahasangha deeply concerned for the wellbeing of anyone to whom you present yourself as a Zen teacher, we feel we cannot remain silent. We need to state publicly our belief that you are not acting faithfully within the bounds of our tradition. We reiterate our call for you to enter treatment with people qualified to diagnose and address your repeated unethical and exploitative behaviors. And, we call on you to honor your commitment to step aside from Kanzeon and allow a remediation process to happen there as well.

Sincerely yours,

Janet Jiryu Abels - Still Mind Zendo

Gregory Hosho Abels - Still Mind Zendo

Robert Joshin Althouse - Zen Life &
Meditation Center

Eiko Joshin Carolyn Atkinson - Everyday
Dharma Zen Center

Shosan Victoria Austin - San Francisco
Zen Center

Chozen Bays - Great Vow Zen Monastery

Hogen Bays - Great Vow Zen Monastery

Dai-En Bennage - Mt. Equity Zendo

Mitra Bishop - Mountain Gate Temple &
Hidden Valley Zen Center

Melissa Myozen Blacker - Boundless Way
Zen

Tony Bland - Starkville Zen Dojo

Angie Boissevain - Floating Zendo
Ingen Kevin Breen - San Francisco Zen Center
Domyo Burk - Dharma Rain Zen Center
Tim Burkett - Minnesota Zen Meditation Center
Gyokuko Carlson - Dharma Rain Zen Center
Kyogen Carlson - Dharma Rain Zen Center
Roko Sherry Chayat - Zen Center of Syracuse
Nonin Chowaney - Nebraska Zen Center
Jissan Larry Christensen - Zen Center of Portland
Jundo Cohen - Treeleaf Zendo
Michael Taiun Elliston - Atlanta Soto Zen Center
Norman Fischer - Everyday Zen Foundation
James Ford - Boundless Way Zen
Jake Jiyu Gage - Vista Zen Center
Eshin Godfrey - Zen Centre of Vancouver
Gaelyn Godwin - Houston Zen Center
Sunyana Graef - Vermont Zen Center
Elizabeth Hamilton - Zen Center of San Diego
Zenkei Blanche Hartman - San Francisco Zen Center
Joko Dave Haselwood - Stone Creek Zen Center
Taigen Henderson - Toronto Zen Centre
Soeng. Hyang - Kwan Um School of Zen
Les Keido Kaye - Kannon Do Zen Meditation Center
Myozan Dennis Keegan - Moon Water Sangha
Dajaku Kinst - Ocean Gate Zen Center
Bodhin Kjolhehe - Rochester Zen Center
Barry Magid - The Ordinary Mind Zendo
Genjo Marinello - Dai Bai Zan Cho Bo Zen Ji

Daishin McCabe - Mt. Equity Zendo
Ejo McMullen - Eugene Zendo
Misha Merrill - Zen Heart Sangha
Mary Mocine - Vallejo Zen Center
Dosho Port - Wild Fox Zen
Susan Ji-on Postal - Empty Hand Zen Center
Byakuren Judith Ragir - Clouds in Water Zen Center
Al Fusho Rapaport - Open Mind Zen Meditation Center
Zuiko Redding - Cedar Rapids Zen Center
Lewis Richmond - The Vimala Sangha
Joan Rieck - Three Treasures Sangha of the Sandias
Diane Eshin Rizzetto - Bay Zen Center
Shinshu Roberts - Ocean Gate Zen Center
David Rynick - Boundless Way Zen
Grace Jill Schireson - Empty Nest Zendo
Yozen Peter Schneider - Beginner's Mind Zen Center
Hozan Alan Senauke - Berkeley Zen Center
Joen Snyder O'Neal - Compassionate Ocean Dharma Center
Myogen Steve Stucky - San Francisco Zen Center
Haju Sunim - Zen Buddhist Temple, Ann Arbor
Val Meiren Szymanski - Bamboo In The Wind
Daniel Terragno - Rocks and Clouds Zendo
Katherine Thanas - Santa Cruz Zen Center
Jordan Thorn - San Francisco Zen Center
Sallie Jiko Tisdale - Dharma Rain Zen Center
Jisho Warner - Stone Creek Zen Center
Baizan Cathleen Williams - San Francisco Zen Center

Addendum

Owning My Responsibility

A Personal Statement from Genpo Merzel

I have chosen to disrobe as a Buddhist Priest, and will stop giving Buddhist Precepts or Ordinations, but I will continue teaching Big Mind. I will spend the rest of my life truly integrating the Soto Zen Buddhist Ethics into my life and practice so I can once again regain dignity and respect. My actions have caused a tremendous amount of pain, confusion, and controversy for my wife, family, and Sangha, and for this I am truly sorry and greatly regret. My behavior was not in alignment with the Buddhist Precepts. I feel disrobing is just a small part of an appropriate response.

I am also resigning as an elder of the White Plum Asanga. My actions should not be viewed as a reflection on the moral fabric of any of the White Plum members.

With great humility I will continue to work on my own shadows and deeply rooted patterns that have led me to miss the mark of being a moral and ethical person and a decent human being. I appreciate all the love and support as well as the criticism that has been shared with me. Experiencing all the pain and suffering that I have caused has truly touched my heart and been the greatest teacher. It has helped open my eyes and given me greater clarity around my own dishonest, hurtful behavior as well as my sexual misconduct. I recently entered therapy and plan to continue indefinitely with it. I am in deep pain over the suffering I have caused my wife, children, students, successors and Sangha.

With sadness and love,

D. Genpo Merzel