

To:

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Rinso Ed Sattizhan, Abiding Abbott, City Center
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Abbots Executive Group of Zen Center

October 3, 2018.

An Open Letter to San Francisco Zen Center regarding Ed Brown

It has come to my attention that the San Francisco Zen Center received a letter of complaint regarding the teaching of my father, Ed Brown, at Green Gulch Farm on July 28, 2018, and that in response to this letter and to Ed's reaction in its aftermath, Zen Center decided bar him from teaching at any of the three locations (City Center, Tassajara, Green Gulch Farm). My father did not ask me to advocate on his behalf. But I have been reflecting on the situation and weighing my words according to the principle of Right Speech - Is it true? Is it kind? Is it beneficial? - and I answer yes, yes, and yes.

Growing up at Zen Center, even as a small child, I knew that Zen Center was a place where broken people came to heal. I thank the person who wrote the letter for voicing her concerns and speaking her truth. I feel saddened that she felt unsafe and threatened by my father's words. I applaud Zen Center for taking swift and decisive action in an attempt to foster safe space. However, I find Zen Center's action to be a bit extreme.

Indeed, the author of the letter did not request that Ed Brown be removed from the teaching staff; she asked that Green Gulch "engage staff in education about social issues so that they know more about the kind of care and language that people need to feel safe enough to practice (...) [to help make] Green Gulch spiritually and emotionally accessible to people who are healing." Ed is the first to admit that he is not perfect, and I believe that he would be receptive to the type of information and education that the letter writer proposes.

I listened carefully to the audio recordings of that day at Green Gulch, and I did not hear what the what the letter writer heard. The statements in her letter represent her truth, which appears to be a series of several miscommunications. I do not intend in any way to belittle or dismiss her experience of the day. I'm saying that what she heard is very different than what was actually said.

The most egregious of the misunderstandings: she claimed that my father spoke of having an erection in the Zendo and hiding it with a meditation cushion. He never said anything of the sort. He told the story of a time when some folks from a group called OneTaste came to visit Green Gulch. When the meditation period ended, he saw a woman wearing black panties bending over

to fluff her cushion. He was stunned and did not know what to do, so he did what is completely routine and customary at the end of a meditation period at ZC: he turned and fluffed his own cushion, bowed towards it, and bowed away from it. When he turned back around, the woman had her clothes on. There was no mention of an erection. There was not even the slightest hint of an insinuation about an erection. The purpose of telling the story was to illustrate a situation in which one feels befuddled and doesn't know what to say or do. In the talk at GGF, he blames himself as the teacher for not expressly stating that people are supposed to wear clothes in the Zendo.

The complaint letter stated that when Ed explained where the bathrooms were located, he was “dismissing transgender people’s needs by saying ‘I don’t know about that stuff.’” Listening to the recordings, I heard a rather clumsy attempt to acknowledge people with various gender identities and to give everyone permission to use whichever bathroom they choose.

The author of the letter states she did not appreciate “when jokes were objectifying or at the expense of people who hold marginalized identities.” Again, this is not what I heard. He related a story from Byron Katie (not a Zen teacher, but a woman whose work my father respects) in which she went into the women’s bathroom and found the seat completely wet. She wondered if a transvestite had peed all over the seat. She cleaned the mess and used the bathroom, and when she flushed, water sprayed all over the toilet. In the audio recordings at GGF, the audience does not laugh at the mention of a transvestite; they laugh when the flush sprays water all over the place. Clearly, people in attendance understood that the butt of the joke is not the transvestite, but Byron Katie herself when she realizes that she was completely mistaken in her first assumption: the audience grasped that the story was meant as an example of how one’s thinking can be faulty.

I heard several instances in which Ed self-deprecatingly poked fun at himself. At one point, the laughter came when he mentioned me. He talked about making a gratitude list, and, feeling uninspired, began giving thanks for things like “the floor, the sunlight...” and many other somewhat boring items before finally saying “Oh, and yeah, my daughter.” People laughed. So did I.

As for the letter writer identifying herself “as a queer woman and a survivor of sexual violence”: I am so sorry for everything that you’ve been through in your life, including that upsetting day at Green Gulch. I hope that you find healing and peace. May you be safe and empowered. May you find refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Peace be with you. May you be held in love and compassion.

My father is one of the few remaining direct students of Suzuki Roshi, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. For decades, countless people have told me that his way of teaching the Dharma reaches them like no other. It seems to me that he is one of the teachers who draws people to Zen Center, and that by ousting him, Zen Center probably has more to lose than he does.

I believe there is a way that the letter writer’s concerns could be validated and her recommendations implemented, without resorting to such a drastic move as expelling a loved

and gifted teacher from Zen Center. My sense is that in aiming to do the right thing, you expelled him before fully assessing the situation and exploring other possible solutions.

I ask that you reflect on what can be learned from this situation for the greater good of the Sangha. What actions will Zen Center take to be more welcoming and inclusive of “people who hold marginalized identities?” Would Zen Center consider making Ed’s expulsion temporary rather than permanent? What conditions would need to be met for there to be some kind of discussion rather than acrimony within our Sangha? And, if and when that time comes, what overtures would Zen Center be willing to make to assure Ed that he is welcome?

At this point, he is at peace with your decision to oust him and he’s letting go. And I trust that the next chapter of his life will be good, with or without Zen Center. Maybe it is time for me to let go too. But it hurts.

Gasshō,

Lichen Brown