

# University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library — Archives

June 3, 2010

To: The Board of Directors, The Zen Studies Society  
From: Andy Atable

Dear Board Member:

Recent postings on the internet prompt this letter to you. I have kept my silence for many years, but now find myself implicated in ZSS affairs because of various documents posted on the internet. In August 1995, the board of ZSS received a petition from many Buddhist teachers—Philip Kapleau and Robert Aitken among them--that called for the withdrawal of my former teacher from his duties as Zen teacher of The Zen Studies Society (ZSS). With the other directors of ZSS at that time, I approved the official reply of ZSS to that letter. I am now being asked why I signed that reply. Before I even consider a public response, I feel that I owe the courtesy of making my views known to the current directors of The Society

The sheer volume of the material on the ZSS today and the internet's power of global disclosure merit a response. I am shocked by the things I did not know. Robert Aitken in his blog has asked the abbot to publicly address the accusations against him going back 40 years. Most important, I woke to the fact there are deep, festering resentments from an aggrieved sangha that the Zen Studies Society never conscientiously dealt with: this is why The Society needs to respond in an honest, non-evasive way worthy of a Dharma organization. The Sangha needs your respect and gratitude. Recent Sangha need to know and feel that an effort is being made to right old wrongs instead of feeling that their organization has a troubled past that is concealed from them, and that they, too, should be secretive about The Society to new students.

The recent viral dispersion of the "Aitken-Shimano" archives over the internet, as well as other documents pertaining to past upheavals in the Zen Studies Society, is yet another crisis of scandal for the Zen Studies Society. At this point, the documents that are in public view make revelations that cumulatively are impossible to explain or defend, and they significantly alter perceptions of the "history of a transmission" depicted in *Namu Dai Bosa*. The teaching legacy of the abbot will now be outweighed by the very personal accounts that allege predatory transgressions. Any responses of the ZSS from its board or its abbot are now suspect and self-satirizing. The lineage itself will be seen as problematic. The slow fallout of more documents as the years go by will be a haunting reminder of how successive waves of directors and monks, in being complicit, failed the Zen Studies Society envisioned by its founders.

I write to you as one who used to belong to the mainstream sangha of The Society and who worked for many years for The Zen Studies Society and its

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abbot. My active participation in The Society's affairs began in 1982, when, for the first time, I was approached for help during a time of crisis. I was approached again in the spring of 1993, during another time of crisis. There was a decade between these two events, and then followed another decade (1993-2003) where I lived and worked in Dai Bosatsu Zendo. My involvement as a volunteer and then as employee with ZSS lasted for roughly half of its current life.

I write this letter in solicitude, to see if we can give life anew to a tired phrase, "to let true Dharma continue." The series of unfortunate events that led to the unprecedented departures of three vice abbot/dharma heirs, because they happened in sequence, have dashed any hopes for a harmonious continuity of lineage succession and a fresh articulation of mission for The Society. I was one of the heirs, but although my parting with the ZSS had its share of drama and lawyers (none of them representing me), it is dwarfed by the story of how The Zen Studies Society fulfills or fails its mission. By this I mean how it responds to its constituency which is the sangha, and how it falters when its leader fails to embody its mission. In the years after departing, I found myself drawn to this story vastly more important than my own, the story of The Zen Studies Society.

## ***Point of Departure***

The energy and enthusiasm in its early days of The Zen Studies Society are truly impressive. But scandals quickly compromised The Society early in its history, even before Dai Bosatsu opened in 1976, and many of the sangha who departed were the early dharma helpers, the pioneer practitioners in Shoboji and Dai Bosatsu. The story of The Zen Studies Society is a history of initial devotion and enthusiasms but equally a story of bitter dejection and departures. Central to the story is the role of an abbot who could inspire students to do their best but who, by unbecoming conduct and an inability to learn from past mistakes, subverted many of his accomplishments and caused repeated departures of his students. Of the stories I investigated, the most painful, revealing, and instructive is the story of Mrs. Dorris Carlson.

For years I had heard rumors of her departure, but when I joined the ZSS briefly as a director in the late 80's, the curtain had been drawn on "the Carlson departure". Many years later, when my own departure from ZSS was imminent (Spring, 2003), the abbot read a very moving letter from Mrs. Carlson during the last board meeting I attended. She praised him for his many sacrifices and his great effort for The Dharma. He was reading a letter from the past, retrieved from forty years ago—to show the directors that he had the admiration and unstinting gratitude of Dorris Carlson, the greatest benefactor that the ZSS has known.

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Therefore, I was stunned to learn, from her letters recently posted on the internet, the depth of Mrs. Carlson disappointment when she left The Society in 1984, a full 15 years or so after that worshipful letter. In February of 1984, she wrote to Jean Bankier (a board member):

It is only because of the spiritual stature of Eldo Roshl that I give any funds for the New York Zen Studies Society. If It were not for him, I should not have been Interested. Indeed, I do not share that same confidence that I once did and this is so because many reliable sources have reported to me that the spiritual stature of the Zen Studies Society has been compromised over the years because of Eido Roshī's behavior.

Another letter followed shortly, this time to the directors, where she expressed scathing disapproval over what she saw as financial improprieties (these pertained to the townhouse she had purchased for the Zen Studies Society specifically for the use of the abbot). The letter is dated March 6, 1984. In two short sentences, her scorn for the abbot is expressed:

"September 19, as you know is the anniversary of Chester Carlson's passing. But it should not be the anniversary of a Roshī's deception."

The letter concludes:

"And further, under the present circumstances, I do not want the Carlson name used by the Zen Studies Society in any manner."  
(Sentence quoted in full).

Considering who Mrs. Carlson was, and what she did, "Do not use the Carlson name in any manner" should have the utmost attention of the ZSS board. *It is a directive that cannot be changed by a board resolution, and its intent is indisputably clear.* Mrs. Carlson wished to have nothing to do with the Zen Studies Society, and she did not wish the Zen Studies Society to have anything to do with her. Unless Dorris Carlson's heir(s) have lifted the injunction against the use of her name, please do not use her good name for your own purposes, and please respect the dead. It is the decent thing to do.

I have never met Mrs. Carlson. Her story emerged as a cautionary tale of what can go wrong in a religious not-for profit organization. In her story we see the great divide between the sincere hopes of a generous and righteous philanthropist/sangha member and the cynical and secret workings of an organization that destroyed those hopes. She was the most notable among many tragic casualties.

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## ***Dorris Carlson was Sangha***

Mrs. Carlson's story, because of the magnitude of her beneficence to the organization, is a prism that will illuminate many aspects of The Society. Like you and me, Dorris Carlson was sangha. Her letters quoted by the abbot show a depth of sincerity any teacher would be proud to receive. Her bond with the abbot was a spiritual bond. Her history with The Society shows a dedicated, focused, and sustained kindness. All of that was centered and driven by absolute trust in a spiritual teacher.

I invite you to look at The Zen Studies Society through the prism of Dorris Carlson's story. It is an understatement to say that she was disappointed or embittered. All that she had given, in sincerity and generosity of great magnitude, in the succession of gifts that began with the carriage house on 67<sup>th</sup> street, had come to naught in a few years.

To me, her story is the paradigm of many experiences of those who departed from Shoboji or Dai Bosatsu. For years Mrs. Carlson was patient and tolerant of the scandals in The Society. Like many long-term sangha who finally left, she kept hoping for that crisis of conscience where the abbot would find a turning point and take responsibility for his actions. All clearly became intolerable to her in March 1984 when she made the decision to cut off The Zen Studies Society from her concern.

## ***Points of Departure***

In the years *before and after* Dorris Carlson's disavowal, one can mark additional points of departure. The society's legacy of disappearances has not been buried, but continues to this day. In the aftermath of crisis or scandal, when the best minds of The Society should have been entreated to join the board, the recovery of The Society and planning for its future lay in the hands of the abbot and his wife and well-intentioned but often inexperienced students. Because an essential qualification was their compliance to an abbot who was also the chairman of the board and their teacher, any shortcomings of the abbot could not be dealt with openly and exhaustively. Despite the crises, there was little possibility of change. The governance of The Society made it often impossible for the board to act responsibly *for the organization*.

The tragic loss, in human goodwill and resources, not to speak of the warm fellowship that a true sangha can engender, is heart-rending. Think of dispirited founders, many bereft students, and the women, nuns and monks, and dharma heirs who made the life-changing decision to join a Buddhist sangha. They gave unstintingly to the Dharma, and then one day, in an equally pivotal decision, cut off The Society from their lives. Who among you does not know several sangha who have left bereft? The leadership *has depleted, again and again, the true treasure of any organization: its human capital*. How hollow sounds the words "sangha togetherness".

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## ***Leadership Amidst Complicity***

What produced and tolerated the many crises in the Zen Studies Society was deeply flawed governance. The chairman of the board was the Abbot. His wife was also a full-fledged director with voting rights. After every scandal, what various directors did (sometimes with professional help from legal counsel) was help him survive and help the ZSS resume normal functioning as an organization. Through the years, the homeostasis of the abbot was maintained at great cost. Each relapse caused another cycle of dislocation, many departures, and emphatic loss of reputation. The cost, through the years, was too great for The Society to flourish.

Initially all of us (directors) were hopeful that the abbot could change and would change. In that early stage of involvement, there was no complicity. The complicity and enablement came later, when we (various directors, various students) suspended our usual compunctions *only because he was our teacher*. In many instances, complicity and enablement simply meant that we set the bar so low for our teacher's behavior that he did not have to live by the common decencies. The abbot was not particularly skilled in dealing with allegations of moral transgression. He needed and depended on a board (legal counsel included) that could navigate through the crises. When he was weak and lost, we propped him up; we shielded him from having to deal with the crisis that he had created. If today, you are shielding him from what is being revealed on the internet about him and The Society, you too are enabling him. Your very complicity keeps him in a protective bubble, out of touch.

In ceremonial, ritualized, and choreographed situations, the abbot is very much the master—brisk, in charge, with-it. In a situation where he is asked to account for his actions, he is at sea, rudderless. This shedding of the Rinzai "true man" persona when challenged by real events is puzzling, and leads to pointed questions.

How does your teacher function in the marketplace, that domain Rinzai called "the busy crossroads of life", where everyday we make choices for better or for worse? Does he take responsibility for his actions? Does Rinzai training mean one grows a thick skin of denial against ethical inquiry?

During the episodes of crisis where I was active in the Society, secrets had to be protected, for to have them revealed (we feared) en masse would destroy the Society. Secrets create tensions within an organization. Secrets divide families and congregations (sangha) and create false companionships (Friedman, *Generation to Generation*). Secrets make The Society a dysfunctional Dharma family. The sustained protection of secrets was inimical to everything we were hoping for: a Dharma organization with integrity where Sangha was at the service of its leadership.

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## ***Sensible Governance is not Rocket Science***

Teachers are essential to Dharma organizations. but when they err, organizations need a context where trustees and older sangha and heirs can honestly discuss what is best for the organization.

Our tradition values gratitude: to our teachers and lineage, to Dharma. Gratitude to the Sangha from the teacher is just as essential to the life of an organization.

All Dharma organizations in the United States are sustainable only when there is mutual trust between the Sangha and its leadership. The Sangha is key to sustainability, and it must be treated with the respect and gratitude it deserves.

## ***Closure Creates a new Point of Departure.***

The problems of Zen Studies Society are not so unique. In all cases where religious organizations wished to emerge from the stigma of ethical transgressions, they (eventually) saw the need for public repentance and closure. The Soto and Rinzai establishments, the Sanbokyodan establishment, the San Francisco Zen Center, and the Catholic Church are examples.

In the ZSS, the great fear associated with a public event of closure was the airing of dirty linen in public. But the internet has already done that. Discussion, in the blogspeak the internet encourages, will keep revisiting old issues and can only damage the ZSS. "Holding fast" in silence is to bury your head in the sand and deny that anything can be done. To "march on" in nonchalance, as if one had no time to deal with ethical concerns, is to repeat a mistake of the past. Remember that when Pope Benedict recently had to deal with the predations of priests, he finally made a public admission that was extremely painful *yet also deeply consoling* to the Catholic Sangha: "the sin is within the Church". He understood that his congregation needed to be told, in no uncertain terms, that the culpable would be exposed, that "the buck stops here".

The internet postings open a new gate for the ZSS. For once, all the allegations, all that were embarrassments in the past, can be seen in the light of day and dealt with. I believe that if The Zen Studies wants to move on, to truly leave "the dead concerns of yesterday" behind, it needs to publicly announce its sincere desire to do so through a public event of closure. This can be a healing process that also signals a new direction, and it can only help salvage what remains of the abbot's diminishing legacy.

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*A sincere and heartfelt event of Reconciliation is the only way to re-gather the goodwill of the disaffected sanghas, and the only way to redeem the abbot and The Society. Only by public rites of redress, with the Sangha as the central participant, can you make a credible claim that The Zen Studies Society is turning a new leaf. Only then will it be possible in years ahead to express the gratitude and respect that Dorris and Chester Carlson and Bill Johnstone deserve. You have the power to do this, today. A public event of Reconciliation, with the full participation of all sanghas of The Zen Studies Society, and with witnessing Sanghas from other Buddhist organizations, will transform your story, the story of The Society, from one of a fractured organization into a story of renewal and optimism.*

Sincerely,

Andy Atable



## Internet Citations:

- 1.) <http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/ZenTeachersToZSSBoard.pdf> (1995) (petition to Zen Studies Board, from Aiken, Kapleau, et.al.)
- 2.) <http://robertaitken.blogspot.com/> (challenges Tai San)
- 3.) [http://www.hoodiemonks.org/PDF's/Shimano\\_Archive\\_Redacted/1984\\_0208\\_Carlson\\_Bankier.pdf](http://www.hoodiemonks.org/PDF's/Shimano_Archive_Redacted/1984_0208_Carlson_Bankier.pdf) ("the spiritual stature of Zen Studies has been compromised...")
- 4.) [http://www.hoodiemonks.org/PDF's/Shimano\\_Archive\\_Redacted/1984\\_0306\\_Carlson\\_Busch.pdf](http://www.hoodiemonks.org/PDF's/Shimano_Archive_Redacted/1984_0306_Carlson_Busch.pdf) ("do not use the Carlson name....")