

There has been talk by some about AZC disaffiliating from Rinzai-ji. If AZC were to disaffiliate (which I do not advocate), it is not at all clear what AZC would become. To disaffiliate from Rinzai-ji without clarity and a vision for AZC is to invite uncertainty, factionalism, poor practice and fragmentation.

No Rinzai-ji group has formally disaffiliated as a result of recent news. There are over twenty affiliated Zen centers in North America and Europe that form the Rinzai-ji family. Unfortunately, other lineages have gone through similar situations (for example, with Eido Roshi and Maezumi Roshi). But fortunately, these lineages have emerged with greater clarity and strength, and without splintering or significant disaffiliation by Zen centers.

To be affiliated with Rinzai-ji in no way endorses or approves of the behavior of Joshu Roshi as recently reported and as stated by the Rinzai-ji oshos. Sexual harassment and improper conduct between a student and teacher is clearly wrong. But while Rinzai-ji was founded by Joshu Roshi, Rinzai-ji is larger than any one person. To be affiliated with Rinzai-ji informs the style of practice and ceremonies, the heritage of which Rinzai-ji is a part, the teachings and the broader community of ordained people and practitioners. When we chant the sutra book in day sits, one of the ekos dedicates the merit of chanting – which is to say remembers, acknowledges and thanks – our great grandfathers in the lineage. We specifically acknowledge the teacher of Joshu Roshi, his teacher's teacher, and on back through time.

I start from an essentially conservative position: Zen, and Rinzai Zen, is a non-theistic religion with a history and continuity of over one thousand years. There are many different approaches to Zen, ranging from the personal (I feel better when I sit) to the mystical (seeking insight into who "I" am and my relationship to the universe) to the spiritual/religious/personal commitment to a particular and specific practice. All of these approaches are good, but I have always understood AZC as embodying a spiritual/religious/personal commitment to a particular and specific practice. This approach subsumes and permits all the other approaches, but it has always been clear that AZC stood in a particular place (a non-theistic religion) and a particular tradition (in Rinzai-ji, as part of a Rinzai Zen Buddhist tradition going back hundreds of years). Were this ever to be abandoned, without clarity about what it means, what are we?

This is not a trivial question. There are very real issues about ordination, funerals, marriages, ceremonies, forms of practice, doctrines and the like. Do we make this up as we move forward? We are clear that decisions on religious practice are not

properly the province of the board – but if we disassociate from Rinzaï-ji then who besides the board is responsible for inventing a new AZC? For deciding whether we sit facing the wall or into the room? For determining liturgy, forms of practice and the like? If the response is that AZC will simply carry on just as it always has, and will only amend some stuffy legal papers but will make no other changes, then we are essentially being dishonest. We are saying we want to be a Rinzaï center, and follow the style of practice developed over the last 50 years by Rinzaï-ji and which we have followed for 23 years, but want to avoid “taint” by publicly saying we’re not part of the Rinzaï-ji family when in fact we still act (in terms of practice, style, liturgy, etc.) just as if we were. If the answer is that we’ll follow whatever a new dharma teacher wants, then there is great danger – a dharma teacher who is unbounded by tradition (e.g., Rinzaï practice history) or peers (other ordained people who are part of the same family) simply has far too much power – and we have gone from the frying pan into the fire. Rather than having the “Roshi problem” at some distance and remove, we will have brought it right into AZC. If the answer is that we’ll go with another Rinzaï lineage, or even another Zen lineage, it is frankly difficult to find one untouched by controversy. It is easy to say “disaffiliate,” but it is very difficult to say what happens next.

It is clear to me that some people who have been vocal about expressing disapproval want to explore new forms of Zen practice. I think it is fair to say they want a more democratic and non-hierarchical group, and want to invent new ways of practice. My personal feeling is that if they want to do that, that’s great. I’m all in favor of it. They should start their own group and do it. But that is not what AZC has been for 23 years, and is a different mission and a different entity. And frankly, I think Albuquerque can support and should have more Zen centers and sitting groups.

There are practical steps that can and should be taken. We should reexamine our policy on sexual harassment and related misconduct, and should invite community dialog on what else or further should be done in this area. Clarity around both personal responsibility of practitioners and appropriate behavior by those in clerical or teaching roles is critical.

We should discuss the Zen Center and its relationship to Rinzaï-ji, so that there is better common understanding of the nature and meaning of the relationship. If we hold a sangha meeting on this, we can consider bringing in a neutral facilitator. Clearly any dialog should include board members, senior practitioners and Seiju, as the founding abbot of AZC.

Finally, if some practitioners at AZC want to strike out and explore new approaches, we should view this positively and should offer support and assistance. We are all moving the wheel of Dharma.