

**Executive Summary**  
**Report of the Sangha Harmony Committee, Jan. 5, 2014**  
**Zen Community of Oregon**

This summary provides a brief overview of the Sangha Harmony Committee (SHC)'s report on the causes and consequences of a former senior student's departure from Great Vow Zen Monastery and makes several specific recommendations. The SHC responded to a conflict arising with the former student around his perceived abuse of power by the primary teachers at ZCO. This conflict reached a level of intensity and complexity not encountered before. It is important to recognize that the former student was also acting in a teaching capacity at Great Vow. As a result of these issues, the Sangha Harmony Committee has operated as more of a preliminary fact-finding committee than as a committee helping to resolve a conflict. Because there has not been an ongoing conversation focusing on conflict-resolution, the committee is simply providing a report of the information gathered thus far, in hopes that this will shed some light on the situation, and help guide the activities of our Sangha.

The SHC spent hundreds of hours examining this issue, both as a group and as individual members. They met with the former student, the teachers, with current and former residents of Great Vow individually and in groups, ordained and postulants, with current lay members of Heart of Wisdom as well as with people who have left to practice with other communities. The committee met weekly to discuss its findings and to make recommendations with the intention to keep the Sangha pointed in a healthy direction.

Through this investigation, the SHC found no evidence of unethical behavior such as sexual or financial misconduct on the part of Sangha members or the Teachers. The SHC found no evidence of illegal behavior on the part of Sangha members or the Teachers. The SHC found no evidence that anyone's physical safety is or has been at risk and found no evidence of physical or sexual violence or harassment.

Rather, the SHC found that the former student came to feel that he did not have the heart connection with his teachers at Great Vow that he wished for. However, he then interpreted this lack of connection as a reflection of a dangerous psychological flaw in the teachers. The former student cast his recognition of this notion as the primary cause of his departure and spread this view to others, including his own students, in private meetings. Others reacted to these claims with doubt about their practice and about the teachers. The SHC found that, while there was a real conflict in personal styles and sensitivities between the teachers and some students, there is no basis for claims of psychological disorders or danger in the practice at GVZM, and moreover that having made such claims was an unskillful behavior on the former student's part that led to division in the Sangha. The SHC recognizes that through these months, the former student and the teachers both have suffered in loss of friendships, students, and reputation, and that plans for the monastery's future leadership were derailed. The Committee feels that some of these issues should be addressed as private matters between the former student, his wife (also a former student and teacher at Great Vow) and the primary teachers, while others should be addressed by the Sangha and by Sangha leadership, as described below.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In consideration of all we have heard and observed, we make the following recommendations:

- 1) For the teachers and those directly involved to receive spiritual and emotional support and reflection from their peers and/or from professionals; not to seek this from their own current or former students regardless of their perceived maturity.
- 2) Should the former student decide that he would like to pursue reconciliation, for the benefit of all involved, we strongly recommend that such conversations be guided by a third party, outside the Sangha. *This may take a significant amount of time to allow for hearts and minds to settle before such a process is even begun.* We recommend the third party be a trained mediator and ideally someone well-versed in the Dharma or other spiritual background.
- 3) Disagreements, conflicts, and turbulence are a natural occurrence in human communities. Even the Buddha's own Sangha had deep disagreements. We encourage each person affected by our current situation to read and take to heart the following essay on reconciliation by Thanissaro Bikkhu:  
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/reconciliation.html>
- 4) The former student has alleged that the atmosphere, training, and norms of the monastery have been harmful to some residents, although he found it difficult to articulate the specifics of this. We recommend a third-party review of this conflict to ensure the health and safety of our Sangha. Our community has nothing to hide, will respond openly to such allegations, and is open to finding out if there are any harmful elements that need to change. We recommend the Board contact Gaelyn Godwin, who had initially agreed to serve as an exit-interviewer, to examine our processes.
- 5) The Teachers had been talking of, upon their retirement as co-Abbots, entrusting the care of the Monastery to the former student and his wife. In advance of that, they had been planning to allow the former student and his wife to lead the monastery in their absence as they took time for sabbatical. This is no longer an option available to them, yet their need for sabbatical has not changed. We recommend that the Board of Directors take this up immediately.
- 6) We recommend that there be an ongoing process of thorough evaluation of the current monastic training model to determine if there are additional supports or changes that are needed. The Board has already taken up this task. We further encourage the Board to include the Sangha in this process.
- 7) The Sangha Harmony Committee will be offering Harmony Tea circles during which sangha members will be welcome to process and discuss feelings and concerns about this situation.
- 8) Finally, we encourage the Sangha create more opportunities for celebrations and appreciations including opportunities for fun and enjoyment together, so that we can return to a balanced and joyful relationship with one another.