



Plum Mountain News

Zen Boundaries

by Rev. Rinzan Pechovnik

Anais Nin wrote, “And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” This is what it is to enter spiritual practice. Each person confronts their own willingness to become vulnerable in the pursuit of growth. In the process, they seek out guides and companions to help them on the way.

In over a decade of spiritual practice, what I find myself most touched by is the vulnerability that people bring to their first meditation instruction class, their first sit, their first sesshin. Naturally, in this new environment, they look up to those with more experience and authority and most often, in this process of seeking out the mirror for their own hopes and dreams, look to people wearing symbols (rakusu or robes) or having titles that signify authority (osho or unsui).

Zen priest is one of my roles. So is psychotherapist. In each role (more specifically in the latter where I have more years of experience), people turn to me with tender and vulnerable hearts seeking guidance and/or respectful companionship as they embark on a personal journey to greater peace and fulfillment. In both of these roles, I have taken a vow to be of service to others. In this place of such open vulnerability and such tender susceptibility to influence, it’s important that I am not confused about whose needs I’m taking care of in these relationships. If my own needs come on-line, and I begin to use the relationship to meet them, the growth of the person whom I’m serving will become stunted and distorted, and that person will most likely end up hurt and confused.

We’ve all heard stories of spiritual guides who have used their students to meet their own needs, and the confusion and darkness that these dynamics cast people into is profound. It’s important to note that, while a psychotherapist and priest and teacher are all human beings, they are often held as more than human beings by their patients, congregants and students.

Many of my patients idealize me. It’s part of the process, and I can accept and hold the idealization because I understand that, in the words of the Jungian therapist Robert A. Johnson, I know that I’m holding their “gold” for them. What they see in me is not about me, it’s about what they want to become.

Over time, the idealizations fade as clients actualize themselves and normalize my humanity. It’s at this point, again as Johnson beautifully states, I hand them back their “gold.” (It was never mine nor about me to begin with.) If I were to get caught in the trance of their idealizations, however, I might not want to give it back, and I might start to act as if the idealization were true and endeavor to hold the idealization in place in order to continue to get my needs met, thereby subverting a person’s natural growth to my own undeveloped shadow.

The most noxious form of this kind boundary violation is the romantic/sexual violation. Its closest corollary is to the incestuous relationship, when a parent subverts the vulnerability of their child to meet his or her own sexual needs. Again, we all know the damage, the fragmentation, and the development stagnation that takes place with this kind of abuse.

There are times when one can fool oneself into believing that by going beyond certain boundaries the client, congregant or student will be propelled

along their path more efficiently. A painful example of this occurs when a teacher asks a student to drop their self-consciousness by engaging in levels of intimacy that are outside the natural boundaries for the established relationship. For example, if the person in the role of teacher asks for sexual display or for entrance into deeper realms of sexual intimacy as a way to help the student to expand their horizons, it is all too likely that the “teacher” is abusing their position and taking advantage of the student/client/congregant. While there’s a certain internal logic to the approach of “expanding horizons,” it fails to take into account the fundamental psychological realities that I’ve already written about. Too many times, I’ve worked with people saying, “It all made sense, and I didn’t want to get caught in ‘self,’” while vulnerable aspects of their psyche were being damaged.

Another way in which boundaries can get crossed and damage occurs when the teacher begins idealizing the student. In this case, the teacher begins to project onto the student levels of attainment that the teacher idealizes. The teacher then begins using the student for his or her own unmet developmental needs. The student, in this case, becomes the idealized parent and the teacher the child. This sort of dynamic often burns with a bright light that leads each partner to believe in the utter and unshakeable profundity and spiritual depth of their relationship. It often leads both parties to abruptly abandon their existing values and end ongoing long-term relationships in the name of having suddenly awoken to something much deeper that others simply cannot understand. Indeed, such sudden, about-face behavior is a good sign that one is caught by the trance of an idealization. The relationship may last with some depth of passion for a time, but is rife with risk of pain and psychological disruption. Imagine how the student will take it when the teacher removes his or her idealization, and the student is left abandoned by both the once idealized-parent and idealizing-child.

Many will say that adult spiritual practitioners are more mature than children and that an adult is making adult decisions or

even that, once the idealizations are withdrawn, a normal more mutual, or even sexual, relationship can be developed. In my experience, these are fanciful ideas with little experiential support. No matter that a person is an adult, the power differential triggers childhood dependencies, and even when these dependencies are understood and withdrawn, patterns of power (made even more profound when there is an age difference between the teacher and the student) have already been laid out and the subconscious is usually unwilling to ever fully let them go. (All any of us need do is think about our own continuing adult relationships with our parents to see that we never truly become equals.) At most, a cordial friendship might be developed, but a mutual romantic relationship is difficult to imagine and nearly impossible.

There are the exceptions, wherein teachers/priests have developed healthy long-term married relationships with one-time students or congregants, and these are often used as fodder to dismiss the sorts of concerns that I raise, but these relationships are few and, in my mind, the possibility of success does not outweigh the risk and potential for serious damage. (They correlate to the misused logic of the sort people use to engage in other vices. "My grandpa smoked two packs of cigarettes and drank half a pint of bourbon a day and lived to be ninety!")

Another protestation is the question of "falling in love." "What if, through no fault of my own, I fall in love with one of my clients/congregants/students?" Firstly, I am no curmudgeon. I am a romantic at heart. But more importantly, I am a mature adult. I don't believe that "falling in love" trumps caring for and protecting those whom we serve. "Falling in love" is just "falling in love." I've done it many times. I don't use it as a polestar.

Life is full of missed opportunities. These include missed opportunities for friendship, love, pleasure, sex, professional advancement, interpersonal connection, and so on. The paths we may take are infinite, and with each decision, we close a path off. I did this when I married. I did the same when I became a therapist. I did it again when I became a priest. In each, I've limited possibilities in order to reach greater personal potential and to be of more loving service to those in my life.

In maturity, we move from impulse to inspiration. The underpinnings of impulses are seeking pleasure or avoiding pain. The underpinning of inspiration is vow. I have marriage vows, professional vows and ordination vows. In marriage, I have vowed to close off certain exits and potentials to get my needs met when my primary romantic partner cannot meet them. This provides for personal growth and development as a certain amount of self-soothing and tolerance to my own unmet drives must be handled internally.

Similarly, as a psychotherapist with licensure under my state board, I have agreed not to have "dual relationships" with clients. In other words, someone cannot be both my client and my friend, let alone my lover (which is different from me loving my clients, which I do). Some boards put a three-year moratorium on this restriction. Mine makes it lifelong. What this means is that, as soon as anyone approaches me in my role as a psychotherapist, any possibility of romantic connection with them is forbidden for the remainder of my life. This seems reasonable and mature to me, and I submit to it willingly. The restriction helps me clarify my role as a caregiver, trumps selfish gain and demands that I create an even more mature outlook on life, accepting personal limitation for the benefit of others.

A priest's vow goes even farther because relationships aren't contained in the four walls of a therapy office. Anytime I am in public wearing my priest's garb, I'm taken as a religious figure and projections start to fall into place. Currently, I am married, and I have no idea what it would be like to date as a priest. That said, any clergy will tell you that it is a complicated and nuanced project. Many go outside their congregation, and the courting process is long and involved, and the intensity of connection (sexual connection in particular) is forestalled while the relationship develops and matures. In my mind, this is natural and appropriate, and the only thing it disrupts is my impatience. What it develops is safety for others and maturity in me.

We are faced with decisions in life, and these decisions create limitations. To paraphrase psychotherapist and author Irvin Yalom, "Choices create exclusions." With each choice we make, our life possibilities

diminish. The diminishment of possibilities forces us to face our own mortality. In the end, spiritual practice is not about feeling good, but being comfortable with our limitations and being comfortable with our own deaths. (Once we are comfortable with limitations and death, we indeed tend to feel good, but this is a different topic.)

Looking at and working with dissatisfaction and death is one of the core components of living a spiritual life. This is why renunciation is so emphasized in practice.

In Zen, we intentionally limit our choices. We restrain the body and roaming mind for long hours at a time. We learn how to face pain and boredom. We take vows and shape our lives according to the precepts. The entire schedule of sesshin is designed to take away choices so that we come face to face with our small-self and so that we can open to what it is to be truly alive. In other words, we limit our lives to look more fully at our lives and then to become more alive.

Contrary to what the small-self would believe, restraint from desires does not limit my life energy. On the contrary, it expands it. It gives it more space to flow and grow and function well. As a priest (as well as a married man and as a psychotherapist), I've willingly renounced many possibilities in my life (as a man in recovery, I've also renounced the possibility of using recreational drugs or alcohol as well). Each renunciation has created more clarity and freedom for me. Its analogous to clearing clouds in the sky. Things open up as I mature into my vows.

Again, using psychotherapy as the corollary I have most experience with, when working with a man or a woman who has suffered sexual trauma, there is often a tightness and uncertainty in the room. I don't address it right away for the tightness is there as a self-protection. My client does not yet know if she is safe with me. I let it sit, and I speak about how important it is for her to know her own boundaries. This is an important conversation, but it doesn't have much weight until, at some point, with all the certainty of my vow, I'm able to confidently and maturely tell her, "You need to take care of yourself, and you need to make decisions about what is safe for you and what is not, and you may believe you

already know this because we've already gotten to know each other, and you've already said you trust me, but I also just want to make clear and say it out loud: I will never violate your sexual boundaries. That simply will not happen. I say this because I think your safety is most important, and I'm not saying it so that you trust me. I'm saying it because that's where I'm coming from, and I want you to decide how that feels for you and whether you feel safe enough to do the work you came here to do."

Invariably (in no small part because I'm saying something true from every pore of my being), the tension eases and there is more space in the room. Some clients can then clarify that I'm not enjoying their disclosures. Others can simply relax and know that they can talk about themselves without fear of it being used for my own purposes. Regardless, the room opens up. You can feel it.

The same is true inside of me. I open with the clarity of knowing where I stand. The same must be true inside a sangha when we know and trust that the boundaries of leaders and authority figures will remain intact, and we need not fear being used by others.

It's true that part of spiritual practice is saying "yes." We say "yes" to life and to the truth and to the cultivation of our practice. Some believe that establishing boundaries for ourselves is blocking a natural "yes." But, if we look closely, we can find a "yes" embedded in every "no." When I say I will not have romantic relationships with people whom I serve, I'm saying "yes" to the tenderness of caring for and respecting people's gently opening hearts. I'm saying "yes" to something larger than me and my own egocentric needs. I'm saying "yes" to my own capacity, "yes" to the acknowledging of each person's individual healing.

