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Michael O’Keefe: When I became a priest, I wanted it to mean something. Of course, we all learn in Buddhism that we endow things with meaning, that they don't inherently have meaning, we endow them with that. And certainly becoming a priest was that for me. I was endowing myself and the practice and conjoining them both in a very formal and public way and in a way in which I wanted everybody to know. I wanted my family to know, I wanted my friends to know. By the same token, when I wanted to undo that, I wanted to do it formally and I wanted to do it publicly. I wanted my friends to know, I wanted my family to know that I took it seriously. It wasn't capricious to become a Zen priest, nor was it to abandon Buddhism and abandon Zen practice. I wanted to be open about that because if the lineage is going to survive, there has to be a transparency to it.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, and you just heard Michael O’Keefe. Michael is an actor, poet, and lyricist—and he’s also a former Zen priest. In his article in the Spring issue of *Tricycle*, “The Lost Robe,” he explores what led him to renounce his vows and leave the priesthood. In my conversation with Michael, we talk about his path to ordination in the Zen Peacemaker Order, his subsequent disillusionment with the order and his teacher, Bernie Glassman, how becoming a parent transformed his relationship to the priesthood, and how he views the connections between acting and Buddhist practice. So here’s my conversation with Michael O’Keefe.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with actor Michael O'Keefe. Hi, Michael. It's great to be with you.

Michael O’Keefe: Hi, James. Good to see you.



James Shaheen: Michael, we're here to talk about your article in the Spring issue of *Tricycle*. It's called “The Lost Robe.” To start, can you tell us a bit about your background? What first brought you to Buddhism?

Michael O'Keefe: I was getting sober. I had about five years of living in recovery in 1985 or so. I was around 30 years old, and a friend of mine who's a bass player in New York named John Miller for my 30th birthday said, “You have to be at my apartment at 6:30 in the morning on a Sunday morning.” I was like, “Man, there better be a bag full of cash for me at your apartment at 6:30 in the morning, because I can't really think of anything else that's going to get me up.” We drove up to Riverdale for an introduction to Zen practice that was led by Lou Nordstrom, a student of Bernie Glassman's. It was at the Zen Community of New York. That was my present for my 30th birthday, and I never looked back. I took that “Introduction to Zen” workshop and stayed with Bernie and with the Zen Community of New York for years.

I was also looking for something as an actor. There's a lot of confluence of ideas and experience in Zen and in acting as well that I've done, a lot of commonality there. And so those two things were very important to me and in a way still are important to me now all these years later. That's what got me initially involved, but I'd already been set up because I'd spent so much time in my teenage years reading Ginsburg and Kerouac, but especially Gary Snyder, who of all the Beat writers was really the most orthodox and devoted Buddhist practitioner among them, at least in my limited take on the Beat writers of that generation. All those ideas had been planted in my head by the time I was 18 or 19 years old, and then by the time I was 30, they came to fruition.

James Shaheen: Can you say something more about the connection between your Zen practice and acting?

Michael O'Keefe: Anything I have to say about Zen and really acting as well, I really think my perspective is that of a student. I don't think I have any particular thing to teach. I don't think I've



accomplished anything extraordinary, and I really just have an aspiration to stay connected in my way to those things.

And so a lot of what happens in acting is you prepare a kind of backstory, you understand the history of your character, what's the confluence of events that have led to the peak experience they're about to have as a character in the story that's being told. And then you want to free yourself from all that and be connected to the moment so that you and the other actors have this kind of moment-to-moment spontaneity.

Zen practice is very similar in that way. After all the cosmology has been explored and all the philosophy has been explicated and all the postures have been explained, really what it comes down to is can you participate in a noncoercive way in these moments that are transpiring moment after moment? And if so, then you can start to ride the wave of spontaneity and the dharma and the energy and the samadhi and all those wonderful things that come from meditation.

So I found that kind of invaluable for trying to at least establish that sense of personal freedom in myself so that I could use it as an actor. That became a goal for me. And then also in recovery, the idea of communing, as they might say in recovery, with powers greater than yourself. And so all of that appealed to me, and even now, all these years later, it still does.

James Shaheen: So could you tell us a little bit about your teachers, Bernie Glassman and Maezumi Roshi, and what drew you to practicing with them?

Michael O'Keefe: I don't have to tell you, and I'm sure most of your listeners know, that Maezumi Roshi was in that wave of early dharma teachers that came from Japan. He was a contemporary of Suzuki Roshi's, and whereas Suzuki Roshi was in San Francisco and setting up all of those practices and those centers up there, Maezumi Roshi was in LA and he had that first wave of dharma successors who came out of his early practice in the '60s like Bernie Glassman,



my primary root teacher when I was a Zen student, Jan Chozen Bays, Gerry Shishin Wick, Charlotte Joko Beck, all of those teachers were part of Maizumi Roshi's early wave. And then they all went out separately and started their own centers. One of the differences between the lineage that I perceived, or at least that I thought about after I got to know the people in San Francisco, is that a lot of the San Francisco successors stayed in San Francisco. It's not unusual for the San Francisco Zen Center to have four or five abbots emeriti in residence teaching there. And of course, they went out to other places as well. Almost all of Mayuzumi Roshi's successors left and started centers somewhere else.

Bernie came to New York, I think in 1981, and he started the Zen Community of New York. One of his initial supporters was Lex Hixon, who besides being a really interesting guy was also a Sufi Sheikh and came from a rather well-off family. He supported Bernie. He was one of the people on the Naropa board and supported Naropa as well. And so Bernie had this incredible mansion, the Greyston Mansion, overlooking the Hudson River in Riverdale, and was also starting a social action mission, which really appealed to me. Bernie was one of the people who became prominent in the wave of Engaged Buddhism and began things like the Greyston Family Inn, which provided permanent housing for people coming out of temporary homelessness; the Greyston Bakery, which provided employment for formerly what could be characterized as unemployable people or people that wouldn't necessarily have a good shot of getting a job; and then the HIV/AIDS project started. I was fortunate enough to know him then and get to know him and be part of that group of people that were trying to help all those things get established up in Riverdale and Yonkers.

James Shaheen: So your relationship with Bernie is discussed in the article. At one point you say you were looking for in Bernie what you did not find in your father. Can you say something about that?

Michael O'Keefe: Before I say anything about Bernie or my father, I'm going to tell you that I love them both immeasurably. If I'm like anybody in the world, it's my father, and in some ways,



I’m perhaps not so much like him. One of my father’s tragedies that he was able to turn around was that he was alcoholic. He had a tenured professorship at Fordham University School of Law when I was a kid, and by the time he was 35, he managed to lose it and had drunk himself out of a job. I was the oldest of seven kids. At that point, the damage to our childhood had already been done, and so there was a kind of resetting of the table. When my father got sober, that was great, but all of us as kids had our own journeys to go through as children of an alcoholic. Much to my father’s credit and my mother as well, they didn’t really hassle us a lot when we were young teenagers about drinking and getting high, because they knew we were doing that. There were boundaries, which were appropriate, but there wasn’t a lot of sturm und drang about that in our house so that when we were all in our early 20s and wanted to get sober, we hung out with my father, and we all went to meetings together. For me personally, that was part of my journey of getting to know him again and learning to appreciate him in a different way. Do you know what I mean?

So then when I met Bernie, I was looking for someone who had had an experience that, I don’t know if verifiable is the right word, but it was evident in their practice. And certainly Bernie demonstrated that kind of power and presence, and any of his students would tell you he was an incredibly compelling speaker, really proficient at koan study and knew as much as anyone about the formality of Zen practice and the spontaneity of it, and then part of his genius was to take it all off the cushion and create all these social action models.

James Shaheen: So in 1986, you received the precepts from Bertie after he co led a workshop with your father called “The Monk and the Drunk.” How did that workshop come together, and what was it like receiving the precepts in the presence of this unlikely pair?

Michael O’Keefe: I was very open with Bernie about my recovery at the time, and we went to this monastery in Garrison, New York, that these Franciscans run, where they have a recovery program for alcoholics. At this moment, there was a poster of the 12 steps on the wall. He looked at them and he thought, “Oh,” and he literally said something like “I was trying to figure out



what we were doing here, and I just realized what it is. This is a great model, this 12-step thing, so I'm going to adapt it to a Zen presentation.” And he started presenting what he called the yellow brick road, which was his version of the 12 steps, to his Zen students, and I felt like this was a great connection for me and him, and he was getting something from my practice and I was getting something from him. And so then I had started getting these ideas because my father was what was known in recovery circles as a circuit speaker. So a recovery group in Denver, for instance, would be having a celebration of their twentieth year, and they would invite one of these speakers to come in to speak to their group. There was a circuit of these people, and my father was one of them. Because he was a very good professor and teacher, when he did manage to establish some sobriety, he was able to convey the steps in a way in which people in recovery really enjoyed it.

In fact, when my father passed in 2006, at his funeral, which was in Larchmont, New York, where we grew up, at St. Augustine's Church, Bob Kennedy, the Jesuit priest who was a student of Bernie's actually came and officiated at my father's funeral. And the church was packed. There was not an empty seat in the house. And Bob, just before we were going to start, turned to me and said, “This is like being at the funeral of one of the Kennedy brothers. What's going on?” I said, “Yeah, my father was really popular.”

So he and Bernie met and hit it off. And then I gradually started talking to him about it. And then my father was the one that needed more convincing. But as soon as he realized that there was nothing cultish about Bernie or about Buddhism or any of the things that we were doing, they hit it off. They found a way to create this workshop together. And then I helped moderate it. Then when it was over, we went to this empty studio in Omega and my brother Kevin was there, my sister Ann, my sponsor from the recovery program was there, Bernie and Jishu, Bernie's wife at the time, who was also a monk and a student of his, we did the precepts. I took Jukai there.



James Shaheen: I think it was eight years later that you were named as a priest in Bernie's newly established Zen Peacemaker Order. Could you tell us a bit about that order? What made you decide to ordain?

Michael O'Keefe: His whole mission was really clear and at that point was very well established. That ordination took place at the Greyston Foundation, which was a former Catholic nunnery that was a sect of cloistered nuns who made the Eucharist for the Catholic churches all around the area. And their order was going out of existence. The Catholic church, in prior generations, they might graduate 500 students from a convent or a seminary, and in the generation of my generation, they were graduating maybe three or four people from those same seminaries and convents. And so their lineages were disappearing, and there were no more nuns going into this cloister. So they put it up for sale and Bernie, in a really deft series of moves, put together the funding to buy it. And so that's where the foundation was and where the Maitri House and Issan House, the AIDS clinic and the residents were for the people living with AIDS. And the foundation was run from there. And so my parents, two of my brothers and sisters came, and my wife at the time, Bonnie, and her mother and stepfather came as well. I guess there were probably thirty people there at the whole thing.

James Shaheen: So you say that later in 2011, Bernie offered you dharma succession in his lineage, but you turned it down. Why was that?

Michael O'Keefe: Personally, first of all, I did not feel that I merited any kind of leadership position in a Zen community, and I had very strong feelings about being able to convey truths about Zen teaching that teachers should embody. I personally did not feel that way. Part of my problem was having suffered the trauma that I did as a kid. I have a kind of, for lack of a better word, emotional lock box that had a certain kind of obstruction in my inner life. I've had some breakthroughs since then that have been very liberating regarding that, but I'm very much aware of it. And it's a constant kind of companion to me and a way of motivation for me to keep



practicing because I'm very clear about what I have accomplished, I think. And I'm equally clear about what I have not accomplished. And so personally, I didn't feel ready for it.

I felt Bernie's offering of it was not quite disingenuous, but I didn't think it was based on anything that I had accomplished. And this is just my opinion about him. I may be right or wrong about this. You know, he was a systems analyst at NASA and a guy with a PhD in math before he became a monk, and he liked having these kinds of systems in place with people in different positions in order to grow what he called the Peacemaker Order or the Peacemaker Movement. And so there were people that were empowered in order to make that happen, and then he used the verbiage of the Zen lineage, and he called some of these people Roshi and he called some of them Sensei and he gave them these entitlements.

Now, I'm not saying all of this was true for all of his lineage successors, because if you look at people like Fleet Maull or Joan Halifax, Craig Daiken Nelson, Enkyo O'Hara, these are all students of his that are all really, from my point of view, living out embodied versions of the dharma and have created wonderful practice centers and practices for all their students. They really did make it happen. But there were also some other successors of Bernie's, I was curious why they would be called a Roshi or a Sensei. And I also put myself in that category. I would never have accepted that from him or for anybody else at that point.

James Shaheen: You talk about your admiration or love for Bernie, and at the same time, when you met him, you saw him as the perfect foil to your father's alcoholism and you say that you trusted he would never betray you or let you down, but perhaps inevitably he did. Could you tell us about that experience and what role your own expectations played in your disappointment?

Michael O'Keefe: About a year or two after I had ordained, the Zen Peacemaker Order was still centered in Yonkers at that point. Bernie came to me and he asked me for a donation to buy a building to create a permanent residence for his students in Yonkers, where people from the Peacemakers could come and live and train. I thought, this is a great idea. This is exactly what



we need to be doing. And we had already done this purchase of the Greyston Family Inn building and converted that. We already had a construction company with the Greyston Builders. It seemed like a logical fit and a logical evolution. And I thought, yeah, because at the time I was working on the *Roseanne* show as an actor, and frankly, I made more money on that show than I've ever made as an actor, and I've never made that kind of money since. And so I was quite flush. I was already tithing 5 percent of my gross salary to Bernie at that point, since 1992–94, those three years that I was on the show and I had some cash. And I said, sure. So I gave him \$50,000 and I was like, “This is great. We're going to have a place and I'm participating in it and I'm making a contribution.” And then two weeks later, and I really don't think I'm exaggerating the timeframe on this, all of a sudden, everything in Yonkers was going to be done. He decided to move to Joan Halifax's practice center in Santa Fe, Upaya. He was going to turn the running of Greyston over to other people, and he was going to abandon what was going to be called the House of One People, the acronym forms HOOP, which was going to be this kind of interfaith temple built in Yonkers, and there was already a location for it inside of this Catholic nunnery. In fact, when Bernie passed and we had his memorial, we had his memorial in that space that was originally planned to be the House of One People.

So he decided to leave. And then I had a phone conversation with him once I found out about that, where I was like, “Look, if you want to go to Santa Fe, and if you don't want to be in Yonkers, that's fine, but I'd really like you to return my donation because I made a really specific earmark for that money to go in a certain way,” and he said to me “Well, it's being used for something else.” And I was so taken aback. He said this without pause or without reflection, and I was so shocked. I really couldn't talk about it at first. And I was like, that's not right. And the conversation wound down fairly quickly, and then we hung up and I was stung. And I don't really think at the time I knew how betrayed I felt or how hurt I felt at that time, and I thought, let's just move forward and see what happens, and maybe there'll be another opportunity to talk about it.



So then he moves to Santa Fe and then ten days later, his wife, Jishu, died. She had a massive heart attack. And then everybody was in a state of shock and grief from that. A number of his students and successors descended on Santa Fe, and there was this really powerful ceremony for Jishu where we all prepared her body for transition and cleaned her and clothed her and did services and then brought her to the crematorium and then did more services. And then we all put her in the crematorium and then her corpse was incinerated. Then we came back and we collected everything out of there. It was an amazingly powerful thing.

There was a moment where Bernie and I were left alone and we're just sitting outside and I tried to broach this topic again about the money, and he pointed to this building we were sitting in front of and said it was right there. That was the moment that I was like, this is really inadequate. This is really not right. And I really didn't know how to press it. And I really didn't want to press it because he had just lost his wife. And I also didn't want to press it because I was his student and I had, through osmosis, absorbed what I thought was the proper etiquette and boundaries for a student-teacher relationship. And I thought, OK, well, I'm just going to live with this. I'm not going to abandon him. I'm just going to keep moving forward. And then it was like a little over ten years later that he offered me successorship, and then we stayed in relationship even after I refused his successorship until he died, and we stayed close.

James Shaheen: You put it this way: you say that when this encounter happened, you bobbed on the surface while Bernie caught the fish. In other words, you were not in touch with the level of betrayal and anger you felt until much later, and I can't help but see that as part of a pattern that exists in alcoholic families: the child feels rage, but can't express it. And likewise with Bernie, and I don't mean to psychologize, you tell me, you were unable to really get in touch with how betrayed, how hurt, how angry you felt until much later. I wonder if writing this was at all a part of the process of coming to terms with that or its aftermath.

Michael O'Keefe: I do believe Joan Didion was quite insightful when she said she didn't really know how she thought or felt about something until she wrote about it. I think there's merit in



that. And I think that helped me articulate some things. But I was very clear, by the time Bernie offered me successorship in 2011, that's when I was really disillusioned with him. That's when I was engaged to be married. My son was born in 2012. Once he was born, my free time, especially before he went into school, was really devoted to being there for him. Because I'm an actor, and because even when actors have great years, if they're working a lot, they're only working three or four months out of the year, I was able to be a very present father on a day-to-day basis for my son, and my time became taken up with those types of pursuits. So I gradually started to just let my Zen practice fade as my fatherhood took over.

But also at the same time, I met a Daoist teacher up here where I live in upstate New York who was just starting a center for Daoism in America. It's still very much in its nascent phase now. I think he's been formally teaching for about seven years. And so we met and became friends, and then I started studying with him as well. So I gradually abandoned Buddhism and abandoned Zen practice and made a transition over into being a Daoist. About three years ago, I took lay vows in the Daoist lineage. And that's what's called the Quanzhen lineage that I study in, and then what's called the Longmen sect, the Dragon Gate sect. And then of course they have a kind of syncretism in their lineage where they embody what they call the three faiths, Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. It's a kind of amalgam of authentic study, not unlike what Dogen Zenji referred to as the buddhadharma being something that's outside of the purview of just Buddhism. It's the truth. It's the awakened truth. And certainly the Longmen sect of Daoism is very much interested in the same thing. And so there was a lot of confluence between the Daoist model and the Buddhist model, and it was a very easy transition to make. I also didn't have any of the baggage that I now have in a sense about my Zen practice and my Buddhism.

When I wanted to step down, I reached out to Fleet Maull, one of Bernie's successors, and I wanted to do it formally in the same way that I took my vows. I wanted to abandon my vows. I wanted to return my robes. And he respected that, and said he would help me do that. And so we wrote this service, which is essentially like the *tokudo*, the home-leaving service, except that I



gave it all back and renounced everything. And when it happened, I likened it to a divorce because when I took my vows as a priest, I likened it to a marriage in a way. I used to initially think of it as marrying Buddhism, which is different than dating Buddhism. When I abandoned my vows, it was like a divorce. In a way, if it's not too much of a stretch in this analogy, it's very much like my relationship with my first wife. I love my first wife and I admire her greatly. She's an extraordinary artist.

James Shaheen: That was Bonnie Raitt.

Michael O'Keefe: Yeah, and Bonnie, besides being a brilliant singer and songwriter and musician, is a world-class social activist, which is also what appealed to me, at the time when I was married to her, about Bernie's work, and Bonnie fell right in. Bonnie was integral in getting funding from the Elton John Foundation for the Maitri House and Issan House in Yonkers because of its connections to helping people who were living with HIV/AIDS, and her connection to Elton was a direct source of a huge contribution made by that foundation more than once. I mean, it was an annual contribution, and it came in for a while, if I remember, at least a few years. She loved what Bernie was doing with social action. So they had a kind of confluence of meeting of the minds about that as well.

At the same time, if someone would ask me if I want to go live with my ex-wife for a week and share a vacation house with her somewhere right now, I'd be like, “Not really, no.” And I kind of feel right now the same way about Zen practice. I love it, and I got immeasurable gifts from it. And certainly I got a lot more from it than any of the kind of problems that arose from my connection to my practice to it, and I value those experiences greatly and I love them, but I don't really see myself hanging out in the zendo anytime soon either. I just don't feel that way about it, so it's similar for me that way.

James Shaheen: You know, I'd like to ask you about Maezumi Roshi. He was Bernie Glassman's teacher and also yours, and he was likewise no stranger to controversy, especially when it once



again came to drinking. Could you say more about that? How did you process and make sense of this at the time?

Michael O'Keefe: When I got to ZCLA, it was during the same first year that I was studying with Bernie in New York. Roshi had already gone through the kind of blow-up of the Zen Center in the early '80s before I got there, and his drinking became an issue and he went to rehab and he came back. And so there was kind of a reset at ZCLA at the time, so I didn't really see a lot of Roshi's drinking at all even though he still drank. But it wasn't like the scene that it was that led up to the paradigm shift about the way things were there and the way the relationship was working with him and with his students. And so I never really saw very much evidence of it until I became closer to Roshi. I was his *jisha* for a couple of years, his attendant, I was the one helping organize the retreat and making sure all the things ran properly for a while. And then when visitors would come from Japan, we would go out to dinner with them, and then he would be drinking. And it was always interesting to me. I was like, huh, all right, whatever. And it didn't seem to be that big an issue. Do you know what I mean? I never saw him drunk or partying or anything even remotely like that. So I didn't make that much of a big deal out of it, and I just let him have his life. I didn't say anything about it or feel one way or the other. It made me mildly uncomfortable, but I didn't really think about it.

But when he died from drinking as a direct result of his drinking, that was an incredible wake-up call for all of us. As I alluded to in the article, initially we weren't told that. We were told that his brother just found him dead in the morning when he was visiting Japan. It wasn't until three years later, maybe a little bit more than three years later, that we were in sesshin in ZCLA and I and all the other students were told the truth about what had happened. And that was immensely heartbreaking. It was just devastating because in a way, in terms of personality, I probably vibed a little bit more closely with Maezumi Roshi than I did with Bernie. Bernie, I really loved and admired and especially admired his vision. Maezumi Roshi and I just got along really well, and his realization was so evident and his grasp of Buddhism especially was scholarly.



One of the issues in Zen practice, and I think this was an issue for me, and it may or may not be in Zen practice anymore, but back when I started, I didn't really know that much about Buddhism, and all of a sudden I threw myself off the deep end in a kind of immersion in Zen practice without really being grounded in the actual philosophy and the cosmology of the religion, whereas people like Maezumi Roshi grew up in it. His generation, they all had master's degrees in Buddhism from universities, and they were really well versed in its foundation and its history and its practices so that when they began to do Zen practice, which is a fairly radical practice, they were grounded and I wasn't. I accept my karma for what it is, and I accept my past for my past, and in a way, I wouldn't change any of it because it has great value.

James Shaheen: You know, I published a piece years ago that included the circumstances of Maezumi Roshi's death, and I was surprised to find how many of the practitioners in the White Plum Asanga, his sangha, did not know about this. And so they were very upset, although this information had already been disseminated among the teachers. At Zen Center Los Angeles, they were a little bit unhappy that I did not include how much they had done to strengthen their community in the wake of that, but I published something that I assumed people knew about. Naive me.

Michael O'Keefe: In fairness to Enkyo Roshi especially, she did turn ZCLA around, and she also instituted a shared leadership model there. It's much different than the kind of autocracy that was being handed down by Maezumi Roshi and those teachers at the time and was much different than Bernie's model. Credit where credit is due, she deserves credit for that

But at the same time, I think the shock and pain that might come to students of Maezumi Roshi's to find that he died the way he died, I think it was a really important bit of information to come out and an integral bit of information to come out because he was a human being. He was a guy. And I think I certainly did at the time, and I think perhaps we all, some do, some of us do as Zen students or Buddhist students, we all have the capacity to endow our teachers with qualities they don't really have because we need them to be that person that we're looking to to help us shape



our journey and to hopefully what will be an enlightenment experience. And for all of the prajna talk about the negation of the path in order to appreciate the path as you go through it, I think definitely one of the reasons you get involved in Zen practice is because you want to have an enlightenment experience. You want to have that payoff. You want to have something happen. And certainly, Maezumi Roshi offered that, but at the same time, clearly he had serious problems that never really got addressed. And because of it, he died. And also, if you look at his lineage and some of the conflicts between some of his successors, it's not unlike being children of an alcoholic. They each had their own blind spots, and each of them suffered, not all of them, certainly some of them suffered because of that.

James Shaheen: I think ZCLA has done a lot of work toward addressing that and integrating all of that, and they seem to be thriving now. But how did this experience and your experience with Bernie change your understanding of what it means to be a Zen priest?

Michael O'Keefe: I suppose the ultimate aspiration for me as a Zen priest was to turn everything over to the extent that I could make everything that I was doing be of service one way or the other. And maybe it's just a personal shortcoming, but it just didn't work out that way. I just didn't turn out to be that guy. I certainly aspired to be that guy, and I tried to, but at the same time, the containers in which I was working were flawed and leaky, and I wasn't the first student of Bernie's to fall by the roadside and be left behind.

I had a dokusan once, an interview with Maezumi Roshi during sesshin at Mountain Center in California, and he literally said to me, “How come none of Bernie's students stick with him? Why aren't there any successors?” This would have been like around 1992 or 1993 that he said that. And my response at the time was, “Bernie's very demanding,” which he was. He was really demanding. If you wanted to be with him, you pretty much did what he wanted to do and the way he wanted to do it. It's not that he didn't take input or rely on people or have support—he did. Once he got his vision set for some project he wanted to do or a way in which he did, that's



the way it was done, and you either did it that way or you weren't a part of it. I'm not certain that's the best way to run a spiritual order or a religious order.

James Shaheen: You say that you turned down the opportunity to become a successor in 2011, and you felt that you really weren't qualified or suited to that role, yet others you felt were likewise not suited to that role, but nonetheless became successors. How do you think now about how priests and meditation teachers are trained and offered transmission or successorship?

Michael O'Keefe: That's a huge topic, and for me, I have a personal bias on the way it went down for me. I want to preface whatever I say about that with that kind of offering because I'm not an expert on that, and I don't want to present myself as one. But I will say that when you're a student of a teacher and a teacher comes to you and offers you dharma successorship, it's really hard to say no. You want to say yes because you've been there for twenty years or longer. And it's arduous. And you've done the work. You've been in the sesshin. In Bernie's case, we did all this social action work where we did these homeless retreats where we lived on the street homeless five or six days at a time. And you thought, “Oh, look, it's happening,” and there's a part of you that wants to believe it's true. Then, personally, for me, upon deeper reflection, I was like, “Wait a minute, this is not true.” But I can see how some people in his lineage would want to have accepted that dharma successorship and thought, “Yeah, this is it. This is the next step, and I'm ready, let's go.” And that makes me very curious about what was the standard. And so I was aware of that when he came to me, and initially I was thinking, “Oh, this will be great.” But a day or two later, I was like, “I can't do that. I can't be that person.” These are all really sincere, well-intentioned people. They're not trying to run a con on anybody. They're not malicious. It's not misdirected what they're doing. I think it's just not as realized as it could be.

James Shaheen: You touched on this briefly earlier, but you say that becoming a parent transformed your relationship to priesthood, and you realized that being a priest had become a habit, not a practice. Can you say more about that?



Michael O’Keefe: Parenting is real. It's not a concept. When you have to wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning and give your kid a bottle and you have an 8:30 meeting the next morning, now your sleep is messed up, now you're exhausted and you're trying to be a sane, responsible person in the world, you're like, “Wow, this is really challenging.” And kids go through all sorts of transitions and changes, and trying to be on top of that as it's happening, those are very, really powerful motivators. They're all consuming. And as soon as I began to devote myself to doing that, I realized the idea of getting up before my son and my wife and doing a ritual and offering incense and candle and things like that were part of my daily, but it was almost as if I was trying to get that out of the way so I could then get into the day and start taking care of my son. And then my own disillusionment with this gradual awakening to just how betrayed I felt and how taken advantage of I felt started to also influence what was happening while I practiced, and then I was like, “I'm just not going to do this anymore.” And right at that point, within three or four weeks, this kind of Daoist connection surfaced and began to take shape for me in a gradual way. And so I was able to reorient myself into a spiritual practice that in a way I didn't really know very much about. So the process of learning about it became inspiring. The combination of being a parent and then the disillusionment with Bernie and this financial aspect of our relationship, it really started to wear me down in terms of my personal interest in Buddhism and in Zen.

James Shaheen: We talk about a turning word, something that turns you toward the dharma. Was there a particular moment that led you to do the reverse? Or was it just a gradual recognition that you no longer belonged?

Michael O’Keefe: I think it was more gradual. I don't think it was any one moment. There was never anything like “The dharma is bullshit.” It was nothing like that. “Buddhism's a bunch of baloney.” It was nothing like that. But I did see myself distancing myself from the practice, and that became very obvious. And then at that point, I was like, not only is this not who I am in the world, but I'm not even like engaging in the same way and I wasn't getting the juice that I was getting before this kind of disillusionment started to arise. And so at that point I was like, I need



to make it clear to myself why I'm not doing this, but I want to make it clear to my community as well, because I think there's value in a certain kind of transparency, and I'm not certain that these things that I talked about in my piece were all that obvious in the Zen Peacemaker community.

James Shaheen: You mentioned earlier the ceremony with Fleet Maull, giving back your robes. I'm just wondering, why did you feel the need to have a formal ceremony rather than just walk away?

Michael O'Keefe: When I became a priest, I wanted it to mean something. Of course, we all learn in Buddhism that we endow things with meaning, that they don't inherently have meaning, we endow them with that. And certainly becoming a priest was that for me. I was endowing myself and the practice and conjoining them both in a very formal and public way and in a way in which I wanted everybody to know. I wanted my family to know, I wanted my friends to know. By the same token, when I wanted to undo that, I wanted to do it formally and I wanted to do it publicly. I wanted my friends to know, I wanted my family to know that I took it seriously. It wasn't capricious to become a Zen priest, nor was it to abandon Buddhism and abandon Zen practice, that I was taking it seriously. And I wanted to, in a way, control the narrative about that too, which is why I wrote the piece. I wanted to publicly state, “This is my intention. This is what I did. This is why I did it.” And you guys at *Tricycle* gave me that opportunity, and I was really grateful for it. You know, I was trying to step down respectfully, but at the same time, I had this interest in being more transparent about what I saw to be the problems, especially with the student-teacher thing, where we endow these teachers with characteristics they don't really have because we need them to have them in order for us to feel like we're going to get the fulfillment we have. I'm only speaking for myself. I did. I don't know if other people do it. I would assume other people have done it as well. I wanted to be open about that because if the lineage is going to survive, there has to be a transparency.

James Shaheen: As you're speaking, another question comes to mind. We have disappointments in life. We have expectations of people, and inevitably they're flawed. At what point is a line



crossed, or how much of this was suffering from your own expectations? Have you ever wondered about that or tried to balance the two?

Michael O'Keefe: Well, I think personally, that's exactly what happened. Where was the line crossed? In a way, Maezumi Roshi crossed a line too, for me personally, especially because I'm in recovery and I'm very clear about my own incapacity to drink. That's not a hard insight to arrive at. If you're an alcoholic and you have a drinking problem, you don't need to go to a university to get a degree to figure that out.

James Shaheen: But often you're the last one to find out.

Michael O'Keefe: That's true. But still, even then, when they're taking your liver out, they're looking for a liver transplant, you might go, “Maybe I have a drinking problem.” You might wake up to that. The fact that Maezumi Roshi never did that and that in a way he was enabled to not have to really confront it because his students didn't really finally confront him about it either. They did in a certain way because he went as far to rehab, but he never stopped drinking. He never got sober. I'm not saying that I'm better off than Maezumi Roshi. That's not what I mean. To compare my presence in the world to Maezumi Roshi's, I mean, this is an extraordinary guy who brought Zen to America with all of these dharma successors. He was one of the most brilliant public speakers I'd ever seen, and speaking in a second language. My hat's off to him. But at the same time, it broke my heart, and it definitely crossed the line with me and the same thing with Bernie. And I definitely think my expectations got in the way. I think really in the end, I was more disappointed in myself than in either of them, mainly because I felt like I set myself up to have a kind of diminished experience. But it was all because I didn't really know the deeper story that was taking place. But now in retrospect, like I said, I really value that story, and I value both of them and both of their roles in my life. A number of the things that I've been able to accomplish were direct results of my work with them.



James Shaheen: You know, life is complicated. You end by saying you, despite all, love your teachers unconditionally. Can you say something about that?

Michael O'Keefe: Well, I do. They were an inspiration to me in so many different ways, and much like my father. I love my father unconditionally. And he definitely crashed the family house when we were kids. He really took us all down with him, but that never changed the fact that I loved him. And I also knew where to assign the blame and who was responsible. I think that's important for lineages as well. I love Maezumi Roshi and Bernie, and I think they are not blameless in their own lives and in their own lineages and practices and centers. And they need to be held accountable so that those places can thrive. If you try to cover things over like the experiences I had or smooth them over, it undermines the foundation of it.

James Shaheen: Michael, is there anything else you'd like to add before we close?

Michael O'Keefe: Like I said, I'm just so grateful that *Tricycle* published this article.

James Shaheen: Well, thank you. It was a real pleasure to publish it, and thank you for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to read Michael's article in the Spring issue of *Tricycle*. Thanks again, Michael. Take care.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Michael O'Keefe. To read Michael's article, visit tricycle.org/magazine. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available, and we are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah

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“Why Actor Michael O’Keefe Renounced His Buddhist Vows”

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Fleming and the Podglomerate. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!