

An Open Letter from Geshe Michael

April 26, 2012

This is an open letter by Geshe Michael Roach, spiritual director of Diamond Mountain University and Retreat Center, concerning the events surrounding the recent tragic death of one of our students, Ian Thorson. The letter has been reviewed and approved by the Board of Directors of the University.

I write this letter at the request of many friends of the University around the world. It has been a very sad and difficult week for all of us, mourning and trying to understand the loss of one of our oldest friends; a dear, courageous, and dedicated spiritual seeker. I know the parents and other relatives of the affected families well, and I know that this has been a heart-wrenching time for them too. We are deeply sorry for the loss that they and Ian's wife, Lama Christie McNally, are surely feeling.

I apologize that this note could not have been more immediate. For the past several weeks I have been travelling out of the country teaching, which has made communication difficult, and I felt that before writing it was important to wait for reliable reports of this situation from the local authorities to supplement the reports I received from the staff of the University.

I have also been very reluctant to make any statements which might make this sad and painful situation more so. I particularly have not wanted to say anything to hurt two people who have been my dear friends, students, and even teachers. But I believe that not making a public statement now would cause more pain and confusion for many people.

Background

Diamond Mountain University is located in the desert mountains of southeastern Arizona. It is an unaccredited, free university with no fees charged to any of its students. It has been recognized as a legal, 501(c)(3) non-profit organization by both state and federal authorities. We offer what I believe is perhaps the most authentic and rigorous course of Buddhist study available outside of a traditional Tibetan monastery. We also offer retreat facilities, also for free.

The teaching and support staff of the University work without pay, as a service to the world. And so of course we depend upon hundreds of dedicated volunteers and small sponsors, all around the world. Everyone at the University works very hard, and is extremely dedicated.

The university is located on 960 acres of wilderness land. About 30 buildings on the land have been constructed by volunteers as facilities for education, retreat, and prayer. The University has zero debt for the land and facilities, which we believe results from our policy of offering classes for free.

The Great Retreat

In December of 2010, thirty-nine students of the University began a traditional "Great Retreat" of 3 years, 3 months, and 3 days. Before the retreat, almost all of the retreatants completed a rigorous course of 7 years of study of advanced Buddhism on campus, consisting

of more than 10,000 pages of instruction translated directly from ancient Tibetan sources, to prepare them. Most of the retreatants had also completed all or part of a series of 18 foundation courses in Buddhist practice.

This is the most thorough and detailed preparation that I am aware of—inside or outside of the traditional Tibetan monasteries—for a retreat of this kind. The Board of Directors appointed Lama Christie McNally, a longtime teacher at the University and one of the original group of founders, as the retreat director. As with all other appointed positions at the University, this director reports to the Board.

Care of Retreatants

The health and safety of the retreatants has been a priority throughout the retreat. Within the retreat itself there is an M.D., as well as one registered nurse and two physician's assistants. Outside the retreat boundary we have a resident, full-time registered nurse. Inside of a central supply building in the retreat valley there is a special telephone system which the retreatants may use for calling help in an emergency. This system is checked by the retreat caretaker staff on a weekly basis. There is a system in place for "neighborhood" emergency medical assistance, where one retreatant helps another who is in need and may not be able to reach the emergency phone.

Emotional and spiritual care of the retreatants is overseen by the Retreat Director within the retreat, along with a "counselor" in each of the retreat "neighborhoods," or clusters of retreat cabins. The neighborhood counselors are senior DMU teachers, each with more than 10 years of training, in one case including advanced degree education as a psychologist.

Physically, all retreat cabins have been approved by the county authorities and include heating, solar electricity, and fresh water from our dedicated water system, which draws from wells and the famous spring here, and stretches over two miles throughout the retreat valley.

As per Buddhist tradition for this kind of retreat, the retreatants are asked to maintain verbal silence, but can communicate by notes and can be spoken to during visits by family, teachers, or caretaking staff when necessary. The retreatants are on a schedule of either one or two months in deep personal retreat (during which they normally see no one), with a single "break" month between, during which there are opportunities to get together for prayers and other ceremonies. Twice a year during a break month, we hold Great Retreat Teachings by teachers both inside and outside the retreat. At these times, the Spiritual Director of the entire university (myself) meets individually and in small groups with retreatants who wish guidance; and in some cases family members and personal spiritual teachers of retreatants also meet with them during this time.

Retreatants correspond freely with family members as they choose, and any retreatant is free at any time to leave the retreat simply by walking out to the caretaker cabins. After almost a year and a half of intense retreat, only three retreatants have left the retreat, which is a testament to the care and dedication of the entire University community.

Retreat Teachings of February 2012

Great Retreat Teachings were held, as scheduled, in the first week of February. Teachers included myself and Lama Christie, among others. About 150 people attended, including parents, friends, and family of retreatants, as well as new students and old. During her public talk on the evening of Saturday, February 4, which I also attended, Lama Christie told a story which appeared to describe serious incidents of mutual spousal abuse between herself and her husband, Ian Thorson, on campus during the retreat.

Lama Christie described what sounded like repeated physical abuse of herself by her husband, and also an incident in which she had stabbed Ian with a knife, under what she described as a spiritual influence.

These statements of course caused great concern to the Board of Directors, and we also received many expressions of concern and confusion from retreatants' parents, families, students and friends of DMU. The Board immediately initiated an inquiry, and in my own public talk on the following day I stated that we had a moral and legal responsibility to conduct such an investigation. Our entire lineage is of course founded upon the principle of non-violence, and the sacredness of all life. I made it clear that such violence would not be tolerated in a place of spiritual light and happiness.

Request to Leave the Campus

Diamond Mountain University has an established policy prohibiting violence, and prohibiting the possession of weapons on campus (and of course prohibiting their use). Every student who attends this university is required, at the beginning of each semester, to sign an agreement stating that they understand and will abide by these and all other University guidelines.

If a student violates these guidelines, the Board of Directors investigates the violation carefully. Those involved are encouraged to explain their side of the incident, and anyone who witnessed the occurrence is asked to make a statement, so that the decision about any disciplinary action can be as fair as possible. Disciplinary action may range from a formal warning, to expulsion from the campus either permanently or for a specified period of time. If the action is documented to be a violation of local or federal law, local authorities should be informed. We have not been perfect, but we have done our best to keep these policies.

The Board of course felt a moral and legal obligation to report the contents of the talk to the local county police department, who made a record of the report but decided not to follow up further.

The Board began the process of requesting statements from the parties involved. During the week of February 6, Lama Christie and her husband Ian were each supplied two separate letters from the board requesting further clarification of possible spousal abuse and violence. These requests were strongly rejected.

During the same public talk of February 4, Lama Christie stated that the knife wound to Ian required sutures, which were administered inside the retreat valley. The Board requested and received a written statement from a professional medical practitioner inside the retreat, stating that they had sewn up wounds sustained by Ian that they had been told were the accidental result of playing with a knife. The medical person described three separate wounds to the torso, one of which was deep enough to threaten vital organs.

The Board then began the process of deciding on an appropriate course of action from the University. Most members of the board are close spiritual students of Lama Christie, and this was a heart-rending exercise which continued over several meetings. In the end, we decided to ask the couple to leave the campus for one year. Here are some of the reasons for our decision:

- 1) Members of the Board had previously received multiple formal and informal reports of partner abuse and assault of students and staff by Ian, including a written complaint of an incident which took place off campus, and another incident at the University which led to Ian being asked to leave the campus for a period of time.

Reports of previous incidents, even those which occurred outside of our university, played a large part in our decision. Some of us felt that Lama Christie, by mentioning the abuse publicly at the only talk which I attended, was making a conscious or unconscious cry for help.

I think it's important to mention here that I do not personally believe that these were acts of malice. Ian was incredibly sensitive to outside stimulus—an accomplished poet, linguist, and spiritual practitioner who could “hear” the world in a way that most of us cannot. Sometimes those of us who spent time around him would see him get overwhelmed by this sensitivity and fly into windmills of unintended physical outbursts, which at times caused potentially serious physical harm to those close by. The Board was deeply afraid that one of these could trigger further mutual harm by the couple.

2) The couple's retreat cabin was very remote, and we felt that if there were further incidents, there was a chance that no one would hear and be able to help. If the couple were out in public, this chance might be lessened.

3) We were strongly hoping for some indication that the couple understood that the violence was wrong, and should not be repeated. But it seemed from the statements made that violence under some kind of spiritual influence was considered alright. We wanted to send a strong message to the couple, to our University community, and to the general public that as individuals, as caretakers of a university, and as spiritual practitioners we strongly condemned this point of view. We did not, and we do not, want this view or activity on the campus of this university.

Again I think it is very important to point out that each individual's personal spiritual experience is unique, and very possibly valid to themselves. We have no way of judging how these events were viewed spiritually by either Lama Christie or Ian. Knowing both of them for years, knowing them both to be incredibly devoted practitioners, we can only assume that something important for them was occurring.

At the same time, our responsibility as a Board is to protect the wellbeing and safety of everyone who attends this University, and the University itself. It is our heartfelt hope, and it is the reason why we continue to sustain the University, that many generations of practitioners may use this place in the future. The actions of these individuals could well have resulted in the permanent closing of the University. And so although each individual has the right to their own spiritual experience, and this experience may be valid for them, we did not feel it was fair to take the risk to deny these same experiences for many others to come.

In the following days, the Board sought the opinion of a professional psychologist to try to understand what the couple might be feeling. We also sought legal counsel, and on February 9 held a meeting with an attorney, who strongly encouraged us to take action, saying that it was the absolute duty of the board of directors of an organization such as our own to do so, in order to protect the future of both the retreat and the University itself.

After much deliberation, the Board took a formal vote to ask the couple to leave the campus for one year. We also felt that this and other, unrelated incidents warranted the removal of Lama Christie as Retreat Director and any other leadership role in the University. We also felt of course that a serious injury to a retreatant should have been reported to the Board.

We felt that it was important to present this decision to the couple in a sensitive way which caused minimum disturbance to themselves and the other retreatants, but this was made difficult by Lama Christie's sudden announcement on Wednesday, February 8—without the Board's knowledge or approval—that effective immediately no retreatant was allowed to communicate with outside parties, even family or teachers, for a period of one year. In the days following this announcement, Board members received letters from a number of retreatants expressing concern and dismay at the decision, and asking for help.

Three board members were already on campus, and two more (including myself) made the trip down, to be present and give our support to the retreatants and staff. We decided that the request to leave the campus would be presented to the couple on Wednesday, which is the day that vehicles normally enter the retreat valley to deliver food, to minimize disturbance to the retreatants.

We made preparations to assure that the couple's departure was as safe and gentle as possible. I have myself completed a 3-year retreat, and I know how difficult it is to come out of one. And so we took the following steps,

- 1) We asked one of the couple's closest outside friends and assistants to be on campus, and to assist the couple in their departure.

- 2) We had already put in place a 3-month "transition" program for all retreatants, to kick in whenever they chose to leave the retreat. This included a total of \$3,600 in cash for the couple. We confirmed with their assistant (who was keeping their bank accounts) that another, large sum was available in their account, partly through regular donations of royalties which I have made for them over the last five years.

- 3) We provided a rental car, with the assistant to drive, for several weeks.

- 4) We approved airplane flights for the couple and assistant to any destination in the US, and also reserved a hotel room near the closest airport, with an adjoining door to a room for the assistant. We reviewed with the assistant the need to be both gentle and watchful for any signs of domestic violence.

- 5) We purchased two prepaid cell phones, and loaded them with the telephone numbers of the couple's parents, friends, and personal teachers.

- 6) We carefully reviewed with the assistant the need to try to get the couple to seek the guidance and comfort of these friends, parents, and teachers. We felt that the decision of contacting relatives about the recent events and situation was only the couple's to make. We reviewed with the assistant other retreat facilities in this part of the country that the couple might be interested in.

We were very concerned that there might be an outburst of violence towards those delivering the request to leave the campus, or that if left alone after the request was delivered, the stress might result in Lama Christie or Ian hurting each other or themselves. We had to make sure that someone was with them constantly.

And so we took the following steps:

- 1) We chose two male board members who are very dear friends and students of Lama Christie to deliver a written request to leave the campus.

- 2) We checked with the local Justice of the Peace about the possibility of official backup in case of an outburst of violence, or refusal to leave. He reviewed the history of the case, and the written policies of the university, and confirmed that we still had for at least one of the retreatants a copy of the signed student agreement not to commit violence on the campus. He verified that all cabins on the land are property of the university, and concluded that we had legal grounds to ask them to leave.

He understood that an incident of violence was possible and contacted the county police to have a cruiser available nearby the campus during the day. One of our board members went to sit in the county police office for the day with the necessary court order which would be required for a response in the event of an incident following a request to leave the campus. At no time did police enter the campus property or the retreat valley.

3) We wrote a letter clarifying the university's disciplinary action and requesting that the couple pack a suitcase and leave the campus within the hour, in the company of the assistant, who was standing by with the car, and said that their larger belongings would be packed and forwarded to them immediately. We felt that this would also keep the trusted assistant nearby them throughout the process.

The board members arrived in the early afternoon and knocked on the door to deliver the letters, but there was no answer. They knocked again and concluded that no one was home, or that they didn't want to answer the door. The two letters were placed in a prominent position near the doorknobs. The two board members went to the cabin of one of Lama Christie's most trusted assistants within the retreat, explained the situation, and asked if she would be willing to communicate this to the couple, who might open the door to her.

At this same time, a letter was delivered to all the other retreatants (except one who was still in deep retreat—the rest were on break) asking them to attend a mandatory meeting at the retreat supply cabin. This two-hour meeting was also attended by myself and the president of the Board, as well as one other board member and a staff person who were familiar faces to the retreatants as they make the weekly food deliveries.

We wanted to be available to explain the Board's decision from our different viewpoints, and to answer any questions and concerns. There was also some concern that Ian might have an outburst, enter the meeting, and possibly harm someone.

Just prior to this meeting, we met with John Brady, a level-headed senior teacher who is well respected, and asked him to assume the role of Retreat Director, which he gracefully agreed to do. We outlined a plan for a Retreat Council of five senior retreatants, with John at their head, to guide the retreat, working closely with the Board of Directors of the University. The plan was agreed upon by assembled retreatants, who voted on their choices for the Council, and these choices were confirmed by the Board.

During the first, private meeting, John's first recommendation was that the University allow Lama Christie and Ian an additional five days to leave the campus. We were concerned, but we agreed.

We continued afternoon meetings for two more days to give each retreatant a chance to express their opinion, or any question that came up in their mind, or any past grievance concerning the governance of the retreat. The retreatants were asked to write their questions on slips of paper and strongly encouraged not to break their vow of silence. I also met individually with all but two of the retreatants, to give them personal assurance and guidance in their continued practice.

Obviously, the retreatants were distressed by all that was going on; and while it is not possible to know exactly what they were all thinking and feeling, it seemed that they clearly understood why a decision like this had been necessary.

Lama Christie and Ian refused to meet with members of the Board or to indicate clearly when or if they would follow our request. On February 22, we were informed by email from their assistant that they had left the land at 5am on Monday, February 20, and that he had driven to a public road to pick them up.

The assistant informed the Board that the couple wished strictly no contact or knowledge of their whereabouts. They asked us not to make any attempt to discover their destination. We were asked for cash for hotels and airplanes, so that there would be no receipts, presumably so that we would not know their whereabouts.

We responded that as a non-profit organization we needed receipts but would strictly honor the couple's privacy. We were subsequently presented with hotel receipts and asked to pay for them. The location of the hotels on the receipts were blacked out. Because of this, we could not reimburse these receipts, but receiving them led us to believe that the couple had safely left the area.

Subsequent Events on National Park Land, and Attempted Care for Lama Christie and Ian

In the following weeks we respected the couple's request for privacy. Our offer of cellphones had been refused and these were not taken. We had only the email address of the assistant through which to communicate. The assistant informed us that he had promised to maintain secrecy and could not communicate information or the couple's location to us. On March 26, Lama Christie's father called and asked if she had left the retreat; we confirmed this and referred him to her assistant's email and phone number so that he could hear the story from her directly.

Retreatants locked the doors of the couple's retreat cabin, to prevent it from being broken into by illegal immigrants, who often cross our land and who had broken into the cabin before. No one else entered the cabin.

I began an effort to try to create communication between Lama Christie and four persons whom I thought she considered her personal teachers, and from whom she might accept guidance, which we all felt that she desperately needed. She had before leaving the campus refused to meet with members of the Board or myself, or to accept letters of advice which I sent in to the retreat for her, strongly urging her to contact her teachers and parents for guidance.

On Monday, March 5, I took a 5-hour flight to attend a teaching event and to speak directly with one of these personal teachers. We had a very long talk concerning the couple's welfare, and the teacher agreed to reach out personally. On March 9, I sent an email about this to the assistant, who did not respond.

On March 9, I took a flight outside the US for another event and again had a very long direct meeting with another of Lama Christie's personal teachers, who also agreed to help. There was still no reply from the assistant.

From March 5 to April 18, I communicated through their staff and by email with the other two of Lama Christie's personal teachers, who said that of course they would help and offer personal guidance. It was not until April 14 that I received an email from the assistant, stating that they feared they would lose all contact with Lama Christie if people tried to contact her, but that sealed letters could be sent to a New York address and might be opened. I supplied this address to the two teachers on April 17.

On Thursday, April 19, Lama Christie posted a letter on the internet explaining from her point of view the events that had taken place. We don't know from where or how she posted this.

At 6am in the morning on Sunday, April 22, Lama Christie made a call from a cellphone to a volunteer on the Diamond Mountain campus. She said that she and Ian were in a cave on federal lands southwest of the University campus, and that Ian had a serious medical problem. She described their location and Diamond Mountain staff were roused. They drove to the nearest road location, then hiked on. One staff member called 911, and the 911 staff asked that Lama Christie call 911 on her cellphone to try to get a location by triangulation. She did so, but the authorities were not able to identify the exact location using the cell phone. The county authorities dispatched an assistance team by helicopters.

The helicopter search teams located the couple and Diamond Mountain volunteers arrived shortly afterwards. Our staff were asked not

to stay in the vicinity and made the 60-minute hike down to Fort Bowie, a large national park facility and rangers' residence west of the University.

During the rescue operation, I was in Argentina at a teaching program. I established cell phone contact with Lama Christie's assistant, determined that he knew about the rescue attempt, and asked him to inform me whether the couple were in the state of Arizona or elsewhere, and if he knew their location.

I was told that the assistant did not know their location and was bound not to tell me if he did know. I think everyone can understand then that it is frustrating that DMU has been asked to comment on where or in what condition the couple were during the period up to this incident. From the above, it should be clear that we had no knowledge of their presence in the state of Arizona, and still have no knowledge of whether they left the area and returned, or never left. No one connected with DMU has ever "searched" the area for them before the day of the rescue, nor did we have any reason or jurisdiction to do so on the thousands of acres of public land surrounding our University.

We learned that Ian had passed away, and that an autopsy to determine the cause of death was scheduled. We contacted the county sheriff and were told that an investigation was under way; a report was released online by the sheriff's department on Monday, April 23, giving some information and saying that an investigation was still continuing. The local medical examiner informed us that no information could be released except to members of the family. One news report quoted an official as saying that no foul play was suspected.

On Tuesday, April 24, Lama Christie's assistants posted a statement online concerning these events and the circumstances of Ian's passing, describing serious dehydration. We have no reason to doubt this heartbreaking account and, like everyone else, we at DMU are waiting for any additional information that might be made public.

During the incident we learned that two volunteers at the University were aware that Lama Christie and Ian had been in the area, we still don't know for sure how long. These individuals may have been supplying the couple with food and water, apparently along with a charged cell phone. I had spent the entire day on Sunday, April 1, in a University meeting in Phoenix with one of these individuals, and they never mentioned anything at all about the couple. The individuals are now with Lama Christie helping her, and we have asked that they give us some information about their role once some healing has occurred.

Members of the Board of Directors have still not been allowed to speak with Lama Christie directly and have been asked not to disturb her privacy at this time, but according to her assistants she is well and healing rapidly. I have sent messages asking that she seek the guidance and support of her personal teachers, but have no way of confirming that she has. During this period I have also sent repeated offers to speak with her if that would help, or to provide other material assistance.

We have reports from friends that a private funeral was held in Willcox, Arizona, on April 26, and that it was attended by Ian's mother, and Lama Christie's also. We don't have any information on Lama Christie's plans, except that she intends to maintain privacy.

Ways of Healing

Friends and students have asked me how we can think about these events, and how they can help. Here are some of my suggestions.

A very good practice to do when someone that we love dies is the following. Every day in the evening, write down in a journal one

single memory of them that we have which is beautiful, especially something that might reveal that they were an angel in disguise, meant to help us while we knew them in this world.

In Ian's case, this is not difficult. For me, I remember one incident when another student came to me and said that he had heard a divine being singing off in the desert behind some trees. He was extremely thrilled that his practice was finally paying off, and ran to meet the Being. And then he found Ian in a small tent, singing to the gods.

If we keep this practice up over a number of weeks, we begin to see the real reason of our loved one's visit to our lives, and also what they were trying to teach us by leaving.

In our tradition we also believe that a person is aware of others in the weeks after their death, and we can at times throughout the day speak out loud to them; things that we loved about them, things that we regretted.

How to think of the things our teachers do (including of course myself), that we don't agree with? Or of our own teachers when they don't seem to agree with each other? I like the story of the Lama who asked his three students to rob a bank; two of them did, but a third respectfully declined, saying that as far as he understood, stealing was a wrong thing to do. And then the Lama had said that it had all been a test, to see if the student would respect the most fundamental rules of morality—and that the student had passed the test. That is to say, I think we are bound forever to respect the foundational guidelines of not harming others, while at the same time maintaining our respect and love for all our teachers.

On a practical level, I think it is crucial that every one of us have a personal teacher to guide us day to day, and correct us when we go wrong. We all need someone above us who can love and help us, like a parent. We have an ancient "Ne-Lama" system in place at DMU where each member of the community is asked to have a personal mentor who can listen to their problems and guide them in their actions. As I have stated over and over for many years, I would like to ask that people continue to respect this system, and to make sure that they have someone they can turn to.

I would also like to repeat my request that all friends and students who grant advanced Buddhist teachings first complete all the 18 foundational courses and the 18 advanced courses themselves, preferably at a leisurely pace, in person with a teacher who holds the entire lineage. This applies even to the most senior teachers in the DM lineage; if you're not sure what courses you have formally completed, please contact the Asian Classics Institute registrar.

I would also like to repeat my decade-long request that people maintain a spiritual diary, with brief notations six times a day. And I would like to repeat that no student who has not completed the 18 foundational courses should be granted the advanced courses.

I think that these advices, particularly about having a close teacher who can guide us, would prevent tragedies such as the one that just occurred.

On a community level, I feel that it's important that we be kind to one another, and to recognize that—according to our Buddhist tradition—the problems that we see around us are coming from how we ourselves have treated others in the past. I think that this will help all of us to be forgiving of each other.

I and the other members of the Board of DMU are neither omniscient nor infallible. We definitely make mistakes, and we are very grateful for any advice and suggestions that everyone can send us to help us. As a teacher, I myself am to a large degree responsible, like a parent, for the behavior of my students, even when they behave in ways that the parent has asked them not to. And I accept this responsibility, along with the joys of parenting as well.

All of the board members, particularly those serving on the campus, have basically sacrificed their entire lives to the University and the Retreat—to the service of others, without pay, and with endless problems to deal with. We are trying to do what we think is best, and right, and—in my own case especially—to do so with feelings of reconciliation and love. These events have been a tremendous strain on all of us, and I would like to encourage everyone to send expressions of love and encouragement to the brave and committed individuals of the DM Board. I pray that they will not become discouraged, and continue steadfast in serving the retreatants and future generations of DMU students.

I will also be going down to Diamond Mountain University when I return to the United States next week, counseling retreatants, and organizing a small memorial service for Ian. In the early years, Ian often travelled with us on teaching tours, and the ten or so of us here on this trip have decided that to continue to finish the planned programs is what he would most want us to do right now.

Again, on behalf of the entire University, I would like to express our sorrow and condolences to Ian's family, and to his partner Lama Christie. We live close to the city of Phoenix, named after the mythical bird which rose from the ashes, a symbol of a new life—and I pray that all of your family, and all of us in the extended Diamond Mountain family as well, will take this opportunity to feel the preciousness of our time here in this world together, and to make good use of it, by taking care of each other. Lama Christie, as one of the original founders of DMU and the driving force behind much of the building in the retreat valley, has shown us how much a person can do with strong determination. And we are determined that our University will be a place of refuge and enlightenment for many more generations of students to come.

Geshe Michael Roach

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