

Dear Members of the FZI Board,

I am writing to provide an account of my interactions with Michael Hotz, which I understand will form part of the materials being gathered in connection with the request for his removal from the presidency and from any position of membership within the First Zen Institute. I am sharing this because I now know that similar incidents have occurred with other young women, and because what happened to me was not simply a matter of poor judgment but a serious breach of trust, ethics, and basic decency. I am not positioning myself as a victim, nor am I attempting to overlook my own role in the situation. I was young, inexperienced, and uncertain about many aspects of my life then, and I made choices that were not wise. Still, acknowledging my own part does not negate the ways in which Michael acted—deliberately and repeatedly—in ways that were inappropriate, manipulative, and incompatible with the responsibilities of a spiritual leader.

I first came to the Institute in 2017, during a period of significant personal upheaval. I had just graduated from college, felt unprepared for the transition into adulthood, and was navigating intense pressure from my mother regarding medical school. A meditation teacher from my college suggested the Institute as a way to continue my Zen practice and regain some grounding. I began attending weekly meditation sessions, spent time in the library, and eventually met Michael. At that time, I saw him—someone in his seventies who had spent decades immersed in Zen practice—as a genuine spiritual elder who might offer clarity and support at a time I badly needed both.

We became friendly, and he took an active interest in the difficulties I was having with my mother. He positioned himself as someone who understood my situation better than anyone else, and I came to trust him in that role. Shortly before I left New York for a research job in Maine, I went to say goodbye. During that visit, he initiated sexual contact—using his foot in an inappropriate way for minutes and then suddenly kissing me. I froze. I was uncomfortable but unable to react, and the moment ended only because my mother happened to call me. I left abruptly and pushed the discomfort out of mind.

I also want to emphasize that in that moment, I was completely averse to the advance. I froze entirely. The experience was deeply uncomfortable, and my inability to react was itself a kind of shock response. I pushed the memory out of my mind so completely that I did not consciously revisit it—not even later, when the sexual relationship began. I believe this is important to name because it illustrates how these dynamics often unfold: an initial freeze response can, over time, be overwritten by a sense of familiarity, making it harder to recognize the progression for what it is. What began with total aversion was later reframed in my own mind as something I “chose,” when in reality the foundation was laid through an earlier moment in which my agency had already been compromised.

While I was in Maine, our contact intensified. We spoke frequently—and often for hours—and continued to act as a counsellor and spiritual guide. When I quit my job — a decision that objectively derailed the career path I had been pressured toward — he congratulated me in a way that, in hindsight, feels manipulative, as though he was quietly pleased to see me become more dependent, more directionless, more available.

When I returned to New York in early 2018, the dynamic shifted rapidly. The day I came back, we spent many hours together. He initiated a sexual relationship—fully initiated by him—despite knowing I had been a virgin and despite the overwhelming power differential between us. Although this encounter was “consensual” in the technical sense, the conditions surrounding that consent were defined by months of psychological dependence that he cultivated. By the time this happened, he had already crossed boundaries, already taken advantage of the trust he had encouraged, and already positioned himself as the person I relied on most.

From there, a pattern developed. He pressured me into sexual acts I was uncomfortable with by appealing directly to my insecurities—particularly the fact that I had never had a boyfriend or any prior romantic relationship. He knew this was a sensitive area for me, something I felt embarrassed and self-critical about, and he used it as leverage. He told me repeatedly that my reluctance or discomfort reflected personal “defects,” and that these supposed defects were the reason I had never had a boyfriend and the reason I would be unable to maintain a relationship in the future. The implication was always the same: that complying with what he wanted sexually was proof of my “worthiness,” and refusing meant confirming the fears I already had about myself.

In addition to this, he repeatedly framed the sexual dynamic as an act of compassion on his part. He told me that he was engaging with me sexually because he “saw where I needed spiritual nourishment,” and that sexual contact could transmit certain insights that could not be conveyed through ordinary teaching. He described this as a tantric investigation of desire, implying that by engaging with him I was being given access to a deeper spiritual path. He also insinuated—many times—that he had attained multiple states of samādhi in his meditation practice, states that could not be explained to others and that supposedly placed him in a unique position to “guide” me through this process. Framing himself as someone operating on a higher plane of realization, he claimed that keeping our relationship secret was my responsibility to the Sangha because he was “risking himself to help me,” and that I should be grateful for what he portrayed as a rare and advanced form of teaching. At the time, I was naïve enough to take some of these far fetched claims seriously. I am embarrassed to admit that now, but the embarrassment does not change the fact that he explicitly made these claims and presented them with the authority he knew I trusted.

He repeatedly implied that he was the only person in the Institute who had penetrated the koans at any real depth (he mentioned some sort of koan session Sokeian/Mary would conduct back in the days, I can’t remember who know), and that none of you — the senior members and board included — had ever truly understood them. He spoke about *all of you* with open contempt, describing you as spiritually incompetent, psychologically unstable, or fundamentally incapable of genuine realization. I am stating this plainly because it reveals something essential about his character: he used the language of Zen to elevate himself and belittle every person in the community, and he used the aura of “spiritual attainment” to rationalize his behavior with young women. His attitude toward *all of you* was consistently dismissive and demeaning, even as you continued to trust him with leadership. The contempt with which he spoke about you all revealed a degree of self-importance at odds with the humility one expects of a spiritual practitioner.

Before the relationship ended, it was already clear to me that this was not an expression of affection. It was a seduction driven by ego. The moment the dynamic became physical, the warmth and empathy he had previously offered evaporated. Whenever I expressed confusion or emotional difficulty, he reframed it as a spiritual failing on my part—telling me that my attachment to him showed I had not “penetrated the teachings,” and that

continuing with him might “teach me something” about tracing desire back to its origins. What he described as spiritual guidance now appears clearly as a deliberate strategy to minimize my feelings and maintain control of the situation.

The relationship ended only because my mother discovered my diary and confronted me, giving me an ultimatum of either cutting contact or accepting that she would inform the board of the incidents. Out of a misplaced sense of protectiveness toward him and the Institute, I cut off contact quietly rather than alert anyone at the time. I continued attending the Institute occasionally, though it no longer felt like a place of refuge.

With time and distance, I also came to understand something important about my own role: I made choices that were impulsive, self-involved, and in some cases ethically questionable, including disregarding the fact that he had a long-term partner. I take responsibility for that. I was young and still sorting through the insecurities, blind spots, and unresolved emotional patterns that many people in their early twenties carry into a spiritual community. Those are not unusual traits—they are the “shadow” material that spiritual practice is meant to illuminate and help integrate in a healthy way. A genuine spiritual community creates space for younger practitioners to work through these difficulties safely, with appropriate guidance and boundaries.

Still, I acknowledge the importance of striving, as a member of a spiritual community, to maintain and enhance harmony rather than disrupt it, and to operate with care and compassion toward others. My actions were in contradiction to this tenet, and I regret that—both personally and ethically. I would strive to be less self-involved in the future. Undoubtedly, whether due to manipulation or otherwise, I had formed a strong attachment to Michael, and that attachment drove me into behavior that I now recognize as ethically wrong, particularly given his long-term relationship with Ana.

But the responsibility of a seventy-three-year-old president is categorically different. A leader in a spiritual environment should be able to meet someone in my position with clarity, restraint, and maturity. What happened instead was the opposite: the parts of me that most needed clarity and grounding were the very parts he singled out, amplified, and used for his own purposes, through seduction, pressure, secrecy, and psychological manipulation. The imbalance of age, experience, and authority made it his obligation to exercise discernment, not to exploit the situation. **Not to mention, as I have already said, the responsibility of a president to act in accordance with the harmony and wellbeing of the sangha as a whole.**

I want to explicitly address the difference in age and responsibility between us, because it matters. I was twenty-three. Michael was nearly fifty years older. He had spent decades inside a Zen community. One would reasonably expect that the imbalance of age, experience, and authority made it his obligation to exercise discernment, not to exploit the situation: to guide a younger practitioner away from confusion—not deeper into it. **The fact that at 73 years of age, he chose instead to cultivate secrecy, seduction, and manipulation with someone so much younger speaks not to a momentary lapse of judgement but to a deeper, long-standing absence of personal growth. *If someone can reach seventy-three, after a lifetime in a spiritual environment, and still choose to engage in this kind of behavior with young women, it indicates not only a failure to mature but also a lack of willingness and ability to do so.***

And the far-fetched spiritual claims he made to justify his actions — claims of transmitting insight through sex, of unique samādhi states accessible only to him — are but further evidence of a delusional narcissism that has gone unchecked for decades.

I am aware now that my experience is not an isolated case. There appears to be a pattern involving other young women who entered the community seeking support or spiritual clarity. The consistency of this pattern suggests more than poor judgment. It points to a habitual misuse of authority and a willingness to exploit exactly the vulnerabilities that a spiritual community is meant to help people understand and integrate in a healthy way.

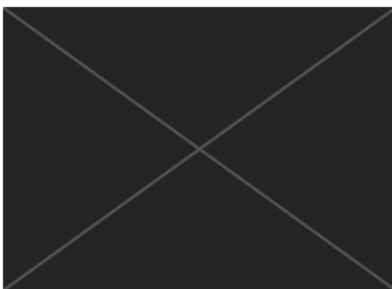
For these reasons, I believe it is not enough for Michael to step down as president. He should be removed from leadership and from any participation in the community. A practice-based sangha depends on trust, integrity, and psychological safety. Allowing him to remain in any capacity would undermine those foundations and send a message that such conduct is tolerated.

If the board chooses to ignore this — again — it confirms Michael's own description of you all as "hopeless," spiritually unmoored, and incapable of discernment. It would demonstrate that the Institute is exactly the kind of false spiritual space that Zen texts warn about: one in which a charismatic figure is allowed to deceive, manipulate, and exploit because people would rather look away than confront the truth. If there is any hope that this Institute might still serve as a place of truth, genuine practice, and refuge for young people seeking clarity, then removing him from leadership is not optional. It is an ethical necessity.

I am sharing this not out of anger but out of clarity. I have had years to reflect on what happened and to take responsibility for my part. What remains now is the recognition that the Institute cannot function with integrity unless it fully discontinues Michael's role and involvement in the community.

I understand that we live in the 21st century and that, in many contexts, what occurred might not carry formal repercussions. This is not a police matter, nor something for which he would be personally incriminated. But within a spiritual community, there must be consequences that reflect the ethical standards the community claims to uphold. I may have played a part in what happened, but I never took on the formal responsibility of leading a sangha or representing its values. He did. He accepted that role—and the implicit commitment to uphold its ethics—and he violated the standard that he, officially or unofficially, agreed to maintain.

Sincerely,



December 13th, 2025



December 13th, 2025

Dear Members of the FZI Board,

I am writing to urge that Michael Hotz step down as president of FZI due to a troubling and persistent pattern of inappropriate behavior toward young women attending FZI. These reports, shared by multiple individuals, describe behavior that raises significant issues regarding appropriate boundaries, power dynamics, and member safety within the sangha.

I was a member of FZI while living in New York City from 2017 to 2020, and valued the opportunity to deepen my Zen practice within a community that I felt connected to. It is therefore with profound sadness that I have come to learn of these accounts, some of which date back to my time there and others that appear to have occurred more recently.

I cannot in good conscience allow this pattern of misconduct and inaction to continue unaddressed. Such behavior is a betrayal of Sokei-an's legacy and the Rinzai Zen tradition that FZI represents. Mr. Hotz's reported conduct demonstrates that he is unfit to hold a position of authority or trust within this community. However, accountability must extend beyond one individual. The broader culture within FZI that enabled or overlooked this behavior also demands serious reflection and change.

I strongly urge FZI to take immediate action—beginning with Mr. Hotz's resignation—and to establish and enforce a clear, transparent code of conduct to protect all attendees. If the Board fails to act, I will pursue other avenues to ensure that this information is brought to public attention so that future attendees can make informed decisions about whether FZI is an appropriate environment for their Zen practice.

Sincerely,

A large black rectangular box with a white 'X' drawn across it, used to redact the signature.A smaller black rectangular box with a white 'X' drawn across it, used to redact contact information.

December 12, 2025

First Zen Institute of America
113 E 30th St
New York, NY 10016

To whom it may concern:

Around two years ago, I began coming to the weekly sits. I had no problem with Michael personally, however, I recollect that he began sending love poetry to a friend of mine. He also made other comments. If I remember correctly, the last text my friend received from Michael was something along the lines of “I ate your peaches bich”. She felt very uncomfortable with this. After this occurred, my friend stopped attending the weekly sits. I stopped attending the weekly in solidarity — and also because I felt strongly that I could no longer invite my friends in good faith without mentioning this had happened.

My intention in writing this is not to engender shame or humiliation. All of us have done embarrassing things. I would hate for people to define me only by those things, and I don't think it's helpful, compassionate, or healing to define Michael by these things. My testimony indicates that Michael's position of power is a significant liability to your organization. However, I hope my testimony is handled with grace. Other than this incident, Michael was nothing but kind, hospitable, respectful to me and many of my friends. For that we are grateful.



From: [REDACTED]
Subject: Your Letters About Misconduct at The First Zen Institute — Private & Confidential, Not to Be Shared
Date: April 2026 [REDACTED]
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED],

[REDACTED] About a month ago, I received copies of each of your letters (as well as [REDACTED], noting ethical and sexual misconduct at the First Zen Institute (FZI). I've been reflecting carefully on what has been shared and how to respond.

First, [REDACTED] I take your accounts seriously. What you describe is deeply concerning, and I am sorry that you experienced distressing situations in a Zen establishment—a place meant for practice, safety, and trust.

In addition to what you've written, I can proffer that [REDACTED] at FZI, I personally observed instances in which its director framed teachings, portrayed human relations, and employed language in ways that emphasized sexualized or tantric themes. Taken together, your accounts and these observations point to blurred or inappropriate boundaries, particularly given the clear imbalance of power between leadership and practitioners. In any spiritual, charitable, or practice-based community, leaders have an obligation to maintain and follow a strong code of ethical conduct. Unfortunately, situations like this are not without precedent in many communities and sanghas.

I also believe that, where credible concerns about personal boundary violations exist, meaningful accountability measures are warranted. These may include public disclosures, removal from positions of authority and residency, restrictions on teaching roles (whether formal or informal), and requirements for professional ethics training. The aim is to respond with integrity and a commitment to preventing harm. In more serious cases, where an assault may have occurred, it is important to contact the appropriate authorities.

Your willingness to come forward and speak about these difficult experiences took courage. I hope your concerns are met with the attention and action they deserve. I ask that all recipients of this email, including those cc'd, keep it private and refrain from sharing it further.



In a dark time, the eye begins to see.
Theodore Roethke

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