

Dear Friends,

On several occasions this year, I've offered updates regarding my personal experience in the wake of Dharma Ocean's supposed 'dissolution'. Wanting to keep you reasonably informed in this regard, I shared [a letter](#) from this year's Winter Meditation Intensive in late-January 2020 and [a follow up](#) several weeks later.

In our May newsletter, I offered another in this series. This came after the Dharma Ocean Board announced that some activity would be continuing under the DO banner. I was short but, I believe, to the point in writing: "I have had and do have and will have no involvement with the 'new Dharma Ocean'." Shortly after publishing this, I sent a letter to the board expressing consternation at these latest developments and the manner in which they had been communicated. I also excluded myself from all future mailings.

Since this time, a few people have reached out wondering, appropriately enough, how I came to take these actions. It was not easy, I assure you. Nor did I act without a great deal of reflection, contemplation, and soul searching. While I have offered a few general words of explanation in the past, I'd like to share a bit more detail now.

My relationship with Reggie Ray and the organization that came to be known as Dharma Ocean stretches back twenty years. Starting out as a small group of students wanting to study and practice with an inspiring teacher, we eventually became an international community with thousands of people involved in varying ways.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can see a number of organizational tendencies were evident throughout this span. Centralized authority, for instance, was part of who we were from the earliest days. From my perspective, this tendency was initially quite appropriate and functional. In the beginning, we really did not know what we were doing as practitioners or leadership. A strong guiding hand was needed and we were given this. To this day, I am profoundly appreciative of this fact.

As years passed, however, our capacity as students and mentors grew. While this was met with a certain loosening of authority, it was not, in my opinion, met with enough of this. Rather than being fully supported and encouraged, the independence required of any complete path of development was limited and sometimes undermined by the centralized dynamic baked into - some might even say ossified within - the Dharma Ocean community. The concentrated authority that had once played a functional role in our midst had, in other words, become dysfunctional.

Organizationally, this was reflected in power structures so inwardly oriented that initiating and maintaining meaningful action outside the wants of the so-called 'centre of the mandala' was often impossible.

In October of 2019, for instance, the Board of Directors publicly acknowledged "that authority has been highly centralized...in Dharma Ocean". Seeking to address this, it was announced that Reggie, as Spiritual Director, was stepping away "from participation in all board activities". Affirming the significance of this shift, we were further informed that the board would now "work independently" of his influence. Not two months later, it was suggested - but never directly acknowledged or explained - that Reggie was back on this same body. This situation seems to continue to this day.

Centralization was also evident in more personal ways. It could be seen in teaching developments and instructional initiatives that unfolded with little apparent regard for the needs and realities of my own life and path, for example.

Along these lines, I took part in a series of biweekly meetings between September 2018 and July 2019. Intended to train a select group of senior students how to hold the future of Dharma Ocean, Reggie asserted the importance of these gatherings and insisted it would be "very difficult" should I miss many of these. After adjusting my life schedule twice in order to respect this assertion, I took part in most of the meetings throughout this time. From the beginning, there was little sense of direction within or between gatherings. And after almost a year, no actual training had been offered. Concerns that

were raised about all this seemed to pass unacknowledged and the expectation to participate remained intact until I left that group in August of 2019.

Taken in isolation, these examples may not amount to much. In trying to point out systemic dysfunction, I am well aware that specific instances often do not communicate the fullness of this sort of dynamic. Both organizationally and personally, however, the pervasive and apparently immovable fact of centralized authority in Dharma Ocean - of dysfunctional centralization in Dharma Ocean - became increasingly apparent to me between 2018 and 2020. Incident after incident piled up, one on top of the other, until this truth became unavoidable.

In the end, I watched this give rise to leadership decisions that were often inexplicable and sometimes indefensible. I felt this create a personal context that was more and more disempowering, more and more demeaning. In the end then, the appropriate thing for me was to simply say, 'I'm done.'

Of course, it's not quite so easy as this. Of course, I'm not actually done. Extricating oneself from a twenty year relationship is not something that happens overnight. A great deal of grief - a term encompassing the entire spectrum of human emotion - remains to be seen, felt, and explored. And there are so many questions to consider. 'Why did I not see this earlier?' for example. And 'What kinds of harm might have come from this?'

As rich and important and, to be honest, as devastating as my experience of extrication has been, however, this is not the focus of the present letter. Perhaps these issues and developments will be addressed in later updates. Perhaps not. For now, I want to offer some sort of glimpse - and even after three pages, the above really is just this: a glimpse - of the causes and conditions that lead me to walk away from the "new Dharma Ocean" in such a full and complete way. I am trying to present a clearer and more detailed sense of the 'whys' that exist behind my actions than I've been ready and/or able to offer in the past.

I hope these words come close to realizing this aim. I also hope they prove to be of some benefit. And, of course, I hope you and yours are taking care and doing well during this challenging time.

With warm wishes and heart regards,

Neil W. McKinlay

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