

AN OPEN LETTER TO MY TEACHER, EIDO TAI SHIMANO  
(Written March 29, 1979, but never sent)

Sweet reason has its limits. Now I am tired of sweet reason, of looking for compromise where none is forthcoming, of hoping against hope that honesty and openness will appear where only pride and deception hold sway, of longing for some chink in the armor of egotism and lawlessness -- protective suit that somehow allows you to use up students like old Kleenex. I am tired of lies. Yet with all this, it is still with a great deal of ambivalence, pain, and sadness that I offer you my resignation from Zen Studies Society.

The difficulty in discussing the matter is that it is so diffuse, so spread over time so easy to forgive if one only sees one or two incidents. "What the hell?" I used to say to myself, "the roshi has his moods just like me." I used to be quite pleased to think we were alike in any way at all. If we were alike in one way -- human, frail, occasionally angry, sarcastic, nasty -- why, then we might be alike in other ways and I too might some day have enlightenment tucked under my belt as firmly as I assumed you had. I too might go to older and wiser teachers who would approve my understanding of some great Something. You were a Teacher and Teachers were to be venerated. I wasn't sure just how to express that veneration, but I did my best, starting in early 1974.

How I loved and love that long, clean zendo at 223 East 67th St. with its beautiful floor and the parallel rows of black cushions on which we sit for periods of 40 or so minutes in silence. And the silence itself! What a lot of silence. No preachments, convincings, argumentations - just the silence to which we all return. I loved it. At first, like others, I did not think much that this organization like other organizations. It needed money. I was only a little upset when you bent your energies to raising money in the zendo. It was a little too much like the Catholic Church for my taste, but still, it was for the monastery in the mountains, Dai Bosatsu, a place where generations to come would practice zazen, our seated, silent meditation. A great practice. If I had to be discomfited a little with long lectures on helping to spread Zen Buddhism, well, it was par for the course. It was a big project. Three million dollars. I understand better now and do not begrudge you that effort. It was a good effort, well. I am glad to have been part of it, in whatever small way.

But then came 1975 and what later was humorously referred to as the "Fuck Follies." A little at a time it came out: The Teacher had taken a series of bed partners from the sangha and had made passes at others. For a while, I didn't believe it. You were married, you were the Teacher, you had submitted yourself to the precept of moral conduct. I thought: "The roshi screws around, I screw around. The roshi and I are alike again." But then I talked with some of your paramours. It wasn't quite so clear. Each had thought of herself as "the only one." Each had been unceremoniously ditched. I heard about the confrontation between you, your teacher, your wife and one of the sangha members. I heard about your teacher's feeling that for sure you would confess yourself publicly at one meeting or another. And yet, when it came, there it was, your message to the sangha, part of the Triple Treasure, your students: 1. It's none of your business, and, 2. You were dissolving the sangha and everyone would have to reapply for membership. Each person

would be sent a card on which to reapply. Those who were dissenting at the time felt sure they would not receive cards. In the event, as you know, no one got cards -- by that time, the dissidents, the ones who had raised the cry, were gone. It was safe to begin again without criticism.

I stayed. The reasons I stayed are only now becoming clear to me. I stayed because I was afraid to leave. I had come looking for a way to clarify my own confusions and although I had been offered new confusions, still, there was Something I was afraid to lose. I thought that Something was the zendo and your teaching. I thought that you were giving me a good reverse teaching, callousness taking the place of loving means. A good tough teaching, I thought. You were giving me that. I would grow in strength.

Time came and went. There were stories. About the student who tried to commit ritual suicide at Dai Bosatsu. About other women you were involved with. But after the first upset, I shut the door on the Fuck Follies. I was going to sit on cushion and let the world take care of itself. If others wanted to accuse you of "being proud, deceptive, and megalomaniacal," that was their trip. I wasn't there for your teaching, I was there for the core of Zen practice -- for zazen. So I backed away from you at one level. I didn't trust you. But I also made sure to be pleasant on appropriate occasions. It was nice to bask in the light of your approval, your consultation, your attention. It made me feel good to be referred to as a "senior student," although there were twinges of doubt: If all those who had left in such anger, pain, confusion, and sadness were still around, hell, I'd only be a puppy along the "senior student" ladder. Five years: Is that a "senior student" in out lifelong practice?

But as you are so well aware -- out of sight, out of mind. I couldn't constantly be worried about people who were no longer visible, no longer around.

But now that it has begun again, those same people swell into my mind like long-waiting ghosts: Mike and Ray and Estelle and Sheila and Harold and Elihu and Lea and Steve and Wendy and the two Peters and Nora and the two Bruces and Cleve and Paul and Tome and another Peter and Dave... the list, as you recall, is much, much longer, but it is painful for me to remember. Each of them made his or her own decision, yet in each case I think you played a significant, negative role. For some, it was the unwillingness to be direct about the issues; for some it was the pride; for some, the deceptions, for some, the scorned lover. When they left, I asked one of the members of the Board of Directors about it. "Everyone makes up his own mind," he said. And he was unfailingly right, unassailably right ... he was the kind of right that declines to discuss human beings, human needs, the bases of action or the wounds foolishly inflicted by another. I have learned to expect this sort of attitude around the zendo. When things become difficult, those in positions of power get fortune-cookie vague, salving their own consciences, I suppose, with the notion that many of the old masters were terse. The underlying assumptions seems to be: "Since the Way has no standards, I have no need of standards either. In two ways this assumption is flawed: 1. Acting like an old master can hardly be equated with being a master, and, 2. Students who left their teachers in the past (the ancient past) left with every right to claim some attainment or at least with the kindly

direction of a teacher who wished them to pursue the true Way. Around Zen Studies Society, those who leave, leave the pride, deception, unwillingness to be straightforward, the hiding behind an oriental 'face' that has no place in a good Zen student. Inflicting these wounds cannot be equated with skilful means. I see it as egotism of a very destructive sort.

So now it has begun again. First Peter and Dave sent a letter to the board of trustees. They sent it together with the diary that included love letters addressed to you from a woman member. Do you know what Peter said to me? He said, "We (Dave and Peter) were naive. We thought Eido Roshi would be out in a week. We thought the board of directors would have to take action. We were naive."

Then came my letter. I like to think of it as much more moderate in tone, urging as it did the board's sitting down with you "not in a spirit of blame, but with the hope of letting in a little air where things have become stuffy, fetid, and cramped."

Then came [REDACTED]'s letter, carefully outlining the "sexual blackmail" to which she felt she and others had been subjected at Dai Bosatsu. How clearly she did it, pointing out the fact that female students come troubled to the practice; how after a while, they naturally wish to open their hearts, air their inmost doubts and fears to their teacher; and how you would often interpret this opening as a sign of weakness and an invitation to sexual browsing.

And then the board meeting, that appearance of honesty and candor. Most of the board members, including your wife, the treasurer, were invited as well as several other students, including me. The President of Zen Studies Society, Sylvan Busch, also invited me. "It's your letter we're going to discuss," he said. I asked if Peter and Dave, on whose information and letters I had based my own written conclusions, were also coming. At this point, he grew vague and began to tell me about all the action he'd taken since he received my letter. When I asked him again if Peter and Dave were coming, pointing out that they had been students of long-standing before their recent departure and that our letters were two but our voice was one, he began the same explanation of all the action he'd taken since receiving my letter. I inferred, correctly as you know, that Dave and Peter had not been invited. At that point I said I would not come to the meeting myself. My reasoning: I am not inclined to play Joan of Arc: Becoming a martyr or scapegoat in a room full of your supporters is stupid. By even being there, I give the appearance of supporting your and your board's dream that such a meeting implies honesty and candor. It does no such thing. It is merely another convenient deception.

Look what happened to George.

George, that quiet, industrious, and far from impetuous or impatient student had the audacity to ask you privately to your face if you had made sexual advances during dokusan, that intimate moment between teacher and student when openness is a must. Did you answer George? Or did you say nothing to a sincere student and instead cross-

question him heatedly about the person or people who might have told him. I know it was the latter.

And now George is gone too.

And did the meeting discuss my letter? From three eyewitnesses, the answer is no. Yes, I heard your wife was disdainful of my not being there, but she is a disdainful woman. And yes, I heard that you decided not to ban people from the zendo after all ... ever since Peter checked with his grandfather (a judge) and let you know that it was illegal to exclude orderly people from a tax-exempt organization. But did you discuss making sexual advances in dokusan? No. The possibility of trying to find your mistresses (since you seem determined to have them) from the vast population of New York -- from a population that has no interest in or connection with Zen Studies Society? No. [REDACTED]'s letter? No. Peter and Dave's letter? No. This, I suppose, is a good example of honesty and candor.

And as to the later letter I sent to Sylvan requesting that any response the board might care to make to mine be in writing...

"But you didn't send that letter to the whole board," he said.

"I sent it to you. You're president," I replied.

"Yes, but you didn't send it to the whole board. You sent it to me personally."

"The letter was sent to you as president of Zen Studies. Look at the address on the letter."

"Well, the whole board doesn't have a copy."

Finally I got out of him that indeed the board had no intention of answering in writing. A good tactic. Spoken words are forgotten. As were yours, when you claimed Peter had never been banned from the zendo, yet berated George for letting him in. You changed your tune only later, saying your wife, who actually threw him out, had had a "misunderstanding."

And now you lay claim to "noble silence," a thing you say American students will never understand. You no longer deign to speak of the matter. Noble silence? Which Americans can never understand? If Americans can never understand your teaching, why are you teaching in America? Is this really "noble silence" or the silence of a Nixon, the silence of a lawgiver who conceives himself to be above the law? "How dare they!" you have said on more than one occasion, referring to those who have spoken freely of the 'rumors.' How dare they? They dare because the rumors are not rumors. I personally know three women to whom you made advances during dokusan. I know and equal number of bed partners. I am not counting the number -- the great number -- about whom I have heard at second, though reliable, hand.

How dare they? They dare because the evidence is too overwhelming, the witnesses too numerous. They dare because even the face of direct and conciliatory questioning, you bend all your energies not towards discussion with the very people who form the blood of our practice, but towards diverting the discussion. "Who told you that?" you ask; "There are rumors," you say. And there you go again sending out members of the board to camouflage and defend what you yourself cannot answer. They dare also because they long for honesty and straightforwardness.

I too hoped for that. But now I have seen too much. I had said to myself, "Ah-ha! He's changing. See how softly, how apparently with compassion and candor he speaks. Maybe he'll get off this self-destructive bender of thinking himself better than other people, of manipulating, denying and deceiving." But I was fooling myself. Again and again the sexual matters come to the fore and people discuss a great deal. Sex is fun to discuss. But in this case it is very secondary indeed. It is simply part of an overall pattern.

Really, there are too many bodies in your wake, too many people used up needlessly in order to support your ego. By staying at Zen Studies Society, I tacitly support the notion that casting off people who are no longer useful or friendly to you is all right. In doing this, I abuse my own conscience and my own being. Ironically, perhaps, it is partly due to my Zen training that I am no longer willing to do this. I think Zen is an excellent practice, useful and thorough-going for those who find it to their taste. But just because the practice is real in no way implies the same for its organizers, teachers or adherents. Sometimes it is true and sometimes it isn't. There is no certainty.

I once heard a teacher asked, "How can we be sure the teacher is a true teacher?" He replied, "You can't: It takes a thief to catch a thief."

In writing this letter, I don't feel that I have caught a thief. I feel tired. I don't particularly mind if others want to think of you as a true teacher. I simply state that I cannot.

Zen is a good practice. I thank you for your part in my Zen. It's a good practice. Please try it sometime.

Adam Fisher  
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