

Mark Oppenheimer

I write about religion, culture, fatherhood, myself. Still looking for a way to get paid to write about my dogs.

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A Buddhist vs. Me

 Tuesday, December 28, 2010 |  Email |  Share

Apparently NYC Zen Buddhist leader Eido Shimano Roshi has been circulating a letter that he says he sent in reply to my [article of a few months ago](#) about his alleged sexual indiscretions. I do not know if his letter ever made it to the *Times* (if he sent it, he sent it four months after the article appeared). I do know that in it he alleges I never spoke with him. What he does not say is that I left numerous messages at both his zendoes, on answering machines and with people who answered the phone, asking to speak with him. I also spoke with at least three of his board members. [More here](#), especially this paragraph from Eido Shimano's letter, which strikes me as curious:

“ 1. Mr. Oppenheimer did not interview me for this article, nor did he speak with Mr. Aitken or the young woman who is referred to in the article. The article states that he attempted to contact me and that I did not return several phone calls – this is just not true. I was never contacted by Mr. Oppenheimer, nor did I receive any correspondence from him at either my Livingston Manor address or my New York City address.

It is possible, I suppose, that he does not know about my dozen or so attempts to contact him. It is possible that none of my messages got to him, and that none of the board members who did speak

with me apprised him that I was looking for him.

Anything is possible, I suppose.

But here is one of his own board members, Genjo Marinello, castigating him for his backpedaling:

“ “ *I am sorry to report that Eido Roshi has yet to get past his denial. Just yesterday I read a letter dated December 1st, 2010, directed to the editor of the New York Times signed by Eido Shimano Roshi. I can only say that I was shocked, disturbed and offended by what I read. In this letter he claimed that the New York Times article that appeared August 21st was not factual and said that, “I have not resigned because of these false accusations.” In my mind, this statement makes a mockery of Eido Roshi’s public apology of September*

7th. This letter to the NYT is a clear attempt to rewrite history and is a pure and simple example of denial.

Accordingly, I have written Eido Roshi (who, as of Dec. 8th, resigned as Abbot) and my colleagues on the ZSS Board that this denial undermines the spirit of the retirement agreement that is currently being negotiated. In addition, I mentioned that our willingness to allow Eido Roshi to occasionally see requesting senior students for dokusan (Dharma Interview) on ZSS property is predicated on the idea that he genuinely acknowledges and is remorseful for past actions

and understands the damage he has done.

Under the circumstances, I have asked the full board to revisit our previous deliberations. I ask this with the belief and determination that the work of the ZSS Board can, to paraphrase what others have said in previous posts, help this organization actualize its potential to become a sincere place of practice and learning, an oasis of Buddhist wisdom, and an inspiring example of Right Living.

Reader Comments (8)

You wouldn't be doing your job right if you weren't pissing someone off. The spiritual arena may seem like one that deserves a journalistic kid-gloves approach, but for those of us who take it with seriousness (as contrasted with solemnity), spiritual life can not only survive a turn-over-the-rocks scrutiny, it also cannot have much credible meaning without it.

My only complaint about the article which pissed Mr. Shimano off was that it relied too heavily on the usual suspects -- the people with 'accreditation' or title or accolade. The article was too subjunctive-case polite.

So many people -- just ordinary people who hoped to get a handle on happiness or peace through Zen practice -- were wounded by Mr. Shimano's antics that the circumstantial case is purely enormous (see <http://www.shimanoarchive.com/> among others). The fact that Mr. Shimano has not forthrightly acknowledged his involvement in any harm may be taken in one of two ways: 1. Those claiming to have been harmed are liars or insane or misinterpreted their painful adventures with Mr. Shimano ... a stance Mr. Shimano has maintained in one form or another for 40 years, when he was willing to comment at all or 2. The very fact that students should feel wounded enough to mention it suggests that Mr. Shimano as a Zen teacher got it wrong ... this is not a realm in which sociopathic CEO's can ply their trade with any expectation that the promises of Zen practice will be kept.

I am sorry but not surprised that Mr. Shimano has treated you to his illusionist misdirections. But I am grateful you took a swing at the topic. It helps a lot of people who have been through the wringer and bear the scars to prove it.

Thank you ... and I apologize for the length.

December 29, 2010 |  genkaku

This author of the open letter requested that I make it widely available. --Andy Afable

**

Dear members of the Board of Directors of ZSS & members of ZSS Sangha,

This most recent revelation of Eido Shimano Roshi's attitude towards the meaning of his conduct, as reported, and his position, as expressed in his letter (to The New York Times) -- all, go well beyond a mere "denial". It is a familiar (see his past expression of regret & other published communications from ZSS) set of distortions, omissions & manipulations.

I believe that Eido Shimano Roshi is incapable of seeing the true nature of his conduct, its consequences to people involved, and its broader meaning. His "reality" is so self-serving &

apparently so fundamental to his view of the world & himself that he is unable to respond to other people's perception of the same facts with any degree of compassion.

He is like a machinist who brought the train to a wreck but who continues to stand on top of the ruins, clutching controls for his dear life.

The ZSS Board will make a tragic mistake if they continue to to define their actions by the way it might affect Eido Shimano Roshi. His "distance" from the administration of ZSS changes absolutely nothing. These maneuvers continue to revolve around the same recalcitrant position of the Board: ZSS can derive its legitimacy & practice authority ONLY from association with Eido Shimano Roshi. For as long as that remains so, nothing will change in our stricken organization.

The Board had been appointed & received its delegated authority from their Teacher & has no other claim at legitimacy.

What was that meeting with Sangha members, referred to in the Board's documentation? How many people were present? How were they selected? Was this meeting announced in advance & how was it publicized? Why can't we have an unexpurgated list of supporters & other interested people – who are prepared to make or renew commitment to ZSS - and poll them on fundamental questions of ZSS survival? In any mainstream non-profit organization, Boards represent the avowed mission & will of its members. Members of the Board are entrusted with a fiduciary obligation to carry out this will on behalf of all the members & in a spirit of the organization's core mission.

Whose will does ZSS Board of Directors carry out? Whom do they represent, at this point? Do we have to wait for a joint legal action by people aggrieved by Eido Shimano Roshi? Should we wait for an injunction from the Court to put a stop to the unseemly maneuvers to grant Eido Shimano Roshi the spiritual status and position he clearly has forfeited? Remember Jack Welsh & the GM Board. Why do we have to live with this never-ending scandal?

I trust that we still have more than a handful of Sangha members who continue to believe in ZSS future & who have not been driven into despair of any possibility of change in our Zendo. Eido Shimano Roshi's decisive removal from power & influence, is only a necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisite for change.

The house empty of Right Practice can not stand! We should re-enter our Zendo with full & courageous heart & fill it with Good Effort. Taking a position on these painful matters is the beginning of such effort.

Gassho,

Zogen

December 29, 2010

For my earlier letter to the Board, go to:

http://www.sanghaconvergence.org/DATA/20101216_Zogen_ZSS.pdf

December 29, 2010 |  Andy Afable

Hey! Nice going!!

I'm really glad you took the time to write this, figuring you've got to be sort of busy. I'm sure that's what Shimano figured too. Looks like he picked on the wrong guy.

Many, many people over the last 40 years have been put in your situation by this man -- that of having to defend themselves after doing nothing wrong.

I read Shimano's letter. It's smelly toilet paper -- he produces little else than this. Smelly toilet paper and misery for those around him. It's a sad thing that his follower's idealism has enabled this chubby little tyrant to employ such transparent deceptions throughout his tenure at DBZ. The level of dishonesty and deceit is unbelievable.

In fact, that's part of the reason it's continued for so long -- it's unbelievable.

If you're interested, you can read some of the archive link in the above comment.

"Zen" just means sitting meditation. Nothing more than that. There are a lot of good people looking for places to sit together. They always have to deal with these slow motion megalomaniacs. The continuing scandals at the American Zen centers -- all of them -- are shameful almost to the point of hilarity. It would really be funny, their infant-monster antics, were it not for the hurt they cause.

Really, somebody ought to write a book. (?)

December 29, 2010 |  not Jushin

The leadership models American Buddhism has inherited from Asian Buddhism will simply not work here...The leadership models of Asian Buddhism were contained by a cohesive communal structure that simply does not exist here. Chogyam Trungpa drank himself to death and is still venerated by many clueless American practitioners as an example of

enlightenment. He was able to create a financially-driven structure that protected him from meaningful criticism which persists to this day and makes piles of money selling a corrupted Dharma. I wish your Sangha well in your process of healing and creating a community that holds teachers and students accountable! Yours in the Dharma, Eric.

December 30, 2010 |  Eric Belsey

Thank you, Mark. Here's a post written in response to Zogen's letter, but intended for the Zen Studies Society Board.

Zogen, (and Zen Studies Society)

Thank you for your strong letter. I appreciated your sensitive introduction which expresses the complex "loyalty trap" experienced by the Directors of the Zen Studies Society while they try to protect a "beloved teacher" from whom they "derive authority from Zen training, ordination, and for some of you, Dharma Transmission from Eido Shimano Roshi".

This is, and historically has been, the "outstanding dilemma" blocking a just resolution to the 40 + years of outrageous abuses to students by Eido Shimano and the ZSS Board's complicity. You wisely and rightly suggest that ALL contributors to ZSS, past and present, should have a voice in the future and renewal of the ZSS.

"We are all "stakeholders" of Zen Studies Society – Teachers and students, residents and visitors, who come back for more, nuns and monks, ordained and never ordained, Dharma heirs acknowledged or not – ALL who want to participate in extricating our organization from the autocratic control of one man who has no ounce of legitimacy left".

As you say, some will want to point out that Eido Shimano and his wife Aiho, have stepped down from the board, have retired (initially worded "resigned") and therefore no longer hold positions of authority. However, there is no question that Eido Shimano continues to be a strong influence on the present board which includes two dharma heirs (one to become the new Abbess) and Genjo Marinello. Eido Shimano will continue to reside at Dai Bosatsu Zendo, and will continue to give teishos there and at Shobo-ji in NYC. His influence and authority is further empowered by edified descriptions on the ZSS website such as "his incomparable Dharma".

In the meantime, there are Sangha that expend energy, and still hope for accountability/renewal and restorative justice, but the wheel stops turning as it meets those few board members left who hold the only active and decisive trustee position for unbiased change and renewal.

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Someday, when Eido Shimano Roshi gets past his denial, he can explain what this Dharma is that gets kicked around like a soccer ball and allows for an esteemed teacher to repeatedly commit serious abuses, lies, and slandering of students who try to speak the truth of their experience? I personally was asked by Eido Shimano to lie “for the sake of the Dharma”. These are exact words from him. I now know that I am not the only person who has been asked by him to deliberately lie. How many times has he done this? How many in the ZSS have “protected the Dharma” in their silence?

Dharma Heir Genjo Marinello recently related that he has “always done what he thinks is best for the Dharma”, and some are genuinely moved by the struggle and difficulty he is having in resolving his own mixed issues. But while Genjo uses this process of introspection to straddle a fence, caught in the “loyalty trap”, time passes. We wait. We wait and watched resignation turn to retirement, recommendations from the Faith Trust Institute largely ignored, and plans for his future residence at both DBZ and Shobo-ji .

Years of experience, clear and equally introspective such as yours, Zogen, and that of other former ZSS members who are now disenfranchised, go unheeded and brushed aside.

Somehow, at the end of the day, Genjo, you have to act. By straddling the fence you can keep the convenience of being able to shift to whatever side presents you in the most favorable light. If you can do it long enough all the commotion may pass and nothing too major really has to change. As a fellow Quaker who continues to practice zazen, please return to the fundamental Dharma Teaching:

To do no evil;
To do good;
To save all beings.

“To live in the virtue of that Life and Power that takes away the occasion for all war”
(Quaker Testimony of Peace, George Fox 1651)

.....Takes away occasions for war..... May we seek through honesty, transparency, and inclusiveness, occasions for Peace.

**

So, Zogen, to sum it up so far, “moral indignation”, is where we are stuck. Your vision of including ALL past and present members of ZSS is democratic, healing, and enlivening. The last few sentences in your letter are so beautiful and freeing that I repeat them here.

“Nothing less will begin to restore our hope that ZSS might become, one day, what it was meant to become:

a serene place of practice and learning,
an oasis of Buddhist wisdom,
an inspiring example of Right Living,
of Precepts as a living reality.”

I hope my letter has correctly reflected yours, and please continue to participate in this greater maha-sangha conversation.

January 3, 2011 |  Olivia

Reposted from Genkaku's blog, January 2, 2011 8:46 PM

After reading the eleven new postings (post-Ford) on the Archive, I'm astonished at how few (except for 2 or 3 of those letters) have to do w/ the actual problem at ZSS, but instead are Genjo and Roko puff-pieces concealed in the context of dealing with the problem. I mean, wake the frack up, folks!

Is the American Sangha so fracking naive as to take these, which are essentially form letters, as compassionate support from "teachers" to correct a wrong? (Kensei Koji hit it on the mark in his letter.)

First, where were these wise folks months or years ago? Kobutsu, Genkaku, and a few others have been beating this drum for quite a while, yet those who drafted these form letters on the eve of an abbot's installation could not raise their concerns earlier?

Second, it's all the same delusional, self-promotional crap that got ZSS into the mess it finds itself. You "teachers" dressed in your finest, parade around talking about "it." You are just bags of bones playing out the night of a thousand knives.

An old friend who is a student of Pema's recently told me not to worry, that Buddhism is not dead. You know what? She's right. Chodran teaches, and literally thousands of people listen. Her practice is alive and is also not devoid of a human or moral center.

Again, I am drawn back to Ikyu's Skeletons. Over-and-over, through the past few months it keeps pulling me back.

Except for a very few gems, institutionalized Zen in North America is showing itself to be lame or just plain dead. Now I know why my cushion sits alone.

Oy,

-Tenshin-

January 2, 2011 8:46 PM

January 3, 2011 |  -Tenshin-

Today is the day on which the Zen Studies Society Board of Directors votes on what action it plans to take in regard to Eido Tai Shimano and his relationship to ZSS. While the Faith-Trust Institute, at the behest of ZSS suggested that all ties with Shimano must be severed completely, it seems unlikely that this will happen. Some compromise will be found that allows Shimano to retire ... and smirk. Without a clear and complete break, Zen Studies Society signs its own death warrant and sullies whatever banner Zen Buddhism in America may lay claim to. It is such a pity.

As a last-stand plea, I wrote this email to Joe Soun Dowling, president of of ZSS board of directors:

To Joe Soun Dowling (joedwl@aol.com), president of the Zen Studies Society Board of Directors

Dear Joe Soun Dowling -- I recognize that today's vote about the future of Eido Tai Shimano and his relationship with Zen Studies Society must be enormously difficult. So much confusion, anger, love, uncertainty and downright bitterness has filled the air that it cannot be easy. Thank you for your efforts.

But as a nobody-Zen-student, I would like to urge you and your fellow board members one last time: Please, please, please make a clean break. No if's, and's, but's, or lofty compromises. PLEASE. Listen to the Faith-Trust Institute. Listen to the pleas that have erupted in any number of quarters. If even the American Zen Teachers Association can speak up a little ... well, it can't all be vitriol and vindictiveness, do you think?

The penalty for compromising or fudging a response to all this will be a death knell for Zen Studies Society and a blot on the banner of Zen Buddhism in America. This is not just argumentative hyperbole. Please, please, please consider it. Please make a clean, clear break.

With respect,

adam genkaku fisher

January 10, 2011 |  adam

This is a letter I just posted to the AZTA (American Zen Teachers Association). I am not a particularly senior or influential member there at all, so it will likely mean next to diddly squat. However, I am ashamed at myself for being silent too long. I am ashamed too that ... once again ... there seems to be a consensus gathering among many "teachers" to allow the Sangha involved to handle this internally, and work out some kind of "honorable departure" for Mr. Shimano.

Rev. Kobutsu Malone told me about this case a couple of years ago, asking me to join in doing something. I stood silent, because it was "not my teacher, not my sangha, not my problem". However, now that the details are crystal clear ... on the wrongdoing and the years of cover-up ... no one can stand silent. Mr. Shimano must not be allowed an "honorable exit", the Sangha that covered this up for decades can not be allowed to handle it and "work it out".

I am posting it here and at Treeleaf as the best places I can think of to say this. Shame on us if this is papered over again ...

Dear All,

I will briefly speak as a newer member of this organization, junior to many people here whom I respect whose opinions may differ. For the first time since joining this body, I am ashamed.

This is not a normal case of a teacher who, perchance, had an affair with a student, or a drinking problem, or bought himself a BMW with Sangha funds, or other like personal or minor fault. Nor is it something that happened over the short term or recently.

Instead, this is the story of a teacher who engaged in case upon case of serial sexual abuse for decades, all while his Sangha and students looked the other way and covered it up, all while many here knew yet chose to do nothing. I know that Mr. Shimano is too just a victim of greed and ignorance, the real culprits here. However, at the same time, a teacher of the Precepts who intentionally acts again and again, over decades, to harm the innocent, showing little if any remorse in case after case, repeating the harm over decades with no self-reflection ... is a kind of monster in our midst. Shame on us for not decrying this in the strongest terms, allowing any kind of "honorable exit".

Thus the calls of "give them more time to work it out" are about 10 years too late. They have had years, and chance upon chance. To "give them more time" and allow a "graceful exit" for Mr. Shimano is not the right answer here. He must be condemned by all of us in the strongest and most unambiguous terms, we must deny him any respect (his years of service do not outweigh the damage done here), the members of this organization must denounce the years of cover up, we should publicly admit our own role in not doing enough. Moreover, we must now publicly turn our backs on Mr. Shimano. Furthermore, we must turn our backs on the ZSS ... treat them as persona non grata ... unless and until they exhibit real reforms.

If it were a case in which such events had happened but once or twice, or nobody in the organization knew, or there had not been cover up after cover up for YEARS then my opinion would be different. However, this is our moral equivalent of the child abuse scandals plaguing the Catholic Church. If we allow Mr. Shimano to make a graceful exit, if we allow things to be papered over again ... our own shame is compounded.

Our students are watching. Right now, opinion I am hearing among people observing is that the "teachers of the Precepts" look like a bunch of hypocrites trying to protect their own.

Shame on all of us.

Gassho, Jundo

January 10, 2011 |  Jundo Cohen

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