

ANCESTORS

No Mean Preacher

Robert Aitken Roshi: The Last Interview Joel Whitney

Also in this issue: [Remembering Aitken Roshi: A student offers glimpses of the late Zen master](#), by Roshi Paul Genki Kahn

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I step from my taxi onto the driveway of the Koko-an Zendo in Honolulu, three hours early for my interview with the eminent Zen master Robert Aitken. I had planned to use the time for extra research; instead, I'm hijacked by another visitor. Kobutsu Malone is a Zen priest, visiting from Maine. Portly, bald as a pink bowling ball, with wild white eyebrows that jut from his face like jagged tumbleweeds or lightning bolts, he wears green-brown Zen robes and steps slowly down the center's lawn to meet me. Hands in a thoughtful posture behind his back, he resembles a medieval European monk, a character out of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Taking him first as the sangha's manager, through whom I've arranged the interview, I thank him for coming out to meet me and ask for a place to keep reading. Malone's first words are a threat—namely, to chain me to the radiator so I won't get into trouble. He pauses for the joke to sink in, erupting in a hoarse roar of laughter. I smile awkwardly.

I had been invited by *Tricycle* to fly to Maui and interview the new U.S. poet laureate, W. S. Merwin. A longtime fan of Merwin's writing, I jumped at the chance, not hesitating when asked if I could also interview the Zen roshi Merwin originally went to Hawaii to study under. Recognizing Aitken's name from my older habit, hardly kept up, of reading Zen classics, and knowing this would make the trip all the more worthwhile for the magazine, I said yes enthusiastically. Only later did I realize I'd have little time to prepare for both interviews. All of which would prove even more complicated when, the day after I sent follow-up questions to a difficult interview, Robert Aitken Roshi died of pneumonia.



On the first Monday in August, a day overcast with fog, I'd scheduled a 10 a.m. interview with the legendary teacher, who—at 93 and now quite frail—was, I learned, in the midst of a kind of war. Aitken had started a blog in May. On Thursday, May 20, Tom Aitken posted a letter signed by his father that read, "This is an open letter to Eido Tai Shimano Roshi: Dear Tai San, There are many reports of your abuse of women published on the web which indicate that you have been involved in breaking the precepts over a period of more than 40 years. I would like to urge you to come forth and make a statement in response to these accusations."

In 2003, Aitken donated his complete papers to the University of Hawaii at Manoa, but he had left

a batch pertaining to Shimano sealed. In the summer of 2008, he instructed Lynn Davis at the university to unseal them. A website named the Shimano Archive has been making them widely available ever since. Now that letters and affidavits from women alleging they were coerced or inappropriately seduced to sleep with Shimano were publicly available, and with Aitken's blog publicly requesting a response, Eido Shimano's community, the Zen Studies Society, announced on July 4 his stepping down from the board. To some in the broader Zen community, this appeared to be a step toward resolution. To others, it looked like mere window dressing. As I would see, Aitken fell into the latter category. Malone, who works on the archive, did as well.

I had planned to focus my piece on Aitken's career as a Zen teacher in helping transplant Buddhism to the West. In his extensive writings, he had elucidated with uncommon skill and clarity essential Buddhist concepts for generations of Western students: "Unpack karma and you get cause and effect. Unpack cause and effect and you get affinity. Unpack affinity and you get the tendency to coalesce. Unpack the tendency to coalesce and you get intimacy. Unpack intimacy and you will find that you contain all beings. Unpack containment and there is the goddess of mercy herself."

Malone, I soon see, has other ideas for the interview. Walking past lockers and a large statue of Bodhidharma, we enter a common area in the Zen Center where I hope to work. He asks for my email address and begins to send me articles and documents from the archive, urging me to consider the Shimano material for the focus of my article, or for a follow-up one. The reading I plan to finish is slow going, repeatedly halted as Malone plies me with heartbreaking stories of Eido Shimano Roshi allegedly preying on his most vulnerable students.

The first piece he sends was written by a former student of Shimano's, and I'm led to believe her account is typical of those found in the archive: "Before I could get the feeling back in my legs [after meditation], he ripped me off the floor and pulled my body against his, then grabbed my breast, and prodded my mouth with his tongue, and started to pull up my skirt and reach between my legs." This all came, the former student wrote, just after Shimano had declared her experiences earlier as "enlightenment," telling her, "The best time to make love to a woman is right after sesshin, when she looks her sexiest." I find this compelling, but remind Malone that I've been sent to do an overview of Aitken's long and storied career. A positive piece. A Q&A.

Aitken has been speaking out against Eido Roshi's behavior since 1964, after the latter was placed in the Koko An Zendo by Soen Nakagawa, who was teacher to both Aitken and Shimano. In *Original Dwelling Place* (1996), Aitken writes of meeting Soen Roshi that "[he] appeared, almost shyly, very young in appearance," and "I had the strong conviction: 'This is my teacher.'" Yet because of Shimano's sexual relationships with students in this very zendo, Aitken, in a sense, lost that conviction: "When Shimano's social relationships got him into trouble at the Koko An Zendo ... in 1964, he felt obliged to move to New York. My own relationship with Soen Roshi fell apart at this point." Soon thereafter, Aitken began to study under Hakuun Yasutani, and eventually with Yasutani Roshi's chief dharma heir, Koun Yamada, from whom Aitken received dharma transmission.



I have interviewed dozens of tough subjects—a head of state, members of Congress, the guy who wrote the torture memo justifying cruel Bush administration policies in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, the dude who coined the term “Axis of Evil.” I’m not afraid of combative interviews, and I’m not expecting one. Despite this, I’m jittery when I enter the room where Aitken awaits me.

I know he’s 93. Yet at first glance I’m surprised how frail and withered Aitken looks (I suppose because web photos are outdated). I’m also surprised to find that I won’t be alone during the interview, which is a first for me. Just before entering, Malone tells me Aitken has asked him and Lynn Davis, from the university archive, to document the interview as well. I won’t get Aitken alone to ask him if this is true, and I have no time to argue, since it’s sprung on me as I enter, so I decide to trust it and do my best. I enter, and Malone and I bow. Malone turns on his tape recorder, and (after a few questions) Davis enters and sets up her video camera, which I hope isn’t pointed at me.

In a blue plaid short-sleeve button-down shirt open to the chest, with a white V-neck underneath, and navy jogging pants, Aitken sits on a teak couch with turquoise upholstery and a giant Quanyin oil painting on the wall above his skeletal head. Zen calligraphy bookends the painting. He has a magnifying glass on the couch next to him, wears gold-rimmed glasses and a gold watch, and a fuzzy yellow wreath with beads (Hawaiian or Japanese?) rings his neck.

Aware that under normal circumstances interviews make subjects nervous, and hoping to talk at a very basic level with him, I downplay my Zen practice, confessing that I’m mostly a book Buddhist, if any kind at all. Bored by my disclaimers, Aitken barks, “Let’s do it,” and I sense impatience in a man it must pain to sit upright.

From the very first, he resists me, his mouth clenching and unclenching throughout our talk. Sitting upright, legs crossed at the ankles, he barely looks at me or moves until I ask my question. After logging his ailments (Parkinson’s, macular degeneration), I start with “Mu,” emptiness—mistakenly calling it a concept.

“It’s not a concept,” he snaps. Listening to the recording later, I can hear that it is very difficult for him to speak; what sounds abrupt or churlish may be his forcing his mouth to do what it used to do with ease. With my next question he begins a maneuver he will do several times, which is to throw my question back at me. “One of the questions you ponder in *Encouraging Words*, is ‘Why if all beings are Buddha was it necessary for the ancients to sweat blood?’” “Actually that’s the question,” he fires back. “Why was it necessary?”

Me: My question is, what is it that unteaches us our buddhanature? Why are we estranged from it?

Aitken: Why was it the ancients sweat blood to understand it? That’s the question.

Me: Yeah.

Aitken: I say, Why is it? I’m asking you that.

Me: I’m asking you, too. [*After all, I’m the interviewer.*]

Aitken: No, I can’t answer for you. It doesn’t do you any good.

Me: I’m imagining you’ve thought about this question a little longer than I have.

[*Silence.*]

Frustrated at the thought that he might continue in this vein, as if we were engaged in a stylized dialogue between Zen teacher and student and not a magazine interview, I repeat my question about Mu, because this isn’t my first time at the rodeo with a wily interviewee. He recalls the response when someone asked Louis Armstrong what jazz is: “Lady, if you have to ask me, I can’t tell you.’ That’s my answer.” When we quibble over the difference between intellectual and experiential Mu, he quips, “I think it would be a good idea if you were to come here and do zazen with a true master.”

When he admits that Zen as a concept, coming from books, turns him off, I steer us to his imprisonment in a Japanese prison camp during World War II. I see later it is my anger as well as desperation to get him to “open up” that makes me do this; he found Zen, after all, in a book by R. H. Blyth. Without seeming to notice my point, he asks Malone to bring him the book, the “very same volume,” from his shelf across the room. He flips pages for a long time. There’s a silence I feel a compulsion to speak through (knowing tape is rolling, knowing I’m not getting much). “Energy is eternal delight,” he finally reads. You met Blyth in the camp? “I met him right away.” But you didn’t sit, you didn’t practice together? “He wasn’t a zazen enthusiast.”

Petty, but I feel I’ve made a point: Zen wisdom, too, can be found in books. I’ve gathered that Aitken has held this view as well.

I ask him about the difference between Zen in Japan, where it emerged among monastics, and here, where it is predominantly a lay practice.

“Well, the title of a recent essay I wrote, “ he says, “is ‘Give What Is There a Chance.’ In other words, in Australia they have what is called bush regeneration. They clear out all the rubbish plants, and the native plants grow up. If you clear all the plants in your head, what is already there will grow up.”

He starts to cough furiously and asks for his nurse. A panic enters the room with his nurse. After they sort out which medicine he needs, I nudge: “So we were talking about ‘native plants.’”

“We were talking about Mu,” he shoots back. “What is already there?”

“What is already there?” I stupidly repeat.

“If you clear out the rubbish, then you find out what is already there.”

I mutter, fumbling for my next question, wondering, if he is calling my thoughts rubbish, is he calling my questions rubbish too? Smirking at the others in the room, he chides me outright: “It went right over his head.” I’m used to the evasions of interview subjects, not outright mocking. “Competition *can* be healthy,” Aitken writes in his 1984 book *The Mind of Clover*. “After all, conversation itself is a kind of competition, and at its best in Zen dialogues it saves all beings. When the self is forgotten, the play becomes the thing, and everybody benefits.”

But it’s just not working here. From what I understand, this behavior is uncharacteristic of a man known to, as one of his admirers told me, “meet people where they are.” In interview after interview one sees Aitken answers questions with candor rather than impose the form, as he seems to be doing here, of a Zen dialogue between student and teacher.

So I switch to politics, a subject on which Aitken has amassed no small amount of authority. He is a lifelong activist, and he is well known as a cofounder of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and for his extensive writings on the crossroads of Zen and politics. In fact, *The Mind of Clover* is an attempt to place Zen within a moral framework, one that could rescue it from the kind of moral relativism one might hear a sexually exploitative or politically disengaged teacher invoke in his or her defense. In elucidating the Zen precepts (e.g., not killing, not stealing, not misusing sex), the book explores the ethical dimensions of Zen practice, a subject that previously had been much neglected in written discourse. “Without the precepts as guidelines,” he writes, “Zen Buddhism tends to become a hobby, made to fit the needs of the ego.” On the first grave precept of not killing, he writes: “Just because historical statistics show lots of war, it does not follow that behind history there is an imperative to wage war. Indeed, the imperative is self-realization. It is the perversion of self-realization into self-aggrandizement that directs the course of our lives to violence.”

I ask whether modernity, militarization, exploitative capitalism, environmental destruction, exhaustion of resources—the woes he has decried—suggest that Zen’s ethical dimensions are coming too slowly to the West or are diminishing in the East. He acknowledges that it’s a good point and calls Zen’s arrival in the West “a step forward.”

What's a good second step? "If all beings by nature are Buddha," he begins, "that means by nature you are Buddha. Is it then possible for you to manufacture arms?"

"It's not possible."

"I don't think so," he agrees. "That's the second step."

I have a follow-up; I forge onward. "That's the second step, but—"

Again, he mocks: "Oh, he passed right by it."

Does Zen need a sense of urgency against other forces that are more destructive? Wheezing, then coughing, he says, "Of course it would be nice if it were to happen right away."

Does Zen's transplantation from East to West have its own unhelpful tendencies? Yes. When people say, for instance, "We don't get involved in politics." He sighs, "I hear that all the time." In *The Mind of Clover*, Aitken writes, "We have reached the place in international affairs, and in local affairs too, where it is altogether absurd to insist, as some of my Buddhist friends still do, that the religious person does not get involved in politics." Later, "I do not hold the view ... that before one can work for the protection of animals, forests, and small family farms—or for world peace—one must be completely realized, compassionate, and peaceful." But when I ask a follow-up, he says he's tired of this question. I suggest that we move on. He mocks me again for moving on. Are you afraid of death? "I'm not fearful of nonbeing," he insists. "It's possible the world will be coming to an end much sooner than we would find comfortable."

Me [incredulous]: So the state of the world disturbs you more than your own...

Aitken [cutting me off]: I'm just sorry, that's all. I don't know if it disturbs me. I just regret it.

Me: Are there other things relating to your teaching, relating to Zen coming to the West, that you feel regret about?

Aitken: There are so many things that are marvelous about [Zen] coming to the West that I can overlook the little disadvantages.

Me: You've written on your blog recently about Eido Shimano.

Aitken: Oh, that's like asking a question about a hippopotamus when we're really discussing a leaf frog.

Me: I'm just wondering if there's a regret in the fact that this has been going on and in the fact that you—

Aitken: Damn right it is.

Me: —that you've been trying to clear it up.

Aitken: Damn right it is.

Me: Is there anything you'd like to say about that?

Aitken: He's a crook.

Me: He's a crook?

Aitken: We've got to find a way that he can say, 'I'm a crook.'

Me: Is there anything you'd like to say to the people, for instance, in his circle or his orbit who have maybe helped enable his behavior?

Aitken: They are part of the problem. [*Coughs.*]

Me: It must be frustrating to be aware of this [going on allegedly] for so long, to be so interpersonally touched by it, and to be aware perhaps that it may be one of the unfortunate by-products of Zen in the West or at least this one instance—

Aitken: It's not a by-product of Zen in the West. It's the by-product of a criminal mind. Nothing to do with Zen, nothing to do with Zen.

Me: So it's an aberration? [*Pause.*] Is there anything you'd like to say about or to the women who've come forward?

Aitken: I'm awed by their courage. I want to give them all the possible encouragement I can.

Me: From what I understand, two of the women allegedly affected by this behavior were here and had nervous collapses?

Aitken: That was 40-something years ago.

Me: Were you here then?

Aitken: [*Loudly.*] I certainly was.

Me: Were you aware of anything amiss—

Aitken: [*Shouting.*] I certainly was.

After a long pause, through which Aitken wheezes, I go on.

Me: When I came in, we listed some of your health concerns, and we have been talking about this issue that clearly agitates you, you've written about it on your blog—

Aitken: I really don't mind that I have health issues. These are natural developments of a person of my age. And no, they don't trouble me at all. Why should they trouble me? That happens naturally. But Eido Roshi is a crook. And his actions are not natural in any way. They are contrived.

Me: And they agitate you?

Aitken: Bloody well right.

I make a comparison between the Zen teacher and the therapist. I'm trying to get at the intimacy of both authority figures with their students/patients.

Me [*reading from Encouraging Words*]: "Transference is the process of entrusting one's growth to a loved one." It seems to me that the structure of Zen in the West, with teachers having an intimacy with the students (that's the word you use a lot), it seems that unlike the—

"Transference, you see, is not like that," he corrects me. "Transference is a very superficial kind of movement. What's happening in the dokusan room is a realization of..." He pauses as he hears a bird outside. It's a thrush, whose singing he refers to so often in his writing. "The bird," Aitken mutters. "Hark! how blithe the thrush sings!/ He, too, is no mean preacher:/ Come forth into the light of things,/ Let nature be your teacher.' Wordsworth said this in 1798. That's very different from transference. As I said, it's like the difference between an armadillo and a leaf frog. Two different things."

Afterward, Roland, the zendo manager, tries to browbeat me over lunch. We are eating downstairs in the center's kitchen with two new residents, a married couple—an American guy and his Japanese wife. It's their first day. As we eat a vegan feast of fruit and vegetable salads and quinoa, Roland insists on seeing a transcript of the interview before I publish it. With the others recording it, there to witness my being mocked, I'm not in the mood. I tell him I don't offer sign-off to handlers. (It's only later I put together how he must have been tasked with making sure the aged teacher didn't say anything erratic as a result of his illness, and how he, too, may have been overwhelmed by this.) He insists that with such an old man it is necessary. I tell him this was never discussed, I wouldn't have agreed, and assure him that if I have questions, I'll be in touch. We go in circles as he insists again and again that I should show it to him. Repeating that I'm not looking to do a hatchet job, and irritated over having to restate that this is not how journalism works, I look at the resident couple to see if I'm the only one who finds this persistence strange. Am I being too sensitive? To make peace, I ask Roland where he's from. He smiles sarcastically, chews exaggeratedly. It is a clear 'fuck you.' Fuck you too, Roland. Fuck you all.

After lunch, I kill time on gmail, trying to file the myriad articles and pictures Malone sends, while he talks baby talk to his dog on Skype ("Hi, dear Bear. There's Daddy's baby. Yes, you are. You're Daddy's baby.") or steps outside to chain-smoke. I can't wait to leave this madhouse. I examine a picture I'd just been asked to take of Malone with Aitken. Malone's crying. Why? *Roshi will soon die*. In another, I'm shaking Aitken's hand just after the interview, his book under my arm, and I'm smiling broadly, maybe defensively. Malone crying, me smiling. Despite asking him point-blank if he's afraid, the gravity, reality of his dying did not penetrate me.

In light of the Shimano controversy, I'm struck by a parallel between Zen in the West and the plight of the greater cultural left. In dozens of interviews with liberals and progressives, I've traced how antiwar progressives accuse liberal hawks of absolutism (that is, a clumsy overdetermination of moral dualisms). To justify warfare (e.g., state killing), the scourge of something worse—terrorism or Stalinism or Nazism— is invoked. And liberal hawks, parroting conservatives, accuse progressives of moral relativism (where anything goes, all ideas are equally valid)—for instance, in defending "multiculturalism" in a world where some cultures allegedly want to wipe out others, or where stoning alleged fornicators, usually women, is accepted. These are vast oversimplifications, but to the degree that both charges have their merits, it is only in our principles (international law, the Bill of Rights) that we steer between extremes. Aitken's precepts in *The Mind of Clover* form a kind of moral Middle Way for Buddhists, possibly in harmony with the struggles of the left, to navigate. Ultimately, this is what he was struggling with when he shouted, "He's a crook."

Lest the notion of emptiness be distorted by hawks to claim there is no self to kill, Aitken writes, "If there is no sword, no swing of the sword, no decapitation, then what about the blood? What about the wails of the widow and children? The absolute position, when isolated, omits human details completely." He also writes, "Without falling into a kind of pernicious equality in which all views are equally valid, you can play with views and see what happens. If I am anxious to protect myself, then I will kill your views. If I practice giving life, then I will offer you the scope you need."

Have I got everything? I check my recorder to make sure it recorded, anxious to transcribe what promises to be an embarrassing conversation. The new resident appears, standing over me. "Would you like to sit with my husband and me?" she asks. She is young, pretty. "Sure." There's time, I think, before my cab comes. Time for my mood to improve. As we walk past the Bodhidharma statue, turn the corner toward the meditation area, she apologizes for Roland, someone she must have just met herself. "That was really intense; sorry that happened."

I take a deep breath, heartened. We join her husband in the zendo. He smiles kindly as I grab a zafu. I do a rusty half-lotus and slowly settle down, counting my breaths. Sure enough, everything begins to grow fuller, filling my senses with calm, with clearness and quiet. All I hear is air going through me. The same thrush from earlier sings in the trees. Somewhere down the hall, behind me, in the room with the Quanyin, Robert Aitken Roshi coughs and wheezes.

Joel Whitney is the founder of *Guernica* magazine. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Images: Photographs by Tom Haar

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Reply by [paul6316](#) on February 13, 2011, 10:32 am

I know laughter isn't the appropriate response to this article, but your depiction of the Bedlam of paranoia and gratuitous humiliation that is the American Zen meditation center was very funny, right down to the nice, normal and bemused couple whom you always meet at these places who are wondering how they took a wrong turn on their way to the Zendo and wound up kidnapped by a bunch of Scientologists.

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Reply by [rob.grover](#) on February 25, 2011, 1:25 am

hey, i like this guy! wish i could have known him. -grover

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Reply by [Joel Whitney](#) on March 25, 2011, 9:50 am

Grover, I recommend his books highly. They include thoughts about his readings, memories of his teachers, poems he wrote and translated, not to mention an intellectually incisive dissection of the teachings.

Best,
-Joel

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Reply by [dougiedd](#) on February 26, 2011, 3:21 pm

"I step from my taxi onto the driveway of the Koko-an Zendo in Honolulu". An inauspicious start for sure, given that the Koko-an Zendo has been closed for years. But no need for proof reading by the temple secretary!

Malone's recommendation, to chain you up to keep you out of trouble was indeed a gesture of great compassion.

So too was the late Roshi's advice to you "I think it would be a good idea if you were to come here and do zazen with a true master."

In an article purportedly an interview with Aitken, the word "I" appears with surprising frequency; (i lost count after 30).

How sad that Tricycle finds this sort of immature psychological introspection to be a fitting way to honor the life of a fine man.

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Reply by [Joel Whitney](#) on March 25, 2011, 10:27 am

Hi Dougiedd,

The Aitken profile, wisely on Tricycle's part, was assigned to a former student of Aitken's (link above). Tricycle also ran a note honoring Aitken in the previous issue. Sadly, the personal essay (what was left, after my interview failed) sort of leans on the use of the pronoun "i". Clearly it offends you... You counted 30 instances of "i" in a 3000-word essay. (That's 1 instance per 100 words?) Likewise, you have used the pronoun i once above, in about 100 words--not counting quoted material. I'm not offended by the pronoun in the least. Here's a nice bit from Aitken that I hope lets us both off the hook, from Encouraging Words (hardcover edition), page 65:

"Ego and non-ego form a complementarity that can be explained mathematically, so to speak, but in our lives the subject of research is not 'out there' and is, in fact, the observer herself or himself. The burden of proof is not upon research instruments, but upon the conduct of the self. If the observer behaves egotistically, then the teaching of ego as non-ego is mocked. [new paragraph] This teaching, however, is not a denial of ego, any more than emptiness is a denial of form. 'Form is exactly emptiness;/ emptiness is exactly form,' as the 'Heart Sutra' says. Ego is exactly non-ego; non-ego exactly ego."

All the best
Joel

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Reply by [timtakegi](#) on February 27, 2011, 2:42 am

Mr. Whitney:

Your writing expresses an anger that is palpable and a compassion clouded by pride. You play up your own background interviewing "heads of state and members of Congress" yet these boastful asides are belied by a surprisingly amateurish approach to this piece. Is this a snarky email to your best friend, or a serious piece of journalism?

As a reader you are left to wonder if it was this immaturity that Aitken-Roshi sensed when he chose to respond to you like he did - as a Zen master (which he was) to a student of Buddhism still immature in his practice. Or maybe he acted as he did because as an old man with limited energy and only hours remaining before his death (which he also was) he was eager to shift the focus of your interview in order to help right an old wrong before he passed. Either way, is either possibility fairly treated by your dismissive tone?

You are also left to wonder about your carefree willingness to use the Tricycle as a forum for your petty grievances. Whether "Roland" annoyed you or not, what is so strange about a student of a dying master worrying about how his ailing teacher's labored utterances might be used against him? Sure, you may be right that you had no obligation to submit your article for his approval, but to put in print an expletive filled tirade against a man wanting to protect his debilitated teacher is beyond immature- its vindictive.

In the last paragraph you describe your own brief escape from this angst - through zazen. Yet even here what is most striking is your own immaturity. Your description of your practice suggests that your attitude towards zazen is not so different than a valium addicts attitude towards his favorite pill: you use it as an escape. As Aitken-roshi might have told you, in the practice of Zen you may utilize sitting and breathing but in fact "all of life is zazen" and the path of Zen is compassion itself. In your description of your own practice all that is illustrated is an ability to temporarily remove yourself from your frustrations, only to reembrace them - with pen in hand - once the meditation bell has rung.

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Reply by [turtlesmolly](#) on March 9, 2011, 5:11 am

Well written! Thank you . Molly

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Reply by [Joel Whitney](#) on March 25, 2011, 12:06 pm

Hi timtakegi,

No disrespect was intended to any of the people who appear in this essay. I did strive to be honest about my own feelings of wanting the interview I was sent by my editors to get, the stress one puts on oneself when things start to go awry, and to show that at certain points I wanted to see (and started to see) a bigger picture. This was about something bigger than my myopic need to get the best quotes from an interview subject, for instance, into my little tape recorder; it was more than a job. And so a line had to be carefully tread between honestly showing those (even uncomfortable) feelings and being fair to the people in the meditation center--without adding too much explanation (as I fear I may be doing now). Roland was protecting his teacher and there's a parenthetical in the Roland paragraph acknowledging that (which comes through enough that you cite it back at me, yes?). Malone seemed to be motivated by a deep concern for students he clearly saw as abused by Eido--which is evidenced everyday in his work on the archive--as well as an abiding devotion to a mentor whom he was meeting for the first and last time. His tears served as a reminder to me that perhaps I wasn't getting something. I tried to make that clear, to offset the use of expletives that may, you're right, have been expressed in other words. At the same time, I think the disrespect you're hearing (as if it were aimed at Aitken) is actually me trying to sketch feelings of disappointment over a job, on my part, that felt like it was being badly done. I hope that's not too presumptuous of me to point out.

For what it's worth, here's another quote from Aitken's Encouraging Words (I just came across my notes to this book under a pile on my desk--and thought of these comments by you, Molly, & Clark). This is from page 70, and I hope not too much of a non sequitur here:

"To acknowledge one's own dark side with a smile and to acknowledge the shining side of the other person with a smile -- this is practice."

I tried to do both, but can see that in your reading it was too much of the former and too little of the latter. Ok. So be it. Let your fine reminder that "'all of life is zazen' and the path of Zen is compassion itself" be the last word, if you like.

All best
Joel

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Reply by [peterpowers](#) on February 27, 2011, 9:26 am

Was anybody forced to read the article?

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Reply by [Joel Whitney](#) on March 25, 2011, 4:59 pm

Some of my family members were, Peter. :)

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Reply by [turtlesmolly](#) on February 28, 2011, 10:04 pm

The article, "Remembering Aitken Roshi " by Roshi Paul Genki was most enjoyable, but this one, no, I think not.....For a period of time, I was a student of Aitken Roshis. My children were 3 and 5 when we first moved to Hawaii in@ 1987. We all felt at home immediately at the Koko An Zendo. These were wonderful years, pre Palolo Zen center, and helping as Palolo Center was being built! In time,Roshi eventually retired to the Big Island to be closer to son, Tom, and at this time, I joined the Honolulu Mindfulness Community,though I continued to be a friend of The Diamond Sangha, and of Aitken Roshi.

Ah, but I am digressing from my point! The article, "No Mean Preacher" seemed to me to show little respect or compassion for this amazing 93 year old Zen Roshi, who was loved and admired by so many, and who was quite sick at the time of this interview.

His illness is mentioned several times in the article, Roshi coughing here, wheezing there....You do not feel good when you wheeze and cough. Asthmatic all my life, I know this from personal experience..Roshi was brave and unselfish to continue to do this interview, despite severe coughing and wheezing.

The author mentions Roshi several times in a negative way. He says he(Roshi) "chides" the interviewer,and describes how he(Roshi) "quibbles" with the interviewer.

At one point the interviewer says, " Roshi coughs furiously and asks for his Nurse", yet Aitken Roshi has the courage to go on with the interview! The interviewer seemed to insinuate that Roshi was rude and unthoughtful.

Later he complained about his attendant too, who was just trying to protect his dear 93 year old teacher. Tricycle, you should not have published this poorly written,negative article, He is someone who deserves our utmost respect and admiration.

Robert Aitken Roshi was a wonderful teacher, scholar and writer, and should be remembered as such. He was a pillar of strength and wisdom.

Thank you for listening, with Gratitude, Molly Gluek

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Reply by [Joel Whitney](#) on March 25, 2011, 12:27 pm

Hi Molly,

I enjoyed your digression.

As for this:

"The article, 'No Mean Preacher' seemed to me to show little respect or compassion for this amazing 93 year old Zen Roshi, who was loved and admired by so many, and who was quite sick at the time of this interview."

I strongly disagree with this sentiment; I respected him so much that I spent hours and hours reading, relishing his words, trying to pick through his quest over Zen ethics, politics, and the role of the teacher vis a vis sexual relationships with his/her students. In other words, I drudged up what seemed most to upset him most just before he died.

I found absolutely nothing to dispute your final thought, only quote after quote to justify it, when you write that: "Robert Aitken Roshi was a wonderful teacher, scholar and writer, and should be remembered as such. He was a pillar of strength and wisdom."

Best,
Joel

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Reply by [clark.ratliffe](#) on March 1, 2011, 10:45 pm

Aitken Roshi was my old teacher for nearly 30 years and never ceased to surprise. This time I marvel at his tenacity as a teacher. Here he was, a frail 93 year old master, just a couple days before his death, trying like crazy to give this churlish fellow a little peek at the bowl. Joel Whitney's self involved crudeness seems to be eclipsed only by his cluelessness.

Tricycle, I am disappointed in your editorial judgment. This article does not do you credit.

Gassho, Clark Ratliffe

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Reply by [Joel Whitney](#) on March 25, 2011, 11:37 am

Hi Clark,

While I obviously disagree with your last statement, I like your phrase "a little peek at the bowl." I hope you're a writer.

Best

Joel

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Reply by [Monty McKeever](#) on March 10, 2011, 12:50 pm

I appreciate this piece. It is a completely honest account of Joel's experience that day. Nothing more, nothing less.

Aitken Roshi was a truly great man and one of the most important figures in modern Buddhism, and I don't think the fact that a journalist had a difficult time interviewing him while he was in such a condition should be seen as any type of disrespect towards him. It is simply "what occurred."

Further more, the discussion about the Shimano scandals shows that Aitken Roshi was truly the champion of Buddhist ethics that so many of us love him for being, right up until the very end of his life. I for one am grateful that Joel was able to share this rather intimate glimpse into Aitken Roshi's concerns and convictions regarding these matters.

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Reply by [paulac](#) on March 19, 2011, 10:32 am

I agree with this sentiment. The writer expressed his emotions, and took responsibility for them. I kind of liked the "fuck you." It was genuine.

I remember him saying "it's not a concept" in just that tone of voice when asked a question after teisho at the little zendo in Kaimu. He could come off as gruff and professorial sometimes, but I appreciated his teaching as it was. Rōshi was a complex man, and though I loved him as a teacher and a friend, I would resist any attempt to canonize him posthumously.

It grieves me to see Rōshi in physical and spiritual pain at the end of his life. But I too am grateful to have had a glimpse of how this great soul faced death at the end of a long illness, still pissed off about the injustices that pissed him off as a much younger man. Thank you, Rōdaishi.

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Reply by [Joel Whitney](#) on March 25, 2011, 11:35 am

Thanks Monty. Thanks paulac

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Reply by [jackelope62](#) on March 20, 2011, 9:45 am

The reason that relative Bodhichitta is so important is that it allows us to generate merit not only for yourself, but for all beings to become enlightened. I am a physician who works with the elderly and pneumonia as well as other illnesses cause confusion, irritability, and memory loss, particularly in the elderly. Roshi's description clearly is reflective of those changes. Anguish, on the part of his aide, may cause us to act irrationally and one's worth cannot be properly judged during a period of mental distress. Thus we have a great man dying, confused in the ravages of illness, and his aide who can be said to love him dearly. Let us reflect and show loving kindness and compassion to both.

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Reply by [jackelope62](#) on March 20, 2011, 9:45 am

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Reply by [titus_obrien](#) on March 30, 2011, 3:06 pm

What a gross and unpleasant article.

I found the complete taped interview online, and experienced a vastly different encounter than the one the writer spins. His questions seemed blithe and superficial, and he truly wasn't responding to Aitken's points in a particularly sharp manner. Aitken maybe became frustrated - hell, I did to, listening to the interviewer. If I were days away from dying, I wouldn't have pulled many punches either to such inanities. But his answers to me seem quite straightforward, even kind and helpful, and largely pretty patient considering, with none of the aggression the writer implies.

The writer displays a grotesque sense of self-importance and lack of empathy for a group of people who are helping nurse a very sick man, again days away from death. The atmosphere may have seemed weird, there were some things he considered inappropriate - ok. But what a hatchet job! Clearly with a hatchet to grind.

And the whole arc of the thing, ending with the writer's mini-satori while sitting for what he clearly states is the first time in a long time, with his stated preference for "book zen." Me me me me.

Yuck yuck yuck. Sorry Robert Aitken didn't coddle your preference for book zen, bub. Boo hoo.

But happy the cute girl supported your wounded ego, and led you to the zendo.

Another superior work of journalism from Tricycle...nice.

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Reply by [Joel Whitney](#) on April 3, 2011, 12:37 pm

Dear [titus_obrien](#),

Let me start with where I agree with you. I don't think the audio that was taken (by Kobutsu) is very interesting listening either.

As for the rest of your comment, there are a few points worth examining. The first is this notion that Aitken was doing me or Tricycle some sort of favor, and that he or we knew for sure he was dying. Of course, we edited and published the piece after he died but before then he agreed to an interview with a Buddhist magazine--as a Buddhist teacher. If he was unwell we were certain he or the center would have told us he wasn't able to do the interview.

You imply that my questions or burden on his time wasn't worthy him, which sounds elitist and petty to me. I'm not exactly sure what you mean.

You also seem to enjoy cliches surrounding axes and hatchets and my sense is you would appreciate this more if it were a more straightforward, sentimental tribute rather than a critical personal essay, examining exactly what happened, and contextualizing some of it with Aitken's writings. We looked together, Tricycle and I, at what was in the transcription from the q&a and, just like you, found it lacking. I also tried to follow up with Aitken just before he died. But obviously there was no time.

Finally, your last line makes it abundantly clear that you yourself have an axe to grind with Tricycle. "Another superior work of journalism from Tricycle" suggests that you are disappointed with some aspect of Tricycle's series of articles and interviews and columns--I'll go out on a limb and suggest that you can't stand critical thoughtful writing but would prefer if you could send Tricycle an approved topics list of those teachings and teachers you personally approve of who must never be examined critically--but rather ought to be treated like saints and saintly pronouncements. You betray yourself while accusing me of it. As a non-Zen practitioner (and I should thank you for reading at least that closely; the commenters above seemed to build their criticism around assuming I'm a "bad" Buddhist) wouldn't I have less of an axe to grind than, say--oh, I don't know--you?

I think Aitken comes off fine in this. I note repeatedly in the piece how frail he was; it ends with his coughing and wheezing. His act of talking to me is therefore something we can see together as an act of strength. Like the other commenters above you take my details as facts to use them against me like you discovered them on your own, despite me reporting them. This is a piece about missing the point entirely; only for that reason does your comment resonate as a fine example.



Reply by [titus_obrien](#) on April 3, 2011, 7:52 pm

Gee, ok, I guess we're all idiots and only you know how your article should be read and interpreted. Good to know. Thanks.

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Reply by [peterpowers](#) on April 4, 2011, 9:56 pm

Thank you Joel for taking the time to conduct the interview and write the article--if the contents chap me badly enough maybe I should take a course in journalism and try it myself.

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