

## Sexual Ethics, Zen Scandals, and Cults

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The root of the word “scandal” comes from the Greek *skandalon*, meaning snare or cause of moral stumbling. Over time “*skan*” became the word for the stick used to spring a trap. Now its meaning has shifted from pointing to the cause of stumbling to the stumbling itself. Every human society and organization is prone to moral stumbling, and just in case we’re tempted to think our way is above it all, we should remember that Zen Buddhism is no exception.

Recently, two scandals – I should say two *more* scandals - have drawn attention in the Zen world. Both involve male teachers having sexual relations with their female students. One of the scandals involves Reverend Eido Shimano, founder of the Zen Studies Society in New York. Mr. Shimano was one of the first Japanese Zen teachers to come to America, eventually establishing what became a very active Zen community.

By reports, Mr. Shimano has been a serial sexual predator for decades, making uninvited and intrusive sexual advances on female students, some of whom became involved with him in sexual affairs which resulted in great psychological suffering. Over the years as reports of this behavior surfaced, there were attempts to call him to account. However, he had supporters in the sangha who resisted meeting his misdeeds head-on and imposing consequences. In some cases, his conduct was excused by the idea that his spiritual awakening is so profound that he somehow “lives in the absolute” and that questions of harm or abuse are matters in the relative world and do not apply to him.

Recently, documentation of Mr. Shimano’s behavior became more widely available to the public with the release ([www.shimanoarchive.com](http://www.shimanoarchive.com)) and an article about trouble in his sangha was published in the New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/us/21beliefs.html?scp=1&sq=eido%20shimano&st=cse>). After a kind of public apology, Mr. Shimano tried to refute allegations made about him in a private letter to the Times, a letter which later became public. He appears to be unrepentant and, as of this writing, it’s my understanding he has been barred from teaching in the sangha he founded. While it’s hard not to have some feelings of anger toward Mr. Shimano, it’s also important to remember that he has himself been a suffering being, perhaps in the grip of some kind of sexual addiction. His sangha and his victims have a long road ahead as they try to take on the task of healing and reconciliation.

More recently, Dennis Genpo Merzel has apparently resigned from his leadership role in the Big Mind Big Heart Zen sangha in Salt Lake. He has confessed to having sexual relations with students. Mr. Merzel's apology sounds heartfelt to me, but of course it remains to be seen whether and how his promised repentance will be actualized. He says he will take off his Zen priest's robes but continue to offer his unique "big mind" teaching. How this squares with his remorse is unclear to me. We'll see. His statement is available at <http://www.bigmind.org/Home.html>.

What's the point in bringing up these two situations? As a Zen priest, I've promised to try to encourage people in their practice, and these two situations, emblematic of others like them, are pretty discouraging, even heartbreaking. But I think there are good reasons to look at them carefully. It's always our practice to keep our eyes on reality even when it's painful, and more specifically I believe these situations can teach us something about how to build healthy sanghas.

What is it that allows these kinds of boundary violations and misbehavior to arise and continue in environments and communities which people create and join with good intentions? I've considered this in the light of personal experience. When I was young – in my early 20s – I spent several years living in a spiritual cult. I didn't know at the time it was a cult. I figured that out later. But when I reflect on the teacher during those years and on the dynamics of the group, I appreciate something about how sanghas enable things like the Shimano and Genpo situations to develop.

We bring our deepest hopes and vulnerabilities to spiritual practice, along with all of our confusion. We also tend to forget that our teachers, however deeply and however long and hard they've practiced, are no different. This is tough, and many teachers also forget this about themselves, especially when they are subject to the adulation and idealized projections of their students. What's more, sanghas sometimes tend to mitigate against challenging the teacher or questioning his/her authority because everyone's hopes and vulnerabilities are at stake and so banking on the teacher's wisdom as a kind of refuge from anxiety and a hedge against uncertainty becomes a high stakes game. So some sanghas tend to close ranks around unrealistic ideas about their teacher, ideas the teacher may encourage, consciously or otherwise. And in some cases, the formalized empowerments and rituals of Zen practice may foster a sense that the teacher's role is sacred and not to be challenged. I think these kinds of dynamics are intensified in residential sanghas.

I saw some of this up close in my own early experience of residential practice with a spiritual teacher. The teacher, not connected to the Zen tradition, was a brilliant man who had many profound things to say to the community and to each of us individually. He encouraged others to see him as a kind of special being and any challenge to his teaching came to be perceived as evidence of a flaw in the student's understanding, sincerity, and/or character. On the surface, the teacher invited questions, but the flavor of his responses told a different story and when caught in obvious mistakes, he said he made them purposely so students would have the freedom to reject his teaching.

Because the community was isolated physically and psychologically, members depended on each other and the teacher for everything, including relationship and a sense of meaning and belonging. Persistent argument with or challenge to the teacher led a kind of ostracism. Everyone understood you were essentially "out," a status the teacher would reinforce using many means, subtle and otherwise. It was a case of "my way or the highway" and over time the group became a self-reinforcing hothouse with the teacher at the center. In other words, a cult.

There are many lists of cult characteristics, not all of which apply in every case, but they are useful tools for analyzing one aspect of a sangha's health. In my experience, cults don't become cults overnight. They move in that direction by degrees. Alternance to cultish signs and tendencies is a useful safeguard against the abuses that cult dynamics enable. I think several points are applicable to how we practice together in Zen sanghas, including but not limited to those listed here, which are drawn from the International Cultic Association website – [http://www.csj.org/infoserv\\_cult101/checklis.htm](http://www.csj.org/infoserv_cult101/checklis.htm) -

- *The group displays zealous or unquestioning commitment to its leader/teacher and regards his/her belief system, ideology, or practices as “the Truth” or in Zen terms, the true Dharma or correct understanding.* In such sanghas, the head teacher's words and view become the sole teaching or the only teaching paid serious respect.
- *Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.* Discouragement can be subtle and punishment can be in the form of isolation and disapproval.
- *The leadership dictates, sometimes in great detail, how members should think, act, and feel; for example, members must get permission to date, change jobs, etc.* This may sound foreign to our practice tradition, but in fact it really isn't. Some Zen teachers impose such conditions on students who wish to enter into formal discipleship and insist on having a say over even small details of disciples' personal lives, even including such things as whether and when they can visit with old friends.
- *The leader isn't really accountable to any authorities.* While many sanghas may have boards and committees to which the teacher is technically accountable, real accountability can erode over time, especially when boards and committees are comprised of members who are the teacher's disciples.
- *Subservience to the leader or group requires members to cut ties with family and friends, and radically alter the personal goals and activities they had before joining the group.* Further to what has already been said, while the word “subservience” isn't one we use much in Zen, we do place importance on the concept of home leaving and may also place spiritual value on the practice of “venerating” the teacher, which, combined with a teacher's insistence on micro-managing disciples' lives, can lead to a kind of subservience.

What I'm suggesting is that it might be useful to consider every spiritual community, every Zen sangha, as a cult risk. Human tendencies in this direction are strong. Societies and groups develop hierarchical structures and the impulse to endow leaders with special traits and powers seems hard to resist, arising from deep socio-biological roots. And these impulses are especially dangerous when a leader himself (or herself) – often an ambitious person despite other good intentions – is pulling for adulation and power. When they tore down the statue of Sadaam Hussein in Iraq, someone commented, “They should keep the pedestal. They'll want to use it again in the future.”

We appreciate strong teachers in the Zen tradition and I'm not suggesting that having a strong teacher always risks turning a sangha into a cult. However, as distasteful as it may be, sanghas would be wise to put concerns about cultish tendencies or teacher behavior that leans in this direction up for discussion sooner rather than later. It's a matter of the sangha's overall health and the safety of its individual members.