

An Open Letter on Journalistic Integrity and the Shambhala Sun

We adopt this means, as a last resort, to air a concern about a gross failure of journalistic ethics on the part of the Shambhala Sun. The world of American Buddhist publishing has been relatively small and honorable to date, so such a failure is conspicuous and, we feel, warrants public notice and remedy. Unfortunately, as we'll report in detail below, our efforts to obtain an appropriate correction directly from the Sun came to naught. Thus our recourse to this posting.

Before proceeding to specifics, we need to make clear that, by its actions, the Sun besmirched the memory of a man we hold very dear, our late teacher, friend, and collaborator, Robert Aitken Roshi. We've pursued the matter in part out of loyalty to him, feeling an obligation to correct the worst errors of fact in the Sun article. But Aitken Roshi's reputation is probably as secure as anything in this 'burning house' can be, and what's at stake here -- integrity in Buddhist journalism -- is both larger and more imminently perishable.

The problem began with the Sun commissioning an article about Aitken Roshi from a writer who had an axe to grind, a long-alienated Dharma successor named John Tarrant. When the article was published last year in its November issue, we expressed our concerns to Sun editor-in-chief Melvin McLeod, who responded, "Of course we were aware that we were treading into dangerous territory in asking John to do this homage, and we did sound out some people to ask whether they felt it would be resented by current students of Aitken Roshi's." We have no idea whom Mr. McLeod and his staff consulted or how seriously they took the process of consultation, but we do know that they didn't speak with the people most likely to be offended and also best positioned to gauge potential negative reactions -- those of us who remained close to Aitken Roshi at the end of his life and who represent the tradition that he and his wife established, the Diamond Sangha.

Despite awareness of the risk involved, the Sun commissioned the article from Dr. Tarrant and published it without any indication of concern and without disclosing the author's estrangement from Aitken Roshi. This is the error that troubles us most. While Mr. McLeod is certainly free to choose who writes for his magazine, journalistic ethics require that periodicals disclose personal history that might compromise their writers' fairness. Lacking such information, unsuspecting readers are ill-equipped to assess the reliability of what they read.

If the Sun maintained these professional standards, it would have needed to acknowledge that Dr. Tarrant's relationship with Aitken Roshi ruptured in the late 1990s and never recovered. Concerned that Dr. Tarrant's approach to Zen had gone seriously awry, for a year Aitken Roshi discreetly pressed him to pull his group out of the Diamond Sangha. This unhappy separation finally took place in 1999 but turned out to be a prelude to an even more painful break: when repeated and persuasive allegations of misconduct on Dr. Tarrant's part -- professional (in his work as a psychotherapist), sexual, and organizational -- came to light, after private efforts to encourage resolution proved

unsuccessful, Aitken Roshi and ten other Diamond Sangha teachers issued an open letter, urging their former colleague to mend his ways. Dr. Tarrant reacted angrily. Communication between the two men came to an end.

Dr. Tarrant's desire to gloss over these facts in his article is understandable, but in agreeing to write about Aitken Roshi for the Buddhist public, he forfeited the option of concealing them. Since he chose not to disclose them himself, it was incumbent on the Sun to do so, and the resulting article makes the reason for this apparent. Although the Sun advertised the story on its cover as an "homage" to Aitken Roshi and Dr. Tarrant termed it a "tribute," it bore abundant signs that its author was still hurt and angry and had seized the opportunity to take revenge on his old teacher.

It's certainly peculiar for a tribute to a Zen master to feature the assertion that he "never stopped wondering if he had indeed ever had an enlightenment experience. . . . Sometimes he was quite sure he hadn't." Even more unusual is to couple a disparaging assessment of the master's realization with a triumphant rehearsal of one's own. How could the Sun serve this up as neutral and trustworthy reporting? Dr. Tarrant tells its readers Aitken Roshi "put down other teachers, out of a kind of embarrassed competitiveness," but somehow neither he nor the Sun seems to have noticed that he was trashing his own dead teacher -- not in private conversation but publicly, in print.

Just for the record, Aitken Roshi was appropriately humble about his awakening, but he spoke of it candidly as occasion required and wrote about it openly, too. Rather than relying on Dr. Tarrant's account, we suggest that readers look up "Willy-Nilly Zen," an autobiographical piece that Aitken Roshi prepared at his teacher's behest in 1971 and later published as an appendix to his well-known book *Taking the Path of Zen*. As his own telling makes clear, it wasn't a big-bang experience of the sort Dr. Tarrant trumpets, but it began a process of widening insight that ultimately made him a wise, compassionate, skillful, and upright teacher. Unfortunately, a big-bang realization doesn't ensure such a result.

The Sun story is as peculiar for what it omits as for its belittlement of Aitken Roshi's awakening. An homage can ordinarily be expected to stress its subject's strengths, but Dr. Tarrant and his editor managed to overlook a characteristic absolutely central to Aitken Roshi's nature and to his teaching and writing: his emphasis on the precepts and on living out the Dharma in all its ethical dimensions. This is the contribution to Western Buddhism for which he surely was best known and will be best remembered. How Dr. Tarrant and the Sun could neglect it we can't fathom.

Altogether, the Sun "homage" bears only intermittent resemblance to the person we knew. When Mr. McLeod received our letter-to-the-editor objecting to the article's inaccuracies and taking the Sun to task for not disclosing Dr. Tarrant's broken relationship with his subject, he promptly engaged us in revising our letter for publication in the Sun. This entailed tempering the "tone" of our comments and finding adequate ways to make our point while respecting the magazine's "pretty strong policy . . . not to

get into detailed public discussions of possible misconduct." (Note: the text of our original letter is attached, below.)

We tolerated this extraordinary intrusion in the content of our letter, feeling it would be worthwhile to place even a watered-down critique before Sun subscribers. Accepting as sincere Mr. McLeod's assurance, "I think you're doing the right thing in writing this, and if there's fault it's mine for putting you in this spot," we went back and forth with him by phone and e-mail, working out a text he'd be willing to print. After we acceded to his final suggestion, Mr. McLeod volunteered his satisfaction with both our collaboration and its result, so we were astounded when he wrote again, five days later, declaring that he wouldn't use our letter after all.

Instead, he proposed that we start over, taking a different tack -- "to focus the letter exclusively on how you feel John [Tarrant]'s portrayal of Aitken Roshi was not accurate, and to offer your own view of him." In this fashion, he suggested, the letter could "become a completely positive contribution, in itself an homage to and celebration of Aitken Roshi." Maybe so, but it wouldn't be our letter anymore and, in its complete positivity, would let the Sun off the hook on the point we consider most crucial: its failure to adhere to a basic principle of fairness in journalism.

In making a case for this change of direction, Mr. McLeod advanced an argument that we find untenable, to put it mildly: "we have tried not to wash the Buddhist world's dirty laundry in public -- to avoid getting into detail about difficulties and divisions within Buddhist sanghas. This is particularly important in the Sun, with a substantial non-Buddhist or beginning Buddhist audience." To the degree that this policy represents refusal to indulge in back-biting and gossip-mongering, we enthusiastically applaud it; otherwise, it seems to us that it infantilizes readers and may protect them from information that beginners actually need to be attuned to in exploring the profusion of Buddhist paths, organizations, and teachers on offer in North America today. How he applied the policy in the present instance seems utterly indefensible, for while it has shielded his readers from awareness of Dr. Tarrant's misconduct and removal from the Diamond Sangha, it hasn't spared them his biased "tribute" impugning the wisdom and character of a widely respected teacher.

Needless to say, perhaps, we declined Mr. McLeod's request, and we counterproposed that he, as editor-in-chief, publish a statement acknowledging the error of printing Dr. Tarrant's article without divulging the fact and the causes of his bitter, ten-year alienation from Aitken Roshi. Mr. McLeod subsequently negotiated and ran (in the March issue) a letter from the Honolulu Diamond Sangha board of directors that politely laments his choice of author and corrects a few of the piece's numerous misstatements. Nowhere, however, has the Sun publicly acknowledged, and taken responsibility for, the editorial failures outlined above.

We feel that these failures are serious enough to cast doubt on the journalistic integrity of the Sun, and we urge other members of the American Buddhist community to register any concerns they may have on this subject, in the hope that Mr. McLeod and his staff

will remember their mishandling of this story and exercise increased care when ethical questions arise in the future. If that were to happen, in the long run this sad incident might actually have beneficial results.

Nelson Foster
Ring of Bone Zendo and East Rock Sangha
Dharma heir of Aitken Roshi

Jack Shoemaker
Editorial director, Counterpoint Press
Literary Executor for Robert Aitken

Original letter, e-mailed to Melvin McLeod on October 20, 2010:

To the Editor:

In publishing John Tarrant's demeaning "tribute" to Robert Aitken Roshi, the Shambhala Sun has done a disservice not only to our late friend and teacher but also to its readers and the author himself. He professes surprise at discovering he had "any strong reaction" to Aitken Roshi's death, but his feelings have a long history, and anyone familiar with that history can understand how his deep-seated hurt and anger might have lingered. Sadly, they also have twisted an ostensibly warm reminiscence of his "Old Man" into a covert or perhaps unconscious score-settling. We wish Sun editors had spared everyone this beautifully crafted but badly distorted account.

Now that it's in print, readers deserve information that enables them to put it in context. Although Dr. Tarrant did enjoy a close and trusting relationship with his teacher for some time, by 1998 his approach to Zen had departed so seriously from that of the Diamond Sangha as a whole that, for the better part of a year, Aitken Roshi pressed him and his group to withdraw. After their withdrawal, in response to convincing reports of misconduct on Dr. Tarrant's part -- professional (as a psychotherapist), sexual, and organizational -- Aitken Roshi and ten other Diamond Sangha teachers issued an open letter calling on him to mend his ways. Communication between the two men ceased at that time, more than a decade ago.

Dr. Tarrant's reluctance to publicize these unhappy facts is understandable, and we take no pleasure in mentioning them, but journalistic ethics require that they be disclosed, if not by the writer himself then by the Sun. It's apparent to us that hard feelings significantly affected his portrait of his former teacher, for it bears a dim resemblance to the man we knew, each of us for longer than Dr. Tarrant did.

While faulting Aitken Roshi for "put[ting] down other teachers, out of a kind of embarrassed competitiveness," Dr. Tarrant has indulged in that vice himself, though seemingly without embarrassment. He manages to combine a glowing account of his own awakening with a disparaging account of his teacher's, even claiming that "Bob never

stopped wondering if he had ever had" one. Horsefeathers. Aitken Roshi was appropriately modest about his experience, but he spoke about it publicly when circumstances warranted and wrote about it, too. Any reader who cares to look it up will find his own description of the experience and its subsequent unfolding in "Willy-Nilly Zen," an autobiographical piece he prepared in 1971 and published as an appendix to Taking the Path of Zen. Twenty-four years later, he repeated the tale at the request of a reporter in Bangkok!

We find it galling to see Aitken Roshi's humility and candor turned against him, not only in this matter but also with respect to his early uncertainties as a Zen teacher. These predate Dr. Tarrant's arrival from Australia, so he, like many others, heard about them after the fact, precisely because Aitken Roshi spoke openly about them, expressing profound gratitude for the guidance and encouragement he received from Maezumi Roshi. Anne Aitken used to lament that her husband had "no carapace," no protective covering, a trait that left him vulnerable to misrepresentation and mockery in life, as in death. It also made him approachable and inspiring, however, a man who showed by example how insight and character may mature over decades of practice. Dr. Tarrant's characterization of him as "timid and anxious" will astonish people who saw him teach confidently before large audiences in the 1980s and '90s.

Other errors of fact and interpretation we will set aside here, but we cannot close without noting a curious omission from this remembrance: it leaves utterly unmentioned the contribution to Western Buddhism for which Aitken Roshi is most widely known -- his attention to the ethical implications of practice and realization and his stress on embodying them in the social, economic, political, and environmental conditions of our day. He certainly had his share of failings, but he had greater and more important virtues than this account admits. We hope Sun readers will seek out less jaundiced appraisals of his life and work.

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