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The Shocking Scandal at the Heart of American Zen

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Even Zen masters can be deviants. Inside the new book that unearths a disturbing pattern of affairs at the top of one of the largest Buddhist communities in the U.S.

A new ebook by New York Times religion columnist Mark Oppenheimer alleges what many in the American Buddhist community have known for years: that some of its most revered teachers were also serial sex offenders.



As with many religious sex scandals, this is old news to insiders. (Getty)

Case in point: Eido Shimano Roshi. The founder and leader of New York's Zen Studies Society—among the largest Western Buddhist communities in America, with prominent CEOs and celebrities among its members—Shimano carried on

clandestine affairs with over a dozen women in his community over the course of thirty years, according to Oppenheimer's provocatively titled *Zen Predator of the Upper East Side*. The book is a devastating indictment of Shimano Roshi, filled with hard evidence of the affairs and the cover-ups, the testimony of several victims, and occasionally lurid details. It even includes Shimano's own confession to having sex with some students, though, he says, "far fewer" than his accusers allege.

As with many religious sex scandals, this is old news to insiders. Other Zen roshis with similar allegations against them include Richard Baker, Joshu Sasaki, Taizan Maezumi—the list goes on, really. The pattern is disturbingly familiar from Catholic, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish, and similar systematic abuse scandals: insiders made aware, positive values of spiritual teacher stressed, abuse hushed up, abuse repeated.

Yet in Shimano's case, the facts are murkier. First, all of his "victims," if that's even the right word, were adults; this was not a case of predation of teenagers, as in the Catholic Church. Second, none were raped, in the narrowest (and legal) sense of the term. And while some sexual acts are alleged to have been coerced, most of Shimano's reported liaisons were consensual—that is, if there can ever be consent within a power relationship such as that between guru and disciple, which perhaps there cannot. Finally, while Shimano was married, it's not known what his wife made of the allegations, or when she knew of them.

Then there's the matter of culture. Shimano's actions are inexcusable by Japanese, American, or any other cultural standard. Yet they did take place within a system of power and patriarchy that includes male sexual philandering within it. How different was Shimano's behavior from that of a typical Japanese businessman? This is neither to excuse his conduct nor make generalizations about other cultures – but it is to recognize that Western terms such as "sex offender" may not completely fit.

But a Zen monk? Here, too, the situation is more complex than it may first appear. We may have an image of Zen abbots as peaceful, enlightened, and sexually abstinent, but this simultaneously parochial and Orientalist image is our problem, not theirs. Actually, enlightened Zen monks are often worldly, engaged, and sexually voracious. Likewise, most Westerners may believe that sex and spiritual teaching should be kept separate. But in what non-Judeo-Christian-Muslim book is that written? Indeed, some of Shimano's sexual partners regarded their physical intimacy with their teacher as part of their spiritual path. We should be wary before projecting our own Western sex negativity on non-Western spiritual teachers.

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Of course, the Zen Studies Center didn't advertise this in its brochures – and here, as Oppenheimer relates, the scandal is inescapable. Shimano wove a web of deceit around him, and his associates added layers of obfuscation and denial. Whatever the sex may have been like for some of the women involved, the hypocrisy, secrecy, and lies are indisputable. And Shimano's alleged M.O. – of finding the "needy" woman, exploiting her vulnerability, and having sexual relations within the walls of the Zendo itself – is worse than creepy, no matter what robes the predator is wearing.

Remarkably, Shimano's charisma has not dimmed over the years. Indeed, one of the most fascinating passages in *Zen Predator* is when Oppenheimer himself meditates with Shimano, and feels proud that Shimano approves of him. Anyone who has been in the presence of a powerful boss, guru, or other father-figure knows how toxic this dynamic can be.

The book is at its weakest, perhaps unsurprisingly, when it hazards theoretical guesses as to why Zen teachers have this problem with their sexual appetites. For example, Oppenheimer misstates Zen teaching as holding that good and evil do not exist because everything is one. Well, not quite. On an absolute level, everything may be empty (not the same as "one"). But on the relative plane, Zen is this-worldly and does not deny ethics, or ontology for that matter. These scandals have more to do with power than philosophy. Zen centers may be no better than churches, corporations, and congresses, but they are surely no worse.

Oppenheimer also gets that philosophy quite wrong. "It can be especially hard to face demons in a tradition that promises that there are none," he says early on in *Zen Predator*. This assessment would come as news to most Buddhists, since the Buddha's own awakening came only after he defeated Mara, the arch-demon of Buddhism who – like Satan in *The Last Temptation of Christ* – sought to tempt him with an array of challenges and tricks. To be sure, most Western Buddhists regard Mara (and other demons) as personifications of psychological states. But surely that's what Oppenheimer means as well.

What Oppenheimer clearly gets right, however, is the way in which power, charisma, and authority create an environment in which leaders (religious or otherwise) become "too big to fail." Followers want the project – whether it's Buddhism, Boeing, or the Boy Scouts – to succeed, and they hush up any accusation that might shine an unkind light. Loyalties are tested, whistleblowers punished. It's almost mechanistic.

Until it isn't. *Zen Predator* often reads like a soap opera, complete with lurid emails, shady financial dealings, and betrayals. But eventually, there are just too many cuckolded husbands and alienated female students, and Shimano's associates finally had to admit the truth. The Zen Society ushers him into retirement – though some allege that without a full airing of the truth, it can never fully recover.

Perversely, the whole sad tale, and the publication of *Zen Predator* itself, might be good for American Buddhism. The stereotypical notion many of us hold of a wise, Yoda-like Zen master dispensing pithy spiritual bromides is not just inaccurate and offensive – it's deeply unhelpful to the contemplative path itself. In the end, meditation is not about exotic sages, black robes, and following in the footsteps of someone else. It's about finding your own footsteps, in your own Western clothes, and according to your own experiences and insights.

Idolizing one's teachers is an impediment to the spiritual path. This is one of the meanings of the famous Zen koan, "If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him." Which is exactly what Oppenheimer has done.

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