

From: Michael Kieran [REDACTED]@[REDACTED]  
Subject: Michael and Nelson's response to Atlantic article about Eido Shimano  
Date: February 3, 2015 at 8:06 PM  
To: Kobutsu Malone kobutsu@engaged-zen.org

---

Aloha Kobutsu,

How are you Old Buddha?

In case this hasn't found its way to you yet, below is a letter Nelson and I recently sent Mark Oppenheimer detailing some errors of fact regarding Aitken Roshi in his *"Zen Predator of the Upper East Side"*.

We thought you'd want to know and to possibly include this in the Shimano Archive.

All the best to you my friend,  
Michael

Sent January 24, 2015:  
Dear Mr. Oppenheimer,

We want to thank you for what you've done to expose Mr. Shimano's gross misconduct. Tawdry and sad as the story is, we feel that it needed to come to light and, in the long run if not the short, will serve the interests of Zen in the United States. We strongly concur with your overall assessment that the American Zen sangha has failed to come to grips effectively with unethical and destructive conduct on the part of teachers, and we feel sure your work bolsters the chances that instances of future misconduct will be handled more promptly and successfully. Please read what follows in light of this agreement.

We're writing you (not the Atlantic) in hopes of clearing up errors of fact or interpretation with respect to our late teacher and friend, Robert Aitken. We're obviously interested parties in this matter, feeling indebted to him as we do and wanting to preserve his good name, so you have every reason to doubt the view of events we'll offer below. Still, we hope you'll give the points we make careful consideration and, if you tell the tale again, take them into account.

In your initial paragraph about Robert Aitken, you speak of "his charisma" as though it were simple fact. But charisma lies partly, if not mostly, in the eye of the beholder, and we wonder what sources described him to you as having a charismatic appeal during the period you're referring to here, when the Diamond Sangha was still in its formative stages. In later years, after he came to be known as Aitken Roshi, we agree, some audiences did perceive him as charismatic. People were likely to do so especially if they knew him only at a distance, looked up to him as a proponent and

exemplar of lay Zen practice, enjoyed his progressive stance on ethical and political matters, and relished his books.

But when Shimano lived with the Aitkens, all that was far in the future. As you report in the article, his attempts in 1964 to "drum up interest" in Zen practice came to little, if anything, while Shimano in the same period attracted people merely by strolling around Manhattan in monk's robes. If Robert Aitken had perceptible personal magnetism at that time, somehow it had vanished by the early Seventies, when we first got to know him. By then, he was starting to emerge as a Zen teacher yet felt deeply uncertain of himself in that capacity (a fact he later acknowledged publicly, more than once in print) and seemed conspicuously stiff and awkward in social settings. He had no books to his name (the first wasn't published until 1978) and no prominence in Zen circles, either in Japan or in the U.S.

All this gains importance when you recap his failure to enlist the Japanese masters' help or to find another effective way of dealing with Shimano in 1964. You write, "So Aitken, a senior Zen teacher, was convinced that a young monk, Shimano, whose visa to the United States he had arranged...." But he wasn't, in fact, even a beginning Zen teacher at that time. Not until 1972 did he receive permission to start teaching in a sort of apprentice capacity. Another two years passed before he could teach independently and nine more before a transmission ceremony recognized his full authorization as a master.

This error in chronology would be inconsequential had it not led, here and in subsequent paragraphs, to a misreading of the position Robert Aitken then occupied and the influence he could wield. If he'd been "a senior Zen teacher," his word about the unscrupulous "young monk" would undoubtedly have carried a lot of weight. He was only a devoted layman at the time, however, and saw himself in a weak position relative to the ordained priest who was actually leading the Honolulu group's practice. The statement you quote reflects the disadvantage he felt: in a confrontation, he believed, "the Sangha members generally would have supported" Shimano.

That's why he secretly flew to Japan and appealed to Soen Roshi and Yasutani Roshi for help. Their refusal to intervene left him in a quandary (he was still puzzling over Soen's loyalty to Shimano in a remembrance published in 1996), and literally to the end of his life, he held himself responsible for not resolving it in a manner that would have prevented Shimano from continuing to pursue his sexual compulsions to the detriment of trusting female students. Both before and after becoming in fact a senior Zen teacher, Aitken Roshi tried repeatedly to remedy this failure, which he felt keenly and personally. (You can find documentation of these

efforts on line in the Shimano Archive.)

So your deduction that his connection with Shimano was "an enduring source of shame and regret to Aitken" is absolutely on the mark. The reason you give for that, though, is somewhat amiss: it wasn't because Shimano "sat" with him or even because the Aitkens sponsored and sheltered Shimano, which had been an act of faith on their part -- faith that Soen Roshi was sending a reputable monk to lead their fledgling sangha. Nor at any point had Robert Aitken ever served as a "mentor" to Shimano in Dharma matters; thanks to his years of monastic training, the younger man was understood to be far ahead on the path.

What grieved Aitken Roshi, as he made clear to us many times, was his sense of accountability for the suffering Shimano had caused women and, more broadly, for the damage Shimano's misconduct had done (and was still doing) to propagation of the Dharma in the West. Finally this is what moved him in 2008 to risk unsealing the file that has figured prominently in Shimano's belated comeuppance. What took him so long? Good question. The answer you supply, as though on his behalf, is "It would not be good for Buddhism."

That both overstates his concerns and neglects a matter central to his decision. As to the first point, his concern was less for Buddhism generally than for Zen Buddhism in particular and, even more specifically, for American Zen Buddhism. Most of all it was for the Zen community he and his wife were struggling to establish in Honolulu. Both of the Japanese Zen masters who had traveled to Honolulu to hold sesshin -- the only two with whom he had ongoing personal relationships -- had turned down his plea to discipline Shimano. If he went against their judgment and exposed Shimano's doings, he believed not only that the sangha would side with Shimano but that the two masters would terminate their relationship with him and with the sangha. And in 1964, he had no other masters to turn to for teaching.

The second point, a matter weighing on his mind even more heavily, was that in blowing the whistle on Shimano he would risk exposing the identity of the two women who'd been hospitalized in Honolulu and doing them further harm. How valid this concern was we don't know, though obviously the women must have been at least somewhat unstable. All we know for certain is how acutely he felt concerned for their welfare. The same feeling extended to women who later wrote him about Shimano confidentially.

We hope the foregoing clarifies key aspects of his involvement and welcome any questions it raises for you or any oversights on our part that you

detect. A few lesser points, just for the record:

The young Robert Aitken was captured as a civilian working on Guam on Dec. 8, 1941. He was a civilian internee for the rest of the war, not a military POW.

The "extreme love and hate" for Japan that Shimano attributes to Aitken Roshi may sound plausible but is utterly baseless. He abhorred militarism and militarists of any nationality, but he bore no ill will toward Japanese people generally or even to the guards who staffed the internment camps. In many respects, he did love Japan and its culture and eagerly returned there many times after the war, but his views of both were balanced. He spoke and wrote about weaknesses that he discerned in Japanese society, as he did about flaws in our own.

Aitken Roshi freely said in print that at various times in his life he consulted a psychiatrist or psychologist. Perhaps that's a sign of his mental health. It certainly lends no substance to Shimano's suggestion that he spent time in a mental institution. As you rightly say, this belongs to Shimano's pattern of trying to discredit anyone who's spoken out about his abuses.

Finally, your flat statement "Aitken never went public with what he knew about Shimano, not in 1964, and not for the next half century until his death" seems to us strangely at odds with the fact that he unsealed his records two years before dying. It came late, granted, but wasn't that going public?

In closing, we want to reiterate our gratitude for the work you've done. If we thought any of the issues we've outlined above called for significant revision of your conclusions, we'd have asked for a public correction. We don't, we won't, and we wish you well with further work on this important beat.

Respectfully,

Nelson Foster  
Teacher, Ring of Bone Zendo  
Nevada City, CA

Michael Kieran  
Teacher, Honolulu Diamond Sangha  
Honolulu, HI