

Munich, September 4, 2010

The Zen Studies Society, Inc.

Attn.: Board of directors

223 East 67th Street

New York, NY, U.S.A.

10065-6002

Via email

Dear Board,

I'm writing to you following the recent revelations of more inappropriate activity by your abbot, Mr. Eido T. Shimano, and the subsequent request by Mr. Genjo Marinello on Zen Forum International for public submissions on what to do about him.

I am not a student of Mr. Shimano's but do know him personally from having attended his sesshins in Switzerland from 2006 to 2008. Besides a passing acquaintance with Mr. Carl Baldini, I have no other ties to the Zen Studies Society.

With this letter I'm not going to bother addressing all the inappropriate acts, since they speak for themselves. The fact that, as a charitable organization, you and/or Shimano haven't already drawn the obvious and absolutely non-negotiable consequences long ago is beyond my comprehension in any case.

What I will address, though, is the equally incomprehensible opinion apparently held by some Board members that, despite all of the abuse, Mr. Shimano might still be a worthy teacher "in other respects." In stating my case, I will even ignore the fact that such an opinion is both grossly insensitive to his victims and deeply misinformed about the point of Zen practice in the first place. Instead, I will simply relate my own experience with regard to such "other respects," i.e. from the viewpoint of a perfectly normal sesshin participant, one who was not in fact sexually accosted, lied to, cheated on, threatened, defrauded, or otherwise even remotely mistreated by Mr. Shimano. Indeed, his interactions with me were always cordial and straightforward, even pleasant. Yet I still affirm without hesitation that he is a shockingly hollow teacher, if not completely illegitimate.

Perhaps because I was fortunate enough to have practiced under two other excellent Rinzai teachers beforehand (NB for those who value such things: one of whom was Mr. Shimano's "equal" in terms of formal transmission from Soen Roshi), upon meeting Shimano in Switzerland I could tell right away that something was wrong. He had practically none of the qualities that I knew and loved in my other teachers. To begin with, his teishos were anything but spontaneous; from the well-rehearsed jokes told with an affected chortle, to the "deep meaning" expounded in that fakely grave voice, he seemed to be actually pandering to his audience, even to the point of flattery. The same applied to the way he walked around: it was neither free nor energetic, but rather the slow, controlled gait of someone trying his best to exude authority, or at least what he thought authority looked like. He didn't even sit with us most of the time, retiring instead to the dokusan room three times a day, presumably to – as his supporters suggest – better selflessly convey the "utmost importance of zazen."

Two specific incidents especially stood out for me. The first was when, as I was doing the required bows in the dokusan room one day, for whatever reason Shimano motioned that he wanted to hit me with the stick. That was fine. However, when I got back up afterwards and glanced at him, I was taken aback by the expression on his face. He was practically glowing, with great, round eyes and an enigmatic smile, as if he had just given me some extraordinary gift, and was waiting for the corresponding acknowledgement. It was just a brief moment, but nevertheless extremely unsettling. Not only had he misunderstood what had just (not) happened, but he was also clearly hoping for a definite emotional response from me. I have never experienced anything remotely similar from any other Zen teacher, ever.

The other was the time I happened to be first in line for dokusan. The interview room in the Swiss zendo being immediately above the waiting area, I could watch Shimano climbing the short flight of stairs to get there. As he was going up, he passed right under a set of cobwebs hanging from a corner of the stairwell. They practically grazed his head, yet he didn't even notice. What's more, when I looked back down a few moments later, I then saw that there was a thin layer of dust on the wooden frame of the kansho bell. I can confirm that it was dust because I proceeded to actually wipe my finger through it, right under the eyes of Shimano's personal assistant in charge of the bell. Now I admit that cobwebs and layers of dust are no big deal to a normal person, and are certainly forgivable in the context of a beginner Zen practice, yet for them to go unnoticed by a student who, only hours before, was rabidly screaming at us to "PAY ATTENTION!" – let alone by the supposed master himself – was really unbelievable, especially during sesshin. The fact that the cobwebs, the dust, and my finger mark were all still there days later was just the icing on the cake.

I could continue, but the point is that compared to my previous experience with real, excellent Zen teachers, what I was witnessing was just laughable. After three short sesshins I had had enough and never returned.

So, given the aforementioned opinions about Mr. Shimano's alleged teaching qualities, let me make the following points absolutely clear:

1. Mr. Eido T. Shimano is not an otherwise good teacher who just happens to often and repeatedly go terribly astray. His mind is not clear, and his character is always to a greater or lesser extent needy and manipulative. There is no reason whatsoever to allow him to continue teaching any students, whether new or old.
2. There is no kind of "unparalleled Rinzai transmission to America" that needs to be salvaged by replacing him with one of his successors. It's obvious that such a confused man cannot have transmitted anything remarkable to anyone. I can also personally vouch for this statement, having actually seen and heard some of his successors in action.

Of course, the recent revelations in the Shimano Archives – coupled with his unforgivable willingness to remain in office in spite of them – make all of these "in abstracto" observations about his legitimacy moot. I repeat that under the present circumstances he could have better credentials than Hakuin's yet still have no choice but to resign on the spot. I will just add though, with regard to my second point above, that the very fact that one or more of his successors are even now preparing to take his place is more than enough evidence of their lack of worth, not to mention their callousness. I'm not even sure which scenario is less appealing: whether they noticed or didn't notice what kind of person they've been practicing under this whole time.

To end on a more positive note, though, since you are presumably all Shimano's students in some form or another: even though the situation is indeed unimaginably tragic, and clearly many people have made many mistakes in letting it continue for so long, the entire moral responsibility nevertheless lies squarely with him. If you were unfortunately misled in the past, or even if you knew the truth and for whatever reason failed to act, you are in a certain sense still blameless. As of right now, on the other hand, the fault is entirely yours.

Please – finally – do the right thing.


Christopher Hamacher