



## The Worst of Both Worlds: The "Shimano Problem" Underscores Clash of Cultures When Buddhism Spread to West

By Russ Wellen, September 10, 2010

The "Shimano Problem" and its recent resolution make this an opportune time to briefly explore the subject of Buddhism's integration into the West. Eido Shimano Roshi had been the abbot of the New York Zen Studies Society, one of the oldest Buddhist institutions in the West, and its 1,400-acre Dai Bosatsu retreat in the Catskills until he resigned from both earlier this week. Even though he's headed the former since 1965 and is 77 years old, he isn't retiring. This comment below, posted at the [Tricycle Buddhist magazine](#) blog in reaction to the apology that accompanied his announcement, gives you an idea of what transpired.

Take it from someone who has known Eido Shimano for over thirty years, this is anything but a sincere apology. It is the same tired routine he has repeated each time he has been "caught with his robe open" for three decades.

Yes, the Achilles heel of gurus, abbots, and pastors everywhere -- sleeping with their students and/or worshippers. Before we explore its prevalence in Buddhist America, let's take a moment to celebrate "how the swans came to the lake," to borrow the title of a history of the Zen Buddhism diaspora, if you will, to the United States by Rick Fields (Shambhala, 1992).

Since Buddhism originated in India and moved east to China and then Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia, it was probably as inevitable a migration across the Pacific as Homo erectus following the game out of Africa and populating Asia and Europe. Also since Eastern teachers were often stuck with students sent to them by their families, they were happy to find students in the West who, stoked in part by American traditions such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism, sought out the teachers on their own and were eager to initiate practice.

Of course, the extent to which Buddhism needed to be Westernized became a central issue. American Buddhist centers may appear to have integrated East and West seamlessly, but many obstacles were surmounted during their formative years. Looking back, rituals,

practice, and teachings may have been the least of it. Instead, due to mixed signals between the two cultures and, however much a cliché, culture shock on the part of the Easterners, many American students wound up emotionally and spiritually wounded by Buddhist teachers -- Eastern *and* American. Besides, of course, the good names of the most highly regarded forms of Buddhism in America, Tibetan and Zen, were sullied.

Perhaps the most notorious perpetrator of spiritual abuses was Trungpa Rinpoche, who, while still a teenager, headed several large Tibetan monasteries until, like the Dalai Lama, he was forced out by the 1959 Chinese invasion. Once in the West, his gift for teaching facilitated the founding of what has become known as the Vajradhatu (his U.S. meditation centers), Shambhala Meditation Centers around the world, and the Naropa Institute (now University). But his hedonistic lifestyle and provocative "crazy wisdom" both mystified and alienated.

Trungpa died a grisly alcoholic's death, but his successor was arguably even more dissolute. The claim to fame of Osel Tendzin, an American from New Jersey, was not only seducing students, but becoming infected with HIV and failing to tell those with whom he engaged in sexual behavior. This scenario was paralleled by two American Zen teachers: the womanizing Richard Butler, the abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, and his successor, Reb Anderson, who gained fame by appropriating the gun from a suicide victim and later wielding it in public.

As for Shimano, his serial philandering was a source of concern for decades to long-time colleague Roshi Robert Aitken, who recently died. At the [Zen Site](#), [Vladimir K. and Stuart Lachs](#) illuminated a series of letters from Aitken to Shimano and to others in the Zen community, including two of Japan's most venerated roshis who had been his teachers. Only much later was one of them inclined to condemn Shimano. Watch how the culture clash played out in this instance. (Emphasis added.)

Aitken excuses this lack of interest by the two Japanese Zen masters to cultural differences between America and Japan, writing "it is important to understand that mental illness and character pathology are viewed tolerantly in Japan." Aitken infers that he believes that Shimano may be suffering some form of mental illness or pathology, calling him "*someone in a different dimension altogether.*" Nevertheless, Shimano's Japanese teachers "felt responsible for him, and were not prepared to disgrace him by recalling him to Japan."

In a 1990 piece titled [Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America](#) that's as nuanced as you'll find on the subject, the culture clash was elucidated by Katy Butler. (If you haven't yet, read her recent powerful [New York Times magazine piece](#) that begins with her mother speaking with her about her father: "Please help me get Jeff's pacemaker turned off.") Upon arriving in the United States, Eastern teachers found a nation already predisposed to hero worship and religious hucksterism. Here Ms. Butler writes about what keeps Eastern teachers in line back home until they arrive on these shores and act like a kid in a candy store.

"Pressure from the community is very important in controlling behavior in Tibetan communities," said Dr. Barbara Aziz, an internationally known social . . . who has spent 20 years doing fieldwork among Tibetans. . . . "In Tibetan society, they expect more of the guy they put on the pedestal . . . if such a scandal [as Osel Tendzin's] had happened in Tibet [he] might have been driven from the valley."

Furthermore, Aziz pointed out, Tibetans may "demonstrate all kinds of reverence to a [teacher], but they won't necessarily do what he says. *I see far more discernment among my Tibetan and Nepali friends,*" she concluded, *"than among Westerners."* [Emphasis added.]

Alan Roland, a psychoanalyst and author of *In Search of Self in India and Japan* . . . believes that Asian students approach the teacher-student relationships more subtly than Americans-who often commit rapidly and completely, or not at all. Asian students may display deference, but withhold veneration, until they have studied with a teacher for years. They seem to have a "private self" unknown to many Americans, which is capable of reserving judgement even while scrupulously following the forms. When a teacher fails, Asians may continue to defer to his superior rank but silently withdraw affection and respect.

In America, it's often the reverse. Some Vajradhatu students could forgive Osel Tendzin as a human being, but could not treat him as a leader. . . . few Americans can show deference to someone they don't venerate without feeling hypocritical. Faced with this cognitive dissonance, they either abandon deference and leave, or they deny inner feelings.

Ms. Butler then quotes the current Dalai Lama.

"I recommend never adopting the attitude toward one's Spiritual teacher of seeing his or her every action as divine or noble. . . . if one has a teacher who is not qualified, who is engaging in unsuitable or wrong behavior, then it is appropriate for the student to criticize that behavior."

Finally, a couple random observations about the issues teachers in Eastern traditions sometimes have with power and sex:

- The sheer immaturity they're manifesting is breathtaking. Either they're resisting the transformation that long hours of meditation should be impressing on them or, in the belief that they're fully realized, or enlightened, they think that they're beyond the effects of bad karma on their future as souls.
- It goes without saying that these problems are all but nonexistent in woman-led sanghas and zendos.