

From Joan Halifax, Roshi

Dear Daibosatzu Board and Practitioners,

I am Founding Abbot of Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a woman, a Zen practitioner since 1965, and someone who was sexually assaulted by one of her Buddhist teachers years ago. I have been following the discussion on the AZTA listserv for many months about the Eido Shimano "case". I use the term "case" not to mean koan, but in a legalistic sense. For just as the former Israeli president has just been convicted in a court of law of rape and sexual harassment, so also is Eido Shimano vulnerable to such an indictment.

For many years, I have heard about the sexual behavior of Eido Shimano toward his female students; there has long been talk about many of the Buddhist teachers who have violated sexual boundaries with their students. Sadly, the list of Buddhist teachers who have had intercourse with their students is not short. We have also been aware of not only of teachers having sex in the dokusan room but of teachers engaging in sexual violence toward their students as well.

For those of us who are not only teachers but women, the misogyny that we have encountered when we have brought these violations to the attention of others has been often concerning. For like many rape victims, we have been seen as somehow culpable, have been ignored, criticized, or shunned.

I want to say that I am grateful and am relieved that Eido Shimano has resigned from his abbacy and the Zen Center Board, and that you have identified good, strong leaders to take over your center. We live in a time when there should be zero tolerance of the violation of professional boundaries, and most particularly sexual abuse on the part of leaders, whether they be a president of a country, a prime minister, or a minister, whether psychologist or social worker, whether monk or manager.

Somehow, many of us in the Zen mahasangha thought this situation at your center was moving toward a decent resolution under the aegis of the Faith/Trust Institute. I need to tell you that, among many others, I am shocked and dismayed by the seeming lack of real remorse and understanding on the part of Eido Shimano as per his recent letter to the NYTimes. His behavior verges on sociopathy, or a total lack of feeling, of shame, and of regard for others.

This situation is complicated by another level as well. Perhaps it is too difficult for Eido Shimano's students and the Board of his organization to look with clear eyes at the depth of his delusion. Forgive my presumption, but let me share a little psychology with you. Accordingly, the Antisocial personality disorder (adyp or Atu) is defined by the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as "...a pervasive pattern of disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others that begins in childhood or early adolescence and continues into adulthood."

"Characteristics of people with antisocial personality disorder may include:

Persistent lying or stealing

Apparent lack of remorse[3] or empathy for others

Cruelty to animals[4]

Poor behavioral controls — expressions of irritability, annoyance, impatience, threats, aggression, and verbal abuse; inadequate control of anger and temper

A history of childhood conduct disorder

Recurring difficulties with the law

Promiscuity

Tendency to violate the boundaries and rights of others

Aggressive, often violent behavior; prone to getting involved in fights

Inability to tolerate boredom

Poor or abusive relationships

Irresponsible work behavior

Disregard for safety

"Other common characteristics of those with Antisocial Personality Disorder include superficial charm, shallow emotions, a distorted sense of self, a constant search for new sensations (which can have bizarre consequences), a tendency to physically or verbally abuse peers or relatives, and manipulation of others without remorse or empathy for the victim. Egocentrism, megalomania, lack of responsibility, extroversion, excessive hedonism, high impulsivity, and the desire to experience sensations of control and power can also be present."

I think this description must be somewhat familiar to many of you.....

Many of us have experienced being under the spell of a teacher or person of authority. Some of us have seen our own students caught in the trance of positive projections. But our practice is about waking up and ending suffering, being real and being courageous in dealing with mara, and actualizing compassion, even a compassion that might seem ruthless. We have to realize that the three-fold training is clear on the matter of sex and ethics, physical abuse and sangha relationships, and the role of wisdom and compassion in relation to the three jewels. And we have to see our teachers in a totally realistic light, including their feet of clay.

I also want to say that it is not that Eido Shimano is a scapegoat for all other spiritual teachers who have violated sexual boundaries and engaging in sexually abusive (and probably addictive) behavior. I hope that by bringing this situation to the world's attention through Aitken's now-public archive, the NY Times article, and the increasing storm of emails, blogposts, and communiques (including facebook), the sexual abuse of women by Buddhist teachers will diminish, if not end, through strong negative sanctions of those who have engaged in activities such as this.

Yet under the circumstances you find yourselves in, I think it might be difficult to stand up to someone like Eido, between the denial, guilt and shame associated with unconsciously enabling him, and the power dynamic between Eido and his students, coupled with cultural differences. But sometimes, we simply have to take a stand, and take a stand for the greater good, even though it is difficult to do. This is a time when I hope that the DBZ Board will do exactly this, and not fall into the pattern of denial and retreat that has prevailed at your center (and at many other Buddhist centers as well).

Like family members in dysfunctional families, it is important to realize that every one of us is complicit in some way, including the wider Buddhist community, as we all knew what was going on. At last, you are hearing from members of the greater sangha, and the message is clear: firmly and forever retire your founding abbot, forbid him to teach ever again, and formally forbid him to see students in the privacy of the dokusan room or in any kind of interview situation. I would also ask you to commit to adequate remediation for those who were subject to his predation and his sexual and physical abuse, and make public your stance in all this. If you do not respond responsibly, then you will be held accountable in one way or another, sooner or later. Even if you walk away from your board or your monastery ( a form of denial), you will carry this history of abuse with you, and your passivity in relation to it.

To put it simply, Eido Shimano is an embarrassment to Buddhism, including all of Zen Buddhism, and Japanese Buddhism, in particular. I am concerned that if you, as his Board and monks do not take action, we will be sanctioning this kind of egregious abusive, gender-biased, predatory, misogynistic behavior in our temples and monasteries. We vow, as Buddhists to do no harm. I urge you to end the harm, and end it now.

The sexual abuse of women is no small matter globally. It takes profound commitment to deal with this issue. Humbly, i feel that we as Buddhists need to clean up the scene in our own backyard, and clean it up now. We all share this karma, and we must share the correction process as well. Compassion tells us that, and we have to not only listen but as well to act. Thus these letters you are currently receiving..... Please heed them, and heed them well.

I do feel deeply about this issue since so many women have passed through my zendo diminished and damaged as a result of having been subjected to sexual boundary violations by their teachers; some have been physically abused; others have been psychologically intimidated and then forced into sex. Some women were plainly deluded and hungry for acknowledgment, and in some way, power; others were coerced, shamed, and some were threatened; others were entranced and tricked. In the end, after all is said and done, most have wanted to abandon their Buddhist practice, finding Buddhism too passive and uncaring, if not dangerous.

As a result of what I have borne witness to in others and myself, as well as bearing witness to women who have been raped in the context of war or extreme family abuse, I would suggest here that we need to actualize a compassion that is more skillful and much braver at this time. I hope you will consider that standing aside might not be the best route in terms of this situation with Eido Shimano. I hope you will be courageous and forthright and not take the road of compromise. For it has been compromise, I believe, and lack of ethical resolve that has given rise to our collective suffering in this situation, the individual suffering of the women who have been subjected to this abuse, and to the deep suffering in your sangha.

Joan Halifax  
Founding Abbot  
Upaya Zen Center

PS: By the way, one of your ex-monks has written to the AZTA that letters will have no impact on your decisions regarding Eido Shimano. I hope this is not the case. Even this monk's statement shows that he lacks the morale resolve to take a public step; it seems he, like others in your community, feels that there is no decent resolution and he is hopeless. I hope you do not share his sentiments, but have the courage to put an end to this abuse forever in your community.