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Sexual Abuse

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Why Buddhism?: Violations of Trust in the Sexual Sphere

by Roshi Joan Halifax, Founding Abbot Upaya Zen Center, The Buddhist Channel, Jan 3, 2011

Santa Fe, New Mexico (USA) -- We all know that rape as a weapon of war has been used against women and nations for thousands of years. Rape, forceable seduction, seduction through trickery, power and domination, seduction through loneliness or delusion have also been part of most, if not all, religions.



Yes, if you want to demoralize a nation, rape its women, its daughters, its sisters, its wives..... And if you want to deepen the shadow of any religion, turn wisdom and compassion into hypocrisy, and stand by, conflict averse, as its male clergy disrespects women, has sex with female congregants, dominates women, abuses women, degrades or rapes them.

But as a Zen Buddhist priest, as a woman, I have to ask, why my religion? Why Buddhism? This is not what the Buddha taught. I like Buddhism; I love my practice of meditation; Buddha's teachings are practical; they make sense to me. But for too long in the West, and I am sure in the East, gross misogyny has existed in the Buddhist world, a misogyny so deep that it has allowed the disrespect and abuse of women and nuns in our own time, and not only throughout history, and not only in Asia. The misogynistic abuse is not only in terms of the usual gender issues related to who has responsibility and authority (women usually don't have much, if any), but it is as well expressed through mistreatment of women, through sexual boundary violations of women, and the psychological abuse of women.

Since 1964, according to the late Robert Aitken Roshi's archive (<http://www.shimanoarchive.com/>), a Buddhist teacher, Eido Shimano, has been engaged in sexual misconduct with a number of his female students; sometimes the sex was forceable; sometimes crude, tricky, and coercive. And it has been ongoing, for more than forty-five years. Many Buddhist practitioners have known about this for a long time, although the late Aitken's archive was closed until just before his death in the fall of this year. What was this silence about, I have asked? Why did we not act? Why are we, as Buddhists, so conflict averse?

On August 21, 2010, the NYTimes published an article, Sex Scandal has U.S. Buddhists Looking Within (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/us/21beliefs.html>). This article publicly surfaced Eido Shimano's long pattern of sexual violation. Sadly, On December 1, the principle figure in this article wrote a rebuttal, basically denying his culpability and blaming the NYTimes for disinformation: <http://www.openbuddha.com/2010/12/26/eido-shimano-kind-a-sorta-denies-it-all-and-chastises-the-new-york-times/> The Times reporter, Mark Oppenheimer, responded to this self-serving letter from Eido Shimano: <http://markoppenheimer.com/front-page/a-buddhist-vs-me.html>

I think that this rebuttal by Eido Shimano was the straw that broke the camel's back for many of us Buddhists. We were incredulous on reading Eido Shimano's communique to the Times' reporter. Naively, we had thought that this problem was taken care of; the teacher was full of remorse and had resigned as abbot and board member of the institution that he founded; and the institution was committed to addressing this issue and redressing the ills suffered by the women involved and the wider community.

But we were wrong..... and I assure you, this is not the first time we have been wrong about similar violations.....

Fortunately, the response to Eido Shimano's unempathic, self-centered and self-serving communique has been building, nationally and internationally, over December and into January. Buddhists are finally getting it. You have to take a stand, a strong and vocal stand, against the predatory behavior of its religious figures. You have to speak truth to power, and speak it loudly. And you have to act.....

I have been waiting for this moment not just for the many months since the discussions have been happening among Zen teachers. I have been waiting for years for a concerted response to such violations against women in our Buddhist world. Many of us women have brought these issues to the attention of the wider community and have been shamed and shunned over the years. But finally, just before New Years, the flood of letters addressing Eido Shimano's behavior has found its way onto the shores of his Buddhist monastery and the internet. Herein, one of first of those letters, my own..... <http://www.upaya.org/news/2011/01/02/open-letter-from-roshi-regarding-eido-shimano/>

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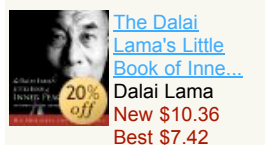
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It will take a while for us to fully understand why we as Buddhists took so long to act. If Eido Shimano had been a doctor, lawyer, or psychotherapist, there would have been rapid social and legal consequences. But there is something about our religions, whether Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Islam, or Buddhist, that disallows us facing the shame associated with sexual violations and the gross gender issues that plague most, if not all, religions.

I understand that letters are easy to write. Less easy are the creation of protections so women (and religious communities) will not be harmed like this ever again. And even more difficult is changing the views, values, and behaviors that made it possible for someone like Eido Shimano and others to engage in such harmful acts for so long. Yet, it is not only a matter of the sexual violation of women and the painful violation of boundaries that are based in trust between teacher and student, it is as well a matter of the violation of the core of human goodness; for his behavior is also a violation of the entire Buddhist community, as well as the teachings of the Buddha which are uncompromising with respect to the unviability of killing, lying, sexual misconduct, wrongful speech, and consuming intoxicants of body, speech and mind. The northstar of goodness has been lost from sight in the long and recent past, and we are all suffering because we cannot see how deep the wound is to the heart of our world and to the coming generations.


Protections, dialogue, education are all necessary at this time. And a commitment to not forgetting..... as well as vowing to not repeat the mistakes of the past, and to practice a compassion that is clear and brave, liberating and just.

I am aware that these words do not address issues related to the sexual violation of children and men by clergy. I am also aware that power dynamics between women and men are inadequately referenced here, nor are issues related to the exploitation of students by female clergy. What I have written, however, is meant to address specifically the violation of boundaries and trust, whether by force or consent, by Buddhist male religious clergy of their female congregants and students, and a particular case in point that is in the foreground of the Zen Buddhist community in the United States at this time.

As author and Buddhist Natalie Goldberg wrote in her book "The Great Failure": "We are often drawn to teachers who unconsciously mirror our own psychology. None of us are clean. We all make mistakes. It's the repetition of those mistakes and the refusal to look at them that compound the suffering and assure their continuation." It seems as though the time has come for us to take a deep look at our individual and collective psychology..... and to strongly request that those teachers who have crossed the boundaries of trust to engage in sexual intercourse with students and congregants step aside, so the healing of individuals and sanghas can begin.

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