

CAVEAT EMPTOR

The Zen Buddhist Community and the Right to Know

I was a student at Dai Bosatsu Zendo during the winter of 1975-76. A scandal hit the community when a female student, in a jealous rage, defaced a large calligraphy of “Mu I Shitsu” or “True man (person) of No Rank” done by Eido Roshi. A large group of senior students left the sangha over reports that Eido Roshi had been having sexual relations with a number of students, using the dokusan room as one place to make liaisons. Some of the students who left included current teachers Lou Nordstrom and Roko Sherry Chayat. I remained. While practicing there, during the period of about a year and a half, I witnessed a student attempt to take his own life by stabbing himself in the belly with a knife. A young military vet who “lost it” in the Zendo, “went off the deep end psychologically” and had to be picked up by parents. Another student, myself, who temporarily “went off the deep end” into what psychiatrists might call paranoid schizophrenia. Meanwhile Eido Roshi was still having or attempting to have sexual relationships with students, including my ex-wife—an experience which she has described in her “novel” *Special Karma*. Is there a connection between the “crazy” behavior of a few students and Eido Roshi’s “lack of morality” (as he once put it)? There is no proof of this. Can the choice of a Zen teacher to have sexual relations with a student result in harm to that student, or to the practice of the community as a whole? That is a matter of opinion, and may depend on the different circumstances in which it occurs. Should Zen students who are practicing in a sangha, or who enter it for the first time have the right to know that teacher-student sexual relations are going on in some form in this community? I believe, yes.

I was working at Green’s Restaurant while it was still a practice center of the San Francisco Zen Center in 1982. The scandal broke that Baker Roshi was having an affair with the wife of a friend/student. This event is well described in *Shoes Outside the Door*, by Michael Downing. This time the teacher was forced to leave and again many senior students left. I know of one devoted student who left Zen practice to join a Catholic monastery, another who left to open his own restaurant. Did students practicing at the San Francisco Zen Center and certainly the husband of the woman, have the right to know that Baker Roshi was having these sexual relations before the scandal broke? I believe, yes.

Thai teacher Achan Chaa tells the story of a monk who goes from monastery to monastery. At each one he says “This place stinks!” and leaves to find a better one. Of course he does not realize that he has dog shit smeared on his own knapsack. As I continue here, please excuse the “dog-shit”!

I have currently been practicing at Pacific Zen Institute under the teacher John Tarrant. I recently learned that John, who was divorced within the last year or so, is having a relationship with a female student who has come from out of state to PZI (in Santa Rosa, CA) for sesshins. John is planning to invite this student and her two children in to his home. I understand that John also had a relationship, while he was still married, with Joan

Sutherland, who has since become one of his dharma heirs. This story is different, of course, from the above stories in degree, and nuanced with innuendo and subtleties which I can't pretend to understand. However, in the two years I have been there, no one has explicitly mentioned that this kind of thing happens at PZI. And again, I know of at least four dear and senior students who have left the sangha over this incident, including a woman and her husband who have been ordained teachers by John. Has John Tarrant done anything of earth shattering moral turpitude here? From what I know personally, no. Has John Tarrant crossed a line which Zen teachers should not cross? That is a matter of opinion. Do students of any Zen teacher who has sexual relations with a student have a right to know that this kind of thing is going on in their community? I believe, yes.

There are no doubt other stories and other details on this topic, many of which I am not aware. The most severe of these that I and many are aware of, however, is Osel Tendzin the dharma heir to Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who died of AIDS in 1990 and who was known to have had unprotected sex with at least one student who also died of AIDS.

After the above three experiences, although I admit to feeling like the Peanuts character who walks around with dust surrounding his head, carrying his bad karma with him wherever he goes, I have arrived at a strong feeling that something should be said and done about this in the larger Zen community. There is never a perfect person or a perfect time to do this kind of thing. I am a male student who has worked very closely with John for about two years now, without a scintilla of fear of being "hit on". So all this is obviously not directly about me. This goes to a larger issue of trust, and caring about the well being of all students. What's at stake here? I don't think that most Zen Buddhists would say that they are entrusting their "souls" to their teacher. Many would not say that it is even a matter of entrusting their future karma to their teacher, since there is no enduring "self" after death. For others these are very serious matters. In any event it may be said that Zen students to some extent entrust their whole psychological and personal well being to their teacher when they make a decision to practice with that teacher. Students in America in the 21st century have the right to know important information that may affect their decision whether or not to practice in a given community with a certain teacher.

Is the problem of Zen teachers crossing a line and having sex with their students the same as the problems the Catholic Church is having with sex abuse by priests? I would say no, but there are important similarities. Like the Catholic Church, I believe that the Zen Buddhist community has neglected to confront this issue directly in a manner that helps to protect vulnerable students. In the State of California businesses that use certain chemicals must post a warning sign "These premises contain chemicals known by the State of California to cause cancer, birth defects or other reproductive harm." If Toyota is selling cars that have faulty gas pedals making some cars unable to stop, then consumers have a right to know. Toyota may still manufacture the best cars out there; these businesses may still be great businesses, that many people patronize, but "consumers" have a right to know of a problem or circumstance that may affect their well being, or their decision whether or not to choose the product: CAVEAT EMPTOR—"Buyer" beware. The same should apply to Zen Buddhist sanghas.

I believe the Zen community as a whole can find creative ways to address this problem. A rating system? “This sangha is of the open sexuality school”– “open sexuality school” being somewhere defined as a sangha that condones sexual relations between their teacher and students. Something, so that any student knows clearly up front that sexual relations between the teacher and students are or may be taking place here, and can use that information in making a decision on the extent he or she wishes to be involved with the teacher and the community.

Although historically some Zen practitioners have followed extreme ascetic discipline, the Zen school doesn’t impose strict guidelines on students in following the precepts. The 15th century poet/rascal/great Zen Master Ikkyu may be one of the causes of all the problems!

Rinzai’s disciples never got the Zen message
But I, the Blind Donkey, know the truth:
Love play can make you immortal.
The autumn breeze of a single night of love is
better than a hundred thousand years of
Sterile sitting meditation...

–Translated by John Stevens

Ikkyu was also known for being an outspoken critic of the corruption of the whole organized system of Zen Buddhism of his day, and spent most of his years as a hermit monk:

they screw inside the temple call in students for “mysterious satori”
only I teach like the seasons

–Translated by Stephen Berg

While one person is in the process working out his/her karma, being compassionate towards him/herself for imperfections in following certain precepts, other people who may be harmed by those imperfections or choices have a right to be protected. They have a right to know if something they may feel is harmful is going on. In America today, I believe that Zen communities as a whole and Zen teachers should have the compassion to create an explicit method to directly inform students if, and to some degree the extent to which the teacher is having sex with students. Not so that anyone can be hung up for gossipy scrutiny and some kind of ultimate judgment, but because no one is above the protection of the precious hearts and minds of unknowing students.

Deep bow,

Phil Benezra