



Sex in the Sangha: Apparently, we still haven't had enough

Posted by James Shaheen on 20 Feb 2011 in [Buddhism](#) [Zen](#)

The sex scandals that have rocked the Zen communities in recent weeks are pretty depressing. First it was Eido Shimano, whose exposure on the internet was followed up by a *New York Times* [report](#). Zen teacher John Tarrant is now [under fire](#) for writing an obit for the late Aitken Roshi. Aitken had disowned Tarrant for what Aitken considered Tarrant's sexual indiscretions with students, and also criticized Tarrant's teaching style and conduct as a therapist. So Tarrant didn't win any points with Aitken's Diamond Sangha for what they considered a veiled attack on their teacher. Now, Genpo Merzel, among the dharma heirs of Maezumi Roshi, has [publicly apologized](#) for breaking his marriage vows by having sex with students.

None of this is new. People have talked of Eido Shimano's behavior for years. Once, as my predecessor prepared to publish accusations against Shimano, his accusers withdrew their names and the story never saw the light of day. Another, non-Buddhist publication made the same decision about the story for the same reasons. Discussions of Tarrant's alleged relationships with students are old news, too, and Genpo Merzel has had like trouble in the past.

It's easy enough to judge others' actions. Plenty of times we have seen the damaging results of the sexual, financial, and other professional indiscretions that have torn dharma communities apart. Usually, following revelations that rival our political sex scandals, the pile-on begins, and perhaps it is well deserved. But a whole new dimension is added when teachers' sexual partners have been called out for their part in creating the very suffering they condemn. One of the 44 signatories to the American Zen Teachers Association's [open letter](#) to Kanzeon Zen Center regarding Genpo Merzel's unacceptable behavior was Jan Chozen Bays, resident teacher of the Zen Community of Oregon, who was given inka by Genpo. In a [letter](#) posted at Sweeping Zen today, Maezumi's daughter Kirsten Mitsuyo Maezumi writes of the damage and pain her father and Bays brought to her family by having a secret affair. Both Maezumi and Bays were married—and not to each other—and both had small children at the time. Bays, a pediatrician, was the Maezumis' family doctor, confidante to Maezumi's wife, and doctor to Genpo Merzel, according to Kirsten Maezumi.

Another signing the AZTA open letter was Roko Sherry Chayat, heir to Eido Shimano. Shimano's behavior had been known about for years, and yet it continued with the full knowledge of many of his students. It is almost impossible to imagine that Chayat herself did not know given her position as Shimano's heir and the length of time she studied with him. Yet it was pressure from without that forced the issue, one that had otherwise continued for years.

But better late than never. It's just that since Kirstin Maezumi has spoken up, both Bays and Chayat might want to shed some light here and discuss their respective parts in these matters if any. We haven't heard from Tarrant publicly; perhaps, disagreeing with his former teacher, he feels he's done nothing wrong. Shimano stepped down last year in the wake of a string of allegations online, after which the *Times* article appeared. And of course, there was Genpo Merzel's public apology.

I don't know what to say about sex between teachers and students. In almost all cases we hear about, it's consensual (or at least physical force was not involved), and it usually falls to the student to determine whether the relationship was appropriate or not. But the power differential is real, and should be acknowledged. Some regret their actions, feel taken advantage of, and grapple with a deep sense of betrayal and shame; others claim to be unaffected—or even positively affected—by such relationships. It's really for the student to decide. But it always seems to end poorly when teachers make a habit of it, especially when a lot of secrecy and denial come into play.

When it comes to sex, regulations are necessary but in the end they are not really an answer. Desire doesn't obey one's wishes; in fact, it is often quite at odds with one's wishes. If that were not the case, it would be much easier to be a good person. But it isn't easy. Still, regulations are there so that when abuse of any kind does happen, people can be called to account. But that it happens and will continue to happen is certain. Sex can make a fool of anyone and often does.

How we deal with desire is a pretty good indication of where we are on the path, but that we're tripped up by it is nothing that should surprise any of us. I think there is a good question we could be asking ourselves right now: What about the way our dharma communities are organized supports and creates situations in which our leaders act in ways that are damaging and undermine our, and their, best intentions, and how do we go about creating community structures that discourage damaging behavior and allow us to deal with it effectively when it occurs? And let's not wait for our teachers to do it for us. They have as much to learn here as anyone. We should know at least that much by now.

As for those for whom relationships between students and teachers are acceptable—fine, and you have no reason to hide it. If you don't think it's all right, ask your teacher about his or her own experience with this and how they feel about it. Make your own decision.

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Reply by [robert nelder](#) on February 20, 2011, 8:51 pm

A teacher, a doctor, a psychiatrist etc, each of these is in a position of trust and sometimes power. Whether consensual or not, they have crossed the line. Sexual misconduct includes the hurt and pain caused to spouses, partners, children, parents, the sangha etc.

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Reply by [MR](#) on February 20, 2011, 8:56 pm

In the Bays/Maezumi case a teacher crossed the line (Maezumi) and a doctor crossed the line (Bays who was apparently physician to maezumi, his kids and Genpo and his wife). There was power and moral accountability on both sides of the situation. It is good to open up this discussion to one of mutual responsibility. Many Zen students walk away from a teacher when they hit a sticking point. The fact that a married woman does not when she is faced with temptation is relevant to her karma and her practice. Doesn't necessarily make her a victim.

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Reply by [viryaparamitas](#) on February 20, 2011, 9:25 pm

In reference to spiritual development it is a critical point to understand the value of boundaries. When one works with a teacher the very potential of the student is undermined by violating this essential dynamic. It is also true that there is an exception and rarely therapists do go off and have long term relationships with some client and the like goes with doctors, psychiatrists etc. When a teacher displays behavior that borders on having a harem around then what are we doing? It is self aggrandizing and in the end a destructive display of power. Hopefully the discussion continues so the expected behavior is solidified.

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Reply by [jeannedesy](#) on February 20, 2011, 10:23 pm

I was sexually and emotionally abused at great length as a child by my father - now dead - something decent people find hard to believe who knew him as a scoutmaster and churchgoer. As an adult, I have also played guitar with a man who had served three years in prison for an "affair" as he saw it with a three-year-old child. He always saw this as consensual, and my father was able to do it by manipulating my consent. The kind of powerful energy a parent has over a child, and a teacher over a student, is difficult to describe unless you can remember experiencing it. It is that elder who is always responsible, and should always resist the temptation of desire. Jack Kornfield has written good guidelines for the teacher who does experience sexual/romantic desire for a student. Our sanghas are experiencing these problems for the same reason the Catholic church in Ireland is, and the same reason every abused child does - teachers/priests/fathers are institutionally endowed with a mystical special quality of holy power. I believe this is rooted in our animal nature that seeks heirarchy and its escape from freedom. It is the very thing the Buddha warned us against in his last words.

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Reply by [NellaLou](#) on February 21, 2011, 12:07 am

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