

November 21, 2011

Kobutsu,

I want to thank you for all you've been doing to bring to light the activities of Eido Shimano and to help protect vulnerable Zen students. You also helped post an earlier piece I wrote entitled "Caveat Emptor". I have attached another writing I just completed, inspired by the publishing of Merry Benezra's book *Special Karma*. My hope is that it may help to ground the discussion on the situation at ZSS with some actual experiences of one who was present as a resident at DBZ--albeit 35 years ago! If you feel it is appropriate I give you permission to submit it online--I was thinking of The Shimano Archives and The Zen Forum International--or I can do it myself. You may be in a position to do this more easily, however . Please just let me know if and where you decide to submit it--if anywhere.

What you and others have been doing is very important. It has helped me sort through difficult times in my life, and hopefully all this will help others who have been harmed--as well as prevent further harm from happening.

Good wishes,

Phil

Thoughts and Observations on “Special Karma” at the Zen Studies Society

My name is Philip Benezra; I am the ex-husband of Merry White Benezra, whose recent book *Special Karma* appears in a post above. I was a resident of Dai Bosatsu Zendo from the fall of 1975 to the summer of 1977; around the same time Merry was there. I want to thank Merry, Carol Spooner, Genkaku Adam Fisher, Kobutsu Malone, Stuart Lachs, Genjo Marinello and others who have written and spoken out, for their courage to try to help those who were victimized by Eido Shimano and by the cooperative culture at the Zen Studies Society. I wonder why there have not been more former residents of Dai Bosatsu who have posted on this site? The posts are almost entirely by outsiders with no actual experience at Dai Bosatsu. I personally found it impossible to write about my own experience at Dai

Bosatsu for over 30 years. The following are nothing more than my own thoughts, observations and speculations.

One reason so few present and former residents have attempted to speak out may be because the atmosphere at Dai Bosatsu was intense with “heavy karma”: “Sit with pain”; “Full Lotus is the best posture”; Hakuin’s Rohatsu exhortation, staying up all night; the story of Gempo Roshi (Soen Roshi’s Teacher) too ill to move and sitting through an entire sesshin without moving on his cushion; the story of Soyen Shaku (who brought Zen to the West), sitting up all night on a crowded ship headed for Southeast Asia with mosquitoes “as big as golf balls” filled with his blood falling off around him; and of course that ultimate red bearded, Hindu role model who pulled off his eyelids and sat until his legs atrophied. Soen Roshi told me personally (I was a former athlete and honors student) to sit every sitting as if I was doing the hundred-meter dash. He showed some of us students a “Zen Ban”, a stick used by Zen monks to support their chin so they can sleep while in meditation posture. This was a lot for a 22-23 year old, fresh out of college who still had no developed sense of who I was in this world. Sleep deprived, undernourished (because of my own choice and “self-discipline”), sitting constantly with pain and exertion, I was probably preprogrammed with my own “special karma” to find that particular ZSS sangha and end up in an inevitable psychological train wreck. Eido Shimano and the Zen Studies Society were the train.

Eido Shimano had his special karma also. He told us on many occasions how his name Ei-Do was a combination of the “Ei” in Eisai (Who brought Rinzai Zen to Japan) and the “Do” from Dogen (Who brought Soto Zen to Japan). He was the “founding father” to bring a lineage of Zen, which combined the Rinzai and Soto traditions to America. While I was there we began a regular practice of chanting the names of the patriarchs from Shakyamuni Buddha to Gempo Roshi. “And when Soen Roshi dies he will be included,” said Eido. And of course it was understood that he would be next.

But his “heavy” special karma was more than this. After having been out of touch with Dai Bosatsu for many years I happened across one of Eido Shimano’s teishos. In it he mentioned (Although he said he didn’t like to talk about it) that he and Soen Roshi had a special understanding and karma to be reborn in hell in their next life. I remember they both loved the song “The Impossible Dream” from *The Man of La Mancha*: “To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause!” What does this mean? And does this have anything to do with Buddhist practice? And what is this passing on to ZSS students? I know that personally, sleep deprived, I went over the edge and into my own psychological hell realm when I left

Dai Bosatsu—still trying to exert myself every hour in my practice like the 100 meter dash, more exhausted than I could bear and hopelessly out of it, going nowhere, with no possible way out of this painful situation anywhere in sight; tormented by the frightful demons of my sleep deprived mind. Psychiatrists at the time I think labeled me anorexic and possibly paranoid schizophrenic. After having been pushed off that cliff I spent a number of years climbing back up the mountain and have now been a high school Social Studies teacher for the past 10 years—trying to give back to young people so they don't have to go through anything like what I went through.

In some of the early archives from the Aitken letters back in Hawaii, Eido Shimano is quoted as saying that he felt he could not control what he was doing to women. Eido used to tell us about his father who was an alcoholic: “He used to drink a bottle of sake a night”. Does Eido have his own sexual addiction? The 12th Century Korean Zen Master Chinul speaks of sudden awakening—someone having a brilliant enlightenment experience—and gradual cultivation—but still needing to practice to work out the bugs and purify ones karma until one is a true “saint” (Stuart Lachs has written about this in much more depth.) Eido, enlightened, but with an addictive, predatory habit in his karma still to work out. At least Soen Roshi told us at one point, “We are very poor teachers. Eido Roshi and I are very poor teachers.”

Eido Shimano is also of samurai lineage. A samurai who fails or who is disgraced is obligated to commit hara kiri. I remember worrying that Eido might actually do this, and being amazed that he was able to survive the seemingly hopeless disgrace of the repeated scandals over the years. I also remember hearing that after one of these low points he showed a Japanese samurai film with the name *Hara Kiri* to his students at Dai Bosatsu. And this tradition of hara kiri and suicide is not just talk. I know I toyed with sticking a knife in my belly while being a (failed) student of Eido's; and did make an unsuccessful attempt at suicide after I left. Soen Roshi told us the story of Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima (Who had a mysterious tie to Soen and Eido's home Ryutaku monastery). When Mishima formally and publicly committed hara kiri in the traditional fashion--Soen Roshi explained in teisho--how admirable his conviction was, as witnessed by how deeply he was able to plunge his own knife into his belly before his “second” cut his head off. I remember going back to my cushion, after that teisho, trying to sit with that kind of intensity! Later, after Soen Roshi had gone back to Japan, I was one of the resident students who found another resident student in his room sitting in lotus posture with his shirt off, blood spilling from his belly and a knife in front of him. The student was hospitalized and survived. An agent was sent

up to investigate the incident and talked with a couple of us residents while we were working in the kitchen at Dai Bosatsu.

Eido Shimano was also a child in Japan during the horrors of World War II. I believe he personally never wanted to spend his life in America, but came here out of obligation, because Soen Roshi needed him to do it. Eido used to speak with some resentment about how Soen Roshi would often use his dokusan time with Eido to stand up and stretch his legs (Since Eido was his senior student). So he may have felt that once again Soen was using him to relieve himself from having to spend any extended time in the strange land of America away from home. So Eido had no special fondness for America or Americans. I get more of a feeling that there may have been some deep underlying feeling of anger with all Americans for the horrors committed to Japanese people during WWII. (And this is admittedly speculation on my part) The whole tenor of Dai Bosatsu Zendo may be said to be a payback to America for the loss, humiliation and horrors of WWII. The unseen “atomic” power of this most powerful of Japanese religions exploding on the American scene on July 4th 1976, the 200th anniversary of the birth of the United States, was Japanese retribution! The title of the *New York Times* magazine article that appeared around this time was “The Quiet Zen Boom”. Eido told us several times that his mantra in the months leading up to the opening ceremony for Dai Bosatsu Zendo was “*July 4th, ‘76*”. This was *his* special karma. Japanese Zen was going to hit America with all its might, spot on, on this most important of dates. I recall at the breakfast on the morning of the opening ceremony, with many Japanese visitors, and Zen dignitaries from around the country in attendance, Eido stood up at one point and with a big smile on his face dramatically unfurled the Japanese flag for all to see. I remember sitting next to an older, long time American student who said something quietly that made me realize how shocking this was for him. The opening ceremony itself was conducted in Japanese first and then translated into English.

Dai Bosatsu monastery, when I was there in '76-'77 was an American Zen monastery in which Japanese culture was emphasized and Eido Shimano was the absolute authority ruling over obedient American students many of whom revered him as almost a god. Most all of the chanting was done in Japanese.

I cannot help but feel that there was an underlying anger in Eido Shimano to “stick it” to Americans. (This is also my personal speculation, and not necessarily even Eido’s “fault”) Is this part of the

uncontrollable passion Eido has had to dominate, have power over and “stick it” to young, vulnerable American women students? ...at their expense.

Jerry Sandusky allegedly had his unending pool of vulnerable underprivileged boys through his Second Mile charity. With the huge population of the greater New York City area as a draw, Eido also had an unending resource of troubled, distraught students looking for freedom from their suffering in a beautiful exotic Japanese Zen temple high in the Catskill Mountains. Many of them, sadly, ended up jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Many, I imagine, left with more trauma in their lives than they came with, feeling all along, like I did, that *they alone* failed again.

I personally take full responsibility for my own choices and for my own karma that I brought to Dai Bosatsu. But I remember one conversation with Eido, after I had become sick, when he actually opened the door a bit and asked me if I felt the *he* had done anything to make me feel the way I did. When I began to open my mouth and say “Well, yes...” he jumped on me and exclaimed “It was *you* who had the egotistical practice! *You* who would not speak !”...etc., etc... which sent me back into my crazy shell for the time being.

To the extent that the attitude of Eido Shimano is that he is in an “absolute realm” and has done nothing wrong, and to the extent that the culture of the Zen Studies Society and their leadership facilitates this attitude, that is, in my opinion, criminally wrong. Once again, I appreciate people like Kobutsu and Genjo who are trying to take practical steps to protect vulnerable students at the Zen Studies Society. If nothing else I hope that these long overdue revelations and this change in events can bring a catharsis for people like Merry Benezra and others, many of whom, if their experience was anything like mine, were victimized to the point of depression and potential suicide. My hope is that these revelations may at least be for any victims who are out there something like the scene in the film *Good Will Hunting*: when long time abused and untrusting Will (Matt Damon) finally breaks down in tears with psychotherapist (Robin Williams), who says to Will:

“It’s not your fault...It’s not your fault...It’s not your fault.”