



Christopher Chase created the doc: "Interview with Merry Benezra, author of "Special Karma: A Zen Novel of Love and Folly""

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What literary works and writers have most influenced you, in terms of your own writing style?

My favorite novelists are language-focused -- Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, Michael Ondaatje, J.M. Coetzee. The first two had some influence on *Special Karma*, which was initially more experimental in style. Over the years, I have sanded down my more ambitious (precious) flourishes. As time went by, they finally started to set even my teeth on edge. But I love language that is alive, and I hope *Special Karma* is still full of this kind of language.

Since 2009, I have studied poetry-writing under the amazing auspices of several Stanford University Stegner Fellowship grads -- through Stanford's evening program, tutorials, and a spin-off workshop group. I am grateful for this training, which I most definitely brought to the revision process over the last year.

How long have you been working on this story, how many drafts?

I lived at Dai Bosatsu Zendo from July 1976 to February 1977, and I began writing *Special Karma* in 1981. I worked with Gail Sher as my reader - a friend and amazing poet who had also been a San Francisco Zen Center student and Tassajara resident. We decided on a schedule of completing each chapter before moving on to the next one, as less overwhelming. Because *Special Karma* is a novelized memoir, the shape of the book was never an issue that needed to be worked out. I think I delivered new writing and revisions to Gail every two weeks - which is why *Special Karma* is gratefully dedicated to her! The overall timing turned out to be about six months per chapter, and so the book took over four years initially.

It then turned out to be impossible to find a publisher for a novelized memoir on a controversial subject aimed at a niche audience. (To my great surprise and bitter disappointment.) So it went onto a shelf while I devoted my energies to holding down my job as an immigration paralegal and raising my son in a single-parent household.

Once I decided to self-publish *Special Karma*, I devoted what has turned out to be a year of evenings and weekends intensively revising the manuscript. I'm very glad it was not published in 1986 after all, because it is a much better book now. I'm also glad to have self-published, as it gave me all the time I needed to really pull it together. I now have four boxes full of paper that need to be shredded.

How many drafts: hard to say at this point. 20+.

That's interesting. So you finished the book in 1986 but have revised it over the past year. Did your study of poetry writing influence your revisions in any way?

The revisions I made were mostly in the categories of taking out or at least sanding down the show-off language of my youth, finding better iterations for awkward phrasings, and creating smoother pathways for the reader to navigate themes and character arcs. Poetry writing has trained me to be ruthless as a writer. To interrogate modifiers, to resist overwriting, to suggest without drawing the readers' conclusions for them, to avoid closure. One thing that pleases me about Special Karma is how it lays out some themes and issues having to do with Zen practice without necessarily resolving them.

Some of the experiences described in the book must have been very traumatic and I assume you know many others who went through this. Were the consequences the same for most, or did everyone react differently?

Yes, everyone's experience and reaction is different. I did not have the full-out sexual encounter with Eido that many women had, so my experiences are different right away, from that perspective. I cannot really speak for anyone but myself.

I went to DBZ with a refuge-taking mind. I was 28 and unmarried. I had concluded a sexually driven affair with an older married man, and, following that fiasco, I became engaged to an available man my age who changed his mind three days before our wedding. The whole sex/marriage thing did not seem to be working for me, did not seem to be my karma, and I assumed that by living in a Zen monastery I would be putting all of that behind me. Having an affair with the teacher wasn't in any way part of my agenda. I didn't know about Eido's reputation until after I had arrived - when I had already, in my mind, burned my bridges back to the material world. I assumed that this was a problem I could handle with one word: No.

I found Eido's advances to be disrespectful and corrosive to my journey as a Zen student. My first two sesshins were marred by this, and I very nearly went lost my emotional and psychological bearings during the second sesshin. This was when he told me I had a 'special karma,' and I gradually came to the realization that this special karma of mine had nothing to do with the possibility of grounding myself and my life in Dharma - the only thing I really wanted.

Someone defending Eido (as I tried to do for a while) could say that he found my Achilles heel - my spiritual greed - and attacked me there, in order to help my practice in the long run. But my clear sense of him is that he had no such intention. He wanted sex, as he told me, simply because it could be 'quite enjoyable.' And he chose incredibly inopportune times to suggest this; e.g., during sesshin.

Facing the idea of leaving DBZ and then finally doing so was difficult for me, because I had considered this to be my last stop in life and didn't have any other options in mind. But in fact, once I left I quickly remembered there were other Zen centers, and so I soon moved to San Francisco where I happily lived as a more peripheral than engaged member of the SFZC community for a few years.

I can certainly say that Eido's advances took the heart out of my motivation as a Zen student, and I have been wary of Zen teachers and I suppose the power structure of Zen practice centers ever since. My understanding of Dharma, however, has never wavered.

And then I have to add that DBZ and SFZC were where I found my tribe. As disturbing as Eido's approaches were, discovering community for the first time in my life was extraordinarily healing. My experience was definitely in shades of grey.

How do you view spiritual teachers such as the Roshi in the story, who seduce or abuse their students? Can anything positive come from this?

I view spiritual teachers who seduce or abuse their students as human beings with emotional baggage and a perfect staging area.

In the U.S., doctors, psychologists, lawyers, professors, and ministers belong to professional organizations that proscribe these types of relationships. The idea is that if having a relationship with one's patient/ client/ student/ parishioner is so compelling that it can't be helped, fine, but then one is essentially expelled from one's professional organization. It seems incredibly straightforward to me that this should be a rule implemented in all U.S. Zen practice centers.

Anything positive from seductive spiritual teachers: I understand there are women who feel they have not been harmed in their encounters with seductive spiritual teachers, and were perhaps given dharmic and/or emotional benefits. But I don't know any of them personally. So, if you find them, you would need to ask them. I do understand they are out there.

From your own life, and knowledge of others, how do people heal from experiences like this?

Again, I can only speak for myself. Time and community help, of course. And I found writing Special Karma to be incredibly healing. I believe that novelizing my story, while an understandably controversial approach, had something to do with this. It allowed me to develop a certain analytical distance from, and then a growing compassion for, my 'characters,' as they (we) went along on their inevitable but foolish tracks.

And certainly I have found that Buddhist practice and philosophy provides a framework in which to process the foibles and karmic underpinnings of everyone on the planet, including myself.

Why have you written this book, why are you telling your story now?

From the day I left Dai Bosatsu, I have wanted to share the story of my friendships and experience at a Zen monastery, and to demonstrate how any level of sexual harassment in a Zen practice center can be corrosive and dangerous.

I was disappointed not to be able to find a publisher or very many supporters within the Zen community when I finished my book in 1986, when I expected to see it in print. The singular exception was Sandy Boucher, the author of *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*. She read my manuscript and brought it to the attention of many people in an effort to get it published. She also wrote a very powerful introductory letter for it, which she has recently and very kindly allowed to use as the book's back-cover blurb.

When I read the New York Times story on Eido in July 2010, I decided it might be a good time to get *Special Karma* off the shelf and out into the world. My story, though 35 years old now, was apparently still current. Self-publishing seemed to have lost some of its stigma, and I had begun to understand the practical reasons why *Special Karma* was a book that mainstream and even niche publishers like *Shambhala* would hesitate to take on. And, any lingering fears I had of being sued were dissipated by Eido's public loss of reputation.

At that time, I also developed relationships with some of the people involved in the current uproar at Zen Studies Society – people on the outside, pushing for justice – who encouraged me to get my book out.

I have had a sense of self-publishing *Special Karma* to complete the arc and simply 'lodge' it in the canon of books about Zen and Zen practice.

That said, now that it is out, I am also hoping it will find its audience.

Can I ask – were you surprised to learn of the detailed history of Eido Roshi that has come out recently? Have you read the Shimano archives and Aitkin Roshi's materials, and if so, did they influence your revision process or how you view what happened, looking back now?

I was not surprised. In addition to my experience, I know that Eido had a lover when I arrived at DBZ and another one when I returned in January 1978, and still another one in 1979 when I wrote my letter to the Board. During the winter interim period after the first kessei, he drove a vulnerable young woman away from DBZ the morning after she arrived. Despite the scandals and turmoil, the winter before I arrived, which so many students took very seriously, it is clear to me as an insider that he never had the smallest intention of changing his behavior.

Yes, I have been keeping up with the Shimano archives, and I am so grateful to Aitken Roshi and Kobutsu for stepping forward. The Internet has made an incredible impact, which is so long overdue. Because of the recent uproar at Zen Studies Society and the emerging understanding of Eido's sexual aggression, I was tempted to give the Roshi a larger or at least a heavier role in Iris's story, though it seems to me that his behavior already casts a shadow over the entire book. In the end I added some language to make very clear (I hope) the emotional impact his 'special karma' remark had. But when I tried to do more than that it felt propagandistic to me, and unfair to the story. My book may fall short of some people's hopes. I did not sleep with Eido, my life wasn't ruined by him. But I think my book clearly sketches behavior, on his part, that was unconscionable -- from relentlessly sounding the note of sexual interest to giving me the answers to my koans -- everything he did undermined my ability to effectively undertake Zen practice at Dai Bosatsu, and soured my ability to really engage in Zen practice anywhere else. I do not think it is too much to say that I arrived at DBZ an ardent stream-enterer, and left disheartened and wary.

Do you think more could and should have been done to hinder his ability to function as a Zen Buddhist teacher in America?

Absolutely. I wrote a letter to the Board in 1979. Other people have come forward over the years. I have a hard time understanding what kept the Board from taking action. It is absurd and tragic.

There seemed to be a culture of silence here, where people either looked the other way, actively covered up dysfunctional behavior, or simply felt helpless to do anything. Does that sound accurate to you?

Yes, and I was a participant in this silence when I was at DBZ. When a student who was also a Board member asked me directly if Eido was coming on to me, I denied it. The last thing I wanted to do was leave just because the teacher sometimes took lovers. Then, when it was clear that this was something I wasn't going to be able to cope with, I dug myself in rather than climbing out. I didn't think I had any other options in life, and it made me fearful of speaking out. I have some empathy for anyone who is in this or a similar position. This is why structural change, redundancies, need to be in place. There need to be mentors and caretakers, perhaps, whose job it is to keep an eye out for these issues, and then a structure above the teacher, that the caretakers can report to.

What are the most important changes you feel are required, or that you hope to see in Western Zen Buddhism?

A professional code of conduct like the one psychologists have. Possibly this means the Zen practice centers in the United States would need to create an umbrella organization that would handle this. And my caretaker idea above.

I would also love to see Zen practice become a more open culture in every way. New students could be given mentors, and the whole mysterious quality of Zen could be toned down. I strongly believe that human beings perceive Dharma with their physical bodies, and there are techniques to facilitate this in un-special ways. What if koan study was like Bible study, done around a table? A leveling between the ones who 'know' and the ones who don't. Just a thought.

Finally, you talked earlier about finding your tribe with Zen Buddhist communities. Also, that your understanding of the Dharma has never wavered. Can you say more about that?

I am not associated with a Zen community right now, but when I was in my late twenties and early thirties, the students I met at DBZ and San Francisco Zen Center were my true sangha. In all of our quirky variations, we shared this sense of banging our heads against the wall of existence and pain.

My sense of Dharma doesn't waver because it is not its nature to do so, and that is the great thing, isn't it? I think I have had moments of intersecting with reality (I choose to read them as such) and I deeply honor them.

Thank you Merry.