

Some Fundamental Problems With Zen Practice

by Christopher Hamacher

Recent revelations about a number of Zen teachers in the West have been quite unsettling. The many student testimonials and other documents, particularly those in the [Shimano Archive](#), have shown that certain highly-revered, “Buddhist masters” were in fact aggressive, hypocritical, autocratic and narcissistic people - even to the extent of being sexually abusive. And these personal characteristics were apparently freely observable by their students at all times without any obvious improvements.

The question thus arises as to how these situations could have come into being. I suggest that one explanation is that the doctrines of Zen Buddhism itself do not readily condemn any of the behaviour that occurred. For example, Zen practice typically places very little emphasis on justice or morally correct conduct. As one [author](#) has put it, “if we search for evidence of substantive interest in morality in the two dimensions of the Zen tradition where we would most expect to find it - in the vast canon of Zen sacred literature and in the full repertoire of Zen practices - we discover that it is largely absent.” And though ethical principles such as wisdom and compassion do exist in the broader Buddhist literature, Zen typically rejects pursuing the scholarly study thereof. Even the interpretation of the Third Buddhist Precept against misusing sexuality has been left deliberately vague in Japanese Zen. Thus much of the behaviour demonstrated by these teachers, which could quite reasonably be qualified as morally wrong, can still be spun as acceptable in the “amoral” Zen realm. And at the same time, one will also not find any condemnation in Zen of characteristics such as autocratic teacher control or enforced secrecy either, given that they are part and parcel of the traditional monastic environment in Japan. As [Katherine Masis](#) has observed, this poses a particular problem for Western Zen students, due to their conflating “behaviors peculiar to Japanese authoritarianism and behaviors that supposedly would be a wise and compassionate outgrowth of years of practicing meditation.”

Certain Zen teachings can also easily be used as excuses to justify and thus prolong teacher misconduct. One such doctrine is the view of the “Absolute” as different from the “Relative.” As [Caryl Gopfert](#) phrased it in her detailed study of student betrayal by Zen teachers: “in the relative realm, there is betrayal and exploitation, in the realm of the Absolute this is simply the nature of human existence. No one betrays anyone. There is no betrayer and no betrayed, no betrayal.” A teacher can therefore quite plausibly claim that he is merely acting in the so-called Absolute or “unconditioned” realm, where misconduct allegedly does not exist. The student is therefore not only abused, but also made to feel inadequate because she evidently hasn't yet progressed enough in her practice to understand the “true nature” of the situation. The application of this tactic

at the Zen Studies Society, for example, was actually pointed out by a student in 1993: “the argument that there is nothing to judge/no one to judge has been used to justify abusive behavior.”

Another uniquely “Zen” method for a teacher to deflect criticism is to respond that the student's own egocentric point of view is to blame: since the student still sees things through the illusory veil of the ego, she cannot appreciate the fact that what might appear to the untrained eye as womanising, lying, exploitation, etc., is in fact the enlightened activity of a Buddhist master. And since the only authority in a position to judge the difference between real criticism and merely “ego-based delusion” is of course the teacher himself, this argument can clearly be used to trump any possible questioning of his misbehaviour. An especially absurd version of this defence, also allegedly used by Eido Shimano, is that “if I didn't accept the sexual advances of female students, I would be creating worse karma than if I agreed to their propositions.”

[Stuart Lachs](#) suggests an additional reason why Zen students might be particularly susceptible to accepting teacher behaviour that, in any other context, would be denounced. Lachs argues that, due to the myth of dharma transmission, students' advancement up the “Zen institutional ladder” is completely dependent on the teacher's approval. Therefore, students ambitious to become teachers themselves may be tempted to not see him as he really is, in order to gain his favour. This of course becomes an especially important factor in groups where the teacher himself continually stresses how “authentic” his lineage is, how “legendary” his own dharma teacher was, etc.

Another critical observer, [Ralf Halfmann](#), argues that typical Zen practice can actually promote abusive teacher behaviour. Based on his experience in the French *Association Zen Internationale*, Halfmann states that since Zen's utopian ideal of selflessness is in reality impossible to achieve, the student will tend to blame herself and her own practice for her less-than-perfect life. She thereby creates an inner psychological schism between her own experience and the unreachable ideal, and the duality thereof contravenes the very goal of “oneness” which caused the problem in the first place. At the same time, the teacher nourishes precisely this impression of the student being herself to blame, by regularly declaring that the felt discrepancy would disappear if she practiced correctly. Eventually the student may herself become a teacher, and be accordingly required to uphold this propagated illusion of selflessness, so that the schism between her reality and the utopia becomes even stronger. She may try to neutralise the conflict, for example via the abuse of alcohol or sex, and the group's problems are thus perpetuated.

A further contributing factor in long-term teacher misconduct, at least within the Rinzai school, is in my opinion the excessive emphasis on kensho. Since kensho can be a life-changing event, the student may accordingly be very grateful to her teacher and thus more forgiving of his

shortcomings - especially if the teacher himself constantly stresses the importance of the experience. Though this of course a perfectly natural human reaction, in combination with Zen's lack of a moral stance it can seriously compromise the student's ethical judgement. The case of the ZSS particularly demonstrates that the teacher's "forgivable failings" can evidently be stretched to include even grievous sexual misconduct. In the worst case, the cognitive dissonance between, on the one hand, the student's own positive personal relationship to her teacher, and on the other, his obvious defects, may even lead her to believe that he has the "true Dharma Eye" while being a sexual abuser at the same time. This attitude is of course particularly disturbing since it suggests that student exploitation is not even a shortcoming to be forgiven, but instead is perfectly compatible as such with the ultimate goal of Zen practice.

A final reason why certain abusive people are able to continue teaching unhindered for so long, is that their groups eventually regress from what might have initially been legitimate Buddhist practice into dysfunctional, cult-like behaviour. The types of conduct seen at more conservative Zen centres (e.g. elitism, unaccountable leadership, physically exhausting rituals, discouragement of dissent) are in fact all typical warning signs for cultic groups - and the Western Zen community is [starting to realise](#) that a problem in this regard exists. In my opinion, this is an important acknowledgement, since it signals a willingness to frankly examine the deeper causes of long-term teacher abuse, instead of simply papering them over - for instance by implementing more student/teacher "ethical guidelines." Indeed, though such guidelines may be helpful, they are of course only ever "as good as the freedom to use them is alive and well in the community," to quote Caryl Gopfert. Again, we need look no further than the ZSS for evidence on this point, since that group did in fact have ethical guidelines in place since 1993 - and one painful instance of their "enforcement" has been well documented in the Archives. A similar example comes from the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, where, according to a [report](#) by the FaithTrust Institute, their existing rules would in fact have been sufficient to prevent ten years of abuse by Michael Eko Little, but such rules were simply not invoked - among other things because students feared reprisals if they were.

I therefore concur with all of the aforementioned observers that the structure and teachings of Zen Buddhism itself are the root of the problem, and that the many cases of sexual or other teacher misconduct are merely symptoms thereof. The literature on cult dynamics, for example, is immense - one simply has to accept that Zen is not in fact immune from its prescriptions. For this reason, I hope that further research into the area of cult tendencies in Zen will occur, and applaud initiatives such as the recently inaugurated [Shogaku Zen Institute](#), among the goals of which is "understanding the interpersonal, psychological and spiritual aspects of the [Zen] priest's role. We especially concentrate on issues of power, transference, projection, idealization, and conflict." If, on the contrary, perennially abusive teachers are just written off as unrepresentative or extreme, in my

opinion Zen Buddhism will eventually fail as a real alternative to the traditional, faith-based religions in the West.