

SWEEPINGZEN

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The ZSS Dialogue: An ongoing study in healing a community

[Sweeping Zen](#) is providing a valuable forum for airing questions about Zen teacher misconduct and how the Zen community leadership meets this challenge. The recent dialogue in [Sweeping Zen](#) captured in [interviews with Roko Sherry Shinge Chayat Roshi](#) and [Genjo Marinello](#) brings several important questions into focus: How should a Zen center organization remediate and restructure in the aftermath of a teacher's misconduct, how does influential community members' loyalty to a disgraced teacher tend to minimize a teacher's misconduct, and what is the appropriate balance between keeping an established community functioning and thoroughly and honestly disclosing harm done and helping its victims heal. Their side by side interviews begin to resemble a case study in the effort required to remediate teacher misconduct, revealing how even with the best intentions harm can be perpetuated and justified, and how whistleblowers – the Zen students who point out a teacher's faults – are isolated and driven out of sanghas.

There is a dangerous and predictable process that develops in sanghas plagued by teacher misconduct. It's a process of division that preserves and rewards the teacher's defenders and systematically isolates those who speak truth to power. Teachers who commit harm repeatedly can do so only with protectors and enablers and a community that tolerates, dismisses or supports their misconduct. Under such circumstances, loyalty and gratitude to the teacher – a traditional element in Zen practice – becomes a very tricky business, easily hijacked for unwholesome purposes. Because the Zen teacher-student relationship is a new dynamic in the West, it's especially important for us to look carefully at the overall dynamic, at its complexities and boundaries, and at what happens when the relationship breaks down. This is a work in progress and is painful for all concerned parties.

When a teacher is violating appropriate boundaries and exploiting students, there is a loyalist tendency to minimize, explain away, or even cover-up the misconduct in order to keep the community functioning and maintain the status quo. Sometimes what's being protected and preserved is a level of activity, sometimes an idealized concept of the teacher and practice, sometimes a public face or reputation, sometimes the positions and benefits of senior members, sometimes real estate owned by the community, but the dynamic is the same. At the organizational level, those who support the teacher despite his/her harmful misconduct circle the wagons and are typically empowered or "promoted" in the hierarchy to keep the teacher and the community's status as a Zen practice place. Meanwhile those who voice the problem, try to change the system, and ask the teacher to acknowledge his/her harm are driven away. Or they leave to avoid being pulled into the web of loyal apologists. The teacher's supporters come to be labeled as authentic practitioners, true Dharma heirs and examples of Zen wisdom, while those seeking rehabilitation and remediation for the teacher and the community are labeled as troublemakers and enemies of the Dharma. This perverse split affects not only the community, but the quality of Zen teaching and the teachers themselves. The whole Zen tradition is dragged down by lies, cover-ups, and corruption, and the challenging, courageous, and talented students are driven out, isolated, and sometimes deprived of a teaching venue.

In her [Sweeping Zen](#) interview, Roko Shinge Roshi seems to be struggling to find a balanced way to acknowledge and address [Eido Shimano's](#) misconduct and the community's pain without throwing the baby (the ZSS community itself) out with the bathwater. As is now well documented and widely known, Eido Shimano was informed (by [Aitken](#) Roshi's report in 1964) of serious damage to two women in his Hawaii community who were hospitalized in a psychiatric ward resulting from their sexual experiences with Shimano. Despite being warned about the harm he'd caused, the record suggests that Shimano continued for more than 40 years, perhaps compelled by addiction, to risk causing this same harm, having sex with female students who might be especially vulnerable to emotional distress. Roko Shinge Roshi provides some socio-cultural context for his sexual predation, harking back to the 60's and early 70's when women's new found sexual freedom was, in her words, expressed by "choosing who we wanted to have sex with and kind of subverting the paradigm" including taking on teachers as lovers, a choice she compares to elevating the word "queer" to something positive in the gay liberation movement.

Of course, we are always swimming in and influenced by the currents of our times, but there are other perspectives on this kind of acting out that are also worth taking into account in this case. One alternative feminist perspective is that choosing a Zen teacher for a sexual partner is hardly an expression of a woman's freedom, in the 60's, 70's, or at any time before or since. Rather, having sex with a mentor, employer, teacher, or doctor may be better understood as a time-worn, misguided attempt to seek power through sex with a powerful man. I describe some of these dynamics in my book *Zen Women: Beyond Tea Ladies, Iron Maidens and Macho Masters* [↗](#). A seductive adult woman needs to take responsibility for her behavior, but ultimately, it is a Zen master's job to teach any woman seeking sex as a means to enlightenment that seduction and ingratiation are not the route to Zen awakening. Sadly, Eido Shimano apparently advised female students that sexual intimacy with him was good for their Zen practice. Whatever socio-cultural and psychological forces may have been influencing his female victims, they do not mitigate the hard reality of what took place in Shimano's community and the need to keep his misconduct, responsibility as teacher, and the harm caused at the center of our discussions.

Responsible teaching and protection of students is an essential obligation for any teacher in a position of power and a necessary requirement in the Zen teacher's job description. Unequal power in any helping profession requires restraint in satisfying one's own appetites – sexual and otherwise – in favor of protecting students' well-being and not confusing the purpose of training or healing. It is deemed so essential to those empowered to guide others that a legal prohibition between consenting adults has been mandated—sex is illegal— between doctors and patients, therapists and clients, and in some states between ministers and congregation members. Sadly, such a law prohibiting a minister's sexual liaison with a member of his/her congregation has yet to be passed in New York where Shimano did his damage.

In Scott Edelstein's excellent book, *Sex and the Spiritual Teacher*, we learn that a sexually addicted, sexually predatory and sexually exploitative teacher can also apparently offer wisdom, and that such teachers have done just that throughout history. Edelstein argues: "Whether we like it or not, many spiritual teachers *are* both wise and foolish; many *are* both generous and acquisitive; many *are* both loving and self-centered. In fact, a small number of exceptionally insightful and inspiring spiritual teachers have also been serial exploiters." However, he also concludes that the community cannot survive this kind of misconduct and that these serially exploitative teachers *cannot* be remediated. Rather than endlessly arguing about who is at fault, or hand-wringing about the shame and lost opportunity, Edelstein recommends that we need to protect the community and consider that sexual exploitations are not a good fit with the job requirement of being a spiritual guide. We need to become clear on who can be helped and how to protect and heal the community. On this point, I congratulate the ZSS Board for bringing in the Faith Trust Institute to investigate Eido Shimano. Sadly, as Genjo Marinello points out, the Faith Trust recommendations were not followed by the ZSS Board.

We also learn from Genjo Marinello's allegations that the ZSS Board was informed that Eido Shimano had forced himself on some of his students in non-consensual sex. (I also have personally heard women describe non-consensual sexual encounters with Eido Shimano.) Addressing this difficult matter in her [Sweeping Zen](#) interview, Roko Shinge Roshi seems to be aiming for a balanced view, remarking that if such events occurred, "all we can say is how much we deplore it and how much it pains us." By withholding judgment as to the truth of the non-consensual sex ("if" such events occurred), she seems to be trying to establish a calm, neutral ground – not siding with either Eido Shimano or acknowledging the truth of his accusers' allegations. Not an easy task, but an understandable undertaking given Roko Shinge Roshi's attempt to sustain and nurture the ZSS community.

That said, beyond deploring alleged non-consensual sex, going further to express a willingness to investigate and even a willingness to prosecute if compelling evidence is found would be a brave additional step that may be necessary for healing the community. A sincere promise of investigation, possible prosecution, and remuneration to victims would encourage women to come forward and tell their stories so that justice could be served and the community could truly begin to heal. Whatever the legal consequences, knowing that Eido Shimano had perpetrated rape or date rape is an essential part of this conversation and the potential healing of the ZSS community. "Deploing" is certainly an expression of compassion, but I wonder how far it will go toward actually healing these concerns and allegations and repairing the community. Encouraging women to come forward requires trust and honesty; these basic conditions need to be more clearly established for ZSS women to testify. We have learned from the Catholic Church that an attempt for truth and justice can seem hopeless to survivors of clergy abuse since the clergy are so well protected by the institutional denial and avoidance. Investigating allegations, supporting those abused and physically forced to have sex without consent, and seeing that justice is served begins to offer the appropriate response to move beyond the misconduct and the mistrust.

Sangha leaders should consider actions to create a trusting environment. Expressions of disapproval of non-consensual sex are weak tea. We all deplore rape, but what will we do about such allegations in a Zen community? Genjo Marinello suggests that that Eido Shimano's (\$90,000/year) retirement money is inappropriate under such circumstances. It seems he is being rewarded for harmful behavior, and that the victims of his harm should receive compensation instead. Until this level of honest investigation and appropriate action are undertaken, a cloud of mistrust will shadow the ZSS community. No matter how hard the ZSS Board works to rewrite the bylaws or restructure the community, the integrity of the community cannot be restored until the truth is heard and an appropriate response is offered.

Speaking and facing the truth, meeting reality, is the backbone of the Zen tradition. In order for Zen to become authentic in the West, it needs to root in honesty and accountability. All of us should care enough about Zen to look closely at what is being taught, to take responsibility for creating structures to apply honesty in our communities, and to develop processes for early remediation and termination for the teachers' transgressions that cannot be remediated. To honor the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, we must each hold those three treasures dear and not become passive observers. I believe the ZSS Board is trying to find the balance between protecting an established teaching venue and healing the community. This has been a thankless job for all of them. Zen practice requires guts. Let us keep working to make it real here in the West. Please investigate thoroughly and then voice your findings on this matter. We can still make a difference in the outcome.

BLOGGER PROFILE



Abbess Myoan Grace Schireson

Abbess Myoan Grace Schireson is a Dharma teacher in the Suzuki Roshi lineage empowered by Sojun Mel Weitsman, abbot of Berkeley Zen Center. She has also been empowered to teach koans by Keido Fukushima Roshi, chief abbot of Tofukuji Monastery in Kyoto, Japan. Grace is the head teacher of the Central Valley Zen Foundation and has founded and leads three Zen groups and a Zen retreat center in California. Grace is also a clinical psychologist who has specialized in women and families. She has been married for forty-one years and has two grown sons and three grandchildren. She can be reached at www.emptynestzendo.org

ABOUT SWEEPING ZEN



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