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The Shimano saga: Selling off to pay the rent?

The Buddhist Channel, July 22, 2012

Zen Studies Society's controversial land deal with Nature Conservancy

New York, USA -- This week, Gallup, Inc., a US, research-based performance-management consulting company issued a report entitled "U.S. Confidence in Organized Religion at Low Point." It appears that confidence in "Organized Religion" in America has been in steady decline since the early 1970's.



While the Gallup report deals primarily with "Christian" denominations, Catholic and Protestant, there is ample evidence that even relatively new, and somewhat obscure, organized religious traditions in America are also being questioned by adherents.

In America, everybody's got to pay the rent, and the Zen Studies Society, a Zen Buddhist organization based in New York, with its two multi-million dollar centers, is no different. Upkeep is required if the two centers -- Dai BosatsuZen monastery set on a 1,400-acre tract in the town of Hardenburgh, N.Y., and New York Zendo Sho Bo Ji, a converted carriage house on East 67th Street in Manhattan -- are to survive.

But the Zen Studies Society has been feeling the crunch of late not just because of hard economic times but also because of a variety of scandals centering on the former abbot, Eido Tai Shimano -- a man who, over a period of 46 years, stands credibly accused of a variety of depredations, including lying, character assassination, sexual misconduct and financial improprieties.

Shimano came to the United States in 1960, and, over time, gathered around him many groups of students and supporters who financed the creation of both Dai Bosatsu and Sho Bo Ji. It was their money and their spirit and their participation in Zen practice that bore fruit. That fruit was not always sweet, however. Over the decades Shimano repeatedly destroyed and alienated group after group when his behavior became public and he was never able to build a truly sustainable community for the practice of Zen.

In 2008, a series of revelations began to etch Shimano's role not just as a 'revered Zen teacher,' but also as a serial sexual predator, one who used his position as a teacher to advance his sometimes unwanted advances (alleged date rape), as a liar who had no compunction to tell the truth and constant engagement in self aggrandizing machinations and hagiographic hyperbole.

Large numbers of people were left mentally scarred in ways reminiscent of the child sex-abuse victims of the Vatican: A trust and a body betrayed. Year after year, decade after decade... Denial after denial -- after denial...

With papers provided by Robert Aitken Roshi and the subsequent efforts of the Rev. Kobutsu Malone, the Shimano Archive filled with documentation of Shimano's manipulative, abusive and self-important activities. And as that documentation became more widely known, membership (and thus income) at Zen Studies Society dwindled.

Now the Zen Studies Society faces some very hard financial choices. Shimano was forced into retirement in 2010, but his self-mandated deferred retirement package demands a \$90,000 per year payment, that includes upkeep for the Manhattan apartment he and his wife live in, medical and life insurance for both of them, and various other benefits... All coming out of the Zen Studies Society's donor supported pockets.

As a result, Zen Studies Society is in negotiations with The Nature Conservancy of Arlington, Va., either to lease, sell outright or create an easement on 1,000 acres of Dai Bosatsu's 1,400 total acreage. This is land about which Shimano once said, "Under any circumstances, not even a square foot of property or a speck of dust should be sold. Right now this is under your [the Board of Directors] management, but strictly speaking it is the property of the Dharma, Keep that in your mind." The money from such a sale/lease/easement would clearly be used not only to support and advance the institutions under Zen Studies Society control, but also to meet its coerced contractual obligation with Shimano.

In a March 13, 2012, letter and subsequent phone conversation with the Nature Conservancy, the Rev. Kobutsu Malone attempted to point out that any payment for the land would amount to the support of a "serial sexual predator" and further, were Shimano's depredations become the subject of a lawsuit, the Conservancy might find itself dragged into a legal matter that was not of its own devising. The bad publicity associated with such a legal battle might not be to the Conservancy's benefit.

In a July 2, 2012, conversation with [Rick Werwaiss](#), executive director of the Eastern New York Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, the Rev. Kobutsu Malone reiterated again and again his concerns and his argument that the Conservancy might want to steer clear of the deal. For his part, Werwaiss made it clear that the Conservancy would take its own due precautions, but essentially didn't care what history preceded any potential deal. He seemed to be purposely ignoring the effect that a respected conservation organization's bottom line support of a financially hemorrhaging organization that has never offered a sincere apology on the myriads of people who were victims of their disgraced leader and the decades long inaction of multiple Boards of Directors. Survivors of Eido Shimano and his Zen Studies Society organization feel that the Nature Conservancy's involvement at this time is the equivalent to a kick in the teeth as the Conservancy's donor supplied funds will essentially be used to provide support for an already wealthy serial sexual predator who is completely unremorseful for the damage and hurt he has wrecked over the years.

It is not entirely clear at the moment where the negotiations stand. Neither Zen Studies Society nor the Nature Conservancy has offered any transparent discussion about the amount of land in question or the financial arrangements under consideration.

The Nature Conservancy's lock-step mantra of "our mission is to protect and preserve the lands and water on which all life depends," is likely to be perceived by survivors of Shimano's depredations as the equivalent of a kick in the teeth – in the same fashion as would be a statement by the Penn State Athletic Department to the effect of, "all we want to do is play football."

It is clear that everyone has to pay the rent.

The question is, at what cost?

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