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DRINKING THE KOOL-AID

Posted by: Merry White Benezra on April 5, 2013

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I arrived at Dai Bosatsu Zendo in the summer of 1976 with a refuge-taking heart, more than ready to sever my ties with the difficult world. My family karma was alcohol and death; my sexual karma was a propensity to fall in love and be hurt. My career karma was corporate, at once frustrating and deadening. At the age of 28, I had decided I was absolutely finished with trying to find my niche in samsara. So when, soon after my arrival, a senior student gave me the bad news about Eido Roshi and the DBZ sex scandal that had broken the community open in Christmas 1975, it was beyond too late.



At 44, Eido was a beautiful man, charismatic, absolutely imbued with the atmosphere of Zen and its aesthetics. As a deeply invested Japanophile, I should have been a very easy mark. But, perhaps because of the tip-off, when Eido began to approach me I knew it wasn't a unique or spontaneous attraction (it was being hit up); and, frankly, his technique was poor. "How many men?" he would ask. "Must have been more than one hundred?" How many humiliating heartbreaks would have been the better question.

Saying “No thank you” did not (as I had expected) inoculate me from harm. “Do you like your room?” he asked, as I was rising to leave our first dokusan meeting. An odd question, I thought. I said I did. I loved my room, my monk’s cell. If I had said my room was too small and my futon was too hard and I was lonely, would the conversation would have moved on to alternative sleeping arrangements, such as in the Roshi’s quarters?

Dokusan is the private meeting between roshi and student, the crucible in which the teacher both tests the student’s understanding of Dharma and challenges her to experience the greatest spiritual insight, known in Zen practice as kensho. In Rinzai Zen practice, dokusan is the place where the roshi assigns a koan (Zen riddle), and where the student returns to deliver her answer—good, bad, or hopeless. Back in the Zendo, Rinzai students are encouraged to emulate the great lineage holders—like Bodhidharma, whose student Huike’s effort and sincerity were such that he brought his teacher his severed arm. The sincere Rinzai novice will put out stupendous physical and emotional energy in attempting to break through her koan. As D.T. Suzuki admonishes in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, “your whole personality, your utmost will, your deepest nature, determined to bring the situation to an issue, throws itself with no thought of self or no-self, of this or that, directly and unreservedly against the iron wall of the koan.”

Sesshin is the seven-day period in which the entire sangha meditates like this from before dawn until long after sunset, day after day, going back and forth to dokusan to be tested and encouraged. This isn’t a good time to proposition a serious student; it’s like handing a cup of cyanide to a marathon runner.

On the last evening of the first sesshin of the training period, Eido invited me to enjoy a book of pornographic photos with him in his private study. I very quickly excused myself and reeled back to my room. Sesshin ended the following morning and I had to decide. Dai Bosatsu’s very first training period had just started; who was I to bring it to a close? So I let myself believe that Eido had simply made a mistake about the kind of student I meant to be. If other women actually wanted this, that was their business.

In the middle of the training period’s second sesshin, Eido revealed the news in dokusan that I had a ‘special karma.’ For someone in my frame of mind, this should only have meant a great spiritual karma. In a Zen monastery, it should only imply spiritual potential. But I had shown so little on-demand spiritual acumen at that point that I knew, in my heart of hearts, that my spiritual karma was not what he meant. Permitting myself to come to this realization in the pressure cooker of sesshin was excruciating. After failing to get a straight answer from Eido about the nature of my special karma and finding myself unable to do anything but cry, nonstop, I walked out of the sesshin. If I had not done so, I believe I could have experienced a complete mental breakdown. I thought long and hard about suicide. If my ‘special karma,’ wasn’t spiritual, what was left?

And, a week or so later, Eido confirmed that my special karma was, after all, to have won the lucky ticket that gave the winner a night (or more!) in bed with a real Zen master. It was a ticket I never redeemed.

After leaving Dai Bosatsu I lived for a while in the San Francisco Zen Center community, where I found that the zealous refuge-taker had evolved into a gimlet-eyed critic. Why were students always saying, "Roshi says this or that," when faced with any situation? Why was the wise roshi driving a new BMW? And then life happened to me after all—marriage, baby, divorce, career. These days, when I see an authority figure in robes serving up paradoxes—for example, that zazen "doesn't work" but we should do it anyway—I turn and walk in the other direction. My ability to suspend disbelief is near zero. And so I accept that my potential as a Zen adept has been forfeited, at least in this lifetime.

Is there such a thing as enlightenment? If there is, it strikes me as a phantom that comes and goes; when it passes, we are the same people we always were. Does enlightenment confer wisdom? Compassion? My experience has been that it resoundingly does not. Not only are these qualities absent in Eido, they have been extraordinarily lacking in nearly every actor on the Zen Studies Society scene, including its current Abbot. The entire effort at ZSS, up the point where the *New York Times* expose began to bite into memberships and contributions (or up to the point of being sued by Eido for \$2 million they don't have), has been to look the other way, pay victims off, and collude with Eido's attribution of mental illness in his accusers.

I am watching the unfolding of Eido's denouement with interest. Finally, at the age of 81, a sexual criminal is being publicly unmasked. But, shouldn't this have happened in 1964, when his first victims were hospitalized? Or during one of the many Fuck Follies (as we called them) in the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's—when evidence of Eido's unremitting and unapologetic sexual pathology was brought, again and again, to the attention of the ZSS Board?

At ZSS, the Zen values of equanimity, non-judgment, and veneration for the teacher have played into Eido's hands. And in their trajectories toward kensho, very few Zen practitioners have been willing to ruffle their samadhis by facing and dealing with Eido's damage. To varying degrees, we have all been drinking the Kool-Aid—victims and enablers alike. But I have to ask—is this all Zen practice is, in the end? A dangerous cult?

Recently it has come to light that Eido's teacher, Soen Roshi, either failed to add Eido's name to the list of lineage holders (the one that includes Bodhidharma) at Myoshinji, his home temple in Japan—or later removed it. There are many ways to look at this, and how it impacts Eido and his successors. One way is to ask, What is a piece of paper, anyway? But to my mind, Soen's act is the one clean moment in this whole terrible affair. Someone saw, someone acted. Like a sword's stroke.

I never met Soen, and saw him only once. He looked like a small, gnarled tree. A tree with a force field.


One wants so very much to believe.

Photo Details

Photo by [M Dougan](#) via [Flickr](#) under a [CC-BY](#) license.

Flickr description: Meditation room at the Dai Bosatsu Zendo. Cushion with the square pillow on top was my spot for the weekend.

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ABOUT MERRY WHITE BENEZYA



Merry White Benezra is the author of [Special Karma: A Zen Novel of Love and Folly](#), which you can learn more about at <http://specialkarma.wordpress.com/>. She has also has a blog about poetry and poetics at <http://studiousmuse.wordpress.com/>. Merry lives and works in Mountain View, California.

