

From Zen Buddhism to Preying on Vulnerable Women

The chilling story of Eido Shimano—a new [ebook](#) from *The Atlantic*

MARK OPPENHEIMER | NOV 14 2013, 10:18 AM ET



Eido Shimano, the Japanese Zen Buddhist monk whose exploitative relationships with female followers over a fifty-year period were to tear apart

the American Buddhist community, arrived in the United States in August 1960, at the age of 27, to study at the University of Hawaii. He moved in with Bob Aitken, a Zen teacher who had first been exposed to Zen as a prisoner of war in a Japanese camp, afterwards studying with leading Japanese masters. Shimano stayed in Hawaii for four years, then left for New York City, promptly to organize one of the country's great sanghas, or Zen communities. Until the women he serially abused finally began to speak out, in the last two years or so, Shimano was a pillar—the pillar—of the New York City community of Zen Buddhists.

Bob Aitken, Shimano's first host in America, is now dead. But in a handwritten note dated May 4, 1964, apparently for his own records, he recorded the reason for Shimano's departure from Hawaii. This note, haunting in retrospect, foreshadows all the abuse that was to come.

Aitken and Shimano had jointly decided to volunteer at Queen's Medical Center, hoping to learn a bit about mental illness. Two female Zen students from their sangha had recently been hospitalized there for "mental breakdowns." That's when a psychiatric social worker noticed something curious: a name from their case records—Shimano's—was the same as one of the hospital's volunteers. This coincidence was passed along to Dr. Linus Pauling Jr., a psychiatrist at the hospital, who investigated the matter, then reported back to Aitken that Shimano had played a role in the women's breakdowns. Aitken claimed that he made his own inquiries; he was vague about what he found, but he became convinced that Shimano "had indeed played such a role" in the women's breakdowns and was guilty of "ruthless ... exploitation" of the women.

"I felt," Aitken wrote, "that if I confronted him with the evidence, he would deny everything, and the Sangha members generally would support him. Further, I was concerned about protecting the two women." Aitken asked the advice of senior members of the Buddhist community. He even flew to Japan to

consult with his own teachers, the legendary Nakagawa and Yasutani—neither of whom, it turns out, doubted that Shimano was capable of sleeping around, but both of whom seemed unwilling to accept that this behavior was really a problem.

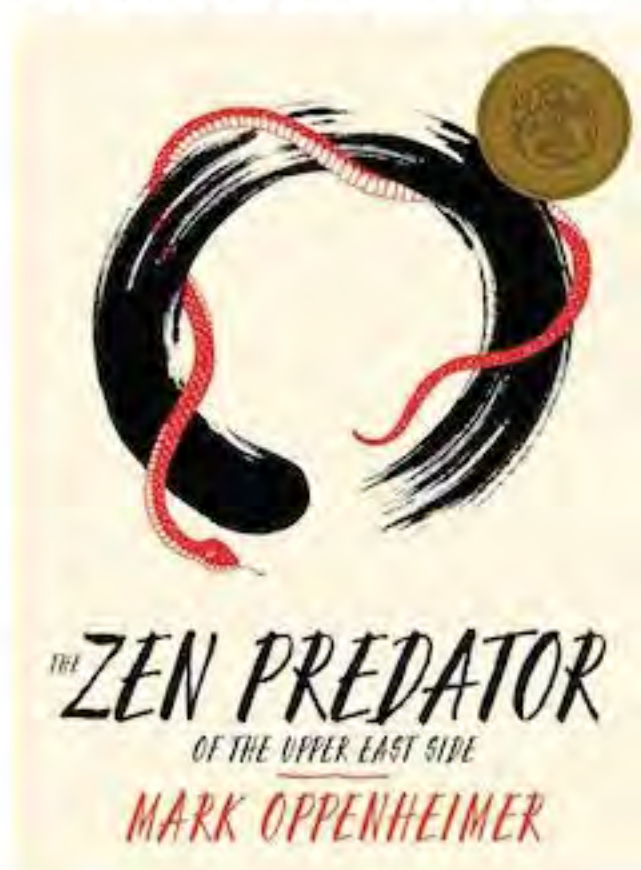
Aitken never went public with what he knew about Shimano, not in 1964, and not for the next half century until his death.

Tormented, Robert Aitken saved his correspondence with and about Shimano. He must have made it known that he was keeping the definitive dossier on Shimano, because over the years insiders leaked to him copies of private letters to the Zen Studies Society board, minutes of board deliberations, and other documents that helped complete the story of Shimano's predations. In 2003, Aitken gave the papers to the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and in 2008, just after his 90th birthday, he agreed to allow public access to the papers he had been saving for 45 years.

The papers might have just sat in boxes at the university archives in Manoa had not a former Shimano follower, a Zen priest named Kobutsu Malone, requested that photocopies of the entire archive be sent to his home in rural Maine. By 2008, when he was able to get the papers, Malone had developed an obsessive grudge against Shimano. An engineer by trade, Kevin Malone—he would take his dharma name, Kobutsu, as his legal name in 2010—had begun in 1977 to sit, or meditate, at Shimano's New York Zendo, where he was soon volunteering his handyman skills, doing carpentry, electrical wiring, and other tasks. In 1979, he moved to Dai Bosatsu, Shimano's country monastery, with his future wife. They took up residence in the gatehouse, from which Malone superintended the campus, "running the buildings, all the vehicles, logging, everything," he told me last year. He got married there in July of 1979, and had a son, Sean, in 1980. The next year, the family left for California, where Malone had a job offer. He and his wife divorced in 1990, and many years later he learned that his ex-wife, who had slept with Shimano before marrying Malone, had continued a casual affair with their teacher during their marriage—as his ex-wife confirmed for me.

I heard this story in October 2012, when I visited Malone at his one-bedroom apartment in a forgettable development in coastal Maine. When I arrived, I was greeted at the door by Malone, a short, blunt, white-haired, heavy-lidded, chain-smoking, double-wide bruiser of a man—and by his enormous Newfoundland, Harley-Bear. Malone’s small living room was crowded with files and a large computer—tools in his daily fight to expose Shimano, a task to which he says he has dedicated tens of thousands of hours. “I’m on disability,” Malone said when I asked how he supported himself. He unbuttoned his shirt so that I could see his surgical scars. “I’ve had five heart attacks, two strokes, and a triple bypass,” he told me as he took a puff on a hand-rolled cigarette, which between drags rested in a large glass ashtray.

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What finally brought the wrath of Malone down on Shimano was not the revelation that Shimano had cuckolded him, but rather a letter that Shimano wrote, or perhaps only signed off on, to one William Van Gordon, an English Buddhist whose mother was the subject of a 2007 story for the Daily Mail called “The Cult Guru Who Stole My Son.” Malone, who already had an avocation raking muck in Buddhist circles, began his own investigation into what he saw as the fraudulent practices of Van Gordon and his mentor, Edo Shonin. Wondering who this self-appointed American P.I. was, Van Gordon wrote to Shimano, asking whether it was true that Malone was a Zen priest, as he had claimed in correspondence. The e-mail Shimano sent back, likely written by his secretary, was painfully dismissive. “He came to Dai Bosatsu Zendo in the early eighties,” Shimano wrote. “He then attended a few sesshins with me

and expressed his interest to become our caretaker ... As a caretaker, he did not do any formal practice with the sangha. After a few years, he left [Dai Bosatsu] and I would see him sporadically, when he would offer to help with the

maintenance of our city temple ... He was living in New Jersey, with his two boys, separated from his wife ... He begged me to ordain him, telling me that he needed some kind of credential to support his chaplaincy work in prisons. I finally agreed ...”

One can imagine Malone’s feelings on reading this e-mail, after a friend at a Buddhist publication, which had received a copy from Van Gordon, sent it on to him. In his own mind, he is a proud, if exiled, Buddhist. In 1993, the Buddhist chaplaincy he ran at Sing Sing was covered by The New York Times. He is the only Buddhist I have met—besides Shimano himself, that is—who legally adopted his dharma name, going from Kevin to Kobutsu. So it was Shimano’s insult that drove Malone to put Aitken’s files—which are, according to an archivist at the University of Hawaii, still “being processed”—on the Internet.

Malone bought the domain ShimanoArchive.com and spent two years transcribing handwritten letters, and imploring friends and acquaintances to translate any documents in Japanese. He added to Aitken’s files his own collection of just about anything pertaining to Shimano. The full archive comprises more than 6,000 pages so far, and it includes Aitken’s earliest notes on Shimano, accusing letters to the board of Zen Studies Society from the 1970s onward, anguished missives from disillusioned monks, private correspondence among board members—often confused, befuddled, or in denial—and painful testimonials from women whom Shimano had, they said, groped, made passes at, seduced, romanced, and in many cases dumped. This was the information that became available online in March 2010.

It would take days to read the archive from beginning to end. For the casual inquisitor, the curious browser, the Peeping Tom, there is no need to read it that way: you can dip into it most anywhere and find something shocking, horrifying, or compellingly smutty. For the more serious student—of Buddhism, of sexual abuse, of Eido Shimano—the archive does reward a thorough examination, because it contains within it all the explanations for why Shimano lasted as long as he did. To begin, there is evidence of his *modus operandi*, which seems always to have involved finding the needy woman, the unstable one, the one who could not stand up for herself. Then, throughout the

archive, you can find the excuses others gave for enabling him: the desire to protect Buddhism, the gratitude to Shimano, the confusion about what Buddhism permits or does not permit. It's all there, a case study in a community's inability to protect itself.

At the very beginning of the archive are Aitken's anguished letters about the women in Hawaii. On August 24, 1964, Aitken wrote to Nakagawa, the Japanese teacher, "The whole thing hinges on the matter of mental health. If the girls had come to their priest in search of sex, and had found sex, then surely there would have been no mental breakdown afterward. But, the way Dr. Smith expresses it, they came in search of Zen and found sex, and therefore broke down."

A year later, on August 5, 1965, Aitken was again writing to Nakagawa; Shimano had gone to New York, but Aitken was unable to get the two women off his mind: Shimano, he wrote, had seduced one of the two women "within a few days of her arrival, and they were lovers thereafter. She was surprised at this turn of affairs, but accepted it, thinking that it could be a means for her kensho"—her moment of enlightenment. "He had told her that he would locate permanently in Hawaii, so when he left for the extended trip with Yasutani Roshi, she was very upset. Upon his return early in 1964, he resumed their relationship, not mentioning his engagement [to be married] until a month or so later. This coincides with his affair with [the other woman], which also began after his engagement and after his return from his world tour."

Scroll through more of the archives, and more than a decade later you come to a letter of January 30, 1979, by anonymous authors who called themselves "Your Friends in the Dharma." In their letter, to the whole sangha, they again point to Shimano's preference for unstable women: "Eido Roshi has beyond doubt disgracefully abused his role as teacher and betrayed the trust of his students by continuing to commit acts with the females of our sangha ... Eido Roshi knowingly takes advantage of girls in [a] mentally unstable condition and with emotional vulnerability who come to him seeking spiritual help and guidance. In face of these deplorable actions and the concern of our sangha, Eido Roshi has continually denied his involvement, and maintained an attitude that he is beyond questioning. We feel it's time to question."

One particularly poignant letter in the archive, dated February 20, 1979, is from one former student, Merry Benezra, to another. I have interviewed both students in the past year; they stand by their stories. Benezra herself—who later wrote a *roman à clef* about Shimano—never had sex with Shimano, although, as she writes, she “experienced quite a bit of sexual ‘harassment’ from Eido Roshi (from innuendo to proposition)” during two stays at Dai Bosatsu. During the first stay, the harassment was “just a barrage.” For months she spoke of the incidents to no one. “I wanted to be thought of as a student, and not one of Roshi’s women,” she wrote. “I did not want to rock the boat. After I left I found out, in correspondence with [another woman], that Roshi had also propositioned her ... We had been very close friends and yet we had kept a silence on something that was disturbing us every day, in order to protect the sangha, the kessei”—a three-month training period—“and the Roshi.”

The letter continues in a key of gratitude: “When I left [after my first stay], I seriously thought of ‘blowing the whistle.’ But I was grateful for the opportunity I’d had to practice at Dai Bosatsu, and I thought that if I said anything it would be the end of everything at Dai Bosatsu. I really thought it would fold the place ... One of the problems of Dai Bosatsu is that to warn a new female student that she is likely to be propositioned by her teacher is to risk every new female student leaving in a very big hurry and telling the world.”

As far as we know, Shimano has never taken a sexual interest in men. But, as Kobutsu Malone could testify, Shimano’s activities harmed men, too. One of the most pained documents in the archive is titled “An Open Letter to My Teacher, Eido Tai Shimano,” and it was written March 29, 1979, by the student Adam Fisher. Infuriated by the same revelations of Shimano’s affairs that prompted the letters above, also from 1979, Fisher ultimately decided against sending his letter to Shimano; it seems that just getting his feelings down on paper was enough for him, at the time. In 2011, the letter finally became public, when Fisher sent it to Malone for the archive. The letter begins with Fisher’s fond memories of what drew him to Zen practice. “What a lot of silence,” Fisher wrote. “No preachments, convincings, argumentations—just the silence to which we all return. I loved it.” The idyll quickly ended, however.

But then came 1975 and what later was humorously referred to as the “Fuck Follies” ... The Teacher had taken a series of bed partners from the sangha and had made passes at others. For a while, I didn’t believe it. You were married, you were the teacher, you had submitted yourself to the precept of moral conduct ... But then I talked with some of your paramours ... Each had thought of herself as “the only one.” Each had been unceremoniously ditched. I heard about the confrontation between you, your teacher, your wife and one of the sangha members.

Yet Fisher remained at Dai Bosatsu. “I stayed,” he wrote, “because I was afraid to leave.” He decided not to concern himself with his teacher’s ethics. “Time came and went. There were stories. About the student who tried to commit ritual suicide at Dai Bosatsu. About other women you were involved with. But after the first upset, I shut the door on the Fuck Follies. I was going to sit on [the] cushion and let the world take care of itself.”

But by 1979, Fisher had encountered new accusations that he was unwilling to ignore: “So now it has begun again. First Peter and Dave sent a letter to the board of trustees. They sent it together with the diary that included love letters addressed to you from a woman member. Do you know what Peter said to me? He said, æWe ... were naive. We thought Eido Roshi would be out in a week. We thought the board of directors would have to take action ... ”

As for the board of directors, they are in some ways the second villain of the archives. Friendly with Shimano, loyal to him, unable to hear criticism of their beloved roshi, they were so uniformly committed to Shimano that in 1982, when the board president, George Zournas, finally decided to do something, he found that he had no support at all. He wrote to his fellow board members:

I am sure you have been aware of the undercurrent of disease that has been running through the zendo over the past several months. Some of you have learned that this has been caused by the latest in a long series of accusations against Eido Roshi by young women who say they have been seduced by him in the dokusan room ... This is but the most recent of a long

series of such seductions, dating back to Eido Roshi's time in Hawaii in the 1960s. Over the past sixteen years as [a] member of the Board of Trustees of the Zen Studies Society and more recently as president of that Society, I have attempted to make excuses for Eido Roshi and to cover up the scandals as best I could. Now, however, sickened by this latest outrage ... I have resigned from the presidency of the Board of Trustees and from the Board itself.

The archive is thus a record of two contradictory impulses. On the one hand this is a Buddhist community of great vigor and activity: daily zazen, weeklong sesshins, large growth in membership, successful building projects, fawning attention from the media. Yet at the same time there is a peculiar timidity, a fear that to speak about Shimano's sexual life would snip the spine of the whole sangha, would paralyze the life force that had come to animate it all. It was a fear that would continue to paralyze members of the community for several decades to come.

