

NEW REPUBLIC

The Zen Buddhist Who Preyed on His Upper East Side Students

by Mark Oppenheimer | November 15, 2013



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Right now, Manhattan's Zen Studies Society, perhaps the most prestigious Zen Buddhist center in the United States, is being torn apart by lawsuits, backstabbing, and infighting. The finances are terrible, and the beautiful carriage house on East 67th Street may have to be sold to pay legal debts—or, if he wins the lawsuit, to pay damages to Eido Shimano, the 82-year-old Zen master who built the society up but also, in a way, has destroyed it. According to revelations that have tumbled out over the past two years, and which I chronicle in-depth in [a new e-book](#), Shimano has spent 50 years preying sexually on his students. He may have slept with dozens; I personally have identified over a dozen, and spoken to many of them. Shimano's womanizing is of the sleaziest sort: He is married, and he has often picked for his mistresses much younger and disturbed women, the kind particularly susceptible to his twisted charisma.

But Shimano is hardly alone; his is not an isolated case. These days, when we think of predatory clergy, we think of Roman Catholic priests. Their sins are far worse than what goes on in Zen circles. But the percentage of the Zen clergy implicated in sexual misdeeds is many times greater than that of the Catholic clergy. In Zen Buddhism, the story of Eido Shimano's abuse of power is so commonplace as to be banal, a cliché.

In the 1960s, four major Zen teachers came to the United States from Japan: Shunryu Suzuki, Taizan Maezumi, Joshu Sasaki, and Eido Shimano. Andy Afable, one of Shimano's former head monks, called these four the "major missionaries" of Zen, as they had all received "transmission" from leading Japanese teachers: That is, they had been deemed worthy to be the heirs, to be responsible for the persistence of the teachings. And three of the four, Afable noted when we spoke, have caused major public sex scandals: first Maezumi, and more recently Shimano and Sasaki. Sasaki, of Rinzaï-ji, a Zen center in Los Angeles, is now 106 years old and, as his board members finally admitted in 2013, was groping and fondling unwilling students well into his 11th decade (he also ran a leading Zen center in New Mexico, and his lewdness did not respect state lines). Maezumi, affiliated with another West Coast *zendo*, the Zen Center of Los Angeles, was a philanderer and an alcoholic, as the scholar Dale S. Wright has detailed at length. The only one of the four whose reputation was unblemished, Shunryu Suzuki of the San Francisco Zen Center, gave *hissangha* over to a man named Richard Baker, who was later embroiled in a sex scandal of his own, resigned from his abbacy, and became the subject of a book with the appropriately suggestive title *Shoes Outside the Door*.

But there are many lesser-known yet just as randy Zen teachers. For example, Afable might have added that at Chobo-ji, a Zen temple in Seattle, Genki Takabayashi made passes at his female students. And after his death, several students of Dainin Katagiri, the founding abbot of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, in Minneapolis, reported having affairs with their teacher, who had been married. Today, one could reasonably assert that of the 30 or 40 important Zen centers in the country, at least 10 have employed head teachers who have been accused of groping, propositioning, seducing, or otherwise exploiting students.

The question is: How do so many Zen Buddhist teachers get away with it, and for so long? We can begin to approach an answer by thinking about the nature of authority.

There are two kinds of authority. The first is grounded in something tangible, concrete, observable: the soldier with his gun, or the scientist with her laboratory results. You can quarrel with their authority, but if the gun works, or if the experiment was well designed and conclusive, you are likely to lose the argument. But there is another kind of authority, an opposite kind, grounded in the invisible, the faith-based, the fictional.

Political authority can function in this second way. The social contract and national constitutions count because we believe them to count, because we will them into reality. Money, too, is worth something because we believe it is—we give the \$20 bill the magical properties of being worth more than the \$1 bill, even though the paper and ink are identical. Above all, we agree to the *stories* that prop up constitutions or money. We agree that the Constitutional Convention made law for all the people, and for all generations to come; we agree that the government will back up our money, if no longer with gold, then with its promises. Without our assent to those stories, the country would not work.

Spiritual authority is that second kind of authority. It depends not on miracles or mystical figures or discoveries of secret books, but merely on our willingness to believe, against evidence if need be, that those things were real. The virgin birth, the Buddha, Joseph Smith's golden plates that became the Book of Mormon—to build spiritual tradition, it does not matter if the people were real or if the events happened. It matters that we keep assenting to the stories.

Despite extraordinary personal shortcomings, Eido Shimano continued to wield spiritual authority throughout his time at the Zen Studies Society. He convinced the American Zen community that he was, in effect, the Second Coming of Suzuki—but even better, because he was here to stay. He was convincing not just because of his own facility with a story, but because he found Americans who were very receptive to that story. He found willing assenters, willing children eager to listen to his fairy tales. And he found them quite easily, because Westerners practicing Zen have an almost infantile relationship to what they perceive to be the authentic, Oriental father. One of Shimano's greatest advantages has been that he is Japanese.

There are some good, and unavoidable, reasons for Americans' dependence on Japanese *roshis* (and, more recently, as Americans have become interested in Tibetan Buddhism, for their dependence on foreign teachers like the Dalai Lama). Americans needed somebody to teach them the rituals. Asia is filled with monks and priests who know how to sit, chant, eat, bow, walk, dress, and live as a Buddhist. Until recently, the United States had very few natives who possessed that knowledge. The situation is now reversing, as the Japanese, in particular, abandon Buddhism as an old relic, while it continues to find adherents in the West. But in the 1960s and 70s, American Buddhists needed the foreigners. And as complete neophytes in Buddhism, they were apt to believe most

anything a teacher said: The Americans had no competing knowledge, no critical faculties, no grounds to challenge the teacher, no fixed point on which to stand.

A student was also liable to believe that her teacher was conveying the one true form of Zen Buddhism. Anybody who traveled to Japan, as many American Buddhists would, quickly learned that every monastery there had its own variations on the tradition—as with any other religious practice, there is no one true form. But the Americans didn't know that. The teacher knew all; the American knew nothing. In this way the teacher was like a deity, a minor god.

“Look, there's a certain type of person that is looking for something else in another culture,” said Ed Glassing, the former resident monk at both Zen Studies Society locations, whom Shimano maligned as a “homosexual.” “Sort of like, something they don't have, so it's mysterious, exotic, it's like *whoa*. And that gets the juices flowing. Like *whoa*, and when you start the practice, the practice I feel is—it's very profound. And the teachings in it. But for the [Zen Studies Society,] my gullibility, spiritual gullibility—I didn't realize that it was a borderline cult. It was high. The focus itself is on the master. And all of us worshipped him to a certain extent.”

Nobody was as worshipful as a student named David Schnyer. According to a 1982 letter from George Zournas to Jack Clareman, the Zen Studies Society's lawyer, a litany of charges was read against Shimano at a board meeting on September 14 of that year. The meeting, which Zournas had hoped would mark the end of Shimano's tenure, turned out to be another show of support. In his letter, Zournas, who had resigned the presidency in July, details for the lawyer's benefit how the various board members reacted to a motion that Shimano and his wife, then the organization's treasurer, be fired. One member suggested that the Shimanos instead be given an extended sabbatical. The new president, Sylvan Busch, “did not open his mouth to show any disapproval of Mr. and Mrs. Shimano's activities.” And then there was Schnyer, the youngest board member, who, according to Zournas, defended Shimano by reportedly saying, “He hasn't raped anyone yet, has he?”

At the time, Schnyer was just 24 years old, yet he had been a Shimano student since he was a teenager. He is now a professor of psychology at the University of Texas, and in December 2012 I spoke with him by telephone.

“I finished high school early, and at 17 I went to college,” Schnyer said. “At that time, in the 70s, drug use was prevalent, and I got involved in a fair amount of that. I approached it with a searching spirituality aspect, reading Huxley and Timothy Leary, and that leads you down the road to the Beat generation and Zen. I took a course at Rochester, an overview of Eastern religion and Confucianism. [The teacher] had been in a Zen monastery for a year in Japan. When I heard about it, I was like, ‘That’s for me.’” Soon, Schnyer was practicing Buddhism. While traveling back to school after a vacation, he stopped with a friend at Dai Bosatsu—the Zen Studies Society’s monastery in the Catskills—and was impressed immediately. “I said, ‘I have to come back here.’ So I did one more semester of school and then dropped out. And then I went back and basically never left. And stayed for 10 years.”

“How bad was Shimano’s womanizing?” I asked Schnyer.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Me and my friend always had suspicions he had ongoing relationships with Japanese women that were kept quiet, and were more or less continuous. And that every now and then something would flare up with a Westerner, often because the Westerner couldn’t keep her mouth shut ... If you counted the blow-ups, you’d say just a few [women,] but we think he ran his life like a Japanese businessman”—lots of affairs, but most of them discreet.

Shimano’s Japanese ways suited Schnyer. “He was perfect for me,” Schnyer said. “He was what I needed. He was not a sticky kind of emotional person. He was a very traditional *Rinzai* master: stern when he needed to be, very rarely encouraging. ‘If you’re going to do this, you’re going to do it on your own, but I’m not going to nurse you.’ For me he was perfect ... Somebody looking from the outside could say that’s why we stuck with him all the time. He worked for me, and if he didn’t work for other people, then I just wanted them to go, and often hoped they’d go more quietly than they did.”

Quietly or not, many people did leave. The Zen Studies Society was marked by frequent turnover. Students in their early 30s, even younger, could find themselves among the senior monks at Dai Bosatsu, in a tradition that is supposed to be ungraspable even after a whole lifetime of study. But for Schnyer this constantly refreshing membership was proof that the *sangha* did disapprove of Shimano’s treatment of women. “You won’t find anybody within the Zen Studies Society who has tolerated this stuff from start to finish,” Schnyer said. “It’s waves of people who say, ‘I’m

done with this, I got what I can out of it' ... and then a new group comes in."

I finally asked Schnyer if he had said what Zournas attributed to him: *He hasn't raped anyone yet, has he?*

"I suspect I probably said something like that," Schnyer said. "I don't remember saying that."

Schnyer maintains a tidy understanding of his personal Zen galaxy, in which Shimano is the sun, hot and dangerous but necessary. He was doing what Japanese *roshis* are supposed to do, what they have done for centuries. Shimano was not the bad guy; rather, those who made too much noise, who refused to go quietly, and thus disturbed Schnyer's and others' Zen practice, were the blameworthy ones. "I remember many heated arguments," he told me, "and no doubt one of my many arguments was: this is personal behavior, not illegal behavior."

Denis Kelly, a former Dai Bosatsu vice abbot, and himself no model of sexual continence—he too has had affairs, he told me, including one that "almost broke up" his current *sangha*—shared Schnyer's understanding of the proper hierarchical relationship between the Zen master and his female students. When Kelly grew frustrated with Shimano's womanizing, he made a proposition. "The deal I cut with him," Kelly told me, "was that he stop sleeping with Western women and only sleep with Japanese women, because they don't tell."

Surely others felt the same way, but only Schnyer and Kelly have been so bold or articulate, have made clear the amorality, and the misogyny, that can infect Zen practice and enable its malefactors. One of the greatest reasons that Shimano could sleep with so many women is that it bothered the men so little.

This article was excerpted from the new e-book ["The Zen Predator of the Upper East Side,"](#) out now. [Mark Oppenheimer](#) is the author of three other books, including [a memoir of high school debate](#) and a [travelogue about crashing bar mitzvahs](#). He writes a religion column for The New York Times and is on Twitter [@markopp1](#).

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