

GENKAKU-AGAIN (adam fisher)

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a cultural divide -- oh really?

Leaving aside Mark Oppenheimer's "[The Zen Predator of the Upper East Side](#)" for a moment, what would anyone think of a man or woman who came to a country 50 years ago and proceeded to cross the cultural and ethical boundaries of the chosen homeland? For precisely how long could those actions be excused based on the cultural mores of the land that had been left behind? Wouldn't the extended stay in the chosen land suggest that this man or woman chose to cross those boundaries, not because s/he wasn't aware of them and not because s/he was held in a genetic thrall to a land left behind, but for some other reason?

What person spends 50 years anywhere without gaining a pretty firm grasp of his/her environment?

Eido Tai Shimano came to America in the early 1960's. He was party to the building of a Zen center in New York (Shobo Ji) and a monastery in the Catskills (Dai Bosatsu Kongo Ji). He was also -- to return to NYTimes writer Oppenheimer's recent ebook -- a man who used his position as a springboard for the sexual manipulation of a string of women students. Further, he arranged to place himself at the head of the umbrella organization that oversaw the two centers, Zen Studies Society. His wife was treasurer. Where the money went was largely a matter of his discretion. A pretty good deal.

During all of those 50 years, Shimano was not shy about claiming and reclaiming his Japanese heritage. Japan, he would sometimes say, was a country better suited to real Zen training, real Zen understanding ... and Americans, between the lines, couldn't possibly hope to match what the Japanese might achieve. More than once he underscored his American students' inferiority. And when it was opportune, he would also claim a poor command of English as a means of sidestepping topics that failed to benefit him.

And more than once, I and others wondered why, if Japan were the land of true Zen and if Shimano were a true Zen student, he didn't just catch the next flight to Tokyo. But of course he had a ready-made answer, an answer that polished his persona as a true Zen master: He stayed in America out of a deep sense of Buddhist compassion: These poor bastards really needed the help that Buddhism could provide and he remained in America, however reluctantly, because he was the gold standard of Buddhist compassion.

What ... a ... good ... guy!

With the publication of Oppenheimer's book/essay about Shimano's willingness to prey on women students, a number of reviews arose, among them, one from [Jay Michaelson](#) in The Daily Beast. Michaelson argues, with tentative asides, that there is a problem with Zen Buddhism that goes beyond Shimano. The very title of his review -- "The Shocking Scandal at the Heart of American Zen" -- genuflects to Oppenheimer's occasional New-York-Times-esque longing to assert a wider, systemic flaw -- a flaw of which Shimano was an example, though far from the only one. This argument can certainly be made, though I'm not sure if either Michaelson or Oppenheimer are the people who can make it with more than a superficial, New-York-Times-y gloss.

Still, making the argument at all, has the net effect of mitigating Shimano's malfeasances: What the hell -- he was just part of a wider fabric. And simultaneously, the argument tends to buy into the notion that 50 years of living in a country is not enough to inform any emigrant.

Michaelson writes:

Then there's the matter of culture. Shimano's actions are inexcusable by Japanese, American, or any other cultural standard. Yet they did take place within a system of power and patriarchy that includes male sexual philandering within it. How different was Shimano's behavior from that of a typical Japanese businessman? This is neither to excuse his conduct nor make generalizations about other cultures -- but it is to recognize that Western terms such as "sex offender" may not completely fit. But a Zen monk? Here, too, the situation is more complex than it may first appear. We may have an image of Zen abbots as peaceful, enlightened, and sexually abstinent, but this simultaneously

parochial and Orientalist image is our problem, not theirs. Actually, enlightened Zen monks are often worldly, engaged, and sexually voracious. Likewise, most Westerners may believe that sex and spiritual teaching should be kept separate. But in what non-Judeo-Christian-Muslim book is that written? Indeed, some of Shimano's sexual partners regarded their physical intimacy with their teacher as part of their spiritual path. We should be wary before projecting our own Western sex negativity on non-Western spiritual teachers.

I agree with Michaelson -- Americans are a conflicted and prurient lot when it comes to sex. And perhaps they are even more conflicted and prurient when it comes to religion and sex. "Projecting our own Western sex negativity on non-Western spiritual teachers" may be an erroneous approach.

But, if in fact such projections exist, how could a man of exquisite training and sensitivity and compassion not pick up on that flaw over a period of 50 years and learn to live within their confines, however misguided and second-rate the students might be? Would his training in compassion and clear-headedness lead him to work within those confines to illuminate a more sensible outlook or would that training incline him to simply flaunt the appreciations of the 'heathens' within whose numbers he found himself? And even if such a man had nothing to do with Zen or spirituality, would the questions be any different?

The difficulty that arises when segueing into broad-brush generalizations about Zen and culture can be seen in an email sent by Roko Shinge Chayat, one of Eido Shimano's chosen Zen-teacher successors. Posted in the [Shimano Archive](#), the note reads in part:

Jay Michaelson really gets it, as Oppenheimer did not in his lurid pursuit of sexual titillation.

By crediting Michaelson's broad-brush approach -- it's the system, dontcha know -- Chayat also is able to legitimize her standing and credibility as the latest abbot of Dai Bosatsu monastery. It's the system, she can claim, and I have not been tarred by the Shimano bill of particulars. For those old enough to remember or who have read history, it sounds suspiciously like the cavalcade of pleas made by former Nazi bigwigs during the Nuremberg Trials: "Ich bin nicht schuldig." (I am not guilty.) Or perhaps the penitent Irishman nursing a hangover: "The devil made me do it." "The system"

excuses those who live within it and relieves them of personal responsibility. From the "systemic" heights, well-wishers can hold "Olive Branch" or "Samoan Circle" or "new ethical guideline" meetings that seek to 'heal' the wounds that many have suffered ... without ever really taking into account the suffering the sufferers suffered. Wouldn't it be nice if those who were part of the problem agreed to meet victims on ground that the *victims* chose, and there forthrightly admit and apologize for a top-lofty complicity?

OK ... it's the system and the culture. After 50 years of living in another culture, a (wo)man may be excused based on cultural heritage ... or if not precisely "cultural heritage," then something sounding suspiciously like it.

But if the culture-made-him-do-it argument won't wash, and if the compassion argument is belied by the facts, why would an insistent Japanese man stay in a country full of heathens and cripples? What reason could be adduced?

Others may have their guess, but I have mine and can do no better than to regurgitate the quote misattributed to P.T. Barnum, the circus mogul:

There's a sucker born every minute.