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Dialogue and Cultic Studies:

Why Dialogue Benefits the Cultic Studies Field

A Message From the Directors of ICSA

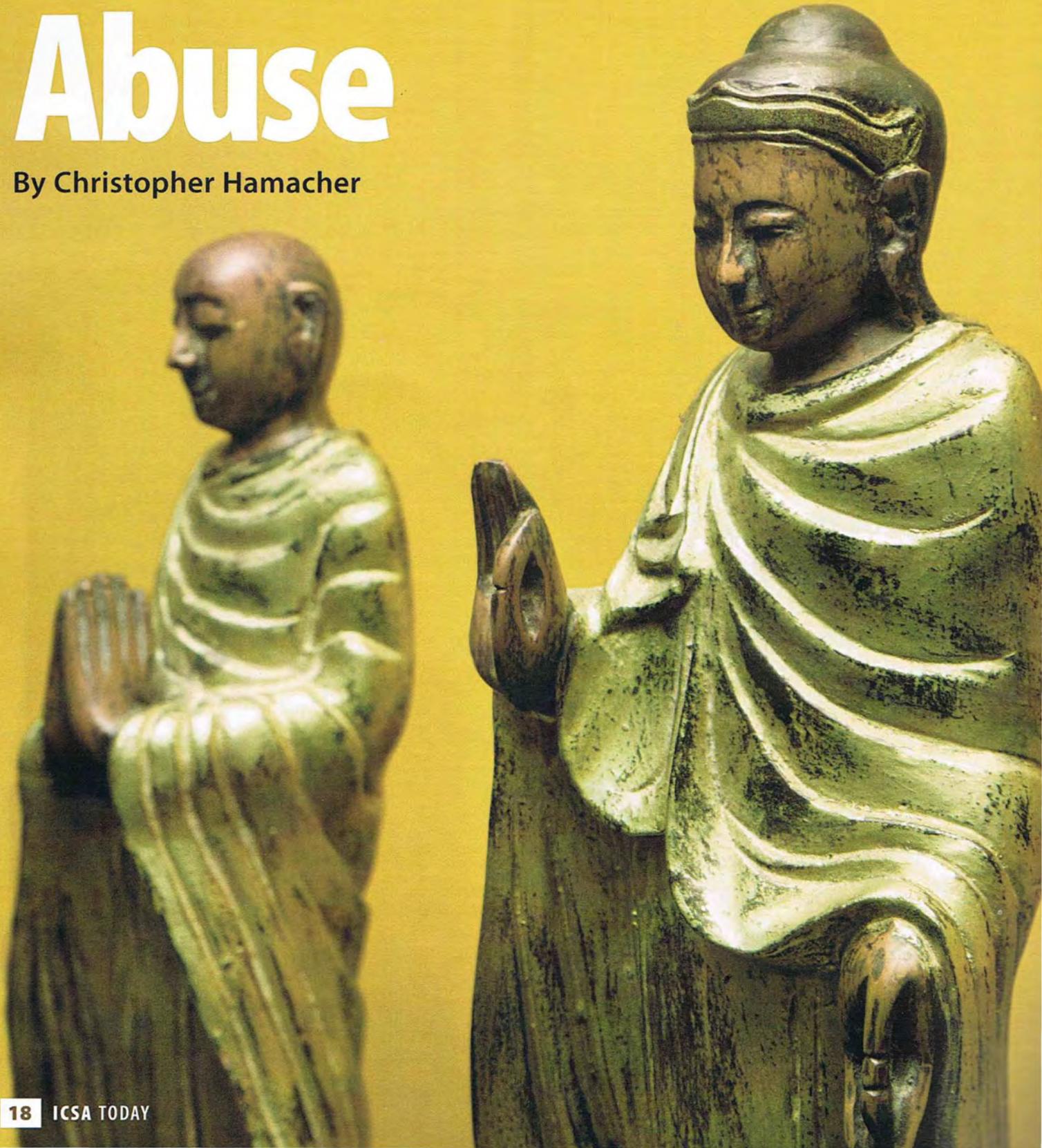
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Zen and the Art of Student Abuse

By Christopher Hamacher



When the first Zen Buddhist teachers began arriving in America from the Far East in the 1950s and 1960s, many liberals and intellectuals were immediately drawn to them as models of enlightened and rational behavior, selflessly showing their students the Buddhist Way without any hint of esoterism or scandal. This idealized picture has lost much of its sheen in the past 20 years, however, since the conduct of numerous Zen teachers has unfortunately not lived up to such exalted standards. Rumors of adulterous relationships with students, or of alcohol abuse, for example, began to suggest that these mysterious Zen masters might be merely human after all. Furthermore, a few particular cases uncovered only within the past few years have been even more problematic: Teachers such as Eido Shimano or Joshu Sasaki have been accused not just of one-time ethical failings, but rather of sexual and/or financial abuse of dozens of students over decades, in some cases without any evidence of remorse.¹ Moreover, other students apparently were aware of what was going on but still were either unwilling or unable to leave the respective group. In my opinion, these cases do not constitute merely unfortunate personal failings of a few errant teachers; rather, they are the natural outcome of the continued application of many entirely accepted Zen Buddhist practices.

First, it is well known that stringent and authoritarian structures, which in some cases admit absolutely no dissent by the student, characterize the Zen tradition. The power hierarchy in a typical Japanese-style Zen monastery is absolute, and open communication between students—for example, about the contents of their personal interviews with the teacher—is frowned upon. Although such a strict atmosphere is perhaps appropriate, given the very personal nature of Zen introspection, it is easy to imagine how an unscrupulous teacher can abuse such rules.

Similarly, the Zen mythology of “dharma transmission” (i.e., a kind of seal of approval passed down by generations of teachers) also can facilitate teacher abuse. For example, a Zen teacher who has received such dharma transmission theoretically no longer needs to behave ethically because his supposed enlightenment already has been officially and irrevocably confirmed in writing. Even though it is far from established what such enlightenment actually means in practice, the many glowing references to it in the Zen literature ensure that any doubts about the teacher’s conduct can swiftly be rationalized away. At the same time, when a teacher receives dharma transmission, he also obtains a monopoly on naming any future teachers in his lineage. Therefore, if his students ever wish to eventually teach themselves, they must continue to study with him regardless of any misgivings they may have about his character. Finally, the teacher’s dharma-transmitted colleagues evidently become reticent to express criticism, as well: In the two aforementioned cases, it was decades before the Zen community was willing or able to speak out against the teachers, despite detailed accounts of abuse.

The teachings of Zen Buddhism itself are also not without problems. For example, Zen typically places very little emphasis on justice or morally correct conduct. As one scholar has put it,

...if we search for evidence of substantive interest in morality in the two dimensions of the Zen tradition where we would most expect to find it—in the vast canon of Zen sacred literature and in the full repertoire of Zen practices—we discover that it is largely absent.²

And although ethical principles such as wisdom and compassion do exist in the broader Buddhist literature, Zen typically rejects the scholarly study thereof. Even the interpretation of the Third Buddhist Precept against misusing sexuality has been left deliberately vague in Japanese Zen. Thus, much teacher behavior that one could quite reasonably qualify as morally wrong can still be spun as acceptable in Zen.

Another Zen doctrine that a teacher can use to deflect criticism is that of our “original nature,”—i.e., that the human ego is ultimately an illusion. For example, the abusive teacher may state that because the student still sees things through the illusory veil of the ego, she cannot appreciate the fact that what might appear to the untrained eye as womanizing, lying, exploitation, and so on is in fact the enlightened activity of a Buddhist master. And because the only authority in a position to judge the difference between justified criticism and merely “ego-based delusion” is of course the teacher himself, he can use this argument to trump almost any possible questioning of his misbehavior. One especially absurd version of this defense, allegedly used by Eido Shimano, is that if he didn’t accept the sexual advances of his female students, he would be creating “worse karma” than if he agreed to their propositions.

These characteristics constitute only a selection of those elements within Zen that a teacher can easily misuse for his own purposes. Of course, such elements do not always lead to problems, and most teachers remain honest and responsible. Nevertheless, in accordance with the Buddhist principle of “do no harm,” I believe it is essential that such potentially dangerous elements be objectively examined and, if need be, discarded from future Zen practice. Only in this way will Zen, in my opinion, remain a legitimate spiritual alternative for Western people in the long term.

Notes

[1] See, for example, www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/us/21beliefs.html and www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/world/asia/zen-buddhists-rouled-by-accusations-against-teacher.html

[2] Wright, Dale S., “Satori and the Moral Dimension of Enlightenment,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 13, (2006), p. 3. For further examples of Zen’s lack of morality, see Victoria, Brian, *Zen War Stories*, Routledge, 2003, 288 pages.

About the Author



Christopher Hamacher, LLB, graduated in law from the Université de Montréal in 1994. He has practiced Zen Buddhism in Japan, America, and Europe since 1999 and has run his own Zen meditation group since 2006. He currently works as a legal translator in Munich, Germany. He presented his paper “Zen Has No Morals!”—*The Latent Potential for Corruption and Abuse in Zen Buddhism, As Exemplified by Two Recent Cases* in French at the 2012 ICSA Annual Conference, and he hosted a poster session on the same topic at the 2013 conference. The paper is also available online at www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Zen_Has_No_Morals.pdf ■