

*Also by Robert Aitken*

The Dragon Who Never Sleeps

Encouraging Words

The Gateless Barrier

The Mind of Clover

The Practice of Perfection

Taking the Path of Zen

A Zen Wave

(with David Steindl-Rast)

The Ground We Share

*Original*

Z E N

*Dwelling*

B U D D H I S T

*Place*

E S S A Y S

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for very different reasons has had difficulty accepting his role as a teacher. At the same time, he often said to me that it was the first duty of a rōshi to find a successor with clear eyes. “If he does not have two clear eyes, at least he should have one clear eye. If not one eye, at least half an eye.” I believe that he, in his great modesty, considered that he might have half an eye and that it was his karma and his responsibility to accept his position as wholeheartedly as possible and to maintain and pass on the teaching that he had received from the Buddha through Bodhidharma, Hakuin, and Gempō.

He could not keep all his commitments. After the deaths of his mother and of his old teacher, Gempō Rōshi, he stopped coming to the United States for sesshin with students of Senzaki Sensei, who had died in 1958. In 1962, he referred those students to Yasutani Haku’un Rōshi, who continued trips for sesshin to this country until 1969. It was clear to us that Sōen Rōshi could not live up to Senzaki’s hopes that he would settle in the United States. It is apparent now that he felt that the monk **Eidō Shimano** would fulfill those expectations in his place.

The other monks at Ryūtakuji seemed to have doubts about Shimano. I remember my surprise when I visited the monastery in 1961, a year after **Shimano** had come to Hawai‘i as our resident leader. The Ryūtakuji monks were my old friends by then—we had known each other long before they had known **Shimano**. I was struck by the fact that none of them inquired about him, even though he had left the monastery only the year before and I had just come from living with him. I asked one of the monks about this and received a look and a shake of the head that clearly informed me that Shimano was not one they could accept.

I am sure that they found ways to communicate their doubts to Sōen Rōshi. Why should he ignore the opinions of his students? Perhaps he felt that his own path was one that was more suited to the United States, a fresh environment, than to the old tradition-bound monastery setting in Japan. When Sōen Rōshi became convinced that **Shimano** understood this particular path of Zen, then perhaps the rōshi was also convinced that he had found the successor he had sought, one who could follow in the footsteps of Senzaki Sensei. Perhaps he also felt that the monks could not understand this, since they had not understood him in other ways.

When Shimano’s social relationships got him into trouble at the Koko An Zendō in Hawai‘i in 1964, he felt obliged to move to New York. My own relationship with Sōen Rōshi fell apart at this point. He could not believe that Shimano’s behavior was not just that of a “young rascal.” Although we saw each other from time to time after that and remained on fairly cordial terms, I always felt that Sōen Rōshi blamed me to some extent for Shimano’s failure to keep his commitments in Hawai‘i.

Sōen Rōshi continued to be faithful to **Eidō Shimano** over the years that followed. His initial belief that Shimano understood him and his imperative to find a successor with at least half an eye apparently kept his confidence unshaken until the crisis created by allegations of sexual abuse at the New York Zen Studies Society erupted in 1975. Moreover, his confidence seemed renewed to some limited degree from time to time even after that, almost until the end of his life. The reasons for this continued support have not always been clear to Zen students in the New York sangha and elsewhere in this country.

They are not completely clear to me either, but as best I can understand them, it seems that three factors are involved. The first is that Japanese social relationships are established on Confucian standards of loyalty to the superior and responsibility for the inferior. Translated into terms of teacher and student, this means that the Japanese Zen student and teacher support each other instinctively as part of their cultural mores.

The second factor is that the student and teacher create a special bond over the years of this intimate, one-on-one interaction in the dokusan (interview) room and in their day-by-day association in life together in the monastery. Their affection for each other is as deep as can be found in any family.

Sōen Rōshi’s loyalty to his disciple under trying circumstances can be compared with the action of his ancestor, Tōrei Zenji, who, I have heard, disowned and defrocked his successor for a major violation of trust in connection with the rebuilding of Ryūtakuji after a fire. I sense that Tōrei felt the monk had violated the Dharma and that this betrayal was serious enough for him to set aside the tradition of personal loyalty to one’s student. Otherwise, Tōrei’s own teaching of accepting abuse could be called into question.<sup>3</sup>

## ORIGINAL DWELLING PLACE

The third factor is Sōen Rōshi's own personality. He was profoundly faithful by nature. In his earliest days at Ryūtakuji, he installed his widowed mother in a cottage on the compound of the monastery, where she remained until her death many years later. He called upon her almost every day when he was in residence and read her his mail and listened to her comments. His relationship with Gempō Rōshi was that of an adoring son, and when the old teacher died, he mounted his life-sized photograph in the main hall of the monastery. It dominated the room, while the Kanzeon figure on the altar reposed behind its screen.

Once, Sōen Rōshi asked me, "What is the most important thing in the world?" I did not dare to answer, so he replied for me, "I think friends are the most important thing in the world." Shimano was much more than a friend, and I can only guess at the deep despair he must have felt when he could finally acknowledge to himself that he had been gravely mistaken about him.

From afar, I always wondered if Sōen Rōshi's extended private retreats in his later years were related to a sense of betrayal by Shimano. His life and his commitments must have seemed to him to be unfulfilled. All the time I knew him, zazen was the way he restored himself, and he believed in the power of one's own zazen to restore others. But zazen in retreat cannot influence others unless they are open to influence. I mourn our great teacher and the tragedy of those final years.

1984



## *Brahmadanda, Intervention, and Related Considerations*

A Think Piece<sup>1</sup>

**I**N July 1964, our resident monk departed under a cloud from the Koko An Zendō, leaving two women students in the mental health ward of the Queen's Medical Center. In the ensuing thirty and more years, I have been musing—and occasionally speaking out—on the subject of sexual exploitation of students by Buddhist teachers, searching for an appropriate role for myself in confronting it. The subject is difficult because, as John Bradford remarked as he watched criminals being led to the executioner, “There but for the grace of God go I.”<sup>2</sup>

Occasionally a woman comes to the interview room wearing a particularly low-cut dress, so that when she bows before me, she might partially expose her breasts. In the early days, I would shut my eyes for the crucial moment, then open them again before she made eye contact. A fellow teacher said, “Why don't you keep your eyes open? Are you so susceptible?”

“No,” I thought to myself, “surely I'm immune by now.” So I tried keeping my eyes open and found that I was indeed vulnerable after all. I noticed that the sexual charge I got from that glimpse of pretty breasts would color my attitude and give the interaction an

## *Brahmadanda, Intervention, and Related Considerations*

itself: “This is the crazy wisdom of our tradition.” “There is no right or wrong.” “Everything is empty anyway.”

Thus, openness and sharing are modes that should be in place when the new teacher is installed. Once an abusive teacher is in control, then intervention is likely to be the only viable way to proceed.

Some students are likely to find that their practice becomes flat in the extended strain of the intervention process. Many will probably drift away. “There are things time passing can never make come true,” as William Stafford has written.<sup>9</sup> One can just do what one can.

There remains the question of how the situation arises in the first place: how is it that the old teacher could be persuaded to convey transmission to an aspirant whose character is fundamentally undeveloped? The answer may lie in the fact that formal leadership positions in Zen have only recently opened to women and, even now, just barely. Male Zen leaders of the past appear to have shut their eyes to the disturbing power of sexuality by failing to address the subject both in Zen literature and in the process of checking the character of their successors.

A look at the literature confirms this. Taking Chinese culture first, among the fifty-five hundred cases listed in my directory of Chinese kōans, I have found just two that acknowledge sexuality, one of them Sung-yūan's question about the vermilion thread, cited earlier.<sup>10</sup>

**In Japanese Buddhism, by contrast, sex is acknowledged but trivialized. Our resident monk at Koko An thirty years ago was mildly admonished by his teacher as a “rascal.” That teacher was my teacher as well, but I was unable to communicate my sense that his monk might be suffering from an obsession.**

Sexual hypocrisy, rather than exploitation, is seen as the primary evil in Japan. Thus the Japanese master who has an affair is criticized, but much stronger disapproval is directed to the teacher who preaches celibacy while keeping a mistress.<sup>11</sup>

The problems are not limited to teachers from Japan. In recent times, we find Korean, Tibetan, and Vietnamese teachers accused of abusing their students. Sanghas with American and European teachers have had to face the issue.

I have heard people try to excuse Far Eastern teachers by suggesting that their monastic training did not permit much interaction with women, and they were not prepared to work with them as students. I find that to be a specious argument. What happened to the basic experience of the "other" as no other than myself? It doesn't matter that the other is superficially different. Without at least a glimpse of the Buddha Shākyamuni's realization that all beings are the Tathāgata, without continuing practice to clarify that glimpse and make it personal, a teacher cannot lead others on the path of wisdom and compassion. He is not grounded—not a teacher in the first place.

The Buddha said, "It is hard to be born a human being. It is hard to meet the true Dharma." So it seems, even in a long-established center, even with earnest practice. It is my hope that we can bring ourselves forth anew from the conflagrations that are still burning people. We know enough. Let's take ourselves in hand, and share.

This is my contribution to the sharing. I look forward to continuing the discussion.

1995