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THE SHIMANO STORY

by

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Recently the Village Voice published an exposé of the behavior Eido Tai Shimano, abbot of the Zen Studies Society and teacher at its two centers, Shōbōji in New York City, and Daibosatsu Monastery in the Catskills. It is a detailed and persuasive account of pathological exploitation. After some ~~dithering~~ ^{hesitation}, I have come to see the importance of making a response from within the American ^{Buddhist} Zen tradition, for the exposé is likely to raise many questions that need to be addressed openly.

--R.A.

Anne Aitken and I met Eido Tai Shimano in 1957 at Ryūtakuji, the monastery where I had trained earlier, in Mishima, Japan. He had then been a monk in residence for about five years. He told us that he wanted to come to the United States, and asked us to help him. We could see that he was a favorite of our teacher, Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi, and we thought that if we established a Zen group in Hawaii and installed Shimano as the head monk, then we might be able to persuade Nakagawa Rōshi to visit us as our teacher at annual retreats. Shimano impressed us as a polite, sincere young man, and we did not inquire into his background.

Even now, I do not know much about Shimano's beginnings, just that he was not a hereditary monk. He told me that his first monastery was located near Tokyo, where he met Nakagawa Rōshi at a conference of Zen teachers. As one of the attendants who served teachers their meals, he was impressed by Nakagawa Rōshi, particularly his way of bowing with thanks to his servers. He resolved at that point to make Nakagawa Rōshi his teacher.

I can only conjecture about what happened in the years Shimano spent at Ryūtakuji. Probably he showed enthusiasm for the path and devotion to making things happen. I should think that ^{negative} qualities which later became ^{evident} ~~so pernicious~~ were then only incipient. There were no women about, and the routine of the monastery undoubtedly consumed most of his energy. I did learn afterwards that he was resented by the other monks at Ryūtakuji, who felt that he was arrogant toward them.

When Shimano arrived in Hawaii in 1960, our Zen group was meeting at our ^{later the} ~~house~~ ^{to the} ~~house~~ ^{Zen center} two nights a week. We had sold our bookstore, and I had not yet begun work at the University of Hawaii. He made his home with us, and he and I set about translating Zen texts together, and establishing group procedures.

Problems arose very quickly. As ~~soon as~~ he began making friends in the group, divisive patterns of relationships appeared. Looking back, I see that I did not handle things well: I argued when I should have kept silent, and I endured when I should have sought a showdown. My trust in the process of meditation and in our teacher kept me persuaded that our difficulties were trivial in a larger perspective.

It was ^{clear} that our preconceptions of a monk as some-
 one who accepted poverty as a way of life were not to be em-
 bodied by ~~that one~~ ^{Shimano}. Unlike our first teacher, Senzaki Nyogen
 Sensei of Los Angeles, and unlike his own colleague from Ryūtakuji,
 [Dōkai] Fukui ^{Oshō}, who came to stay at Yellow Springs, Ohio, for a time
 in the early 1960s, ^{our new monk} ~~Shimano~~ lived anything but a retiring life.
 Though we ~~were~~ only ten minutes on foot from the University of
 Hawaii where he took a half-time course, and though two bus lines
 passed ^{nearby}, he insisted on getting a motorcycle for his trans-
 portation. He dressed like a young man of commerce, and pressed
 for a substantial salary. He was 29 at this time.

I recall that when Anne and I visited Ryūtakuji in the fall
 of 1961, we showed Nakagawa Rōshi photographs of our group. He
 pointed to Shimano in one picture and asked, "Who is that?"

"Tai San," I replied, using Shimano's familiar name.

Nakagawa Rōshi seemed incredulous. "Is that Tai San?" he
^c exclaimed. I looked again at the photo, and was obliged to admit
 that he had indeed changed in just 15 months.

Hereditary Zen Buddhist monks must make a transition to
 society when they finish their monastic training, unless they
 elect to remain at the monastery. Usually they return to their
 home temples and take over as assistant priests, or even as head
 priests in those cases where the father has retired or died. To
 be sure, there is a period of adjustment to the complications of
 a curacy ^q after the relative simplicity of monastic life, but
 the system has worked reasonably well over the generations.

With the shock of a new culture, and with the character he
 brought to the situation, the transition ^{from the monastery}
 was in Shimano's case ^{quite stormy} ~~very~~ [^] ~~unpleasant~~. We felt sometimes that

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he was going through a delayed adolescence. Sometimes his judgment was so poor that we felt we could not explain it as simple immaturity.

In the spring of 1964, two women who regularly attended our meetings suffered nervous breakdowns and had to be hospitalized. One of these breaks occurred during a meeting, and was dramatic and hysterical in its symptoms. I was alarmed and felt responsible, because afterwards I could remember odd things the women said and did before their breaks which might have given me some indication that they needed therapeutic ^{help.} ~~attention~~

I consulted a psychiatrist and asked how I might learn more

about mental health. He suggested that I volunteer on the mental-health ward of our municipal hospital, where he was in charge of the training of psychiatric residents. I would visit with patients twice a week, sit in on staff meetings, and consult with him periodically. I jumped at the chance, and asked if Shimano could accompany me, since he too had expressed concern about the breakdowns. This consent was given, and we began our new schedule of playing checkers and volleyball with the patients. I sat in on a few staff meetings, but Shimano decided not to, as he said he felt he could not follow the rapid, colloquial exchanges in English.

Very soon, however, my friend the psychiatrist told me that the psychiatric social worker ^{the} ~~the~~ ^Λ on the ward had found Shimano's name mentioned prominently in the medical reports of our two members who had become mentally ill. She concluded that he was volunteering on the ward to prey upon other vulnerable women. I was appalled, and could not believe any allegation that Shimano had been a factor in the breakdowns. However, I talked with the psychiatrist who treated one of the women, and he with the utmost discretion persuaded me that I was mistaken. I also wrote to the psychiatrist who had treated the other woman while ^{he} ~~she~~ was in residence at the hospital. I did not have his correct address, so his frank statement that Shimano's ^{behavior} ~~action~~ ^Λ had been responsible for his patient's breakdown did not arrive until after I had taken action.

I felt that I could not confront Shimano with my information. Our relationship was very poor, and we did not trust each other at all. I believed he would deny everything, and I was not prepared to tell the group the whole story, for I was concerned about how ^{exposure} ~~the publicity~~ would affect the two women. I also felt

public

← that a ^{public} confrontation with Shimano could divide the group irrevocably and lead nowhere. I needed to talk with my teacher, so I ~~secretly~~ flew to Japan to consult with Nakagawa Rōshi.

I should explain here that Nakagawa Rōshi's mother and his teacher both had died soon after Shimano came to Hawaii, and he decided to forgo his trips to the United States for a while. He referred Shimano's training and the training of his other students in America to his old friend Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi, with whom Anne and I had done a retreat in Tokyo in 1957. By 1964, Yasutani Rōshi had made ^{three} ~~two~~ ^{in an American circuit:} trips to hold retreats in ^Λ Honolulu, Los Angeles, and New York.

Thus, when I went to Japan to get counseling about Shimano, Nakagawa Rōshi took me to see Yasutani Rōshi, and the three of us consulted together. I confess I felt disappointed in the response of the two teachers to my story. I reported in English and in broken Japanese to Nakagawa Rōshi, and he in turn interpreted for me to Yasutani Rōshi, who spoke no English. Their attitude seemed to be that Shimano had been irresponsible, and that we should encourage him to behave himself. I could not convey my newly found conviction that we were dealing with some kind of pathology, ~~and indeed, some kind of danger.~~

It had taken me four years of living in the same house with Shimano, taking two meals a day with him, and working with him as best I could in translation projects and organizational matters, to realize that this was not merely a personality conflict I was suffering through, but ^{the} ~~the~~ conflict of someone more or less normal with someone in a different dimension altogether. Thus it is not really surprising that our Japanese teachers could not accept my

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belief that their student was badly flawed in character. They felt responsible for him, and were not prepared to disgrace him by recalling him to Japan.

In making judgements about Shimano and his teachers, it is important to understand that mental illness and character pathology are viewed tolerantly in Japan. For example, an alcoholic is spoken of as someone who "likes wine very much." This non-judgemental attitude gives people with problems room to change themselves, if they are so motivated, for they do not have to deal with such concepts as "schizophrenic" or "sociopathic." However, if they are not inclined to change, or are unable to change, a measure of social control is missing.

It should also be understood that Japanese people judge us in the United States by our divorce rates and by our films. I think it is quite possible that Shimano later made a case for himself as one who was set upon by over-sexed American women, convincing his teachers, whose understanding of American culture was, I think I must say, quite meager.

Returning to Hawaii, I found Shimano incensed that I had gone to Japan to tattle. ^{did indeed} He ^{he} deny^{ed} everything. ^{Moreover, he} ~~and~~ declared he could no longer stay in Hawaii, and ^{he} moved almost immediately to New York, where he had already made contacts on trips as an interpreter with Yasutani Rōshi.

The rest I only know about second hand. Anne and I tried to keep our story quiet in Hawaii in order to protect the two women, one of whom made her home with us off and on between stays in the

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mental hospital for the next five years. I felt sure that Shimano had his own story about me and about his departure from Hawaii, but I wrote anyway to the one friend I had in the Zen Studies Society and told him important details. His response was that Shimano planned to get married soon and probably he would settle down. I felt that I could not be any more persuasive with other members of the Society ^{whom} I had not met.

Somehow we carried on, our group prospered, and ultimately Yamada Kōun Rōshi, Yasutani Rōshi's successor, took over our training. I went on to become a successor of Yamada Rōshi in 1974.

Meantime, Shimano completed his formal study with Yasutani Rōshi in 1969, and returned to Nakagawa Rōshi, who made him his successor. This raises an important question. After hearing Shimano's talks in 1976, and after reading his essays since then, I must say that I find him sadly lacking in insight. Wouldn't this be evident to his two teachers as well?

I believe they were both convinced that he was in process of change, and that he would continue to develop. He had established himself very well in New York, and had attracted many fine students. I feel sure that now, with the benefit of hindsight, they would acknowledge that they might better have ^{applied the wisdom of} ~~followed the example of~~ certain great teachers in Zen Buddhist history, who, despite the careful training they extended to all disciples, could find no one good enough, and so died without leaving any successors at all.

To this day, Zen Buddhist training is intensive and exacting. Each action is ritualized and used as a teaching, guiding the monks to worthy applications of the peace and harmony found in meditation practice. The "Ten Grave Precepts" of Buddhism are examined as ^{zazen} ~~themes~~ themes of meditation, and the "Six Perfections of Character" also

are studied. Compassion as the handmaiden of wisdom is stressed in lectures, in interviews, and in the daily life of the monastery. Even with a relatively slight realization, experienced in the course of meditation, the monk who pursues monastic training diligently will emerge from the eight years or so an exemplary human being. Even a lazy monk who walks through the training cannot help but become a better person.

Formal Zen study serves to sharpen and clarify even the deepest realization, and the daily practice of saving all beings becomes a lifetime task. The truly accomplished Zen Buddhist student inevitably is open and loving, obviously an emancipated human being with an affinity for children and animals. I sense that if it were the karma of all people to attain easily to such grace, the Zen monastery would be a far less rigorous place.

Apparently, Shimano was a breed apart. He was, we may be sure, well trained in the monastery, but it seems that only the exterior was polished. Some observers knew right away that this form had no heart. When Nakagawa Rōshi suggested sending Shimano to Los Angeles to serve Senzaki Nyogen Sensei in his last years, Senzaki Sensei sent ^a his trusted friend ~~Shubin Tanahashi~~ to Ryūtakuji to meet Shimano. ^{She} ~~Ms. Tanahashi~~ took one look, and returned to Senzaki Sensei and reported, "Not for you."

Likewise, an old-time student of Shimano told me about taking his brother to a meeting of the Zen Studies Society. The brother, who had no previous exposure to Buddhism, walked out at the first break in the meeting. When asked why, he said, "That guy is only acting."

But, it seems, Nakagawa Rōshi ^{had} compassionate expectations for Shimano's growth and was tolerant of what probably seemed to

be natural setbacks in a strange culture. Shimano's students had certain expectations of someone declared to be a Zen master, and moreover they were of a generation that had suffered disillusionment of American ideals, and were looking to the East for inspiration. In this setting, the mockery of Zen Buddhism and its great traditions, so clearly set forth in the exposé, unfolded and festered.

Shimano's manipulation of others included sexual manipulation. This was a particularly painful betrayal. The student who is sincere about Zen Buddhist practice, or the practice of any religion, learns to forget the self. At the beginning of the selfless life, however, there is an interval of vulnerability, when the student has put off the old carapace and has not yet developed confidence as an avatar of something universal. It seems that at this vulnerable interval, Shimano would violate the trust of the student. It is small wonder that some of them broke down completely. I hope that his former students will gather regularly for meditation, and include in their meetings a time for sharing with a skilled facilitator, and gradually come to heal themselves.

I am also concerned about what Shimano will do now. My guess is that he will stand firm and deny everything, even in the face of all the facts marshalled in the exposé. So long as he is able to persuade even a few people to trust him, he will probably want to continue to teach.

I think this won't do. It seems to me, in view of the evidence, that people who have had leadership roles in the Zen Studies Society should approach Shimano and suggest firmly that he correct himself with the help of a good therapist, or else face legal proceedings to enjoin him from teaching.

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We in other Western Zen Buddhist centers are sure to be affected by the publication of the exposé. It is bitter medicine, but we must swallow it down. I hope we can be the healthier for it, less cultist, and more responsible for ourselves, our friends, and our communities.