Zen Predator

Published by Brad on *June 16, 2014* | 2 Responses

On the recommendation of my friend John Graves, I recently read a Kindle Single called Zen Predator of the Upper East Side by Mark Oppenheimer.

It's about the sex scandals involving Eido Shimano Roshi, a Japanese Zen teacher who has been living and teaching in New York since the mid-1960s. Before reading this book, all I knew of Shimano's scandals was what I read in Shimano's behavior, as described by Oppenheimer, is reprehensible. I'm always reluctant to accept lurid accusations at face value. But even if there's a certain degree of misunderstanding or even misrepresentation going on, there's just such an overwhelming amount of nasty stuff here that it's hard to see Shimano as anything but a world class jerk.

I'm always careful, though. Because we like to believe in villains and victims. Remember The Wizard of Oz? If you haven't seen it, what follows is a spoiler. So spoiler alert!

When Dorothy accidentally throws water on the Wicked Witch of the West and melts her, all the nasty green dudes who'd been following her orders are suddenly free from her spell and become good guys. Here's the scene. This is lazy writing, and innumerable lazy writers have used similar endings countless times. I'm sure it didn't originate with Wizard of Oz, either. Writers of children's TV shows and movies are very fond of this kind of ending because it saves them from having to deal with complex, real world issues and gets the story over with quickly and easily.

We all grow up seeing stories like this. We like them because it allows to identify the bad guys and put all the blame on them, thus absolving ourselves for our own role in making them powerful and even doing their bidding. When we grow up, we know better intellectually. But we still want to believe in Wicked Witches of the West.

A story like Shimano's appears to fit the bill almost perfectly. Oppenheimer tells us that Shimano selected his conquests carefully, targeting insecure young women searching for spiritual fulfillment. Oppenheimer paints Shimano as a master of manipulation, who preyed upon his victims' insecurities and used his other followers' desire to protect the dharma, which was then new to America and thus fragile, to cloak himself in virtual invulnerability.

To suggest that any of these women may have been anything other than nearly helpless victim of a master manipulator seems callous and lacking in compassion. To even imply this would seem to be to agree with Shimano's accusations that these women were the real aggressors, or even crazy people who blame him for seductions that never really happened. I do not agree with Shimano's lame excuses.

You already noticed that I called Shimano a world class jerk. I very much hold him accountable for his role in what happened. Still, Shimano was not the Wicked Witch of the West. He may have cast a powerful spell, but there was no magic involved. He only had the power that those around him provided. He abused his power. But he shouldn't have been given such power to begin with.

Master of Seduction?

A complex system formed which both provided Shimano with fodder for his overwhelming appetite for sexual conquest and a legion of co-conspirators who protected him even when they knew he was doing harm. This, in turn, made him seem even more powerful and therefore more attractive. Thus his seductions were even more successful. He must have been hard to resist, even though it's difficult for me to see him as a very handsome guy. He should have behaved better.

The thing that bugs me about Oppenheimer's book is the same thing that bugs me about so much of what's written on the subject of Zen sex scandals. Writers of such pieces rarely know very much about Zen. Like Oppenheimer, they conflate Zen with all kinds of Eastern spiritual traditions. And so Oppenheimer quotes Josh Baran, who he identifies as a "former Zen priest," who tells him that Zen masters are to be seen as superhuman living Buddhas that one is expected to surrender to, thus becoming childlike and vulnerable.

Amazon's author page says that Mr. Baran, author The Tao of Now, "was recognized as a teacher in the Soto Zen tradition and received 'Dharma transmission'." But I have to wonder what sort of Soto Zen Mr. Baran studied, or perhaps if Oppenheimer heard him right. Every Soto Zen teacher I've ever met has behaved quite the opposite of someone who wished to be seen as a superhuman living Buddha and none I know has ever demanded surrender. If Eido Shimano demanded surrender he was going against thousands of years of Soto Zen tradition.

The implication throughout Oppenheimer's piece is that perhaps there is something intrinsically wrong with Zen which leads to the kind of abuses Shimano indulged in. But it's not about Zen. It's about how power-hungry sociopathic megalomaniacs gravitate towards careers as spiritual teachers in order to have a perfect place to operate.

What Shimano did is anything but unique to the Zen tradition. It happen in religious communities of all denominations and sects. In fact, the tradition of not viewing Zen teachers as superhuman living Buddhas is there to try to prevent such things from happening. Shimano's followers, though, came along at a time when few Westerners knew anything at all about the Zen tradition. So whatever their master told them, they regarded as true.

It is vital that we do not see Zen teachers as superhuman living Buddhas. As the Dalai Lama said, "I recommend never adopting the attitude toward one's spiritual teacher of seeing his or her every action as divine or noble. … if one has a teacher who is not qualified, who is engaging in unsuitable or wrong behavior, then it is appropriate for the student to criticize that behavior."

Respect for one's teacher is important, and hierarchical structures are often necessary to maintain an organization. But fantasies that one's teacher is the embodiment of some sort of divine perfection are destructive and dangerous. They allow master manipulators like Shimano to do their business. Otherwise they are powerless.

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