

# Connections

Personal journal of my experience with Unfettered Mind



Sunday, February 8, 2015

## teachers and masks

In 2008, the instrumental Western Zen teacher Robert Aitken unsealed documents indicating that as early as 1964 the “Zen Master” and main teacher at the Zen Studies Society, Eido Shimano, had **sexually violated two women** resulting in their psychiatric hospitalization. In 2010 the Shimano archive went online with this and other powerful evidence for **five decades of sexual predation**. In 2013, Sherry Chayat, “Shinge Roshi,” the “dharma heir” of Eido Shimano wrote, “we...remain grateful for...his **five decades of inspiring teaching**.”

One student reported that when Sherry informed ZSS students of Shimano’s abuse in May of 2010, she explained that he still had the “true dharma eye” and **“lived in the absolute.”**

But then, in 2012, right before she thanked her teacher for his inspiring teaching, Sherry told Professor Jeff Shore that her teacher was a **“manipulative sociopath.”**

What’s going on here?

It seems as if Sherry is alternating masks. She puts on the mask of the wronged victim, concerned lest others share her fate, when that mask “saves face.” But she puts on the mask of the “Zen Roshi” and devoted disciple when she wants to assert her continued authority. When that mask became a problem again, because it associates her with the man who gave it to her (a man who used his mask to rob others of their dignity and sanity), she switches masks once again.

Keith Johnstone, one of the “pioneers of improvisational theater,” has something to teach us on this subject. He created and studied improv exercises which induce participants to enact various social roles, and penned an interesting chapter on **masks** in which he describes how a theater mask induces the wearer to embody the social role suggested by its face and character, as if in a trance. The suggestion is so powerful as to be irresistible. Interestingly, Johnstone cites the masks used in Tibetan Buddhist ritual tantric practices as an example of this trance-inducing power.

The movie **The Mask** also explored the dis-inhibiting effects of a mask in a light and humorous way. But the famous **Stanley Milgram’s experiment** showed how easy it was to make others do terrible things when condoned by an authority, and the **Stanford prison experiment** showed the dis-inhibiting effects of the mask of authority on the person assuming authority. The humor went dark there.

I see the group dynamic induced around my former teacher (Ken McLeod) as a trance with a twist. Because Ken was simultaneously aware of the unconscious forces behind Eastern practices he had learned *and* the tendency in modern Western culture to be suspicious of masks, he developed a highly refined “maskless mask.” This was the mask of the ordinary unassuming guy, not seeking power or advantage, a mask well-known to politicians and sales people.

Interestingly, Ken adopted and adapted some of Johnstone’s exercises in his work with groups. The participants would take up certain poses and positions of power in a game environment—strictly speaking physical masks are not necessary—to explore group and power dynamics. A friend of mine, though, who practiced Johnstone’s work in an actual theater group for years, with all of its exhilarating and embarrassing moments, quickly noted a peculiarity and a dead giveaway to anyone trained to see the power dynamic at work *in Ken’s group* rather than just in the games: Ken never participated. He watched. In fact I believe he had never participated, ever in his life, in these games. Ken sat off to the side, wearing the teacher’s mask, and just directed, observed and experimented on others.



Off with the masks!

Posted by Patricia Ivan at 8:48 PM



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