

RELEASED TO BLIND DONKEY:

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Dear Diamond Sangha members and friends:

As this issue of Blind Donkey goes to press, I learn that the Village Voice is planning to publish an exposé of Eido Rōshi of the New York Zen Studies Society, a story that was composed last year but never published. It is being rewritten by someone who has no previous knowledge of Buddhism.

The gist of the exposé has been reported in Zen circles for several years: the allegation that Eido Rōshi has used his position as abbot and teacher to manipulate people unconscionably. These reports have provoked chaos in the Zen Studies Society--many members have gone elsewhere to practice and some have discontinued zazen altogether. It is said that there have even been mental breakdowns and attempted suicides.

The exposé may include an account of what is happening at the Zen Center of San Francisco, where Richard Baker-Rōshi has been asked to take a one-year leave of absence after incidents that undermined his credibility as a teacher. It may even include mention of rumours of inappropriate affairs between teachers and students in other Zen centers. The Village Voice reporter has been talking with Zen students across the country by telephone, and one cannot predict what she will decide to include in her story.

The world of American Zen is relatively small, and communication within it is almost instantaneous. We in the Diamond Sangha share the suffering borne by our sisters and brothers elsewhere, and it is important for us to review what has happened and to take appropriate action.

During the 1960s, many people felt betrayed by national leaders and by the apparent bankruptcy of the political-economic system. Some of these people took up Zen as a new way of life, just at the time when new teachers were appearing. In the case of Eido Rōshi, he seemed to be a descendent of a priestly line that was distinguished in enlightenment and culture. He became a successful leader of a large movement that included socially prominent members, some of them quite wealthy.

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It was an authoritarian organization, ruled by Eido Rōshi from the top. Members were encouraged to forget themselves in blind obedience to him, a distortion of the Buddhist teaching of no-self. Eido Rōshi married early in his career, but he reportedly conducted a series of affairs with his students that violated his own teaching of non-harming.

With all this being made public, possibly with the exposure of scandals elsewhere, it is time, I suggest, for us to examine our own weaknesses in teaching, practice, and organization, and to rally around to strengthen our Sangha, and the Buddha Sangha generally.

Many people are asking, "How could So-and So do zazen for twenty or thirty years and still violate the spirit of the precepts in such a flagrant way?" "Wasn't his character obvious to his teacher?" "What does transmission of the Dharma mean, after all?" I want to face these questions squarely.

A full response would take more space than we have in this issue of Blind Donkey. It would discuss the delusions possible in Zen study: the literal and shallow interpretation of "When I am tired I sleep; when I am hungry I eat." It would include a discussion of authoritarian and exclusively male modes of Sangha organization which accompanied Zen teaching to the West. It would examine cultural misunderstandings by Zen teachers and their followers. It would explain the place of the Buddhist precepts in Japanese Zen study, and the importance of Confucianism in Far Eastern monastic life. It would take up charisma, power, and submission as psychological factors.

I suspect that even when we have understood all these matters completely, we will still be thrown back upon ourselves. If it is possible to ask such hard questions about Zen leaders, with their marvelous heritage, then certainly we ourselves must acknowledge that we all have corrupt tendencies, simply as human beings. Where does such an acknowledgement lead us?

I think that it leads us back to the old guidelines that have been neglected: the precepts, the paramitas, and the eight-fold path. It leads us to measures that will permit the Sangha to be responsible for its own governance. It leads us to establish forums that will guarantee open communication.

This means taking care of ourselves and being forthright with our teachers. Our responsibilities also extend to our sisters and brothers who are suffering the trauma of betrayal. I invite suggestions on this subject. How can we help? Please write to us, and write to your trusted sisters and brothers in other centers. Let's polish up the Sangha treasure! The whole world is in a terrible mess. Let's take care of our own troubles, and get on with the bigger job out there!