

# The Aitken-Shimano Letters



by Vladimir K. and Stuart Lachs

*In May of this year, we received a CD collection of letters held at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library Archives. Robert Aitken Rōshi, the founder of the Diamond Sangha, an international Zen sangha, has donated his extensive files to the university library. The letters were, until recently, part of the sealed section of Aitken's voluminous papers. The collection is accompanied by a signed letter dated August 14, 2008, from Lynn Ann Davis, Head of the Preservation Department of the library attesting to their authenticity, and every page of each letter is stamped with the library's stamp. The letters cover the period of 1964 through to 1984 and are devoted to the interactions, directly and indirectly, between Aitken Rōshi and Eido Shimano Rōshi of the New York-based Zen Studies Society. Although there are some letters between Shimano and Aitken, and between Aitken and his Japanese teachers Sōen Rōshi, Yasutani Rōshi, and Yamada Rōshi, many are to others in the wider American Zen movement. The letters are concerned primarily with the "Shimano problem", a problem about the alleged sexual misbehaviour of Eido Shimano Rōshi that first arose in 1964 in Hawai'i, where Aitken Rōshi is based.*

*Following is a summation of the extraordinary story, as explicated in the Aitken letters, of a Zen master teaching in America for some 35 years, who has been accused of sexual misconduct numerous times and yet was never called to task nor properly investigated. A thorough, open and public inquiry into these accusations is long overdue. It is inappropriate that in today's climate, when many religious figures have been accused and found guilty of inappropriate sexual activities, that Zen Buddhist teachers should be exempt from similar inquiries and not be held to the highest standards of propriety.*

*Vladimir K., September, 2009*

Comments on this paper are welcome. Please write to Stuart Lachs at  
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It should be remembered that the mind of the master is ever pure... and even if the master tells lies, steals, and chases women..., he is still to be considered a true master as long as he scolds his disciples for their transgressions.[1]

One wonders what the Buddha would have thought of the statement above. Buddhist history says that the Buddha laid down the rules for monks (the *Vinaya*) and one does not have to be familiar with the *Vinaya* to believe that lying, stealing or inappropriate sex would not be condoned within the rules. [\[2\]](#) In 1985, [Jack Kornfeld](#), Buddhist, Vipassana teacher and clinical psychologist published in the magazine *Yoga Journal* the results of a survey he had done on the “Sex Lives of the Gurus”. Of fifty-four Buddhist, Hindu and Jain teachers that he had interviewed, thirty-four had sexual relationships with students. [\[3\]](#)

In 1983 a major scandal at a prominent Zen center became public for the first time. It was not the first scandal to hit a Zen center, but it was the first one to become well-known outside the narrow American Zen community because it involved the abbot, Richard Zentatsu Baker Rōshi of what was probably the most famous center in America and the first Zen Buddhist Monastery established outside of Asia, the [San Francisco Zen Center](#). Baker Rōshi was accused of having an affair with a married woman, his best friend’s wife. As the story unfolded, a number of other women came forth and revealed that they too had had sexual relations with the roshi. Baker Rōshi was also accused of financial improprieties and of being overly-ambitious in his role as abbot, spending more time with the rich and famous, such as California Governor Jerry Brown, than teaching Zen Buddhism. After much painful, agonizing discussion by all involved, the members of the Zen Center (the *sangha*) dismissed Baker Rōshi from his post and instituted reforms in the organization, giving the members more power and putting the next abbot, Baker Rōshi’s Dharma-heir, [\[4\]](#) Reb Anderson Rōshi, on a four-year contract. Control moved from the all-powerful abbot to the sangha. However, the scandal caused many to leave the practice and forgo further Zen training. There was much bad blood within the sangha between the supporters of Baker Rōshi and those who thought it was time for their abbot to leave. [\[5\]](#) It took many Zen Center members years to overcome their distress at what had happened.

But how had all this come to pass? Why was it not possible to see what was happening and address the issue well before it became so traumatic for so many? There are many reasons (see [Stuart Lachs’ articles](#) on this web site for a detailed explanation about the role of Dharma transmission and the power of the roshi in hiding problems within a sangha) but there seemed to be a parallel between the San Francisco Zen Center and alcoholic and dysfunctional families. One member stated, “we’ve learned all too well how to keep silent and how to keep secrets”, [\[6\]](#) a situation many would recognize from dysfunctional family situations.

The following essay looks at how problems with a Zen Rōshi can develop over many years and never be addressed. The essay traces the development of Eido Tai Shimano Rōshi from a Zen monk who came to Hawaii as monk-in-residence at a Western Zen center, the [Diamond Sangha](#), and, although accused of having inappropriate sexual contact with female Zen students there, became the abbot of a prominent Zen center in New York where he has been teaching for some forty

years. The story is based exclusively upon the letters of the Robert Baker Aitken Papers held at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library Archives. The story shows that it is not only students who keep silent, but that there is sometimes a “conspiracy of silence” among some very prominent Zen teachers in both Japan and America.

The following story refers to accusations against Eido Shimano Rōshi, not proof of any wrongdoing. Eido Shimano Rōshi has denied all wrongdoing and there has been no independent investigation into these accusations. It should be noted however, that at the height of the largest scandal involving Shimano, an investigation was stopped by Sylvan Bush, Shimano's close associate and Acting President of the Zen Studies Society, who stated, “three unbiased members of the group could not be found.”<sup>[7]</sup> At no time has anyone accused Eido Shimano Rōshi of any criminal activities and therefore there have been no legal proceedings against him. Nor have there been any accusations of sexual misconduct with minors. All the women involved were adults and therefore, ultimately, responsible for their own actions. Two New York City publications talked of covering the story, but both backed out.

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All the letters come from the Robert Baker Aitken Papers held at the [University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library](#) Archives. These papers are available upon request to the library.

TSS = The Shimano Story, unpublished, undated draft of a manuscript by Robert Aitken, probably written in 1983/1984

RRL = [letter to Richard Rudin](#), calling for the resignation of Eido Shimano Rōshi; 1995

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On August 9, 1995, an extraordinary letter was composed and sent to Richard Rudin, President of the Board of Directors, [Zen Studies Society](#), a New York-based group founded in 1956 by Cornelius Crane with the purpose of assisting the Japanese Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki in his work and for promoting Zen Buddhism in America. The letter was signed by eight prominent American Zen teachers, including [Robert Aitken Rōshi](#) and [Philip Kapleau Rōshi](#). The gist of the letter was that the undersigned believed that something had to be done about the Zen Studies Society leader of the previous 30 years or so, Eido Tai Shimano Rōshi, the teacher at the Zen Studies Society's two centres, Shōbōji in New York City and Daibosatsu Monastery in the Catskills Mountains of New York State.

The letter began by outlining the concerns of the teachers:

Over the past three decades, we have interviewed many former students of Shimano Rōshi. Their stories are consistent: trust placed in an apparently wise and

compassionate teacher, only to have that trust manipulated in the form of his sexual misconduct and abuse. Some of these students elected to continue their practice with us; most of them wanted nothing further to do with Zen Buddhism. With report after report of the same depressing story, it is clear to us that our colleague, Shimano Rōshi, is not simply one who slips into an occasional love affair. We have no hesitation in judging from first-hand accounts that the quality of these relationships is not loving but exploitive and extremely damaging to his victims. (RRL)

The letter went on, asking for Shimano's resignation as the "most obvious solution to the problem" but leaving open the possibility of placing Shimano into "a program designed to help him with his harmful predilections", noting that such a course may not be a "cure". The authors also acknowledged the difficulty of the situation for the sangha:

Neither option is easy in the face of the emotional and financial investments of the Sangha and the teacher. However, we urge you to consider that your teacher is jeopardizing the Buddha's noble teachings.<sup>[8]</sup> The situation is grave and calls for action to prevent further harm. (RRL)

The letter asked for a "timely response" and if a response was not forthcoming within a reasonable time, the undersigned would consider making it "an open letter". Copies of this letter were sent to fourteen others involved in the Zen world, including the man under discussion, Eido Shimano Rōshi. Whether there was a timely response or not is unclear, but the letter has never been made public until now and is hardly known in the wider American Zen community.<sup>[9]</sup> But this letter was not the end of the story. Eido Shimano Rōshi continues as roshi and as a Zen Buddhist teacher. Nor was this letter the beginning of this story. For that, it is necessary to go back to 1964.



Robert Aitken Rōshi

Robert Aitken and his wife, Anne, first met Eido Shimano in 1957 at Ryūtakuji, a Rinzai monastery in Mishima, Japan. As Aitken was to write later, "we could see he was a favourite of our teacher, Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi". (TSS) Shimano expressed a desire to go to America. The Aitkens hoped they could induce their teacher, Sōen Nakagawa Rōshi, to come to Honolulu to lead the annual retreat (sesshin) if they set up Shimano as a monk-in-residence at their Zen center in Hawai'i. (TSS) Shimano arrived in 1960, was given accommodation at the Aitkens' home, Koko An, which also served as their Zen center, and Robert Aitken and Shimano began translating Japanese Zen texts and developing group procedures for the sangha.

It soon became apparent that all was not well in the relationship. Shimano did not live up to Aitken's expectations of how a Buddhist monk was to behave, living "anything but a retiring life", sowing discord among the group and dressing "like a young man of commerce", demanding a "substantial" salary. (TSS) Shimano wanted a motor scooter though he was near a bus stop that took him easily to the University of Hawaii where he took classes. He also wanted special clothes. In a photo Aitken showed Sōen in 1961, Sōen could not recognize his own student, Shimano. (TSS)

It was against this background of discord that subsequent events unfolded. In the spring of 1964, two women from the sangha were hospitalized with nervous breakdowns. One of the women spent the next five years in and out of hospital, living with the Aitkens when not hospitalized with mental illness. Aitken, feeling guilty that he had not noticed the impending breakdowns of the two women, [\[10\]](#) began volunteer hospital work to learn more about mental health. Shimano accompanied him on his twice weekly visits. However, it was not long before a psychiatric social worker mentioned to the psychiatrist treating one of the women that Shimano's name was recurring in the reports of the two mentally ill women. The social worker "concluded that he [Shimano] was volunteering on the ward to prey upon other vulnerable women". (TSS)

Appalled, Aitken questioned the psychiatrist who was treating one of the women. Aitken's worst fears were confirmed. The psychiatrist who treated the second woman was no longer working at the hospital so Aitken wrote to him, questioning whether the allegations of sexual misconduct against Shimano were true. It took two weeks to receive a reply but the psychiatrist, Dr C. S. S., was unequivocal, writing in a letter dated August 8, 1964:

There is no reasonable doubt that this person [Shimano] while discussing the highest of intellectual and religious matters seduced and had sexual intercourse with Miss D. [name withheld]. This apparently had a very destructive result....This business suggests that your resident monk is totally incapable of the philosophy and religion he superficially espouses.... I hope this letter will assist you in ridding your community of his perverse influence. [\[11\]](#)

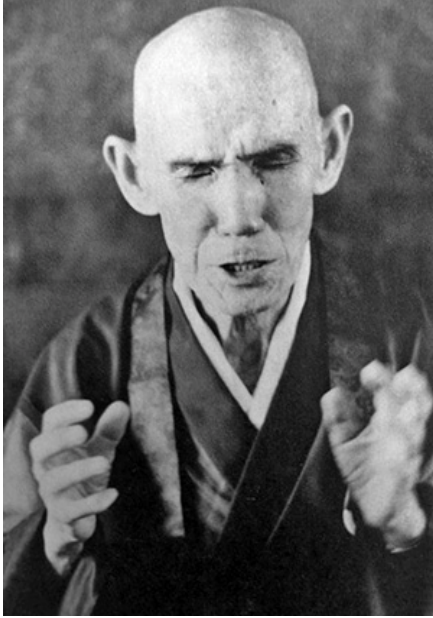
Robert Aitken felt that he could not confront Shimano with these allegations as "Our relationship was very poor, and we did not trust each other at all." (TSS) Nor did he feel that he could go public with these allegations, concerned as he was about the two women, and believing that the allegations "could divide the group irrevocably and lead nowhere". (TSS) Aitken decided to fly to Japan and consult with his teacher, Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi at Ryutakuji. Sōen Rōshi, teacher to both Aitken and Shimano, seemed unconcerned and took Aitken to meet with [Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi](#). Yasutani had been to America a number of times and had taken over the training of Shimano and seemed even less concerned with Aitken's story.

The meeting with the two Zen masters was disappointing. Some twenty years later Aitken wrote:

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. (TSS)



Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi

Aitken excuses this lack of interest by the two Japanese Zen masters to cultural differences between America and Japan, writing “it is important to understand that mental illness and character pathology are viewed tolerantly in Japan.” Aitken infers that he believes that Shimano may be suffering some form of mental illness or pathology, calling him “someone in a different dimension altogether.” (TSS) Nevertheless, Shimano’s Japanese teachers “felt responsible for him, and were not prepared to disgrace him by recalling him to Japan.” (TSS) Aitken returned to Honolulu with the issue unresolved.[\[12\]](#) Events were not only unresolved, but were about to get worse.

Aitken returned to Hawaii in August, 1964, to find that Shimano was about to leave for New York in a fury with Aitken for going to Japan behind his back after having been told that Aitken was going to California. On September 11, 1964, Aitken wrote a long letter to Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi outlining what had happened. Aitken begins by pointing out that the events have “been a real koan for me” and that he regrets, “more than I can say, my weakness in going to Ryutakuji instead of remaining at an inn and consulting with you privately.” Aitken notes that his original plan was to confront Shimano with the accusations and try to persuade him to return to Japan, and “it was weak of me not to insist on it”. Shimano’s sudden departure from Koko An, the home of the Aitkens and place of practice for the Diamond Sangha, caused a rupture within the sangha with three old-timers, including two office holders of the sangha, not showing up at meetings once Shimano left. Aitken tries to explain to Sōen Rōshi the seriousness of the situation, noting that “The accusation made by the doctors against Tai San [Shimano] is very rare, really unheard of in its rarity,” emphasizing that “You may be sure that they [the psychiatrists] are 100% confident that they have the facts when they set anything down on paper.” Aitken goes on to state that Shimano is very angry with him, “so angry that he says he does not trust himself to see me for fear that he will do violence to me” and that “he could never forgive me”.[\[13\]](#)

It was in this letter of September 11, 1964, that Robert Aitken confirms that he will keep “silent about the incident,” pointing out that his first responsibility is to the two women affected.[\[14\]](#) In a letter to Elsie and John Mitchell, dated 22 September, 1964, Aitken relates that another friend has written saying that Shimano explains his reason for leaving Hawai’i was due to conflict with Aitken. Aitken says in this letter, “I don’t mind absorbing some of the blame if that will

keep the real story dark,” and “I am telling people here simply that he is transferring, and I have said the same to everyone by letter when there was occasion to mention it,” except to a few close associates. Aitken regularly assured his teachers, Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi and Yasutani Rōshi, that he was keeping the truth hidden. It would be many years before the events of 1964 became more widely known.

Aitken, on the same day, forwarded a copy of his letter to Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi to Itsuko and Mitsuaki Suzuki, friends in Japan, asking Itsuko to visit Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi to elicit his reaction to Aitken’s letter and find out whether these events would influence Yasutani Rōshi’s plans to visit Koko An. In November, 1964, Yasutani Rōshi wrote to Aitken (a translated letter is in the files) saying that he had talked to Shimano (who had returned to Japan for a visit) and Shimano had told Yasutani that he was determined to move to New York and not return to Honolulu but “He [Shimano] did not mention much in detail about the reason for his leaving Honolulu”. Yasutani wrote that “This decision is entirely depending on his free will and I cannot say anything about his decision.”<sup>[15]</sup> Yasutani points out that Shimano had been very helpful to him by acting as his translator on visits to America<sup>[16]</sup> and that he [Yasutani] was responsible for Shimano’s training as a Zen priest. Yasutani acknowledged that while it was important to help lay people in Zen training, “it is more important to bring up or make a successor to be a Zen leader. This had been the most important thing for all Zen masters and it is why Zen has continued to exist.” Yasutani hoped to make Shimano a Zen master as “At present, Mr. Shimano is the only one who can sure [*sic*] to be my successor.” Given the situation and the fact that Shimano did not plan on returning to Honolulu, Yasutani would not be going to Hawai’i as planned: “All this happened because of Mr Eido’s change of his mind which caused very important situation to me.<sup>[sic]</sup>”

Yasutani’s decision to forego visiting Koko An was a devastating blow to Robert Aitken as the sangha had raised money to build a house for Yasutani’s visit and it was important for the Diamond Sangha to have the Japanese master lead sesshin. In a letter dated December 19, 1964 to Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi, Aitken writes about Yasutani’s decision: “His reasons for his decision were, however, a great surprise and a great disappointment.” Aitken begs Sōen Rōshi to come at least once a year to lead sesshin “otherwise I am really ready to give up everything.” The whole Shimano issue has become a “calamity which has struck us.”

Calamity or not, Aitken still will not tell his sangha the truth about Shimano or why Yasutani will not be visiting Koko An. In a letter to Yasutani, dated December 19, 1964, he reveals that he is “writing to Tai San [Shimano] to learn just what sort of story you and he would want in the next Diamond Sangha [the sangha newsletter].” He writes further:  
We must make a convincing presentation of your reasons for changing your mind, or the damage to the Dharma could be very great. Perhaps you may wish to advise Tai San on this point. I will print whatever he suggests.

On the same day, Aitken writes to Shimano asking for suggestions as to what to write in the newsletter, pointing out that it needs to “seem logical, or else there could be a certain damage to the Dharma, and to the reputations of both you and Yasutani Roshi.” Perhaps protecting the two women involved is no longer the primary issue. In a letter to Temple University professor of religion, Bernard Phillips, dated 27 December, 1964, Aitken, referring to the Shimano affair, claims that “It is no exaggeration to say that the American Dharma, such as it is, is at stake.”[\[17\]](#)

Although Aitken worried that “the American Dharma...is at stake”, he writes warm and courteous letters to the person who, in Aitken’s eyes, endangered the Dharma. In a letter just four months after Shimano set up in New York, Aitken writes to him asking for advice as to how to explain to the Hawai’i sangha the reason for Shimano’s absence and extending to him “best wishes for happiness and for success at your new post” and for Shimano’s upcoming marriage. In a January 4, 1965 letter, Aitken begins by hoping Shimano “had a pleasant New Year celebration, and that you are now well settled in your new activities,” and alluding to a lunch the two had at Koko An before Christmas.

Miss D., one of the women who ended up in a mental hospital due to an affair with Shimano was a German citizen on an immigration visa and in danger of being deported if her illness was considered chronic. On April 1, 1965, Robert Aitken writes to Dr Linus C Pauling, Jr. seeking advice regarding what Miss D’s medical records show regarding the recurrence of her illness and “the role of another alien”, (but not mentioning Shimano by name). Aitken then goes on to claim, “We have disassociated ourselves with the latter individual but we have not as yet been successful in transferring his visa sponsorship.” Yet, just six weeks later, on May 19, Anne Aitken writes to Shimano regarding an upcoming sesshin with Yasutani Rōshi, opening with “I hope that all is going well with you and that you are having a pleasant spring in New York” and concluding with “with best regards to you and to our friends in New York.” It would be nearly twenty years before the Aitkens would “disassociate” themselves publicly from Shimano.

Throughout much of 1965, letters flow between Aitken, Shimano and people in New York City, trying to sort out Shimano’s visa as the Diamond Sangha is sponsor of Shimano and therefore legally liable for him. It appears that no one in New York is able or willing to become Shimano’s sponsor and in the letters by Shimano, he seems to dodge the issue. After nearly a year of pleading with Shimano to find a new sponsor, on July 1, 1965, Robert Aitken, as Chairman of the Diamond Sangha, sends a formal letter to Shimano suggesting that in three months time he will notify the Immigration Department that the sangha is no longer sponsor of Shimano.



On August 5, 1965, Aitken sent a letter to Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi where he discusses the return to Hawai'i and the Aitkins's home, Koko An, of one of the two women who were involved sexually with Shimano. Aitken, in describing the history of the case, mentions that Miss S. arrived in Hawai'i specifically because she heard that "an enlightened monk...could guide her to kensho." Aitken went on:

He seduced her within a few days of her arrival, and they were lovers thereafter. She was surprised at this turn of affairs, but accepted it, thinking that it could be the means for her kensho.

Aitken speculates that the guilt Miss S. felt about deceiving the Aitkens may have led to her mental breakdown. He also reports that the other woman involved, Miss D., is "quite a lot worse, and is not allowed visitors at the hospital." At this point, it is over a year since Miss D. has entered hospital.



Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi

The letters of the 1960's in this collection end with a letter from Shimano on October 25, 1965, asking Aitken for help in securing a lost "Selective Service registration card (Certificate?) (*sic*) for my citizenship." This collection has no further letters between Shimano and Aitken until 1970 when two letters are included. By 1976 it appears that all is forgiven and on January 9, 1976, Shimano, who now signs off as "Eido Tai Shimano, Abbot, Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji [18]" invites Aitken Rōshi [19] to participate, along with one or two of his students, in a week-long sesshin to be conducted by Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi [20] at the newly built International Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji, with a dedication ceremony to follow the sesshin. The new center, built on 1400 acres in the Catskill Mountains of New York state at a cost of three million dollars, is to be dedicated to "the unthinkable movement of Buddha-Dharma from East to West" and Shimano believes "that the transmission of Buddha-Dharma will be greatly aided by our togetherness" on this "rare occasion". Aitken Rōshi, despite almost certainly knowing of a major scandal that erupted in 1975 [21] and the earlier problems with Shimano in Hawai'i, writes a lengthy acceptance letter the following day, agreeing to attend the opening of Dai Bosatsu Zendo. He also mentions bringing his leading student, Nelson Foster, with him and goes on to discuss Foster's koan progress. Aitken's cordiality towards Shimano is difficult to understand [22] given that in 1964 he believed Shimano had some kind of pathological problem and that he feared that Shimano's behaviour could damage

the American Dharma. Aitken's fears were realized in the 1975 scandals at the New York Zen Studies Society where Shimano was abbot. The letters of the 1970's in this collection end here.

In a hand-written letter dated February 21, 1981, Aitken Rōshi announces that he will not attend a meeting of Zen teachers this year as he "could no longer pretend that Eido Rōshi is my colleague." Who the letter is addressed to is unclear as it is addressed only to Rōshi Sama but most likely this refers to Koun Yamada Rōshi, Dharma heir of Yasutani Rōshi, and teacher of Robert Aitken. In this collection of letters, we have the first indication that relations between Aitken Rōshi and Shimano Rōshi are no longer cordial. However, a few years later, events, once again, are to overtake the American Zen community.

In 1982, a flurry of letters appear. Shimano is accused of trying to seduce a female student in dokusan [\[23\]](#). This time, however, the woman, Mrs R. W., is a reporter for the New York-based Village Voice weekly and the ABC television network. An exposé in a national newspaper is threatened. On September 14, 1982, George Zournas, President of the Board of Trustees of the Zen Studies Society and a member of Shimano's group since 1966, writes a letter to the Board pointing out that on July 31 of that year he had submitted his resignation as President of the Board and suggests that it is time for Eido Shimano Rōshi and his wife Aiho to leave. Zournas writes:

As you all know Eido Roshi now stands accused of seducing a student at the Holy Days Sesshin. This is not unique; as old members of the Sangha know that has happened again, and again and again. So much so that it has become a scandal in Zen Buddhist sanghas all over the world and other Zen teachers no longer send their students to us, or are obliged to warn their students about Eido Roshi if the student insists on coming.

Zournas goes on to point out that one of the Society's major fund raisers, [Margot Wilkie](#), resigned from the Board in 1975 due to the sex scandals of that period, and when Zournas is introduced to Ms Wilkie's wealthy friends, he is met with snide remarks about Shimano such as, "How's the horny old pasha and his harem up there in the mountains?" Funds from these former patrons dried up, forcing the Society to run on money "contributed to us by a convicted felon. We have been functioning on money that he obtained from selling illegal drugs!" Zournas also questioned the propriety of having Shimano's wife as Treasurer, implying that perhaps all on the financial side was not above board. The 3-page letter ends with Zournas calling on Eido Rōshi "to spare the Buddha Dharma and the Zen Studies Society further embarrassment and humiliation and follow through with his determination to resign." [\[24\]](#) And if Shimano does not go voluntarily, the Board should remove him and if that fails, "then I call on all people of conscience to resign from the Board of Trustees and encourage all other such people to resign from Dai Bosatsu and Shoboji."



Shimano receives dharma transmission  
from Soen Rōshi, NYC 1972

As events unfolded, it became obvious that the Shimanos had no intention of resigning. With the support of some members of the board, one of whom, David Schnyer, according to Zournas' letter, made the extraordinary comment, "Well, he hasn't raped anyone yet, has he?".<sup>[25]</sup> Shimano held onto his post as Abbot of the Zen Studies Society. George Zournas wrote another letter to the sangha on September 20 stating that it was time "to face unflinchingly the sordid facts as they are," calling the

situation "terrible". Zournas enclosed letters he had written about the Shimano situation in the previous few weeks and urged that the sangha members either sit at home or find some other Zen group to sit with. It was in this letter that Zournas quoted Shimano's own teacher, Sōen Rōshi, as "publicly denouncing Eido Rōshi as "a seducer of women and a liar"". <sup>[26]</sup> An attempt to investigate the various charges against Shimano regarding his sexual activities was blocked when Shimano loyalist Sylvan Busch, the Acting President of the Zen Studies Society, "felt that it would be impossible to find three "neutral" people in the Sangha...forming a fair-minded committee of Sangha members to carefully investigate the charges that have been brought against Mr. Shimano by a number of his women students over the years." <sup>[27]</sup>

On October 21, 1982, Shimano wrote a long letter answering some of the charges made against him by George Zournas. On the charge that Shimano's teacher, Sōen Rōshi, "publicly denounced" Shimano, Shimano says: "I am deeply hurt that you have set yourself up as someone who can comment on my relationship with Soen Rōshi, my teacher, in the most despicable way. This I find really abominable." On the accusation of financial misdeeds, Shimano points out that it was George Zournas who "in fact begged Aiho [Mrs Shimano] to assume the work you could not perform" (Zournas was briefly the Treasurer of the Society) and that "All financial records of the Society are available immediately to any Board Member" and Zournas should have availed himself of this opportunity before "making any hints that Aiho was stealing money from The Zen Studies Society."

On the most serious accusation, seduction of women during dokusan, Shimano

points out that dokusan is a strictly private meeting between student and teacher where neither are permitted to discuss what went on in the dokusan room. He denies any impropriety regarding the reporter, Mrs. R. W. , who accused him of seduction, and explains that she sought him out regarding “an experience” she had during sesshin and subsequently asked to see him after the sesshin in New York, where “She never for the remainder of our conversation inquired about the “experience” that was so important to her during Sesshin. Instead, it seemed to me that she deliberately led the conversation towards things of a sexual nature”.

Eido Shimano concludes by calling Zournas’ allegations “clearly insane” and accuses Zournas of being “petty and childish and it is time you recognize that your outbursts of personal hatred do not help the Sangha.”

A week later, Zournas answers Shimano’s letter with a lengthy letter of his own, going into much detail about Shimano’s behaviour over the years, the 1975 scandals, the 1979 scandals, the current scandal and the number of dedicated Zen Studies Society members who had resigned or left over the years. Zournas concludes:

When Soen Roshi said, “Eido’s shame is Soen’s shame, the shame of Dai Bosatsu is the shame of Ryutakuji and every Buddhist monastery in the world,” he spoke a very great truth, for indeed you are not the only one responsible for this terrible situation. Eido Roshi is responsible. Soen Roshi is responsible. I, Jochi, am responsible. Each member of the Sangha is responsible as well. We are all caught up in some very grievous error, and I pray that in the fullness of time our error will somehow be transformed into Buddha’s Wisdom.

Perhaps no truer words were written throughout the entire alleged sordid affair. As it turned out, there was no exposé in any publication about Eido Shimano Rōshi. At the time of this writing, Eido Shimano Rōshi is still abbot of the Zen Studies Society and no proper investigation into the accusations have been made. As such, they remain accusations rather than established facts. On November 3, 1982, in a letter to Aitken Rōshi, Zournas raises a question that many members of the New York sangha “asked many, many times over the years...why the other Roshis and Zen teachers in this country continue to support Taisan [Shimano] to participate in seminars with him, in fact, never to express any concern or disapproval about his behaviour.”<sup>[28]</sup> Such disapproval did eventually come, some 13 years later in a 1995 letter to Richard Rudin, President of the Board of Directors, Zen Studies Society, signed by eight prominent American Zen teachers, including Robert Aitken Rōshi and Philip Kapleau Rōshi. The gist of the letter was that the undersigned believed that something had to be done about the Zen Studies Society leader of the previous 30 years or so, Eido Tai Shimano Rōshi, the teacher at the Zen Studies Society’s two centres, Shōbōji in New York City and Daibosatsu Monastery. But the letter has had little effect and is barely known in the American Zen community. It has generated no soul searching among the community. The American Zen Teacher’s Association, a group of ordained and lay Zen Buddhist teachers consisting of approximately 100 members, has never looked into the case

nor made a public statement. In fact, Shimano's lineage is recognized by the Association. Shimano Rōshi's home monastery, Ryutakuji, seems uninterested and its abbot appears to deny knowing of any problem. The questions raised by many of the New York sangha, how this was allowed to happen, why had the American Zen community remained silent, remain unanswered. However, the Aitken archive does give some clues and needs to be studied further.

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## Notes

1. Zen Master Sheng-yen (1930-2009) quoted in Means of Authorization: Establishing Hierarchy in Ch'an /Zen Buddhism in America by Stuart Lachs

2. All Buddhist sects have a minimum of five precepts, known as the Five Grave Precepts: to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication. The number of precepts varies from sect to sect and for monks. For more on the precepts, see *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics* by Robert Aitken, North Point Press, 1984

3. see *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, by Rick Fields, Shambhala, 1992, p. 364. In a 2009 survey of over 3,500 American adults across 17 Christian and Jewish churches, Baylor University's School of Social Work found that 3.1% of adult women attending religious services at least once a month have been victims of clergy sexual misconduct. Eight percent of the average Christian congregation of 400 had knowledge of sexual abuse by the clergy in their community of faith. See Largest National Study of Clergy Sexual Misconduct with Adults, September 9, 2009

4. In January, 1983, Richard Baker Rōshi publicly acknowledged Reb Anderson as his Dharma heir by performing the Dharma transmission ceremony (*Shiho*). However, by 1987, Baker Rōshi claimed that he had not "completed Transmission with you [Anderson]. I just assumed we knew that." Furthermore, Baker Rōshi went on to say that he believed Reb Anderson was well aware that he had not received "full" transmission. In effect, Baker Rōshi renounced his Dharma heir and did not recognise him as a legitimate heir in the Suzuki lineage. See *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion, and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center* by Michael Downing, Counterpoint, 2001 p 300 & pp 357-360

5. For a detailed account of the Baker Rōshi scandal, see *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion, and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center* by Michael Downing, Counterpoint, 2001. For an analysis and summary of the story, see Richard Baker and the Myth of the Zen Rōshi by Stuart Lachs

6. *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, by Rick Fields, Shambhala, 1992, p. 363



[7.](#) see letter October 11, 1982 from George Zournas to Robert Aitken

[8.](#) A Zen roshi is often described as a person who has deeply realized the enlightened mind and thereby manifests both wisdom and compassion, becoming a person concerned with helping his students and all sentient beings. Shimano's behaviour as described here, besides being "damaging" to the women involved, caused many of his "victims" to want nothing more to do with Zen Buddhism. Also, many other sangha members over the years have left Zen. Chasing people away from the Dharma is considered a major violation of a Zen monk's vows.

[9.](#) See also [Means of Authorization: Establishing Hierarchy in Ch'an /Zen Buddhism in America](#), and [The Zen Master in America: Dressing the Donkey with Bells and Scarves](#) (f.n. #92, section "Soen Nakagawa roshi and Eido Shimano roshi") both papers by Stuart Lachs.

[10.](#) In The Shimano Story, Aitken writes: "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."

[11.](#) There was another letter from a psychiatrist, Dr. E. F. F., dated 29 July, 1964, "concerning the relationship of a Buddhist priest known to me as "Tai-san" to a certain patient of mine." To maintain confidentiality, Dr. E. F. F. did not name the patient but said, "I can only state that the relationship [between Tai-san and the patient] has been definitely detrimental to my patient's emotional health."

[12.](#) It seems that Sōen Rōshi and Yasutani Rōshi, the two people closest to Shimano, both of whom were dependent on or needed Shimano for their movement to the West, failed to see problems with Shimano. Furthermore, the two Zen masters did not take into account the welfare of those Americans Shimano was trying to convert to Buddhism. Having sent Shimano as a Buddhist missionary to America, it appears that Sōen and Yasutani were more concerned about their student than the people they were hoping to convert to Buddhism. Interestingly, according to Aitken's The Shimano Story, Shimano's fellow monks at Ryutakuji saw Shimano as being "arrogant towards them". As Upton Sinclair wrote, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his livelihood depends on not seeing it."

[13.](#) In an August 13, 1964 letter to Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi, Aitken admits that "Anne and I have confessed something to each other we have not recognized by ourselves before, — that we are a little afraid of Tai San. Watch his eyes."

[14.](#) In the same letter, Aitken admits lying to Shimano about his trip, saying, "Of course, lying is no good, and I do not ordinarily indulge in the practice (Anne [Mrs Aitken] says I am "painfully truthful!"), but in this case I wanted no hint of my purpose to get Tai San [Shimano] excited." Unfortunately, as with many lies,

Aitken was forced to be less than completely truthful with many more people, including his own sangha, to keep the story hidden for nearly thirty years.

[15.](#) Yasutani, being very dependent on Shimano for his translating ability and although in charge of Shimano's training as a Zen priest and seeing him as a possible Dharma heir, claims he cannot say anything about Shimano's decision not to return to Hawai'i. This seems questionable as the relationship between teacher and student in Japanese Zen is extremely hierarchical and the student is completely obedient to the teacher. Although Yasutani has just heard from Robert Aitken that there was major trouble with Shimano in Hawai'i, there seems to be no hesitancy or wait and see attitude with Yasutani, who appears hungry for a successor. It looks as if koan training and ritual enactment are what Yasutani meant by "training." Character development does not seem to be a factor. If character development is important, then perhaps Yasutani Rōshi misunderstood his pupil. Robert Aiken, in his book, *Mind of Clover*, quotes Yamada Koun Rōshi, Dharma-heir of Yasutani Rōshi and a teacher of Aitken, as saying, "The purpose of Zen training is perfection of character." (p.154)

[16.](#) Yasutani first travelled to America in 1962

[17.](#) While Aitken thinks "American Dharma, such as it is, is at stake" he does not think he is making the situation worse by protecting Shimano, a Zen monk he believes has a pathological problem. Hiding a person's pathology and not warning everyone, would be setting the stage for bigger trouble down the line, as events subsequently proved.

[18.](#) Shimano completed his Zen studies with Yasutani Rōshi in 1969 and became a Dharma successor to Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi at a large public ceremony performed at the Zen Studies Society center in New York City, Shoboji, in 1972. Approximately a decade later, Aiken would write, "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?" (TSS)

[19.](#) Robert Aitken received Dharma transmission from Yamada Koun Rōshi in 1974 in Kamakura, Japan and in 1985, *inka shōmei*, "the seal of confirmed transmission that is conveyed to the new master as an enlightened successor of the Buddha". (*The Morning Star: New and Selected Zen Writings* by Robert Aitken, Counterpoint, 2003, p. 26)

[20.](#) On the 4th of July, 1976, after a week-long retreat (sesshin), attended by more than twenty roshis and Zen teachers, ceremonies were held to mark the opening of Dai Bosatsu. In attendance were Richard Baker Rōshi from the San Francisco center, Philip Kapleau Rōshi from Rochester, New York, Takeda Rōshi from Mexico City, Sasaki Rōshi and Maezumi Rōshi from Los Angeles, Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn from Providence, R. I., Tibetan master Chogyam Trungpa,

Rinpoche, as well as a contingent of rōshis from Japan, Japanese Shinto priests and Stuart Lachs. Missing was perhaps the most important person of all, Shimano's teacher, Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi. see *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, by Rick Fields, Shambhala, 1992, p. 1-2

[21.](#) The 1975 scandals are not explained in the letters. Eido Shimano was accused of sexual misconduct with a woman and when that was revealed, a number of other women stepped forth to admit to having an affair with Shimano, often in the same time frame. A significant number of sangha members either left or were thrown out by Shimano at this time.

[22.](#) This event was probably viewed by Aitken Rōshi as a unique and important occasion in American Zen, given the number of high ranking dignitaries present. As Aitken had achieved the title and status of roshi only two years earlier, it is quite possible he would have felt that he should participate and very publicly be seen as an equal at such a prestigious affair, which would have added to his own importance and reputation. An event such as this would add prestige to any roshi participating.

[23.](#) Dokusan: the private meeting between Zen master and student

[24.](#) In an open letter to the sangha dated 14 September, 1982, Zournas reported that on July 31 of that year he offered his resignation as President of the Zen Studies Society. According to Zournas, when he went to tell Eido Shimano of his decision, Shimano asked him not to resign as Shimano had decided to resign his position. Zournas claims that Shimano said, "People say I have polluted the Buddha Dharma. I have lost all enthusiasm for doing any further work in this country. I cannot and will not continue."

[25.](#) see letter September 29, 1982 from George Zournas to Jack Clareman, attorney for the Zen Studies Society

[26.](#) In fact, it was hardly public, as only Shimano, Zournas, long-time Shimano student and loyalist, Sylvan Busch, and the aforementioned faithful Shimano follower David Schnyer, were present. Sōen Rōshi, never made a public statement and, according to a number of letters, kept the whole affair secret from the monks at his monastery, Ryūtakuji. One letter claims that even his number one heir and Soen's successor as abbot of Ryutakuji, Sochu Rōshi, was not informed of events in New York. (See letter from Kōun Yamada to Robert Aitken, October 29, 1982. In this letter Yamada Rōshi notes that Shimano cannot "be fired as though he were a member of firm" and that "the only way he can be removed is if his community there puts him out, which may be the best solution.")

[27.](#) see letter October 11, 1982 from George Zournas to Robert Aitken

[28.](#) It was not only American Zen teachers who failed here, but also Shimano's

own Japanese teachers, Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi, who gave Dharma transmission to Shimano, and Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi, who did much of the training of Shimano and hoped Shimano would become his Dharma heir. Furthermore, the leaders at Shimano's monastery, Ryūtakuji, who had the power to rein in Shimano even after the death of Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi, also did nothing.

[29. Mahaparinibbana Sutta](#)

### **Further Reading**

Note: Many Zen centers have a code of ethics or guidelines regarding proper behaviour by both sangha members and those in positions of power. The following examples may be of help to Zen centers that wish to establish a similar code. (courtesy of a posting at [Open Buddha](#))

Berkeley Zen Center [Ethics Guidelines for Berkeley Zen Center](#)

Morgan Bay Zendo, Surry, Maine [Code of Ethics](#)

San Francisco Zen Center [Ethics](#)

Zen Center of Denver [Diamond Sangha Teachers Ethics Agreement](#)

James Ishmael Ford:

[Holding the Lotus to the Rock: reflections on the future of the Zen sangha in the West](#)

Paul David Jaffe:

[Yasutani Hakuun Roshi — a biographical note](#)

Stephanie Kaza:

[Finding Safe Harbor: Buddhist Sexual Ethics in America](#)

Stuart Lachs:

[Means of Authorization: Establishing Hierarchy in Ch'an /Zen Buddhism in America](#)

[Coming Down from the Zen Clouds: A Critique of the Current State of American Zen](#)

[Richard Baker and the Myth of the Zen Roshi](#)

[The Zen Master in America: Dressing the Donkey with Bells and Scarves](#)

Daniel Palmer:

[Maseo Abe, Zen Buddhism and Social Ethics](#)

Andrew Rawlinson:

[Western Buddhist Teachers](#)

Robert H Sharf:

[Sanbokyodan: Zen and the Way of the New Religions](#)

[Whose Zen? Zen Nationalism Revisited](#)

[The Zen of Japanese Nationalism](#)

