

The Zen Predator of the Upper East Side

Nearly 50 years ago, a penniless monk arrived in Manhattan, where he began to build an unrivaled community of followers—and a reputation for sexual abuse. The ongoing accusations against him expose a dark corner of the Buddhist tradition.

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The Atlantic, December 18, 2014

<https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/the-zen-predator-of-the-upper-east-side/383831/>

I. “That was the beginning of the *sangha*”

Eido Shimano, a Zen Buddhist monk from Japan, arrived at New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport on December 31, 1964, New Year’s Eve. He was 32 years old, and although he had just spent four years in Hawaii, part of the time as a university student, his English was poor. Besides his clothes, he brought with him only a small statue of the Buddha and a *keisaku*, the wooden stick a Zen teacher uses to thwack students whose posture sags during meditation. Before flying east, he had been offered temporary lodging by a couple who lived on Central Park West. Not long after he arrived—the very next day, according to some versions of the story—he began to build his *sangha*, his Zen community. He did this, at first, by walking the streets of New York. The followers just came.

“It was the middle of the 1960s, full of energy,” Shimano recalled when we met for lunch last year. “And all I did was simply walk Manhattan from top to the bottom. And in my Buddhist robe. And many people came. ‘What are you doing? Where are you going?’ So I said, ‘I am from Japan and doing *zazen* practice’”—Zen meditation. It was a kind of Buddhism, he told the curious New Yorkers. Now and again, somebody asked to tag along. Yes, Shimano told them. Of course. Before long, he had a small space to host meditation sessions, and all were invited. “Little by little, every single day, I walked entire Manhattan,” Shimano told me in his still-fractured English. “And every single day I picked up two or three people who were curious. And that was the beginning of the *sangha*.”

Within weeks, Shimano had an enthusiastic *sangha* of perhaps several dozen novices, who met daily for *zazen*. They rotated from one follower’s apartment to the next, learning to sit and meditate. One day a Canadian woman in her 60s, who had been sitting with Shimano every day, said she was returning to Canada, and she handed him an envelope. “I opened it, and there was a check for \$10,000!” Shimano said. He used that money to rent a five-room apartment at 81st Street and West End Avenue. Very soon thereafter—this is still early 1965—a friend told him that he might try to affiliate his growing organization with the Zen Studies Society, which had been founded by D. T. Suzuki, the Columbia University instructor whose English-language books had helped popularize Buddhism in the United States. Suzuki had returned to Japan, and his society was now moribund. Shimano went to see the society’s lawyer, George Yamaoka. “I said to George, ‘I came here about the ZSS,’ and he said, ‘Would you like to join?’ ‘Yes!’ I just signed. And then he immediately resigned, and I became the only ZSS!”

The followers, and the money, kept coming. An anonymous donor gave enough to purchase a carriage house on East 67th Street; in 1968 the renovated building became the home of what Shimano named the New York Zendo (a *zendo* is a hall for meditation). Another devoted student, Dorris Carlson, the widow of the founder of Xerox, gave him \$1 million. “This is for you to establish your monastery in the country,” Shimano said she told him, “where regardless of the racial background, national background, man or woman, everybody could come, and could practice meditation.” In 1969, with Carlson’s money, which she soon doubled to \$2 million, Shimano purchased a 1,400-acre property, in the Catskills town of Livingston Manor, that had once belonged to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brother James. There, Shimano led the construction of Dai Bosatsu Zendo, which opened on July 4, 1976. That October, a writer for *The New York Times Magazine* marveled at the “consummately Japanese” monastery. Dai Bosatsu’s architect had, the *Times* reporter wrote, been sent to Japan to get the details right, and had hired Japanese carpenters for the finishing work. Inside Dai Bosatsu, students were assuming Japanese “dharma names” and eating Japanese delicacies like pickled plums. The opening ceremony had been conducted first in Japanese, and only afterward in English. Shimano was now the abbot, or head monk, of the first authentic Zen temple outside Japan.

By 1976, membership in the Zen Studies Society, which had been near zero in 1965, was close to 300. With an elegant Manhattan headquarters and a Japanese-style monastery in the mountains, Shimano led one of the largest *sanghas* in the United States. Some members were famous; others were rich. In addition to Carlson, with her Xerox money, the Bethlehem Steel executive William P. Johnstone, the publisher Barney Rosset, and the writer Peter Matthiessen were all students of Shimano’s. The Rockefeller Foundation gave money, too. Over the next 35 years, the Zen Studies Society continued to flourish. Its two locations, one perfectly situated to attract wealthy Upper East Siders, the other an idyllic escape from the city, hosted all the important Zen teachers from the United States and those visiting from Japan. By 2010, there were several dozen Zen centers in the United States, and although a few others had residential monasteries like Dai Bosatsu, none of them could match the combined age, beauty, and prestige of what Shimano had built—not to mention its proximity to New York City, with its supply of educated spiritual questers, the perfect audience for Zen.

For Shimano’s disciples, being at Dai Bosatsu—gardening there, sleeping there, meditating there, and eating those pickled plums—was the purest form of Zen life one could achieve in the United States or, perhaps, anywhere in the world. Thousands of eager students studied with Shimano and his monks. Many attended the grueling seven-day *sesshins*, intensive sitting retreats where people meditated the whole time, except for during meals, and were entirely silent, except during short breaks for private counseling with the teacher. Some students moved to Dai Bosatsu for months or years. Monks abandoned their old careers, even their families, and became new people: shaving their heads, wearing their robes, becoming so commonly known by their one-word dharma names that their friends forgot their given names, had no idea what they had been called in their previous lives. For these devotees, such things hardly mattered now. The *sangha* was the community that mattered.

II. “Secretly in a relationship”

On the night of June 21, 2010, a Monday night, about 20 members of the *sangha* were eating in the dining hall at Dai Bosatsu. After dinner, a student I’ll call Daphna, who was then in her

late 20s, with pale, rather Goth looks and a husky alto voice, stood up and asked for everyone's attention. She then gave a long, disorganized speech about secrecy, shame, and the need for openness. A filmmaker who has directed one low-budget movie, Daphna had been practicing Buddhism off and on at Dai Bosatsu for about two years, and had been keeping a secret for nearly that whole time.

"At the end of the meal, she sort of cut in and said what she wanted to say, and everyone else was quiet," Stefan Streit, who was sitting next to Daphna at dinner that night, told me. Streit, who is now an organic farmer outside Philadelphia, was then a resident monk at Dai Bosatsu. The night before, Daphna had told him and two others what she was planning to say at dinner. "So I knew what the topic was as soon as she took the floor," Streit said. As for those not in the know, they could tell that Daphna was angry, but at first they weren't sure why.

According to Shimano, sex with students is not a violation of Buddhist precepts. By sleeping with a student, he might have been doing her a favor.

Fred Forsyth, an artist who now lives in New York City, remembered that her speech "was very long, and she had clearly been preparing it." She spoke of "authority" and "power," and how she was "secretly in a relationship" with someone who wielded much more power than she did. As Daphna spoke, Forsyth realized that his fears were being confirmed. It was clear that Daphna was describing a prolonged sexual affair with Eido Shimano, who was sitting right there. A monk named Bonnie Shoultz recalled that Daphna was particularly upset that she'd had to keep the affair secret, for close to two years.

When Daphna was done, everybody was silent except for one man, a relatively new resident who had been at Dai Bosatsu, working and sitting, for about six months. "Thank you," the man said. Shimano himself said nothing. As Stefan Streit remembers it, Daphna left the dining room first, followed by Shimano, who "got up according to his normal routine, and his attendant bowed him out of the room"—offering a *gassho*, placing the hands together: a gracious move that must have seemed ironic, even grotesque, given what had happened just moments before.

Daphna's allegations, it turned out, were not the first hints that Shimano wasn't the man his followers hoped he was, and that the world he had built was not what it seemed. One week earlier, the Zen Studies Society board had met to discuss allegations of several decades of sexual impropriety, allegations that had surfaced on the Internet. The charges were damning, and well sourced, and Shimano had not denied them. The board had drafted a new set of ethical guidelines, the text of which included an acknowledgment of past indiscretions by Shimano. The hope had been that this new ethics statement would resolve the online rumors, which largely referred to events many years in the past. But news of this more recent affair spread quickly, and it forced prompt action. On July 19, 2010, Shimano resigned from the board of the Zen Studies Society and said that he would step down as abbot in 2012.

But in early August 2010, I got an get e-mails from a member of the *sangha* who believed that Shimano's phased retirement, with attendant honors, dinners, and valedictory speeches, would only keep forestall the necessary healing in the *sangha*. This member hoped that, as a journalist who covered religion, I would tell the world about Shimano's behavior. On August 20, 2010, I wrote [an article for *The New York Times*](#) in which I described the online allegations, recounted Daphna's bombshell at Dai Bosatsu, and quoted several sources discussing the board's deliberations. My article seemed to hasten Shimano's departure: on

September 7, he announced in a letter that rather than waiting until 2012, he would step down as abbot at the end of the year.



Eido Shimano (center) with fellow Zen priests Kobutsu Malone and Junpo Denis Kelly (Kobutsu Malone)

Shimano did leave, but he did not go quietly. He has taken with him some of the wealthiest students, leaving the Zen Studies Society in financial straits—nearly broke, according to some people. Shimano is still living in the uptown apartment that the Zen Studies Society bought in 1984 and has always paid to maintain. And he is currently suing his old society for the pension that he says he is owed, but which the society's new leadership says he forfeited with his decades of bad behavior. In response to those charges, Shimano is arguing that, first, he was never the womanizer that he is alleged to be, and second, even if he was, that is no grounds to void his contract. According to Shimano, sex with students is not a violation of Buddhist precepts. By sleeping with a student, he now says, he might have been doing her a favor.

Shimano's defense, as outrageous as it may sound to some, is worth inspecting. Not because I side with Shimano, but because his views of sexuality are widely held in certain precincts of American Buddhism. In this country, we have learned the hard way that religiosity is no guarantor of morality. But many Americans still imagine that Buddhists are the good kind of religious people—or that they are not religious at all, just “spiritual.” Buddhists, they know, or think they know, do not have the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim beliefs in “dualism,” in good and evil; they are not censorious, always worried about sin and shame. Drawn to what they imagine is a kindler, gentler way of being, imported from a more pacific part of the world, Buddhists themselves, confronted with the worst things a teacher can do, may choose to be willfully naive. It can be especially hard to face demons in a tradition that promises that there are none.

III. “The Buddha probably had many lovers”

The many Zen Buddhists inclined to side with Eido Shimano will argue that, unlike in Judaism or Christianity, in Buddhism there is no specific sexual prohibition against fornication, or promiscuity, or adultery. And there would seem to be ample evidence that, whether or not Buddhism permits lewdness, the religion has done little to inhibit it. These days, when we think of predatory clergy, we think of Roman Catholic priests. Their sins are

far worse than what goes on in Zen circles. But the percentage of the Zen clergy implicated in sexual misdeeds is many times greater than that of the Catholic clergy. In Zen Buddhism, the story of Eido Shimano's abuse of power is so commonplace as to be banal, a cliché.

In the 1960s, four major Zen teachers came to the United States from Japan: Shunryu Suzuki, Taizan Maezumi, Joshu Sasaki, and Eido Shimano. Andy Afable, one of Shimano's former head monks, called these four the "major missionaries" of Zen, as they had all received "transmission" from leading Japanese teachers: that is, they had been deemed worthy to be the heirs, to be responsible for the persistence of the teachings. And three of the four, Afable noted when we spoke, have caused major public sex scandals: first Maezumi, and more recently Shimano and Sasaki. Sasaki, of Rinzai-ji, a Zen center in Los Angeles, is now 106 years old and, as his board members finally admitted in 2013, was groping and fondling unwilling students well into his 11th decade (he also ran a leading Zen center in New Mexico, and his lewdness did not respect state lines). Maezumi, affiliated with another West Coast *zendo*, the Zen Center of Los Angeles, was a philanderer and an alcoholic, as the scholar Dale S. Wright has detailed at length. The only one of the four whose reputation was unblemished, Shunryu Suzuki of the San Francisco Zen Center, gave his *sangha* over to a man named Richard Baker, who was later embroiled in a sex scandal of his own, resigned from his abbacy, and became the subject of a book with the appropriately suggestive title *Shoes Outside the Door*.

But there are many lesser-known yet just as randy Zen teachers. For example, Afable might have added that at Chobo-ji, a Zen temple in Seattle, Genki Takabayashi made passes at his female students. And after his death, several students of Dainin Katagiri, the founding abbot of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, in Minneapolis, reported having affairs with their teacher, who had been married. Today, one could reasonably assert that of the 30 or 40 important Zen centers in the country, at least 10 have employed head teachers who have been accused of groping, propositioning, seducing, or otherwise exploiting students.

Nobody is saying that Eido Shimano is a sexual criminal. He is not alleged to have had sex with underage women, or to have physically forced any woman to perform a sexual act (it's been alleged he may have kissed or groped women after they tried to pull away from him). In our conversations, Shimano admitted to having sex with some students, "far fewer" than 12 as he put it. He would not answer questions about specific women, and he never replied to specific questions submitted to his lawyer. But his critics say that regardless of the numbers, or one's definition of consent, Shimano is guilty of a kind of spiritual malpractice. They say that he took advantage of his spiritual power—his authority, his charisma—to persuade women to do things that they did not want to do, and that when he eventually ignored or left them, they sometimes lost their faith, even their minds.

The important question for any religious community is not why there are scoundrels—they will always be with us—but how they are dealt with.

It is a matter of much debate how sexually chaste or continent a Buddhist is supposed to be. The Buddha probably had many lovers, but he is said to have counseled against "sexual misconduct," a vague prohibition that is open to wide interpretation. Whether or not Shimano's behavior ran contrary to Buddhist ethics—and most Buddhists would say that it clearly did—it surely corrupted, and ultimately may have destroyed, his *sangha*. Yet his community is partly to blame. Shimano's womanizing was never a secret, but his followers pretended not to see. Then forgave him. They believed him when he promised to change.

They made excuses when he did not. When, several times, his behavior got so bad that board members resigned and monks abandoned residential life at Dai Bosatsu, Shimano endured, stayed at the helm, found new recruits. He paid no price.

The important question for any religious community is not why there are scoundrels—they will always be with us—but how they are dealt with. Not why there is a Shimano, but why his leadership lasted so long. From the first inkling of Shimano's problem to his final expulsion, the *sangha* failed for nearly 50 years to confront a sexual predator in their midst. For lethargy and indifference, it is a record to rival that of the Catholic Church toward its pedophiles. There are many reasons for this failure, some of which may be present across religious communities, while others are unique to Buddhism. The case of Eido Shimano can help us understand why religious communities generally, Zen Buddhism in particular, and Shimano's *sangha* especially have been so powerless to stop sexual misdeeds.

There's little doubt that Shimano was the beneficiary of his own charm and shrewdness. He benefitted from the fear that his power instilled—a fear that silenced critics and even journalists who tried to discover the truth. But he was also protected by factors beyond his control. Zen Buddhism in the United States is a young tradition, with no recognized authorities to provide oversight or discipline. Many practitioners have proved eager to cover for leaders, to protect the reputation of a still-growing tradition. Shimano was also protected at times by a simplistic and sexist opinion that if the sex was “consensual,” the women he slept with had nothing to complain about. Of course, he was also fortunate to find himself in the company of the kind of people—both women and men—who were attracted to Zen Buddhism. Desperately seeking something, hopeful that they had found it, they proved extremely, perhaps uniquely, willing to forgive.

IV. “I felt he would deny everything”

Buddhists protected Shimano to protect Buddhism itself. That was the earliest, and remains the most important, reason Shimano's behavior was tolerated. Many Americans still see Buddhism as pagan, suspicious, queer. Buddhist teachers shave their heads and wear funny robes and, if immigrants, may not speak good English. Buddhism is still fighting for acceptance. A sex scandal, its practitioners know, would not help matters.



Counterculture leaders Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, and Ralph Metzner pose in front of a large plaster Buddha statue in New York in 1966. (AP Photo)

Buddhists were practicing in the United States in the 19th century, but they were mostly Japanese immigrants, plus a very small number of white Americans. That didn't change until the 1950s, when books about Zen Buddhism by D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts—along with the enthusiastic endorsement of Buddhism by writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg (who favored Tibetan Buddhism)—helped popularize what had been an obscure Eastern practice. Mainly because of Suzuki's and Watts's writings, the earliest Western, white Buddhists were largely followers of the Zen strain, which has roots in Japan and emphasizes (to put it very simplistically) the act of sitting meditation—some would say to the exclusion of teaching philosophy or ethics. In more recent years, the Dalai Lama's celebrity has vaulted Tibetan Buddhism into a clear lead in the contest for the hearts of young Westerners, but immediately after World War II, when Americans thought of Buddhism, they were thinking of Zen.

One of those Americans was Robert Aitken, who was first exposed to Zen as a prisoner of war in a Japanese camp. After World War II ended, Aitken continued his studies, eventually sitting with some of the leading Japanese masters, like Hakuun Yasutani and Soen Nakagawa. Aitken brought the tradition to Honolulu, where in 1959 he and his wife founded what eventually became known as the Diamond Sangha. Aitken's commitment, his charisma, and of course his center's location on the Pacific Rim made his *sangha* an early and promising outpost of Zen in the United States. It was natural that when a young monk name Eido Shimano—his given name was Eitaro; Eido was his dharma name, the one he took for Buddhist practice and which later appeared on his American visa—was looking to come to the United States, he sought sponsorship from Bob Aitken. The American said yes, and soon would be the first of many in the burgeoning American Buddhist community to cover up Shimano's sexual secrets.

Shimano arrived in the United States in August 1960, at the age of 27, ostensibly to study at the University of Hawaii. Aitken and his wife, Anne, gave Shimano a place to live and to sit *zazen*. Correspondence from Shimano, which Aitken saved, suggests that Shimano was a contented boarder, but in later years Shimano would speak of his time in Honolulu as a dark period. In a movie about Shimano's life, made in the late 1990s with his cooperation, a narrator says that he arrived in Honolulu with just \$5 and two suitcases. Shimano was, the narrator says, "very lonely and very homesick in Honolulu. He had no teacher, no brother monks, no transportation, and no money." At some point, Shimano began to tell people that

the Aitkens had put him on a meager allowance of \$30 a month, and demanded that every cent be accounted for.

Shimano also accused the Aitkens of, in effect, starving him. When I first interviewed Shimano, in late 2012, he offered a story that he has repeated elsewhere: “[The Aitkens] were much older than me, so they ate, for example, in the evening, two pieces of biscuit and soup, and that’s enough for them. But not for me.” Shimano said that when his teacher Soen Nakagawa came to visit, Shimano confided in him that he was always hungry, and that Nakagawa him found a nearby Zen priest who would supplement his diet on the sly. “So every day, after university was over, I went to there, and ate enough rice.”

There may have been many causes of dissension between the Aitkens and Shimano, but as Benjamin Franklin said, guests, like fish, begin to stink after three days—and Shimano stayed four years. So it was no shock when Shimano left for New York City, promptly to organize one the country’s great *sanghas*. But what precisely precipitated his departure from Hawaii? The answer can be found in a handwritten note from Aitken dated May 4, 1964. There is no salutation, and it seems not to have been sent to anyone; rather, it seems to be for Aitken’s own records, as if he had a premonition that it would be wise to record the details of his interactions with Shimano.

According to Aitken’s note, he and Shimano had jointly decided to volunteer at Queen’s Medical Center, hoping to learn a bit about mental illness. Two female Zen students from their *sangha* had recently been hospitalized there for “mental breakdowns.” That’s when a psychiatric social worker noticed something curious: a name from their case records—Shimano’s—was the same as one of the hospital’s volunteers. This coincidence was passed along to Dr. Linus Pauling Jr., a psychiatrist at the hospital—and the son of the Nobel Prize-winning chemist—who investigated the matter, then reported back to Aitken that Shimano had played a role in the women’s breakdowns. (I have not been able to locate either of the women, who of course may now be dead; Pauling told me that he did not remember the incident.) Aitken claimed that he made his own inquiries; he was vague about what he found, but he became convinced that Shimano “had indeed played such a role” in the women’s breakdowns and was guilty of “ruthless ... exploitation” of the women.

“I felt,” Aitken wrote, “that if I confronted him with the evidence, he would deny everything, and the Sangha members generally would support him. Further, I was concerned about protecting the two women. I decided to go to Japan to consult with Soen Roshi and Yasutani Roshi.” (*Roshi* is a Zen title of respect.) In Japan, the senior *roshis* conceded to Aitken that their former student could be guilty of serious impropriety. “Both he and Yasutani Roshi could believe that [Shimano] had been philandering, but could not accept the idea that he was pathologically compulsive.”

Two female Zen students had recently been hospitalized for “mental breakdowns.” That’s when a psychiatric social worker noticed something curious.

So Aitken, a senior Zen teacher, was convinced that a young monk, Shimano, whose visa to the United States he had arranged, had through his sexual predations driven two women to mental breakdowns. Aitken was so distressed the he flew to Japan to consult with his own teachers, Nakagawa and Yasutani—neither of whom, it turns out, doubted that Shimano was capable of sleeping around, but both of whom seemed unwilling to accept that this behavior was *really* a problem.

Nakagawa and Yasutani are long dead, so we cannot ask for their recollections. But it's possible that they felt more than a little culpable, and thus quite a bit defensive. These Japanese elders were of course responsible for sending Shimano to the United States. They had probably entreated Aitken to arrange for Shimano's visa, to house him, to—we might even suspect—take this womanizing troublemaker off their hands. Shimano had a problem, the elders seemed to tell Aitken, but surely nothing that couldn't be controlled.

According to a letter, Aitken rusticated Shimano the week he returned from Japan—or else dropped a hint so weighty that it could not be ignored. Aitken wrote that he arrived home on a Monday and watched as Shimano moved out the next day. Within weeks, Shimano was walking the isle of Manhattan, followers attaching themselves as if clinging to the hem of his garment. But, in a pattern that would repeat for the rest of his life, while he was personally serene, he was soon the source of chaos for those around him.

Further letters in January and February, from Aitken and his wife, indicate that neither Shimano nor the Zen Studies Society in New York had followed through on Aitken's request to change the sponsorship on Shimano's visa. The delay was preventing the Aitkens from bringing over new Japanese monks. On January 30, 1965, Aitken wrote to Bernard Phillips, a professor at Temple University, in Philadelphia, who was affiliated with the Zen Studies Society. Clearly afraid he would never truly be rid of Shimano as long as he was considered the young man's "sponsor," Aitken asked Phillips to help clear up the immigration mess. Phillips responded on March 1 with a bilious letter, explaining that the Buddhists in New York had never promised to sponsor Shimano—he had just showed up, it seemed. "We were presented with a fait accompli," Phillips wrote, "and now are expected to assume financial and other responsibility."

Shimano may have been out of Aitken's hair, but he was still Aitken's problem, in yet another way. Zen has a pronounced sense of lineage. One becomes a teacher by receiving "dharma transmission" from one's own teacher. And within the community, students always know who has "sat" with whom. In this way, honor accrues to students who have sat with important teachers. Shimano would thus be forever linked with Aitken, who, as far as most American Buddhists knew, was still Shimano's sponsor, even mentor, in the United States. This connection must have been an enduring source of shame and regret to Aitken, who for the rest of his life would hear about Shimano's exploitation of women.

Yet Aitken never went public with what he knew about Shimano, not in 1964, and not for the next half century until his death. In a letter to two fellow Buddhists on September 22, 1964, Aitken wrote that he knew that Shimano blamed him for having to leave Hawaii. "I don't mind absorbing some of the blame," Aitken wrote, "if that will keep the real story dark."

The rest of the letter makes even plainer why Aitken wanted to protect Shimano: Zen Buddhism was, as far as Aitken could tell, failing in the United States. In Hawaii, whose residents, many of them of East Asian descent, would be relatively open to Zen, Aitken's daily *zazen* was getting "one or two" meditators per evening. He was visiting religion classes to drum up interest, but he had "not picked up a single member from a dozen such special meetings." Aitken had heard of one woman who, after hearing him speak, had begun to meditate at home, but because she was a Christian she was reluctant to come to meetings. Nevertheless, "just one such case every couple of years is enough to keep me going," Aitken wrote. Perhaps he meant it; perhaps he was just trying to buck himself up. Either way, he

could not let the world know that his recently departed, authentically Japanese monk, who had been with him nearly four years, was a womanizer. It would not be good for Buddhism.

V. "They came in search of Zen and found sex"

Tormented, Robert Aitken saved his correspondence with and about Shimano. He must have made it known what he was doing, keeping the definitive dossier on Shimano, because over the years insiders leaked to him copies of private letters to the Zen Studies Society board, minutes of board deliberations, and other documents that helped complete the story of Shimano's predations from the time he left Hawaii until several years before Aitken's death, in 2010. In 2003, Aitken gave the papers to the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and in 2008, just after his 90th birthday, he agreed to allow [public access to the papers](#) he had been saving for 45 years.

At the very beginning of the archive are Aitken's anguished letters about the women in Hawaii. On August 24, 1964, Aitken wrote to Nakagawa, the Japanese teacher, "The whole thing hinges on the matter of mental health. If the girls had come to their priest in search of sex, and had found sex, then surely there would have been no mental breakdown afterward. But, the way Dr. Smith expresses it, they came in search of Zen and found sex, and therefore broke down."

A year later, on August 5, 1965, Aitken was again writing to Nakagawa; Shimano had gone to New York, but Aitken was unable to get the two women off his mind: "He seduced [one of the two women] 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 a means for her kensho"—her moment of enlightenment. "He had told her that he would locate permanently in Hawaii, so when he left for the extended trip with Yasutani Roshi, she was very upset. Upon his return early in 1964, he resumed their relationship, not mentioning his engagement [to be married] until a month or so later. This coincides with his affair with [the other woman], which also began after his engagement and after his return from his world tour."

"To warn a new female student that she is likely to be propositioned by her teacher is to risk every new female student leaving in a very big hurry and telling the world."

Scroll through more of the archives, and 15 years later you come to a letter of January 30, 1979, by the anonymous authors who called themselves "Your Friends in the Dharma." In their letter, to the whole *sangha*, they again point to Shimano's preference for unstable women: "Eido Roshi has beyond doubt disgracefully abused his role as teacher and betrayed the trust of his students by continuing to commit acts with the females of our sangha ... Eido Roshi knowingly takes advantage of girls in mentally unstable condition and emotional vulnerability who come to him seeking spiritual help and guidance. In face of these deplorable actions and the concern of our sangha, Eido Roshi has continually denied his involvement, and maintained an attitude that he is beyond questioning. We feel it's time to question."

One particularly poignant letter in the archive, dated February 20, 1979, is from one female former student, whom I have identified as Merry Benezra, to another student, who does not want to be named. I have interviewed both students in the past year, and they stand by their stories. Benezra herself never had sex with Shimano, although, as she writes, she

“experienced quite a bit of sexual ‘harassment’ from Eido Roshi (from innuendo to proposition)” during two stays at Dai Bosatsu. During the first stay, the harassment was “just a barrage.” For months she spoke of the incidents to no one. “I wanted to be thought of as a student, and not one of Roshi’s women,” she wrote. “I did not want to rock the boat. After I left I found out, in correspondence with [another woman], that Roshi had also propositioned her ... We had been very close friends and yet we had kept a silence on something that was disturbing us every day, in order to protect the sangha, the kessei”—a three-month training period—“and the Roshi.”

The letter—which the other student does not remember receiving—continues in a key of gratitude: “When I left [after my first stay], I seriously thought of ‘blowing the whistle.’ But I was grateful for the opportunity I’d had to practice at Dai Bosatsu, and I thought that if I said anything it would be the end of everything at Dai Bosatsu. I really thought it would fold the place ... One of the problems of Dai Bosatsu is that to warn a new female student that she is likely to be propositioned by her teacher is to risk every new female student leaving in a very big hurry and telling the world.”

We can see how women were in a special bind. If they spoke the truth about how women were treated within the *sangha*, either they would be called liars, or people would believe them, and fewer women would join the *sangha*, making it even more of a male redoubt. By condemning one man, they might undo the progress women had made against patriarchy. They would be left with an all-male *sangha*, like the old monasteries of Japan. The only option, it seemed, was to stay quiet.

Benezra was not oblivious to women’s dilemma; she was angry about it, and she was finally ready to make waves. She wrote:

“I honestly wish I had slept with the man, just so that I could say so, be one person to SAY it, and also so that I could keep you some real company ... I’ve phoned [board President Sylvan Busch] and told him in detail what my involvement with Eido Roshi was, and all that I know about other women, I know first-hand ... This is, as we’ve said so often, the infancy of Buddhism in America. We are pioneers. We will set the precedents, and I am very much afraid of what can happen if this precedent fails to be set. Practice centers and religious teachers must begin to be accountable; their own karma will destroy them if they are not.”

As far as we know, Shimano has never taken a sexual interest in men. But, as Kobutsu Malone could testify, Shimano’s activities harmed men, too. One of the most pained documents in the archive is titled “An Open Letter to My Teacher, Eido Tai Shimano,” and it was written March 29, 1979, by the monk Adam Fisher. Infuriated by the same revelations of Shimano’s affairs that prompted the letters above, also from 1979, Fisher ultimately decided against sending his letter to Shimano; it seems that just getting his feelings down on paper was enough for him, at the time. In 2011, the letter finally became public, when Fisher sent it to Malone for the archive. The letter begins with Fisher’s fond memories of what drew him to Zen practice. “What a lot of silence,” Fisher wrote. “No preachments, convincings, argumentations—just the silence to which we all return. I loved it.” The idyll quickly ended, however.

But then came 1975 and what later was humorously referred to as the “Fuck Follies” ... The Teacher had taken a series of bed partners from the sangha and had made passes at others. For a while, I didn’t believe it. You were married, you were the teacher, you had submitted

yourself to the precept of moral conduct ... But then I talked with some of your paramours ... Each had thought of herself as “the only one.” Each had been unceremoniously ditched. I heard about the confrontation between you, your teacher, your wife and one of the sangha members.

Yet Fisher remained a Shimano follower. “I stayed,” he wrote, “because I was afraid to leave.” He decided not to concern himself with his teacher’s ethics. “Time came and went. There were stories. About the student who tried to commit ritual suicide at Dai Bosatsu. About other women you were involved with. But after the first upset, I shut the door on the Fuck Follies. I was going to sit on [the] cushion and let the world take care of itself.”

But by 1979, Fisher had encountered new accusations that he was unwilling to ignore.

So now it has begun again. First Peter and Dave sent a letter to the board of trustees. They sent it together with the diary that included love letters addressed to you from a woman member. Do you know what Peter said to me? He said, “We ... were naive. We thought Eido Roshi would be out in a week. We thought the board of directors would have to take action ...”

As for the board of directors, they are in some ways the second villain of the archives. Friendly with Shimano, loyal to him, unable to hear criticism of their beloved *roshi*, they were so uniformly committed to Shimano that in 1982, when the board president, George Zournas, finally decided to do something, he found that he had no support at all. He wrote to his fellow board members:

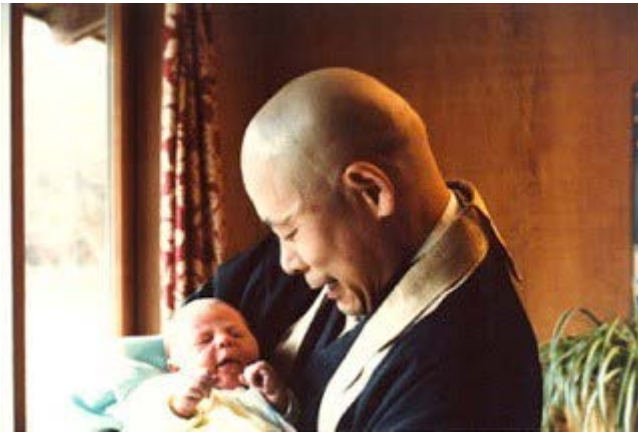
I am sure you have been aware of the undercurrent of disease that has been running through the zendo over the past several months. Some of you have learned that this has been caused by the latest in a long series of accusations against Eido Roshi by young women who say they have been seduced by him in the dokusan room ... This is but the most recent of a long series of such seductions, dating back to Eido Roshi’s time in Hawaii in the 1960s. Over the past sixteen years as [a] member of the Board of Trustees of the Zen Studies Society and more recently as president of that Society, I have attempted to make excuses for Eido Roshi and to cover up the scandals as best I could. Now, however, sickened by this latest outrage ... I have resigned from the presidency of the Board of Trustees and from the Board itself.

The archive is thus a record of two contradictory impulses. On the one hand this is a Buddhist community of great vigor and activity: daily *zazen*, weeklong *sesshins*, large growth in membership, successful building projects, fawning attention from the media. Yet at the same time there is a peculiar timidity, a fear that to speak about Shimano’s sexual life would snip the spine of the whole *sangha*, would paralyze the life force that had come to animate it all.

VI. “Don’t speak in parables’

I have met Shimano three times now. Twice we shared rather formal lunches, and for our third encounter I meditated with him and Nigol Koulajian, his loyal follower, in the third-floor meditation room of Koulajian’s elegant Greenwich Village townhouse. My interactions with Shimano had the effect of making him seem dignified, and difficult to reproach. He struck me as an otherworldly visitor from a mysterious foreign land. When I finished

meditating with him, he told me, “You did good!” and I was *so proud*—I had, after all, sat still for two hours, with just a short break in the middle, and on my first attempt at meditation! His approval meant something to me, I admit.



Shimano holds the infant son of a fellow priest (Kobutsu Malone)

It is surprisingly easy, especially in Shimano’s presence, in the light of his warm smile and self-deprecating laugh, to imagine that this could all be some big misunderstanding. He is now 81 years old, married for many decades to a woman who apparently did not mind when he stepped out on her now and again (a woman who did not respond to my requests, through her lawyer, for an interview).

Sometimes, in demeaning others to exalt himself, Shimano can be very sly and ingenious. But he can also be quite clumsy, preferring the hatchet to the scalpel. It was this somewhat clumsier, less controlled Shimano who showed up at the restaurant of the Four Seasons Hotel for our first meeting, last year. We were joined by Lawrence Gerzog, Shimano’s lawyer; Nigol Koulajian, a wealthy Lebanese American financier who has remained one of Shimano’s most loyal students (and who insisted on picking up the lunch tab); and Eliza Brooke, a college student whom I had hired to transcribe the recorded interview.

Shortly after we sat down to eat, I asked Shimano how he had come to this country, and right after mentioning that Robert Aitken had been his sponsor, he began to attack Aitken.

“He was unfortunately, during the war, he was a—WPO?” Shimano said.

“A POW?” I suggested. “Prisoner of war?”

“Yeah,” Shimano said. “So his feeling toward Japan is extreme love and hate.” As Shimano told it, Aitken was grateful for his experience in Japan, without which he never would have been exposed to Zen, yet he could never forgive the Japanese for imprisoning him. “And,” Shimano added, “he had a mental-hospital experience.”

Here, Gerzog, the lawyer, interjected.

“Do you want to clarify that?” Gerzog asked his client. “It’s my understanding that he *worked* in a mental hospital,” Gerzog said. Koulajian also weighed in: “He worked in a mental hospital.”

Shimano hedged for a moment—“Yes and also no,” he said, somewhat mysteriously—and the lawyer tried to get him back on track: “Well, can we just clarify whether or not he was a patient there?”

“He never said he was the patient,” Shimano said. “But someone told me that he was.”

This mental hospital under discussion was, I realized, the same hospital where Aitken learned of the two women who had had affairs with Shimano. In Aitken’s telling, amply supported by his notes in the archive he kept, both he and Shimano had worked there; in Shimano’s new version, it is where Aitken may have been a *patient*. Shimano then dropped the topic and shifted to the old accusations about the Aitkens: they counted his pennies, they starved him. When I asked why Aitken would have kept such a long file on Shimano, why he would have harbored such suspicions about Shimano’s behavior, Shimano said that he did not even know what was in the online archive. “I don’t do this Internet, luckily,” Shimano said. “So I’m completely out of touch ... I don’t know what an ‘archive’ means.”

At the same lunch, I asked about Daphna, the woman who had made the accusation at the Dai Bosatsu dinner. Shimano was dismissive: “That woman was an actress, and acted about maybe 45 minutes or so? Ahhh. Saying—so I have no idea what she was talking about.” Shimano said that he’d had to ask his attendant to clarify. “After dinner was over, I asked my attendant, ‘What did she say?’ [He] said, ‘She was saying that she had relations with you.’” But then Shimano seemed to confess to me something like an affair: “Then I went back to my room, and one of my old students came ... I told her I did not understand what she [Daphna] was talking about, and she explained it. She said, ‘Is it true?’ No. The truth is that she [Daphna] came to my room without notifying me, without any arrangements, two or three times—that is true.”

“And was there sex those times?” I asked.

“No,” Shimano said. “When you become my age, you will know. When you become my age, you will know.”

At this point, Gerzog became irritated with his client. “Don’t speak in parables,” he admonished Shimano. “Did you have sex or not? If what you’re saying is that at your age you don’t have sex, okay, but that’s not any of our business. I really don’t want you to respond.”

I then mentioned that Ed Glassing, a longtime student of Shimano’s, board member of the Zen Studies Society, and resident monk both at East 67th Street and at Dai Bosatsu, had told me that Shimano had lied to him multiple times about affairs. Glassing had finally broken with Shimano over the Daphna revelation.

“Okay, about Seigan,” Shimano said, using Glassing’s dharma name. “He has some weak points—which I did not say anything to anyone—and that is, he’s a homosexual, and he—”

“Roshi, please!” Gerzog said.

“Okay, okay,” Eido Shimano muttered, reluctantly, and stopped talking.

“And was there sex those times?” I asked. “No,” Shimano said. “When you become my age, you will know.”

By now, one can see the pattern. Robert Aitken? He hated the Japanese because he had been a prisoner of war, and besides, he was a patient in an insane asylum. Daphna couldn't be trusted because she was an actress. Ed Glassing? A homosexual. More than once, I heard from women who had slept with Shimano that he had accused either them or other sex partners of being mentally unstable. And when I asked, in our second interview, about his well-documented break with Soen Nakagawa, his mentor in Japan, Shimano said that "about fifteen years prior to his death," Nakagawa "had a serious accident." According to Shimano, Nakagawa "fell from tree and hit his head strongly. So Soen Roshi that many people know before accident and Soen Roshi after the accident are two different people."

Homosexuals, POWs, the mentally unstable, the brain-damaged: these are the people who try to bring him down. He was fated from the start to be a great *roshi*; those who stand in his way are sick or stupid. Shimano would not, I think, have tried such theories on me unless he had a reasonable expectation that I would believe them. He knows that it is easier, and more flattering to our faith in human nature, to decide that his accusers are a little touched than to think that a Zen master would slander his followers with lies, gossip, or appeals to homophobia. And so the arc of Shimano's narrative bends, inevitably, toward his own anointing.

VII. "I can't say that it was consensual"

The willingness of women to seek Shimano as a teacher, despite the murmurings about his depravity, helps illustrate something about Zen in the United States, an aspect of its culture that has worked very much to Shimano's advantage, and has enabled numerous other *rosHis* to abuse their power: American Zen attracts people looking for something, or somebody, to make them whole. It attracts damaged people.

Of course, all people are to some extent damaged, and all religions attract some seekers looking to salve their psychic wounds. To understand this aspect of Shimano and his sexual career, we must listen to some of the women who were drawn to him, who did not say no, at least not at first. Robin Westen, for example, came to Shimano by way of another guru, Min Pai, who had found her in in 1981, three years after emerging from a desperate state of emptiness, when she comforted herself with drugs and clothes.

"I was living in SoHo," Westen said, when we met near her office in Brooklyn's waterfront Dumbo neighborhood. "I was jet-setting around with movie stars and the British nobility, and I was snorting coke. Before that I had been a hippie, and I had had a lot of free sex, drugs." This Jewish girl from Queens would soon land a job in television at ABC, where beginning in 1980 she wrote for *FYI: For Your Information*, a series of daytime self-help spots aimed at women, hosted by Hal Linden; in 1982, she and the rest of the writing staff would win an Emmy. Nevertheless, Westen had recently been, by her own account, a no-good, terrible person. "I was really into shopping at Bergdorf," she said. "I was ridiculous. I thought you were born and you died. I was a ruthless person. I was not a kind woman. I was such a cunt."

Her life changed in 1978, on the day that she had a *kensho*, or enlightenment experience, on a beach on Cape Cod. She became increasingly interested in spiritual exploration, so she was prepared for the day in 1981 when she met Min Pai, a Korean-American Buddhist and martial-arts instructor, who was visiting one of her co-workers at the ABC offices. Westen sat

across from him and looked into his face. A “sudden infusion of love” poured into her, she wrote in “The Guru,” an essay she published in 2007 in the collection [*Mr. Wrong: Real-Life Stories About the Men We Used to Love*](#). He was “like smooth cream from a pitcher.” After five minutes, he left, but that evening she found him at his martial-arts studio. Almost immediately, she was under his sway. “If Jim Jones could get 913 followers to commit mass suicide,” she wrote, by way of self-explanation, “wasn’t it possible for a charismatic Zen master to gaze into my eyes and convince me to leave my boyfriend, no longer fraternize with friends and colleagues, and give up the glamorous life of restaurant-hopping and designer shopping in exchange for 12 hours a day of meditation, manual labor on the cult’s rustic estate, unquestioned obedience, and the willingness—no, eagerness—to hand over several thousand dollars as well as sex on demand?”

Soon Min Pai began to control every aspect of Westen’s life. For example, he forbid her to wear any scent that not approved by him. (In her essay, she altered this story with an S&M twist, writing that he forbid her to wear any underwear but a pair of leather bondage panties “with a silver clamp by the crotch.”) When she arrived at his apartment one night smelling of baby powder, he ordered her to go home and slammed the door in her face. “I wept all the way home,” she wrote. “Feeling lost, abandoned, unloved, and hopeless, I was near suicidal. What had become of the independent, career-driven woman, the one who dangled New York City hotshots like beads on a necklace?”

Westen finally left Min Pai when, she said, he demanded her participation in a scheme to extort money from another follower’s father, by falsely accusing him of a crime and saying that, as a journalist, she could write about him. (Min Pai died in 2004, so Westen’s version of events will have to stand.) Before leaving Min Pai, however, she had found her way to Eido Shimano (Min Pai had recommended Shimano, and apparently she still trusted his judgment that far). She would describe what happened next in the 1982 article “Zen and the Art of Seduction,” which was never published but can now be found online. The article began this way:

Leaning against the couch, my host loosened the belt of his flowing white robe, patted his stomach, and smiled. He had the most incredible radiance in his eyes ... I was seated across from him on a small round cushion. My legs were numb—a dead giveaway, I suspected, that I had only been practicing Zen for a year. He stood and held out his hand. I took it awkwardly, but before I could get the feeling back in my legs, he ripped me off the floor and pulled my body against his, then grabbed my breast, prodded my mouth with his tongue, and started to pull up my skirt and reach between my legs. For a moment, I was too stunned to react. But then I pushed him away, and stood there ... He acted as though nothing had happened. He was still smiling. I was sickened, frightened, disoriented, confused. The physical assault was enough, but even worse was the emotional betrayal. He was my Zen master, my teacher, my guide, and he had brutally violated my trust.

According to Westen’s article, she followed Shimano out of the *dokusan* room, where private conferences between students and teachers happen, and went downstairs to the meditation room. There, Shimano bowed to a statue of the Buddha. Westen “saw the red light above the exit sign and quickly left the building.” Convinced that hers could not be an isolated case, Westen immediately began making phone calls, and she quickly found others who said that they had been harassed by Shimano.

Westen was fortunate. When she began to see the truth about the Zen teachers, and decided not to be the cowering submissive anymore, she had an old and useful persona to reclaim: the gutsy Jewish girl from outer-borough New York. There's some dignity in a part like that, and she still had the lines memorized. Yesterday she was dominated; today she is indomitable. But many of Shimano's victims didn't have that kind of dressing to put over their wounds. Some of them still sound fragile, and probably always did. Their voices are soft and tentative; they sound deeply unpracticed in speaking up for themselves. You can see when you meet them, or even hear over the telephone, exactly why Shimano would select them.

"If Jim Jones could get 913 followers to commit mass suicide, wasn't it possible for a charismatic Zen master to gaze into my eyes and convince me to leave my boyfriend?"

"Olivia Wood," as she has asked me to call her, said that she was always disposed to the kind of contemplative experience Buddhism offered her. She is now 66 years old and lives in the Northeast. "When I was very young, I had a beautiful experience," she told me, when we spoke by telephone in September 2012. "I was sitting by a lake, and the sun was rising." She became aware of the beauty in everything, "the trees, the chipmunk playing in the woodpile." A church bell rang from across the lake, and she had an "experience that there is a mysterious sort of life behind everything that was kind of ineffable." From then on, she always felt called to that kind of mysterium, to transcendence.

But she also was "challenged from a fairly early age," she said, by a high-school music teacher "who was a real predator." Every year he selected one student to prey on, and in her senior year Wood was that student. After she graduated and went to music conservatory, she met another woman who had been sexually involved with the teacher; together, they went to the principal to tell him what had happened. "That principal said, 'We're aware that it's happening, and we're keeping an eye on it.'" So Wood learned at an early age that those who exploited her would be protected. "That was back in the 1960s, when there really was no good protection for women like us. When I would tell other people, the response was, 'What would happen to the reputation of the high school?' or 'He's such a popular teacher, we wouldn't want to lose him' ... So that sense of powerlessness was really traumatic, probably more traumatic than being abused by that one person."

In the early 1970s, Wood became interested in Zen, and eventually spent a weekend at Dai Bosatsu. After she left, she returned to the college town where she was living with some roommates, and soon received an unexpected visitor. "One day, there's a knock on my door, and I open it, and who should be standing there but Eido Shimano? He said he was coming to visit a professor at the university, a Japanese professor in the East Asian Studies department ... But he came in and told me that he thought I would be a very good student, and encouraged me to come back as his student, and be a resident in his monastery. And I thought about it for a while, and I decided I would do it."

At this point, Wood said, she knew nothing of Shimano's history with women. But he knew about her painful relationship in high school. She could not remember whether she had told him about the high-school teacher the day that he appeared at her door, or if she had already told him at the monastery. In either case, when she next came to Dai Bosatsu, Shimano's knowledge of her past came in handy.

"This would have been around 1978," Wood told me. One evening, very early in her stay, she was upstairs in the *zendo* library, and while she was staring at a painting, Shimano entered.

“Shimano came into the room and told me the story of that brush painting,” she said—it was a rendering of the Jizo Boddhisatva, a revered figure in the Zen and Mahayana Buddhist traditions. “When he finished, he put his arm around me, and I—I froze. I didn’t know how to handle it. I still, to this day, I have had to work very hard on why I allowed the next part to happen. He claimed that he wanted to help me heal”—here Wood let out a rueful laugh—“from what had happened to me, which had always been an extremely physically painful experience, because it was almost always a form of rape. I didn’t really trust that or believe that, but I didn’t know how to say no.”

On the day that he approached her in the library, Wood had sex with Shimano for the first time. “I would far have preferred that it not have happened,” she said. “So I can’t say that it was consensual. He was pretty aggressive. I felt some of that predatory stuff.” Although “the first couple times were okay, were nice,” the relationship soon began to feel lopsided, even cruel. “It was always when he wanted to see me; it was never if I wanted to see him.” Shimano had also failed to mention that he was married, a fact that later made Wood question his “so-called enlightenment.” She raised the issue one time when she wanted to avoid having sex with him.

“I said, ‘But you have a wife’—I was thinking of all the ways I could to get out of this thing—and he said she was in Japan and was mentally ill. He did this to women across the board. Whenever he was finished with someone or displeased with someone, if it was a woman, she was mentally ill. He did that with me too.”

Wood stayed at Dai Bosatsu for more than two years, and for a time she was the *tenzo*, or head cook, an important position. In the beginning, Shimano would summon her for sex “several times a week,” although gradually he tapered off. When he wanted her, he would give “a certain kind of smile, and a little wave that he would have with his hand.” He would point at her, then gesture toward his chambers. After she decided she no longer wanted to have sex with him, she still was not quite able to tell him no; rather, she coped by ignoring his hints. “I would pretend to not see his little signals.” He might approach in the hallway, and she would just turn away. “I would find myself trying to go in another direction.”

What finally gave Wood the strength just to say no? The presence of Shimano’s wife: “One day, while I was the cook, I came out into the dining room, and there was a new woman, a Japanese woman, and I went over to introduce myself to her, ask if she had been there before. And everyone laughed! Turned out it was his wife. Even though she was there, he asked me to come up to his room, and I said, ‘Your wife is here!’ And he said, ‘That’s okay, she’s staying in another room.’ And that’s when I said no. Thank God—I like to think I exonerated myself a little bit there.” Soon thereafter, Wood discovered that Shimano was also sleeping with the woman in the room next to hers.

Had it only been the sex, lies, and secrecy, Wood might not feel as wounded as she does. “It was how I ended up leaving that was so traumatic,” she told me. In part to help her deal with the Shimano relationship, she had begun seeing a Jungian analyst, and he helped her finally make a break. But as part of her therapy, she had been keeping a journal, to track her dreams, draft poetry, and record anything else that might occur to her. When her mother became ill with cancer, she left the monastery suddenly, and forgot to take her journal with her. She left it behind in a box, where a resident monk found it. He made copies of passages that strongly hinted at her affair with Shimano.

While at her mother's house, Wood got a call from Shimano, who asked her to come to New York to meet with him at the East 67th Street building. "He sounded so concerned and distraught that I did go. I went to the New York Zendo and went upstairs with him, and he told me what had happened: that these writings had been found, and copies made, and all sent to the board of directors, and other people. And he gave me a big story of how this could totally destroy the work so many people had done." Here Wood stopped, as if to reflect. "This is awful, isn't it?" she asked. I told her it was.

When her mother became ill with cancer, she left the monastery suddenly, and forgot to take her journal with her. She left it behind in a box, where a resident monk found it.

"I was reeling," she went on, "from the fact that these writings that were so intimate had been—that was like being raped." As much to protect herself from further trauma as to protect her teacher, she agreed to deny what her journal had made clear. "I told him that I would not—that if asked I would tell them they were things I had made up, they were dreams. And he immediately got very calm. Not an inch of interest in what was happening to me. And I left."

Wood returned to the monastery to collect her belongings. While there, she approached an older woman, a member of the board of directors, and told her what Shimano was doing. "This is what is happening," she told her. "You have to stop it." She later heard that, when confronted, Shimano said that she was crazy. "And then Shimano did this business of 'This woman has been under the care of a therapist! She is crazy!' He really slandered me."

VIII. "You start being a little curious"

"Elaine," as I will call her, studied with Shimano for 11 years, and she, too, was a mental captive: obsessed, intoxicated, and now living with a kind of permanent hangover. Today, she lives with her husband in a large, expensive house in a prosperous town. She has a childlike voice and long hair that she dyes brown. As we talked, she sat on the floor in an easy lotus position—Buddhists like to revert to position, just as ballet dancers will often stand in first position, heels together and toes out, even when they're not dancing. She is married to a therapist, who occasionally looked in on us. He seemed to care for her like a concerned father. In preparation for my visit, she had reread old journals and skimmed some relevant Buddhist texts. She was not quite free of Shimano. For example, she did not want me to use her name, because she believes that Shimano is very "psychically powerful," and could potentially harm her from afar.

Like Olivia Wood, Elaine had been abused as a child; like Robin Westen, she came to Shimano on the recommendation of Min Pai, with whom she had studied. In short, she too was drawn to gurus who offered the promise of healing. In May 1981, she went to the Zen Studies Society for the first time. Her first teacher was not Shimano but Lee Milton, then a resident monk. Elaine quickly progressed, and soon she was attending three- and five-day retreats with Milton. Her first trip to Dai Bosatsu was, she thinks, in 1982.

Her practice escalated and intensified, to the point where she was meditating as often as possible, obsessively. "I went to about 50 *sesshins*," Elaine said, "which is unprecedented, I'm told, for a layperson. Each *sesshin* is a week, and I was working full-time." She never

took vacations, spending all her vacation days and sick leave to attend *sesshin*. She lived on the Upper East Side, not far from the *zendo*, so she attended every possible sitting, “four nights a week, on Sundays, sometimes the morning service at five in the morning.”

Elaine knew from the start that Shimano had affairs with his students. “People knew Eido Roshi, and warned me what he was like,” she said. When she first started at the New York Zendo, she heard that a whole crop of students had just left in disgust. For the first four years, she and Shimano did not have sex. Elaine insisted that when they finally did, it was consensual and not exploitative. But her language was ambiguous.

“Eido Roshi—in my day he was more subtle in his exploitation of us,” Elaine said. She remembered his occasional acts of generosity or deference, like his refusal to hit her with *keisaku*. “He knew that was something not to do me,” Elaine said. “I was battered as a child, and that was not for me.” And she gave him credit for not coming on to her, at least not right away. Or at least being willing to take no for an answer. “He left me alone for the first four years,” she said. “Well, he didn’t leave me alone, but I didn’t succumb for about four years ... I observed him, I was warned ... But then slowly things started eroding, and you start being a little curious, and he’s so powerful.”

The more Elaine defended Shimano, the more indefensible he looked. “Subsequently, I found out he was sleeping with my friend before me,” she said. “And when I came to the *zendo*, she started tearing her hair out later on, because she knew I was next. But I wasn’t next, because I was four years later. So there were other people during that time.” Elaine believed that what Shimano did with vulnerable students was abuse. She called him a narcissist. He was “always hurting people,” she told me. But Elaine was also convinced that the two of them had something special. She was not one of his typical easy marks. Their relationship was, she believed, more equal than his others. “I felt that I really loved him, even though he was a scoundrel in a way. Whatever delusions I had, I felt that it—I think he really respected me for standing up to him. I think he was in a really lonely position. He had everyone bowing to him and this and that, and I was a spirited person ... He said that in a way I was more enlightened than him, which is pretty big.”

She stayed with Shimano for 11 years, having sex with him, off and on, for the last seven. After all that time, what they shared was, she was sure, nothing like what he had with the other women. “I was always there, and I was the only person who was always there through those 11 years.” The monks were “coming and going,” and nothing else, nobody else, was constant. “I really had the closest relationship, and I challenged him.”

Eventually, however, Elaine knew that she had to leave. He was sleeping with other women, and it tormented her. A Japanese mistress arrived midway through a *sesshin*, several days after it had begun. “She wasn’t a serious student,” Elaine told me with disdain. “And you know why she was there—because she was going to sleep with him ... So it was a torment. It was my own fault ... I knew all that stuff, but I couldn’t quite get free of him.”

Until one day, when he demanded sex, she finally refused him. “He pleaded with me to sleep with him again, and I refused. I just said no. And he said, ‘One more time?’ And I just said no.”

IX. “I took a vow of celibacy”

“Regardless of what it’s called,” Robin Westen told me, “it’s a cult. You go away, you sleep maybe five hours a night, you’re eating three bowls of rice on your knees, there’s no talking, you’re sitting on a cushion until your knees are killing you for 12 fucking hours a day. You’re waking up at four in the morning and chanting, and the only person you can talk to is this dude in a little closet of a room. They’re breaking you down.”



Shimano greets Pope Benedict XVI at an April 2008 interreligious gathering in Washington, D.C. (Molly Riley/Reuters)

Today, sociologists shy away from the word *cult*, mainly because the word is frightening without being very precise. After all, the kind of intense practice that Westen describes could just as easily apply to life in many Catholic monasteries or convents. Are they cults? And many religious laypeople—Orthodox Jews, evangelical Protestants, devout Muslims—pray every day, sometimes multiple times a day; alter their diets; even, as in the case of Mormons, wear special underwear, all because these are their religion’s customs. Are these people cultists, or just fervent believers?

But even if we eschew the word itself, it is useful to consider that while, in theory, there is a place in Zen for moderation, Shimano’s students came to believe that the more deeply they studied—and the more hours one spent sitting—the better their practice would be. As a result, they often became so identified with Shimano that breaking with the *sangha* could be more traumatic than enduring whatever pain he was inflicting. *Zazen*, the hours of meditation at the heart of Zen Buddhism, is best practiced in a community; at a quiet, properly appointed *zendo*; and under the guidance of a skilled teacher—monk, nun, priest, or abbot. Even in Japan, it is increasingly difficult to find all those necessities together, and in the United States

such a confluence exists in only several dozen cities. It all flows from the teacher, who can build up a community and raise the dollars for a *zendo*.

And of the few teachers in this country who can do that, how hard must it be to find the teacher who works for *you*? If you found such a teacher, how grateful would you be, and how reluctant to leave? Not only can a departing student despair of ever again finding a comparable teacher with whom to sit and meditate, or an equally supportive community, but such a student has to ask whether the previous year—or two years, or 10 years—has all been a waste. The longer one stays, the harder it is to leave. And so it becomes very appealing to ignore, minimize, or deny the faults of the leader. If women and men hoped that Shimano could make them whole, they stayed because it seemed that he was the only one who could. This totalizing effect of Zen Buddhism characterizes other deep practices, and many intentional communities. To live such a life can be exhilarating. But the intensive Zen life can also be disabling, robbing people of their good judgment and causing them to abdicate their self-regard to leaders who may not be worthy of their trust. And when students identify Zen practice wholly with one teacher, their practice might not survive a rupture in the relationship.

In 2006, Andrea Rook, then 31 years old, was leading a rather unremarkable life in Concord, New Hampshire, with her husband, whom she had met on Match.com, and their young daughter. Then she began studying at Dai Bosatsu. Her tutelage with Shimano lasted from 2006 to 2008, and she never slept with him, but she speaks of him with an ardor, and a kind of horror, unmatched by any of his more enduring partners. She left her husband and child for him.

“I would have done almost anything he asked me to,” Rook told me, when we spoke by telephone. “All I wanted was to be there in that monastery with him and learn Zen.” Rook sounded nostalgic as she described her practice, learned from Shimano: the typical “mu” meditation, in which one breathes in and out while concentrating on the word *mu*. “I loved him so much,” she said. “Basically, I left my family. I divorced my husband. We had, up until that point, a decent marriage. It wasn’t the deepest, most meaningful marriage, and maybe we would have ended up divorced in 10 years, but not for 10 years. And my daughter was 2 years old when I left her. I was one of those ferociously protective moms, and I picked up and left Eva for 90 days. As much time as I could get with Shimano, I wanted.”

At first, Rook tried alternating 90 days at Dai Bosatsu with 90-day periods with her daughter. “But after a year, I realized I was forgetting what it was like to be a mom.” She left the *sangha*, and today she is back with her daughter. Rook is enrolled in college, studying psychology, and she teaches Zumba classes. During my second interview with Shimano, I alluded to Rook, and asked him how he felt about students’ leaving their families to study with him. He replied that in the United States, people can do as they please. “In this country,” Shimano said, “people express their own reasons, and if he or she is not crazy, normally I would accept them to come up.”

In Japan, sexual aggression was never an accepted teaching method, but then again, traditional Japanese monasteries were all-male.

Unlike Rook, who got out relatively quickly, and never slept with Shimano, “Anna” (not her real name) did have sex with Shimano, although she said that she had hoped not to, and it took her almost a decade to leave. We met at her house, where she lives alone, but for her dog, in a poor, small town in a sparsely populated state. She agreed to speak with me as long

as I thoroughly hid her identity. She met Shimano in the late 1970s; beyond that I am not permitted to give specific dates or lengths of time. Even her children don't know the entire story, although they do not know the role that Eido Shimano played in what their mother calls her "self-imposed exile." She spoke anxiously but compulsively, both afraid and thrilled to have a curious visitor. Anna is trying to recover from her loss: not the loss of love (for she never loved Eido Shimano), but the loss of her Buddhist practice.

Anna grew up in a liberal Protestant household but never derived much meaning from Christianity. In the 1970s, as a single mother, she read an article about Soen Nakagawa, the great Japanese *roshi*, and decided that she would like to learn from him. She soon discovered that Nakagawa was in Japan, but that she could sit with his leading student in the United States, Eido Shimano. Her practice began slowly, just a weekend at Dai Bosatsu now and again, but as her children aged and became more independent, Anna began to visit for longer periods: seven-day *sesshins*, three-month *kesseis*, eventually multiyear residencies. For years, she learned from Shimano without incident. But she was always on guard.

"I'd heard these rumors," Anna said as we sat in her kitchen. "And I thought, *Well, he is a great being.*" Either the rumors were untrue, she guessed, or there was more to the story, some good reason for Shimano's behavior. Still, Anna preferred not to find out. "I did try to avoid that with him, in a number of ways. I tried to make myself unappealing. I—well, I took a vow of celibacy." Buddhism does not require celibacy of its practitioners, but Anna felt that it enhanced her Buddhist practice. And it kept Shimano away.

After three years, Anna decided to lift her vow of celibacy. "And then he was right there," she said. "And I was not prepared." She volunteered little about their sexual relationship: Shimano initiated it; the encounters were regular but intermittent; she was the one to end it. Given that the relationship felt to her like "a kind of rape, just as statutory rape is a kind of rape," I asked her why she had allowed it to begin. Was she flattered by the attention?

"I don't think I had the chance to think of it as flattering when the first incident happened," Anna said. "No, I was totally taken off guard. Prior to that happening, I'd heard rumors, and I wondered, what will I do? Because I didn't think I was allowed to say no ... What I might say, as a distant cousin, is the feeling that if he was approving of you, that you were on the right path. I see it as part of the Zen tradition, too: the more serious the student is, the more shit they might give you."

Zen does, in fact, have an aspect of sadism to it, or what we might more charitably call tough love. The Zen teacher roams a *zendo* with his stick, his *keisaku*, hitting students between the shoulder blades if they look sleepy or inattentive. A typical meditation session may last for 40 minutes, but two hours isn't uncommon, and on the last day of one annual *sesshin*, the Zen Buddhist sits for a whole day and night, with breaks only for meals. The enforced silence of Zen, whether for an hour or for seven days, can also be torturous—although students insist it can lead to rapture.

In Japan, sexual aggression was never an accepted teaching method, but then again, traditional Japanese monasteries were all-male, limiting the possible temptations for heterosexual teachers. In the United States, in coed monasteries, it is not surprising that a student—trained to see fatigue, hunger, physical pain, and enforced silence as necessary spiritual disciplines—could figure that a teacher's sexual demands were somehow reasonable, even desirable.

When it all went bad, Anna, like Olivia Wood, was torn between justice for herself (and protecting other possible victims) and the all-consuming importance of Zen practice. After all she had suffered, Wood still promised to keep quiet, not wanting to harm the Zen center. By contrast, Anna left Dai Bosatsu convinced that what Shimano had done to her was criminal; she told her story to the Manhattan district attorney's office, but it did not find sufficient evidence to charge Shimano with a crime. (The assistant district attorney who had met with Anna remembered the case, but her notes from that meeting, more than 20 years ago, did not survive.) Yet Anna eventually decided that Shimano's great crime was robbing her of her Zen practice. She never found another *sangha*, and, after all her years with Shimano, she never connected with another teacher. By insisting on being her lover, Shimano robbed her of a teacher.

Anna still misses sitting at Dai Bosatsu. "I have tried to connect with some other places," she told me, "but it's not the same thing." She said she has spoken with other Shimano victims, and they too bemoan the isolation they have felt after leaving Shimano's community. "I do believe that a lot of us have found ourselves without a religion, without a community, and, for Zen Buddhists, without a practice—you know, a meditation practice." In other words, to be without a community *is* to be without a practice. "That to me is at the core of Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism. I struggled for a long, long time not to lose that, which I eventually did. I'm trying to get back to it, because it was a wonderful thing. I guess it was too tied up with Shimano."

X. "Unfortunately, we don't have God"

According to a recent agreement between the plaintiffs and the defendant, the lawsuit *Eido T. Shimano Roshi and Yasuko Aiho Shimano v. The Zen Studies Society, Inc.* will go first to nonbinding arbitration, where a mutually agreeable arbitrator will advise the parties what he or she thinks would happen if the case went to a jury. Jeffrey Hovden, the lawyer for the Zen Studies Society, told me, "The two sides are in arbitration over who the arbitrator will be."

Most of the issues in the case are rather mundane. The most compelling aspect of the reply brief, the most interesting question if this case goes to trial, is the argument that Shimano's sexual activities voided the terms of his agreement. "As spiritual leader, Shimano Roshi had fiduciary and ethical duties to the ZSS members who were his students," the brief maintains.

On numerous occasions, Shimano Roshi engaged in sexual relationships with students of his. Shimano Roshi's sexual relationships constituted an abuse of Shimano Roshi's position ... [His] sexual relationships harmed the ZSS and ZSS members and students. By having sexual relationships with students, Shimano Roshi caused damage to ZSS's national and international reputation. After Shimano Roshi's sexual relationships became known to members of ZSS and the wider Buddhist community, contributions to ZSS fell precipitously.

Here I interrupted: "So your argument will be 'He didn't do it, but if he did, he was doing it all along?'"

This is a legal brief, so one should not inspect it too closely for moral coherence. But it does seem that the Zen Studies Society is arguing that Shimano should not have had sex with students—but that if he was going to have sex with students, then publicly known sex was

especially bad, because it could harm the organization's reputation, causing donations to fall. So if there isn't money to pay Shimano's pension—which, according to many sources I spoke with, there isn't—then it is mostly Shimano's fault. Because he couldn't keep his sex secret.

Lawrence Gerzog, Shimano's lawyer, is arguing that Shimano's discretion, or indiscretion, is immaterial. To begin, Gerzog told me, it is not clear that abstaining from sex with students is a requirement of Buddhism. And if Shimano did not abstain, then his alleged inability to keep his activities quiet could, paradoxically, be a reason that he *should* get his pension. For if there have been rumors of Shimano's womanizing for so many decades, then the Zen Studies Society must have known about the rumors in 1995, when they promised the Shimanos a pension. How, Gerzog asked, can they now turn around and say that Shimano was not providing sound ethical leadership? If his behavior was good enough for the *sangha* all those years, it can't turn around and tsk-tsk him now!

Here is how Gerzog stated this argument, at our second group lunch: “The society is alleging that recent claims of Roshi's sexual activity surprised them, and that's why they're taking the steps that they took now. But there have been suggestions or allegations since, I think the 1950s.” Gerzog drew an analogy to *Casablanca*, in which the Vichy commander is “shocked, shocked” to discover gambling—and then seconds later is handed his winnings. “I think these allegations have been brewing about for many years, and for the society to suggest that they were unaware of them, and/or that it was a deal breaker or that it concerned them is, is the utmost—”

Here I interrupted: “So your argument will be ‘He didn't do it, but if he did, he was doing it all along?’”

“Absolutely,” Gerzog said. “Absolutely.”

Shimano has almost entirely refused to discuss his sexual past, deferring to his lawyer's wishes. At our two lunches, Shimano often seemed about to answer a question about sex when Gerzog would say, “Roshi, don't answer that!” And Roshi wouldn't. But at our second lunch, on June 20, 2013, at Montebello, a New York City restaurant, Shimano did say that he has had sex with “far fewer” than 12 of his students.



Shimano presides over a funeral service for Frankie Parker, a death row inmate who converted to Buddhism before his execution in August 1996. (Tom McKitterick)

And Gerzog did allow Shimano to answer my general questions about sex between teachers and students. I asked, “Is there any ethical concern relating to affairs between teachers and students?” And Shimano replied, after some hesitation, “I guess—I guess—no matter what, it should belong to [the] unethical category.” I reiterated: “It should belong to the unethical category? Teachers should not have affairs with their students in Buddhism?” And Shimano said, “Even—no matter how aggressive the student may be.”

Soon thereafter, I asked whether having sex with a teacher could affect a student’s Zen practice. “Negatively or positively?” Shimano asked me.

“Either,” I said. “Could it affect it positively?”

“Could be,” he said.

“Could be?” I asked.

“Could be.”

“Could it affect it negatively?” I asked.

“Could be.”

“So,” I said, “who would decide, in that situation, whether it’s a good idea?”

“Unfortunately,” Shimano said, “we don’t have God”—there is no Western-style, Judeo-Christian, yes-or-no answer. He started and stopped a bit more, searching for the right words, until he found something he was happy with. “Maybe dharma”—nature, the universe—“is our answer.”

XI. "You may not see your own shadows"

Sherry Chayat, the new abbot, or head priest, of the Zen Studies Society, is 70 years old. She was raised Jewish, and she is going through her second divorce; her first marriage was to a noted Buddhist teacher, Lou Nordstrom, who used to be close to Shimano but will no longer speak of him. Chayat is a dharma heir of Shimano's, a chosen disciple, whom Shimano handpicked as his successor. When Shimano agreed to step aside in 2010, he and Chayat, who goes by the dharma name Roko, had a warm relationship; in fact, she was generally derided by Shimano's critics as a patsy, eager to believe anything he said, or perhaps too afraid to challenge him. In the past two years, however, and especially since the lawsuit was filed, they have become adversaries. In an October 2012 e-mail about some rather arcane controversies concerning Shimano's Japanese Buddhist lineage, an e-mail that I have obtained, Chayat wrote, "The reason we are in such a mess is that we believed in a manipulative sociopath."

Having to face Shimano's true nature, having to acknowledge the depth of his possible transgressions, and having to defend against a lawsuit brought by her former teacher have been painful aspects of Chayat's job as abbot. But these new and unwelcome responsibilities cannot be wholly surprising for her, as she herself left Shimano's *sangha* in 1976 because of his sexual indiscretions—then in 1990 accepted an invitation to return. When she and I met upstairs at the East 67th Street *zendo* in October 2012, she spoke to me of her gratitude to Shimano. It's the kind of gratitude you have, she said, "when you've had a teacher who's brilliant, who has shown you the way in a fundamental sense, not in a relative sense. Who has really been able to help you see for yourself the fundamental reality beyond the duality of good and evil." Alas, she added, Zen Buddhists can "forget that we have to live in the relative world of good and evil, that we have to make choices based on right and wrong."

The true dharma knowledge is that there is no good and evil, that all is one; but true dharma knowledge isn't very helpful to a woman being pressured to have sex.

Without saying so explicitly, Chayat was describing the potential for evil at the heart of Zen Buddhism. The true dharma knowledge, what students come to Shimano to learn, is that there is no good and evil, that all is one; but true dharma knowledge isn't very helpful to a woman being pressured to have sex. And—here's another way that Buddhism can protect, even incite, evil—those who seem to possess the greatest wisdom, or the most spiritual magnetism, may be uniquely incapable of telling right from wrong. "When you yourself are so in the light, you may not see your own shadows very well," Chayat said, about Shimano. "He is a remarkably astute, deep, profound, spiritually evolved, charismatic leader. But as we know there can be these flaws." In an e-mail months later, she clarified the term *flaws*: "As we have come to realize, there has been a long history of secret maneuvering and sexual misconduct."

Although our conversation occurred less than a week after Chayat had referred to Shimano as a "sociopath," I do not believe there was anything insincere in her measured praise of the man. Good/bad, compassionate/cruel, empathetic/sociopathic: although his life's work is to defeat such simplistic dualities, he embodies them.

Nobody knows that paradox better than Chayat, his chosen successor, who now must rescue the Zen Studies Society from Shimano's wreckage but who once, many years ago, fell for him herself. "Someone said that in the early years you had a relationship with him," I said to her. Several members of the *sangha* had in fact told me that Chayat could never possibly make a clean break with the Shimano era, since she had her own secrets to protect.

“You know,” she said, “I had, like many women, perhaps a surprising physical approach that never led to an affair. So, no. Working very closely together, you felt it’s natural if someone throws their arms around you and starts kissing you. It wasn’t a big deal. It didn’t go anywhere.”

“You didn’t have sex with him?” I asked.

“No, it never turned into an affair.”

“Because people have said ...”

“No. I had physical contact with him.” This was in the summer of 1974, she later told me. “There was a passionate embrace. But it didn’t—I guess I was surprised, but it wasn’t something that harmed me in any way ... I was married, he was married, we were both at the monastery. For some reason it never went any further. If I had been given the choice to go further, I probably would have. Everybody was in love with him.”

Right now, Shimano is not permitted on any Zen Studies Society property, and his artifacts have not been returned to him. Membership at the Zen Studies Society is down; Chayat will not confirm or deny the rumor that she has had the East 67th Street building appraised for a possible sale. Shimano continues to live with his wife in the apartment that they may or may not own; he occasionally sits, at various sites in Manhattan, with a small, loyal group of followers. In a statement he released this past July 4, he said that he is beginning work on a translation of the correspondence between two of his late teachers, Soen Nakagawa and Nyogen Senzaki.

“All of this has not made me feel any less grateful to him as a profoundly realized teacher,” Chayat said of the whole ordeal. “But I also feel a deep sadness, deep regret about people having—the alleged relationships’ having harmed people.

“So I feel both, at the same time.”

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