

The New York Times

Sex Scandal Has U.S. Buddhists Looking Within

By Mark Oppenheimer

Aug. 20, 2010

Sooner or later, every traditional faith has to confront sexual impropriety by its spiritual leaders: extramarital sex, or sex with the wrong people (members of the congregation, minors) or, for supposedly celibate clergy, any sex at all.

But there are great differences in how religions handle these transgressions. For Jews and many Protestants, it is the local congregation that decides what sins are too great to countenance, and what kind of discipline is needed. For Roman Catholics, a worldwide hierarchy decides, depending on reports from local representatives. And for Buddhists — well, the answer is not so clear.

The root of the problem, some experts say, is that the teacher/student relationship in Buddhism has no obvious Western analogy. Priests and rabbis know the boundaries, even if some do not always respect them. Doctors, too, have ethical canons they are supposed to honor. A spiritual figure like a priest, an authority figure like a teacher, a therapeutic figure like an analyst — the Buddhist teacher may be all of those, but is not like any one of them. Even sanghas, or Buddhist communities, that discourage such relationships often have no process for enforcing a ban, and as one Zen society in New York is learning, that can lead to problems.

Since 1965, Eido Shimano, now 77, has been the abbot, or head spiritual teacher, of the Zen Studies Society, a Japanese Buddhist community with headquarters on East 67th Street in Manhattan and a 1,400-acre monastery in the Catskills. For much of that time, there have been rumors about the married abbot's sexual liaisons, with his students and with other women. Such rumors could no longer be ignored when, in 2008, the University of Hawaii at Manoa unsealed some papers donated by Robert Aitken, a leading American Buddhist and founder of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

The papers included files about Mr. Shimano that Mr. Aitken kept from 1964 to 2003. Mr. Aitken, who died Aug. 5, met Mr. Shimano when both men worked in Hawaii in the 1960s, and for more than 40 years he kept notes on his colleague's liaisons, based on conversations with women who had confided in him.

In a 1995 letter to the president of the Zen Studies Society's board, Mr. Aitken wrote: "Over the past three decades, we have interviewed many former students of Shimano Roshi. 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." ("Roshi," or teacher, is a Japanese honorific that goes after the name.)

The Aitken papers were soon circulating on the Internet. On June 15, Mr. Shimano's board of

directors, which exercises ultimate authority in the society, met to discuss the allegations. Mr. Shimano, who was then on the board, was not present, but most board members concurred that the charges most likely had some validity.

“I thought the sources were varied enough” to seem valid, said one board member, who asked not to be named. “I certainly didn’t think it was all a fraud.”

At that meeting, the board members began writing a new set of ethical guidelines for the society. In the text, they included an acknowledgment of past indiscretions by Mr. Shimano. Chris Phelan, another board member, said that Mr. Shimano saw the text of the statement and approved of it. “He didn’t step forward and say he was being libeled,” Mr. Phelan said.

Nonetheless, several board members told The New York Times that they believed that Mr. Shimano’s relations with students had ended long ago, and they saw no reason that Mr. Shimano could not continue teaching.

“As far as I knew, there had been a hiatus of 15 years,” said Joe Marinello, a board member who is the abbot of the Seattle Zen Temple.

But then, on July 19, the board announced that Mr. Shimano had resigned from the board after being confronted with allegations of “clergy misconduct.” The statement was sent in response to inquiries from Tricycle, a magazine about Buddhism. Since that time, the board has said that Mr. Shimano will continue as abbot until 2012, but a vice abbot has been appointed and Mr. Shimano will not be taking new students.

So what had changed?

A week after beginning work on new ethical guidelines — which in their final form forbid “sexual advances or liaisons” between teachers and sangha members — the board was confronted with a new revelation.

In interviews over the past two weeks, four board members, including Mr. Marinello, said that on June 21 a woman — whose name he would not reveal — stood up during dinner at the Catskills monastery and announced that for the past two years she had had a consensual affair with Mr. Shimano, who was at the dinner. Several board members have said that Mr. Shimano later admitted the affair in conversations with them. On Wednesday, the society issued a statement acknowledging that “in June of this year, a woman revealed that there was an inappropriate relationship between herself and Eido Roshi.”

Mr. Shimano did not return several phone calls.

In two ways, this small, symbolic statement — Mr. Shimano’s resigning from his own board — reflects how American religion has changed in the last 15 years.

First, this more recent affair occurred in a different news media culture. Clerical impropriety is a hot topic, of course. And on the Internet, where several bloggers were scrutinizing the Aitken papers, the new affair was sure to be mentioned. “The Internet was turning the heat up,” one member said. Board members had to act; they could not afford to be seen as indifferent.

Second, there has been a shift within the American Buddhist community, which has become more concerned about relations between teachers and students.

Historically, because that relationship is considered sacrosanct, affairs were not always condemned, or even disapproved of.

Unlike the therapeutic environment with analysis, with Buddhist teachers and students there are debates about what is appropriate and what isn't," says James Shaheen, editor of Tricycle. As to sexual relationships between teacher and student, "most people would come down on the side of 'Let's just not do it.' "

But there has also been a cultural aversion among Zen Buddhists to seeming censorious about sexuality. In a 2002 review of "Shoes Outside the Door," a book by Michael Downing about Richard Baker, the abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center in the 1970s and '80s, Frederick Crews wrote that Mr. Baker's "serial liaisons, hardly unique in the world of high-level American Buddhism, could have been forgiven, but his chronic untruthfulness about them could not."

Sex, alcoholism and drug abuse by major Buddhist leaders have all been tolerated over the years, by followers who look the other way, or even looked right at it and pretend not to care. For example, the Tibetan Buddhist master Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who founded the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University) in Boulder, Colo., was often publicly drunk. The Buddhist journalist Katy Butler wrote a 1990 article called "Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America," in which she described the public alcoholism of Mr. Trungpa Rinpoche.

"We habitually denied what was in front of our faces, felt powerless and lost touch with our inner experience," Ms. Butler wrote.

Clark Strand, who led Mr. Shimano's Upper East Side zendo from 1988 to 1990, said that on American soil, Asian Buddhism's sexual ethics, in particular, had to change.

"What you see in America is a lot of Asian Buddhist teachers coming into contact for the first time with spiritual communities that include women," Mr. Strand said. "And they weren't necessarily prepared for that."

"To be blunt about it, a Japanese Zen monk could go over the wall and visit a prostitute and a blind eye could be turned to that." In America, he added, "it wasn't as easy to turn a blind eye to going over the wall in his own monastery."

A correction was made on Aug. 24, 2010

The Beliefs column on Saturday, about Buddhist leaders who addressed a sex scandal, referred incorrectly to a 1990 article by Katy Butler, a journalist, titled "Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America." Ms. Butler did not describe Richard Baker, the abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center during the 1970s and 1980, as an alcoholic. She was comparing patterns of behavior by his followers to patterns of enabling behavior of relatives of alcoholics.