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Lineage Delusions: Eido Shimano Roshi, Dharma Transmission, and American Zen

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By Erik Fraser Storlie

In August 2010 *The New York Times* exposed the persistent failure of both the Zen Studies Society of New York and the larger American Zen Buddhist community to address Eido Shimano Roshi's forty year history of sexual abuse of women – and the desire, even now, to excuse or “explain” him. Equally distressing were Robert Aitken's posthumous letters, recently made available, revealing that Aitken, a deeply respected founder in American Zen, had lied for decades about Shimano's misconduct in order to protect, as Aitken explained it, “the American Dharma.”

Were this an isolated case, it would not matter very much, except, of course, to the victims. But it's an old and discouraging story in American yoga and meditation communities. In forty-six years of Zen practice I've observed Asian (and now Western) swamis, tulkus, roshis, rishis, dharma heirs, lineage holders, and masters of various stripes, as well as their disciples, explain that the master's fiscal extravagance, alcoholism, cruelty, sex addiction, violence, and even rape is – of all things – “a teaching!”

We are told that the master “dwells in the absolute,” or is a lineage holder in “crazy wisdom,” or can raise the kundalini energy, or read our chakras and past lives, or help “burn up” our karma, or is offering to share our wife, husband, girlfriend, or boyfriend so as to assist us in breaking our unfortunate attachments – all of this, of course, to stretch us beyond our parochial notions of right and wrong and bring us to the ultimate attainment enjoyed by the master himself (the master almost invariably being male).

We have seen some dwellers in the absolute require absolutely better automobiles and accommodations, while their disciples labor at low wages in community businesses; we have seen some destroy their health with alcohol, while another infected students with AIDS, deluded that his spiritual “power” would block viral transmission. Shockingly, governing members of his organization knew his secret, yet did nothing to warn potential victims.

This is a Mad Hatter's tea party, where hierarchical robes and titles, sadomasochistic austerities, and subterranean libertinism mix together in incestuous "spiritual communities" filled with distrust and rivalries – all this in a scramble for the summit of some distant "spiritual" mountain. This would be comic if it weren't tragic.

And it is tragic.

It is tragic because countless Americans hunger for genuine meaning – meaning unavailable in the toxic mimics offered by game shows, professional sports, "reality" TV, ugly politics, "free-market" competition, and unimaginably wasteful wealth accumulation at the top.

Yet meaning is available – above all in the penetrating explorations into the mysteries of consciousness we undertake in meditation and yoga. And the most important thing we can bring to these inquiries – and to those we hope to further in these inquiries – is our sincerity and selflessness.

The Shimano scandal reminds me of why, some years ago, I refused the opportunity to become a Zen "dharma heir." I refused, knowing that, without this title, despite forty years of training and practice, I would never be a recognized Zen meditation teacher. The offer was generous. But to have accepted would have been tacitly to endorse a credential that conferred great authority – yet was given at the pleasure of a single person and based on a fantasy.

The doctrine of dharma transmission hangs on four overlapping assumptions, all of which must be true to establish its credibility. The first two are beyond proof, and the third and the fourth obviously false.

The first, that the historical Buddha attained a mind of absolute perfection, is pure poetry – fascinating, mysterious – and if accepted, accepted simply as an article of faith. Did the Buddha have such a mind? A wonderful question! Maybe he did. Or maybe, somewhere in the cosmos, he's still exploring, expanding, and perfecting his infinite wide-awake seeing. Or maybe all of us are, exactly at this moment, his eyes opening again and again – and wider and wider as our practice deepens.

The second, that the Buddha's disciple Mahakasyapa also attained this perfect mind and that the Buddha recognized it, depends upon the first. Perhaps, indeed, a perfect being could recognize and attest to the perfection in another perfect being.

The third, that an unbroken chain of such "mind to mind" transmissions has descended, generation after generation, in a known lineage, down to today's living dharma heirs, is simply false on historical grounds. As Edward Conze, the great scholar of Indian Buddhism noted, "much of the traditions about the early history of Ch'an are the inventions of a later age" – inventions befitting a Chinese culture that deeply honored family lineages traced through renowned ancestors.

The fourth, that every such transmission from master to disciple over the last 2500 years was genuine, is contradicted by the behavior of Shimano himself – and, sadly, of any number of Asian and American teachers.

Stated simply, the doctrine of dharma transmission is just one more among the many attractive delusions held by human beings. Unfortunately, adherence to it gives the dharma heir a very powerful – and potentially dangerous – authority within the community of Zen practitioners, much as does the doctrine of the Apostolic Succession in the Roman Catholic Church, where the recent child abuse scandals illustrate the dangers of priesthoods that claim an authority

beyond the ordinary and human. Those in such positions are sorely tempted to protect each other, ignoring or covering up the harm done by their colleagues.

So long as American Zen relies on dharma transmission as a credential, there will be one Shimano after another – and dharma heirs who will go to great lengths to protect the master that conferred authority upon them. For if the master who has declared me awakened has erred, if he does not, indeed, “dwell in the Absolute,” then my own credential is called into question – along with my prestige and authority in the community and my ability to confer this power upon others.

Even if the magical claims of dharma transmission are discarded and it is recognized as an ordinary human institution, it still should not be retained as a method of training Zen meditation teachers. No truly meaningful credential can be conferred simply at the pleasure of one person. Indeed, as a method, it creates toxic interpersonal dynamics in communities, for the future recognition or preferment of a student is entirely dependent upon pleasing a dharma heir, or a presumptive dharma heir. If I wish to rise in this hierarchical system, I must pay court to the dharma heir and his or her favorites, and as a courtier in such a system, I can never openly acknowledge my self-interested pursuit of attention, for my goal is always, theoretically, “spiritual” development. Yet, of course, my ability to please a dharma heir and receive, in my turn, recognition and/or authorization will give me status and even employment opportunities. The dynamics of court, courtier, and courtship create endless distortions of human behavior even in ordinary institutions – a business, political party, or college. These run wild when the king, queen, pope, or dharma heir has imputed “special” powers. Anyone connected for a length of time to a Zen Center can cite examples.

Of course, many Zen teachers will refuse to discard this false credential. Those with the courage to act can take comfort from the Buddha’s words in *The Mahaparinibbana Suttanta*, words that E.A. Burtt suggests bring out “one major and authentic note” among the various presumed “final” teachings attributed to the Buddha.

As the Buddha prepares for death, Ananda begs him to leave “instructions as touching the order.” The Buddha responds that he has nothing more to offer. He has taught freely to everyone, his teaching is complete, and the community must now find its own way forward.

“What, then, Ananda, does the order expect that of me? I have preached the truth without making any distinction between exoteric and esoteric doctrine; for in respect of the truth, Ananda, the Tathagata has no such thing as the closed fist of a teacher, who keeps some things back.”

Then the Buddha hints at the possibility of a coming power struggle, suggesting wryly that if any person now thinks he should run things, he should just go ahead and try. “Surely, Ananda, should there be anyone who harbors the thought, ‘It is I who will lead the brotherhood,’ or, ‘The order is dependent on me,’ he should lay down instructions in any matter concerning the order.”

To illustrate the absurdity of such thinking, the Buddha even goes so far as to insist that he, himself, does not “lead” the order. “Now the Tathagata, Ananda, thinks not that it is he who should lead the brotherhood, or that the order is dependent upon him. Why, then, should the Tathagata leave instructions in any matter concerning the order?”

The Buddha is said to have said many things. But these words ring true. Monks seeking to establish governing hierarchies modeled upon patterns of royal or imperial lineages must have lamented their inclusion in the canon. These words were, to the hearers, most probably unforgettable – told and

retold in the community too many times to be expunged. If they are indeed authoritative, the Buddha himself never had any notion of the creation of a lineage of dharma heirs.

We must move beyond dharma transmission and construct approaches by which teachers of American Zen Buddhist meditation can be prepared effectively – and transparently. There are many models in a myriad of professions, both religious and secular. I would suggest that for Zen in America to speak to people, to become more than an odd, idiosyncratic subculture, it must draw sustenance from America's deep roots in the democratic and egalitarian. English Dissenters brought the first churches to these shores. Their polity was congregational, where the minister served at the pleasure of the congregants. The minister was understood to be as susceptible to error as any in his flock.

Having moved beyond the fairy tale of dharma transmission, Zen communities can begin work on truly thorny questions. Why did so many of the Asian “masters” who came to America, especially during the Sixties, behave in ways that to the objective beholder seem narcissistic, even sociopathic? What was their experience coming to maturity in monasteries and ashrams? Were they damaged in some way as children? And how, today, can the traditional Hindu and Buddhist emphasis on “non-attachment” be meaningfully taught in an America where many suffer “attachment disorders” – an inability to receive or return love?

To matter much in America, Zen must undergo its own painful Protestant Reformation – the deconstruction of lineage. This will free practitioners to learn from trained and accountable teachers in the spirit of the Buddha's final admonition: “Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Seek salvation alone in the truth. Look not to assistance to anyone besides yourselves.”

Front page photo by [Mark Zastrow](#)



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