

The Conscious Process



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Zen and the Emotional/Sexual Contraction

Posted on November 23, 2012

On Thanksgiving Week of 2012, one of his former students revealed in an internet message that Joshu Saskai Roshi, the venerable 105 year old founder and Zen Master of Rinzai-ji (a prominent Zen Buddhist Community in America), had been involved in extensive sexual misconduct with his female students. This particular Japanese monk has been most popularly known as the teacher of the famous singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen. He arrived in California from Japan half a century ago, and proceeded to establish many Zen Buddhist practice centers across the country.

I was a student of Sasaki Roshi from 1971-1974, first at his Los Angeles center, and later at Mt. Baldy, where I lived as one of about a dozen permanent residents for over 2 years. About half were male and the other half female. I have written something about my experiences elsewhere in my blogs (for example <http://travelsindreamland.wordpress.com/2012/09/26/in-the-sanzen-room/>).

When I arrived at Mt. Baldy, I realized that the monastic Abbess also served as Roshi's mistress. Soon after my arrival, they apparently had a falling-out due to Roshi's sexual exploits with another female student. I was to learn that Roshi was quite the horny old fellow, and that sanzen for many female students consisted of a lot of fondling and sex play. Moreover, several of the students were also sexually active with each other, so it came as no surprise that, when one person contracted a sexually transmitted disease, some of the other students eventually got it. It was even suggested that it had started with Roshi.

One time in sanzen (formal interview of teacher and student), Roshi took a good look at me and remarked, "Zen is not the way of the saint." I guess he was seeing my rather eccentric upbringing — I was raised as a Catholic, and had spent 7 years in a Catholic Seminary studying to be a priest. In any case, he told me that I should read "dirty books". He said he enjoyed them (pornography). I felt that was fine for him, but I was not attracted to that pursuit. He told me that I wanted to attach to the Absolute, but needed to first totally throw myself into the objective world, which included sexuality. I understood his point.

Most so-called spiritual practitioners don't ever inspect, much less resolve, the emotional/sexual contraction at the core of their psychological make-up, and so tend as a rule to indulge the classic "spiritual by-pass", which is a form of avoidance and even a strategic denial of a critical aspect of human development. Roshi told me that, when the monks were out on Takuatsu (food begging) back at his Japanese monastery, they carried a stone under their robes with which they would hit their penises when they saw women and began to get aroused. So much for dealing with their sexuality.

Over the course of many decades since my time with Roshi, I have witnessed the same scenes played out ad nauseam in Dharma centers, ashrams, and temples across America, and yet rarely has anyone really addressed the core contraction. Rather, they either look the other way, or wring their hands and talk about oversight committees and so forth — all totally beside the point.

What's clear and apparent is this: the "spiritual" practice itself, even most if not all religion itself (both esoteric and exoteric) as it is practiced today, has become one big exercise in misdirection. When it comes to sexuality, it represents nothing but a habitual form of avoidance, played out on a cultural and institutional level for centuries. However, there is no enlightenment, no liberation, salvation, redemption, or transcendence outside of the way we behave right here, in the very midst of this life, which includes sexuality at the very core of who and what we are as human beings.

Until that is really seen, understood, and integrated, then folks will continue to encounter these apparent “scandals”, which are merely glaring symptoms of a fundamental flaw in the appreciation of the essential role of sexuality in human psychological development and social adaptation, and the consequent epidemic of chronic emotional/sexual contraction that plagues not only the spiritual aspirant, but just about every human walking the earth today who has been influenced by the corruption that most take to be their “religion”.

How many more “Sex Scandals” in the Buddhist community, for example, is it going to take before its adherents wake up and recognize that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way their Religion is taught and practiced, all throughout the various sects? The Tibetan and Zen schools get the most attention of course, since they seem to dominate the spiritual landscape when it comes to Buddhism (and sexual peccadillos) here in the West, but Buddhism itself has never truly come to terms with the whole subject of sexuality, and so it is no wonder these sorts of issues will perpetually make the news. We’ve also come to learn that, for each reported sexual “misconduct” incident, there are typically a dozen or more that go unreported, so it is probably safe to say that we are talking about more than just a few errant fellows with over-active testosterone and unresolved power complexes.

Rather than really bothering to look beyond the symptoms and go to the root of the festering disease, each successive scandal usually ends up with a righteous mob ad hominem attack on the perpetrator du jour, followed by more talk about committees and regulations and so forth (not unlike the talk about handgun controls after each mass shooting that pops up almost weekly now in the new Wild West). Sure, what we need is more government!

Really, how many so-called Zen Masters and Rinpoches will need to be “outed” before it is recognized that the problem is with the institutional teaching of Buddhism itself (not unlike the fact that the problem with the Catholic Predator-Priest Scandals is overwhelmingly generated by the Catholic religion’s attitudes and teachings about sexuality in the first place)?

Let’s look at Zen Buddhist practice, since that seems to be where the action is these days on the scandal front. This so-called Zen School (whether Rinzi, Soto, or Korean) talks a lot about taming the mind and mastering the gut (or hara), but rarely if ever deals with the heart (except perhaps in some vague terms regarding “Bodhisattvic compassion” — an idealism based on a confused notion of “saving all beings”, even though their scriptures paradoxically note that there is not even a single being to save. See <http://www.purifymind.com/HanShan'Elixir.htm>).

In any case, this practice, with few exceptions, attempts to bypass the heart, because it is confused by and even fearful of what lurks there (the emotional/sexual contraction), so instead it by-passes it, in pursuit of a conceptual ideal of enlightenment, where emotions themselves are commonly shrugged off as something akin to delusional poisons.

Ironically, for all its talk about no-self, the Zen that I have observed (over 4 decades) seems to be one of the more self-preoccupied and often down-right selfish practices currently being pursued in the so-called “spiritual” scene here in the West. It is no wonder that the implications of such selfishness would yield the non-stop onslaught of sexual scandals we witness (not to mention what goes publicly unreported). What all of that clearly demonstrates is an absence of any emphasis on awakening at the heart, and yet without such an awakening, all the rest is, to borrow a phrase, “clanging bells”.

The chronic emotional/sexual contraction that plagues just about every human being — the habitual twisting, suppression, and corruption of the primal motive to love and be loved — is spawned at the heart, and hence it will be only at the heart that it can be understood, seen through, healed, and released. Try as one might, there will be no true healing by (mis)directing attention away from it, to the head or gut — there is a whole midsection of the being that needs attention too, and often even more so than the head or gut. The heart will simply not be denied, and if you ignore that plain and obvious fact, Dear Roshi, you may find yourself in bed with disciples who are all too ready to pen their “tell-all” memoir as soon as the affair ends, (not to mention the many shattered victims that may be left in the wake of your failure to grow up and integrate your sexuality into a mature level of social and personal adaptation).

When the meditation aspirant emerges from their heady samadhi, they still must attend to the heart. When the samurai emerges from their sword play, they still must contend with their heart. However, because the heart is so little understood (and even threatening), they would just as soon avoid it (both the meditator and the martial artist), and hence we end up with both the big names (as well as plenty of little ones) in the Zen game here in the West periodically dragged through the same mud, along with their compatriots the Tibetan Rinpoches, the Neo-Advaitins, and the various Gurus and Swamis that regularly wander over from the East, ill-prepared as lambs to the slaughter for the sexual Disneyland of modern America awaiting here to test, bedazzle, and humble them. It is a failure of character, a failure of integrity, which in essence is a failure of heart.

Remember, one cannot transcend what one has never truly understood and resolved in their own direct life experience. This is precisely why we get brilliant (and sometimes not so brilliant) teachers and religious figures who are nevertheless brought down over and over again by their failure to inspect and heal the knot at their hearts, which in turn manifests in all sorts of pathological ways to the detriment of both themselves, their students, and the Dharma (teaching) they are attempting to transmit.