

Phantom Buddha by Alvaro Cardona-Hine

I am neither critic nor book reviewer, but rather a friend of Alvaro, author of Phantom Buddha. He and his partner Gisela began practicing with Joshu Sasaki Roshi in the summer of 1967, several months after I first met this 60 year old Zen master. If you read Alvaro's book, you will learn how and why he left the Zen center where we had all come to live, some time in 1968. It was a time of high drama. Read this book!

Since those early years, I have only seen Alvaro a couple of times, most recently a couple of years ago in New Mexico. I was on a Zen retreat and had driven up to Truchas with a couple of friends. We unexpectedly drove by a sign announcing the Cardona-Hine Gallery; Alvaro is a painter. Surprised and excited, we stopped and had a short visit with Alvaro and his wife of many years. He talked about the book he was finishing describing the painful time when he and his partner were with Sasaki Roshi. He told us that he only used real names for the persons in the story who would not be embarrassed by his story. I wish he had used everyone's real names; I am embarrassed by my actions and inactions of those days.

Alvaro is an artist, both poet and painter. It amazes me that he kept such an accurate record of his dreams! I found myself skipping through them, as it was the story of what happened between him, Gisela (Marianne in the book) and Sasaki Roshi (Fumai Roshi in the book) that interested me. It is a powerful account of powerful people and their manipulations in which Alvaro appears to have been caught. It sheds more light on the way Sasaki Roshi behaved, which has been documented in detail elsewhere, but never, I think, in book form. Gisela was later ordained Gesshin Myoko Osho by Sasaki Roshi and later was acknowledged as a Zen master by a Vietnamese teacher, Thich Man Giac, and given the name Prabhasa Dharma Roshi.

Alvaro's book rings very true to my ears; I remember most of the people he mentions, whether by their real names or not, as well as many of the incidents in the book. At the time these incidents took place, I was not aware of what was going on among the three main characters he portrays. I did not know of Sasaki Roshi's sexual liaisons with many of his female students. I could see Alvaro was having a difficult time with Gisela; he was clearly very angry, but perhaps the unspoken code of

silence about what the teacher was doing prevented any discussion of what was really going on.

Alvaro had sent me an e-copy of the book that I printed out and read in August 2013. I hadn't given the story much thought since then, but a few days ago on early November my twin granddaughters were making drawings on some scrap paper. After they left and I was cleaning up, I noticed that one of the pages had text on the flip side, from some book which I didn't recognize. I read on the page

The partially forgiven miscreant functions in a purgatory of hope until he begins to hate the word, the concept; for hope is for the sick wanting out of wheelchairs. Hope is the mistrusted weapon, the double-edged axe without an axis; a pretty tombstone not yet in heaven because it lists only an initial date and waits for its partner....

Wow, I thought, this guy is really depressed. I still didn't recognize the book or the author. I read on, and a couple of paragraphs later, found this:

after each snowflake
winter never fails to find
the warmth of a stone

"Alvaro, it's you!" I exclaimed. This is the Alvaro I know, an accomplished haiku poet of extraordinary kindness and warmth. The scrap paper pile for my grand daughters' painting project had included a page from my failed original attempt at printing Phantom Buddha. Now, with Alvaro and the old Zen center gang back in the foreground of my thoughts, I have written this.

Sandy Gentei Stewart