

Lineage Delusions Revisited a Year Later: Dharma Transmission, Denial, and American Zen

By Erik Fraser Storlie

“The day you tell the truth be sure your horse is saddled!”

African proverb

About a year ago I offered “Lineage Delusions: Eido Shimano Roshi, Dharma Transmission, and American Zen” to Adam Tebbe and Sweepingzen.com. Since then I’ve heard from women who left Zen Centers where the master preyed upon the vulnerable or, as one said, the “broken” women. And I’ve heard from recipients of dharma transmission who insisted I had no standing to say what I said, that the essay was “offensive.” And I’ve heard much that lies between those poles.

I’d suggested that dharma transmission is, at best, an unreliable credential and, at worst, dangerous – for it confers significant authority, even in the minds of some members of the general public. And I’d suggested further that: “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 who conferred authority upon them.”

Dharma transmission, reinforced as it is with imposing robes, honorific titles, and ritual deference, opens sincere, often naïve, often troubled spiritual seekers to powerful manipulations – and there will be, inevitably, cases of sexual and other abuse.

I’ve heard now many justifications for dharma transmission, but given the real harm to individuals that this misleading non-credential has done, none of them seem adequate. I’ll recount a few offered by several dharma heirs.

One dharma heir explained that Zen would die without dharma transmission. The Dharma would be lost. But given the forms and practices of Buddhism that aren’t dependent on it, this struck me as exaggeration, a sky-is-falling argument, a defense against criticism of any kind. It was another form of Robert Aitkin’s rationale that if he exposed Shimano, the Dharma would be damaged in America. Yet his decision to protect

an abstract Dharma (and Shimano) allowed real damage to be done to real people. I find this unacceptable. We can have confidence that the Dharma is larger than dharma transmission. Solid practice opportunities and solid practice teaching can be established without such a dubious mechanism.

Another dharma heir suggested that dharma transmission was, for the Zen world, like the PhD in the academic. But as a credential, dharma transmission lacks the transparency, delineation, and oversight of multiple mentors that are involved in PhD training (however flawed the process can often be). For example, if my own principal PhD advisor had become terminally ill, he would not have been able to declare me a “doctor” before he died. I would have been assigned another mentor. And had any of a number of highly qualified faculty found me wanting, I would not have been granted my degree. But on his deathbed, Dainin Katagiri Roshi could give dharma transmission to a dozen students. And as David Chadwick, biographer of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and webmaster of cuke.com has noted, Suzuki Roshi wished to give dharma transmission to others, as well as to Richard Baker, but was persuaded that he was too ill to do so. Had Baker not had sole authority at the San Francisco Zen Center, that organization might have been spared much trauma.

The same person insisted, nevertheless, that it didn't matter that dharma transmission was conferred arbitrarily at the pleasure of just one person. Dharma transmission was analogous, he argued, to the medieval craft traditions: the master instructed the apprentice, and eventually the apprentice became a master. The product would be the proof.

But trying to determine a meditation teacher's integrity or the quality of his or her mind in meditation is more difficult than determining whether a pair of shoes from a particular cobbler fits and wears well, or whether a saddle or saucepan is durable, or a sword well-tempered. How does the beginning meditator judge the quality of the mind and spirit of the man or woman who sits on the dais surrounded by many visible signs of authority during lectures and retreats and is perhaps available only for private meetings shrouded in ceremony – meetings in which the master's abrupt or confused answer to a question can masquerade as profound Zen wisdom?

Yet another dharma heir responded that one should not “blame” the license of dharma transmission for the bad acting of license holders. But if a licensing procedure is flawed, or the one conferring the license not truly qualified, the license itself can be no better. And further, unlike a license to practice medicine or psychotherapy, or an authorization to be, for example, a minister in a certain religious denomination, dharma transmission cannot be revoked for cause. Known abusers cannot be stripped of this license – even though it presumably establishes that the holder can be trusted with the most intimate questions of a seeker’s emotional and spiritual development.

Other dharma heirs insisted that only those on the inside could understand the full significance and weight of dharma transmission. I had misrepresented it and I simply had no right to speak of it, having chosen to stay on the outside (near-audible sigh of relief). In the same way the born-again Christian asserts that he “knows in his heart” the truth of salvation. Discussion stops. And those of us “on the outside” must now evaluate the claimant’s internal experience by looking at behavior. The Shimano case broke into wider public notice a year ago because of the chasm between his actions and claims for his profound Enlightenment.

Of course, when the chasm is undeniable, believers can appeal to “crazy wisdom.” Whatever the “master” does, since he enjoys Complete Perfect Enlightenment, is a teaching. Yet accounts of the Buddha’s life never suggest that he recommended behavior in violation of the Eightfold Path – a path fusing action that does no harm with the cultivation of wisdom and compassion through meditation.

Those of us who follow this path, who are committed to doing no harm, have a responsibility, I believe, to tell the truth. This includes, whether we are Zen community members or Zen teachers, a “duty to warn” – and in regard to dharma transmission a moral duty to advise spiritual seekers that, as a credential, it is neither authoritative nor trustworthy.

Such speech has its costs. Whistleblowers are punished. Natalie Goldberg had given generously of her time and talent over many years to help Zen communities publicize themselves and raise funds. But after the publication of *The Great Failure: a Bartender, a Monk, and my Unlikely Path to Truth*, she found herself becoming a non-person in Zen circles. *The Great Failure* and Michael Downing’s *Shoes Outside the*

Door should be required reading of every Zen student and teacher – an antidote to the naïveté I myself brought to the practice as an idealistic younger man who indeed failed in my own “duty to warn.”

I was a founder and influential board member of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. A friend and member of the community rang my doorbell early one morning and made an extremely disturbing accusation of sexual violation involving our teacher. He demanded I do something – at least inform the Board of Directors, if not the entire community. I was stunned, conflicted, and in the end did nothing. I persuaded myself that my friend must be exaggerating. He and his woman friend left the community without breaking their own silence. Years later, I would write him a long-overdue apology.

At the time I was paralyzed by fear and self-concern. Had I made the accusation public, my beloved community would have been thrown into uproar and my own influential position put at risk. I behaved like the member of a cult. I protected myself, when that protection belonged to others.

I should have spoken then. I am speaking now.

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