Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America

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By Katy Butler

One summer afternoon in 1982, a friend of mine stood on a street in Boulder, Colorado–under a bright blue Rocky Mountain sky–holding a bottle of sake. The wine, a gesture of gratitude, was a gift for Vajra Regent Osel Tendon, "Radiant Holder of the Teachings," second-in-command of Vajradhatu, the largest branch of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States.

Moments later, my friend entered an elegant, minimally furnished office nearby. Tendzin—the former Thomas Rich of Passaic, New Jersey, round-eyed, mustachioed and wearing a well-cut business suit —rose from his chair and smiled My friend shook his hand, grateful for the rare private audience. He had recently emerged from an emotionally repressive religious community in Los Angeles, and a meditation retreat led by the Regent had introduced him to a more colorful, less guilt-inducing, spiritual path.

As the afternoon wore on, the men talked about Buddhism, love and theology. Gradually, the sake level dropped inside the bottle. Then my friend, a little drunk, grew bold and raised the subject he feared most: homosexuality. There was a moment of silence.

"Stand up," Tendzin said. "Kiss me." My friend complied.

When the Regent requested oral sex, my friend, slightly dismayed, declined. "I think you can do it," the Regent said cheerfully. The two then moved to a couch, where my friend's taboo against homosexuality was broken.

When it was over, Tendzin mentioned in passing that he had similar sexual encounters several times a day. He offered my friend a ride, opened the office door and led the way through clusters of waiting assistants to a sleek car purring in the twilight below, a driver waiting at the wheel.

My friend later felt confused and embarrassed about that afternoon, but not bitter. "He pushed me into a homosexual experience, and yet at the same time, he was generous. I asked to see him, and he made time for me," he told me. "I felt a mixture of embarrassment and honor. I don't feel Tendzin abused me, and I don't want my sexual experience judged by anybody."

AFTER MY FRIEND TOLD ME his story, I often replayed it in my mind, like a videotape, searching for hidden clues to later events. I noted my friend's fascination with the trappings of spiritual power and his discomfort with moral judgments. I observed Tendzin's apparently routine transformation of a religious audience into an

afternoon of drinking and sexual relations, and how casually he admitted to addictively frequent sex. I had to acknowledge that my friend did not feel harmed; yet I saw in the incident the seeds of the disaster that followed.

A Crisis of Leadership

In April 1987, Vajra Regent Osel Tendzin assumed leadership of the Vajradhatu community, following the death of the well-known and widely respected Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

Less than two years later, in December 1988, the most harmful crisis ever to strike an American Buddhist community unfolded when Vajradhatu administrators told their members that the Regent had been infected with the AIDS virus for nearly three years. Members of the Vajradhatu board of directors conceded that, except for some months of celibacy, he had neither protected his many sexual partners nor told them the truth. One of the Regent's sexual partners, the son of long-term students, was infected, as was a young woman who had later made love to the young man.

Two members of the Vajradhatu board of directors had known of his infection for more than two years, and chose to do nothing. Trungpa Rinpoche had also known about it before his death. Board members had reluctantly informed the *sangha* (community) only after trying for three months to persuade the Regent to act on his own.

"Thinking I had some extraordinary means of protection, I went ahead with my business as if something would take care of it for me," Tendzin reportedly told a stunned community meeting organized in Berkeley in mid-December.

This crisis of leadership was hardly the only disaster to befall an American Buddhist sangha. In 13 years of practicing Buddhist meditation, I have seen venerated, black-robed Japanese roshis and their American dharma heirs (including my own former teacher) exposed for having secret affairs. Other Buddhist teachers—Tibetan, Japanese and America—have misused money, become alcoholic or indulged in eccentric behavior. (See box below.)

As an American Buddhist, I found the scandals heartbreaking and puzzling. I thought of Buddhism not as a cult but as a 2,500-year-old religion devoted to ending suffering, not causing it. I also knew that many of the teachers involved were not charlatans, but sincere, thoroughly trained spiritual mentors, dedicated to transmitting the Buddhist dharma to the West.

As a journalist, I noticed that media coverage of the scandals seemed to reinforce secular America's deeply held suspicion of all religious impulses. The teachers came across as cynical exploiters; their followers as gullible fools.

But having watched and participated in Buddhist communities for more than a decade, I know that these misfortunes are more than a tragic dance between exploitation and naiveté. Their roots lie not in

individual villainy, but in cultural misunderstandings and hidden emotional wounds. And all community members, however unconsciously, play a part in them.

When Buddhism moved West, an ancient and profound Eastern tradition encountered a younger, more fragmented American society. The new American Buddhists enthusiastically built Japanese meditation halls lined with sweet-smelling tatami mats, and Tibetan-style shrine rooms with altars laden with ceremonial bowls of water and rice. Trying, to build new communities, they cobbled together structures that combined elements of Eastern hierarchy and devotion and Western individualism. The blending of widely divergent cultural values was complicated by the fact that orally students hoped to find a sanctuary from the wounds of painful childhoods and from the loneliness of their own culture. When the scandals erupted, however, many found themselves like Dorothy at the end of the Wizard of Oz "back in their own back yards," having unconsciously replicated patterns the hoped to leave behind.

Now, as the shadow side has come to light, certain common elements within the communities are apparent:

• Patterns of denial, shame secrecy and invasiveness reminiscent of alcoholic and incestuous families.

• Soft-pedaling of basic Buddhist precepts against harming others by misusing alcohol and sex.

• An unhealthy marriage of Asian hierarchy and American license that distorts the teacher-disciple relationship; and

• A tendency. once scandals are uncovered, to either scapegoat the disgraced teachers or blindly deny that anything has changed.

A Lineage of Denial

As a member of San Francisco Zen Center in the early I980s. I was mystified by my own failure–and the failure of my friends–to challenge the behavior of our teacher, Richard Baker-roshi, when it seemed to defy common sense. Since then, friends from alcoholic families have told me that our community reproduced patterns of denial and enablement similar to those in their families. When our teacher kept us waiting, failed to meditate and was extravagant with money, we ignored it or explained it away as a teaching. A cadre of well-organized subordinates picked up the pieces behind him just as the wife of an alcoholic might cover her husband's bounced check or bail him out of jail. This "enabling," as alcoholism counselors call it, allowed damaging behavior to continue and grow. It insulated our teacher from the consequences of his actions and deprived him of the chance to learn from his mistakes.

The process damaged us as well: we habitually denied what was in front of our faces, felt powerless and lost touch with our inner experience.

Similar patterns were acknowledged at Zen Center of Los Angeles in 1983, when their teacher, the respected Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi-roshi, entered a treatment program and acknowledged his alcoholism.

[He later drowned in his bathtub after a night of heavy drinking.] “We were all co-alcoholics,” one of Maezumi’s students told the Buddhist historian Sandy Boucher. “We in subtle ways encouraged his alcoholism [because when he was drunk] he would become piercingly honest.”

A similar process may have taken place at Vajradhatu in the 1970s, as students attempted to come to terms with their teacher, Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, a maverick, Oxford-educated Tibetan exile who was brilliant, compassionate and alcoholic.

Trungpa Rinpoche, the 11th incarnation of the Trungpa Tulku. was the teenage head of several large Tibetan monasteries when the 1959 Chinese invasion tore him from his native culture. Eager to meet the West on its own terms, he gave up his robes for a business suit, fell in love with Shakespeare and Mozart, and married an English woman. He sometimes lectured with a glass of sake in his hand.

Trungpa Rinpoche taught that every aspect of human existence–neurosis, passion, desire, alcohol, the dark and the light–was to be embraced and transmuted. He called his wild approach “crazy wisdom,” referring to a small but genuine tradition of revered, eccentric Tibetan yogis–most of whom worked intimately with one or two students.

Many Buddhist teachers–even those uneasy with his behavior–admired Trungpa Rinpoche for his brilliant translation of Buddhism into Western terms. Wary of importing Tibetan cultural forms, he first taught his American students a simple, Zen-based sitting meditation. He then gradually introduced the elaborate Tantric disciplines that distinguish Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism from almost all other Buddhist schools. Students completed foundational practices, including 100,000 prostrations, and attended a three-month seminary in the mountains. Advanced students were ceremonially initiated into confidential Tibetan practices of meditative visualization. Teacher and student entered into a relationship, traditionally more devotional than anything in other Buddhist schools.

Trungpa attracted thousands of well-educated people who soon created the largest, most creative and least conventional of America’s non-Asian Buddhist communities. He counted among his students poets Alan Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, playwright Jean-Claude van Italie, Shambhala Publications publisher Sam Bercholz, and Rick Fields, author of a respected history of American Buddhism. Based primarily in Boulder, students ran businesses, founded Naropa Institute, an accredited Buddhist university; edited a journal on contemplative psychotherapy; and published a widely-read bimonthly Buddhist newspaper, the Vajradhatu Sun.

Yet woven into the discipline and creativity was a strand of hedonism. Vajradhatu students had a reputation for the wildest parties in Buddhist America. Although most Tibetan Tantric schools clearly discourage “acting out” passions and impulses, Trungpa Rinpoche did not. In fact, drunk and speeding, he once crashed a sports car into the side of a joke shop and was left partly paralyzed. He openly slept with students. In Boulder, he lectured brilliantly, yet sometimes so drunk that he had to be carried off-stage or held upright in his chair.

To student Jules Levinson, a Tibetan scholar and Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia, the stories "were very upsetting–that he drank a lot, that he slept around." Yet at the same time, Levinson was grateful to Trungpa. "I found him gentle, delicate, provocative and nurturing–the most compassionate person I have ever known. I just couldn't put it together," he said.

Some students, replaying dynamics from their alcoholic families, responded to Trungpa Rinpoche by denying and enabling his addictive drinking and sexual activity. "I served Rinpoche big glasses of gin first thing in the morning, if you want to talk about enabling," said one woman, who had watched her own father die of alcoholism.

Others resolved their cognitive dissonance by believing that their teacher had transcended the limitations of a human body. "Trungpa Rinpoche said that because he had *Vajra nature* [a yogically transformed and stabilized psychophysiology], he was immune to the normal physiological effects of alcohol," said one student. "We bought the story that it was a way of putting 'earth' into his system, so that he could ... relate to us. It never occurred to anyone I knew that he was possibly an alcoholic, since that was a disease that could only happen to an ordinary mortal. And many of us were ignorant–we thought of an alcoholic only as the classic bum in the street "

An atmosphere of denial permeated the community in the 1970s and early 1980s, and other Vajradhatu students became heavy drinkers. "I found myself a nice little nest where I could keep on drinking," said one long-time Vajradhatu Buddhist. who was among a handful of Vajradhatu members who joined Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in the early 1980s. Their recovery seemed to threaten others. The first woman to get sober was asked to quit the hoard of a home care organization found by Vajradhatu members. "I felt such contempt for someone who had to quit drinking, and I treated her like a mental case." said the woman who got rid of her–a woman who has since joined AA herself.

When Trungpa Rinpoche lay dying in 1986 at the age of 47, only an inner circle knew the symptoms of his final illness. Few could bear to acknowledge that their beloved and brilliant teacher was dying of terminal alcoholism. even when he lay incontinent in his bedroom, belly distended and skin discolored, hallucinating and suffering from varicose veins, gastritis and esophageal varices, a swelling of veins in the esophagus caused almost exclusively by cirrhosis of the liver.

"Rinpoche was certainly not an ordinary Joe, but he sure died like every alcoholic I've ever seen who drank uninterruptedly." said Victoria Fitch, a member of his household staff with years of experience as a nursing attendant. "The denial was bone-deep." she continued. "I watched his alcoholic dementia explained as his being in the realm of the *daikinis* (guardians of the teachings, visualized in female form). When he requested alcohol, no one could bring themselves not to bring it to him, although they tried to water his beer or bring him a little less. In that final time of his life... he could no longer walk independently. At the same time then was a power about hint and an equanimity to his presence that was phenomenal, that I don't know how to explain."

Some students now feel that the Regent Osel Tendzin suffered from a

similar denial of human limitation, as well as ignorance of addictive behavior.

“Many students who are outraged by the Regent’s behavior seem to think he arose out of nowhere,” one student said. “They’re not using their Buddhist training about cause and effect. I think the Regent has emulated in a more extreme and deadly fashion a pattern of denial and ignorance exemplified by Trungpa Rinpoche’s own attitude to alcohol.”

Family Secrets

By the time the crisis broke, a small but significant minority of Vajrtdhatu students had begun to deal with wounds fell by family alcoholism and incest. By the mid-1980s, about 250 Vajradhatu members around the country–mostly wives of alcoholic husbands – had joined Al-Anon, an organization modeled after AA for the Families of alcoholics, and more than a score of sangha members had joined AA. Soft drinks were also served at Vajradhatu ceremonies, and the atmosphere of excessive drinking diminished.

Those in the 12-Step movement were a minority, however, and certain stubbornness persisted. For example, the Regent himself sought to suppress any public discussion of the sexual scandal and crisis, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of an alcoholic family’s defensive secrecy.

When editor Rick Fields prepared a short article for the *Vajradhatu Sun* describing the bare bones of the crisis, he was forbidden to print it. “There have been ongoing discussions, both within community meetings and among many individuals, about the underlying issues that permitted the current situation to occur,” read the banned article. "Those issues include the abuse of power and the betrayal of trust, the proper relationship between teachers with spiritual authority and students, particularly in the West, and the relationship between devotion and critical intelligence on the spiritual path.”

In the article’s place, Fields printed a mute drawing of the Vajradhatu logo–a knot of eternity–stretched to the breaking point over a broken heart. In March, Fields again attempted to run his article and was fired by the Regent. When the board of directors refused to support him, he formally resigned, saying that Buddhist teaching in the West “would best served in the long run by openness and honesty, painful as that may be.”

The suppression of public discussion echoed both the Asian tradition of face-saving as well as the dynamics of alcoholic families. “There’s a sense of family secrets, things you don’t talk about, especially with outsiders,” said Levinson. “Shortly after the news came out I wrote to the Regent and said, 'If the rumors are true, then [those actions] don’t seem to be in accord with the dharma, but it doesn’t make you a devil. The most important thing is what we do now. I would really like you to come talk to us openly, in small groups, at least in Boulder and Halifax, as your health permits. If you can do that we ... may be able to re-establish some trust.' My biggest heartbreak is that he hasn’t done that."

Cross-Cultural Clashes

For more than a year, the stalemate stretched Vajradhatu to the breaking point. Tendzin publicly but obliquely acknowledged violating Buddhist vows, but he declined to accept responsibility for infecting others. He remained on retreat in California with a small group of devoted students, defying; a request by the board of directors that he withdraw from teaching. In Boulder, some anti-Regent students virulently and unrealistically blamed him for the entire disaster, while pro-Regent students practiced what might be called “devotional or transcendental denial.” They urged the preservation of the Buddhist teaching lineage at the expense of facing what had happened Many others fell into what one senior student called “the heartbroken middle.” In a letter widely distributed in Boulder. one student wrote, “If the Board and the Regent cannot work out their differences with compassion and intelligence, the sangha will he shattered.”

The community consulted Tibetan lamas to resolve the impasse, but their responses reflected an Asian emphasis on face-saving, hierarchy and avoidance of open conflict. Although it is unclear how much he understood the situation, one venerated lama, the late Kalu Rinpoche, forbade his American students to comment on the Vajradhatu disaster Another, the Venerable Dilgo Khyentse, Rinpoche, first asked the Regent to go into retreat but urged Vajradhatu students to respect the Regent's authority.

It was too much for many students to stomach “This is a living nightmare for us,” said Robin Kornman a long-time Vajradhatu meditation teacher and a gradate student at Princeton University. “We are being told to follow a person we are certain is deeply confused."

Buddhist students at other centers have experienced similar cross-cultural problems. In the late 1970s, Zen student Andrew Cooper became disturbed when he realized that his Japanese Rosh “discouraged the expression of personal disagreement, doubt or problems within the community, even when those problems were undeniably real and potentally disruptive.”

Cooper, now a graduate student in psychology, thought his teacher was hypocritical until a frend who had lived in Japan told him that the Japanese have no notion of hypocrisy, at least not in the sense we in the West do. “For the Japanese, withholding one’s personal feelings in order to maintain the appearance of harmony within the group is seen as virtuous and noble,” Cooper wrote in an unpublished paper. “This attitude is part of the structuring of Japanese social relations–it has a place there. But when it is imported under the banner of enlightenment and overlaid on an American community, the results are cultish and bizarre.”

Asian Deference and Western License

The results are particularly troublesome when communities import Asian devotional traditions without importing corresponding Asian social controls. Chogyam Trungpa, for instance, came from a society where the sense of “self” and the social controls on that self were

very different from those in the West. Raised from infancy in Eastern Tibet as an incarnate lama, he headed a huge institutional monastery at 19. He was granted tremendous devotion and power, but his freedom was rigidly circumscribed by monastic vows of chastity and abstinence, and by obligations to his monastery and the surrounding Community.

Community standards were based on an intricate system of reciprocal obligation. They were clear and often unspoken. Almost everyone's behavior–serf, lama or landowner– was closely but subtly controlled by a strong and often unspoken need to save face.

But these social controls did not exist in the society to which Trungpa Rinpoche came in the freewheeling 1970s. His American students' behavior was loosely governed by contractual relationships; by frank, open discussions, and by individual choices rather than by shared social ethics and mutual obligation. His ancestors had lived in the same valley for generations; when he first arrived in America, he flew from city to city like a rock star. While America removed all social limits from Trungpa Rinpoche's behavior, his students became his household servants, chauffeured his car and showed him a deference appropriate to a Tibetan lama or feudal lord.

The same deference was shown to his dharma heir. Osel Tendzin. "His meals were occasions for frenzies of linen-pressing, silver-polishing, hairbreadth calibrations in table settings, and exact choreographies of servers," said television producer Deborah Mendelsohn, who helped host Tendzin when he gave two meditation retreats in Los Angeles, but has since left the community. "When he traveled, a handbook went with him to guide his hosts through the particulars of caring for him, including instructions on how and in what order to offer his towel, underpants and robe after he stepped from the shower."

This parody of Asian deference, combined with American license, ultimately proved disastrous, and not only at Vajradhatu. At Zen centers as well, students took on Asian gestures of subservience while their teachers sometimes acted "freely," drinking, spending money, making sexual advances to women or men, all with precious little negative feedback. The deference often went far beyond what would have been granted a teacher in Japan or Tibet.

"Pressure from the community is very important in controlling behavior in Tibetan communities," said Dr Barbara Aziz, an internationally known social anthropologist at the City university of New York who has spent 20 years doing fieldwork among Tibetans in Nepal and Tibet. "In Tibetan society, they expect more of the guy they put on the pedestal .. if such a scandal had happened in Tibet, the whole community might have felt polluted. Osel Tendzin might have been driven from the valley. Depending on the degree of community outrage, his family might have made substantial offerings to the monastery for purification rites and prayers to infuse society with compassion."

Furthermore, Aziz pointed out, Tibetans may "demonstrate all kinds of reverence to a reverend, but they won't necessarily do what he says." "I see far more discernment among my Tibetan and Nepali

friends," she concluded. "than among Westerners."

The Need for Discernment

In this confusing cross-cultural context, the teacher-student bond can he easily misunderstood. In the early days of my Zen training, I would make a formal prostration before my teacher when visiting him For practice instruction. I tried to see him as "enlightened," and I hoped that over time I would internalize the qualities of awareness, sellcontainment and energy that I admired in him.

Idealizing one's teacher is part of a long and healthy tradition in Tibet, Japan and India, according to Alan Roland, a psychoanalyst and author of *In Search of Self in India and Japan*. "The need to have a figure to respect, idealize and imitate is a crucial part of every persons selfdevelopment. But "Eastern cultures are far more articulate about that need and culturally support it," he explained.

Roland believes that Asian students approach the teacher-student relationships more subtly than Americans–who often commit rapidly and completely, or not at all. Asian students may display deference, but withhold veneration, until they have studied with a teacher for years. They scent to have a "private self' unknown to many Americans, a self which is capable of reserving judgement even while scrupulously following the forms. When a teacher fails, Asians may continue to defer to his superior rank but silently withdraw affection and respect.

In America, it's often the reverse. Some Vajradhatu students could forgive Osel Tendzin as a human being, but could not treat him as a leader. Few Americans can show deference to someone they don't venerate without feeling hypocritical. Faced with this cognitive dissonance, they either abandon deference and leave, or they deny inner feelings.

If they deny their perceptions, reality becomes distorted and a mutual dance of delusion begins. "Part of the blame lies with the student, because too much obedience, devotion and blind acceptance spoils a teacher," explained His Holiness the Dalai Lama last year at a conference in Newport Beach. California. "Part also lies with the spiritual master because he lacks the integrity to be immune to that kind of vunerability. I recommend never adopting the attitude toward one's spiritual teacher of seeing his or her every action a divine or noble. This may seem a little bit bold, but if one has a teacher who is not qualified, who is engaging in unsuitable or wrong behavior, then it is appropriate for the student to criticize that behavior."

Turning Point

Last autumn, it looked as though the Vajradhatu sangha would be torn in two. After the long retreat advised by Dilgo Khyentse, Rinpoche, Tendzin boldly reasserted authorty. Those who refused to accept his spiritual leadership were fired from key committees, denied permission to teach meditation and barred from taking part in advanced practices with the rest of their community. The conflict

became so intense that the two opposing factions sent delegations to Nepal and India to implore senior lamas to support their positions.

In response, Khyentse Rinpoche advised Tendzin to enter into a "strict retreat" for a year. Tendzin complied, retaining nominal authority but effectively abdicating his teaching and leadership role. Senior Tibetan lamas were invited to Boulder to teach, and Vajradhatu began to connect again to a wider Tibetan religious tradition.

"This is a real turning point," said a relieved David Rome, a member of the board of directors. "This is a way to come together and feel basic unity, and to look at the issues that this crisis brought to the surface. This is not the end, really, it's the beginning," he said.

After the Fall

As Vajradhatu struggles to pick up the pieces, other Buddhist sanghas, which have undergone similar crises, are likewise dealing with ways to heal their communities. In one of the most promising side effects, American teachers of Insight (*vipassana*) meditation have recently created a clear set of ethical standards for teachers and a community hoard to oversee them.

In other Buddhist communities, however, where teachers have stone-walled accusations of misconduct, successive waves of dissenting students have departed. At San Francisco Zen Center, my own practice home, our teacher resigned under pressure. We brought in psychological consultants and learned to talk more honestly to each other, and adopted more democratic forms of decision-making. Even so, many students left. The meditation hall emptied. Friendships were broken, and some people lost the energy for spiritual practice. Our former teacher moved to Santa Fe and continued teaching; my husband and I moved to the suburbs.

My black meditation robe still hangs in the back of my closet. I never lost faith in Buddhist teachings, but for some years I didn't know how to reconnect with them. Instead, I did what a friend called "remedial work," examining my personal history and the anger and self-righteousness I expressed when the scandal broke. I was among those who hoped to find a sanctuary within Buddhism for my personal wounds. But my culture and family history trailed me into my Buddhist community like a can tied to the tail of a dog.

I study with another Buddhist teacher now, and I constantly remind myself to allow him –and me– to have imperfections. Once a month or so, I gather with others in a friend's living room to recite the lay Buddhist precepts.

Yet something of the past remains unfinished. My old teacher simply left when he could not bear his students' anger any more. I remember a senior preist saying at the time, "Students are expecting him to transform himself without safety. You can't learn a whole new way when you are under attack."

The bitterness from that unresolved schism still hurts, like a splinter working its way deeper into one's palm. A friend of mine, Yvonne

Rand–an ordained Buddhist teacher who still participates closely in the community–said to me recently, "We're still struggling with the fallout of his departure. I don't think the shoe will fully drop until we find a way to be in the same room together. As long as there's a fear of having him around, there's a way people don't understand their part in the situation."

We lack rituals that would allow communities to acknowledge these crises and toheal them. I remember reading about the Full Moon Ceremony used by monks in the first few centuries after Buddha's death. On the eve of every full and new moon during the rainy season, monks would gather in the forst for a ritual called "confession before the community." There, they publicly recited the precepts, admitted their shortcomings, their violations and any damage they had done to their community.

If we reinstated such a quiet ritual, perhaps, a brave, disgraced teacher might safely acknowledge his misconduct and the wounds that brought him to it. Perhaps the sangha could confess its deep disappointment and feelings of betrayal, and its participation in what had gone wrong. Perhaps the whole sangha could publicly apologize to the men or women who had been misused sexually or in other ways, and compensate them in some way.

After full acknowledgment and resitution, forgiveness might be possible and healing begin. ---- by Katy Butler

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End of Story

Related Sidebar: Sex in the Forbidden Zone

In the late 1960s, a bright-eyed, patrician woman I know entered San Francisco Zen Center intending to give her heart to the practice She was in her early twenties, shaken by a failing marriage, with a fierce, lionhearted energy that kept her back straight for long hours in the meditation hall. Several years after the death of her first Zen teacher, his successor - who was married - pressured her to abandon her plans to attend the rigorous winter training period at the Tassajara monastery and to become his personal assistant. She resisted for months, knowing that this would mean living in his house and traveling with him. After she finally agreed, he asked her to enter what he called a “practice relationship” with him that was to be kept a secret from the rest of the community.

“I’d never really felt intimate, never really felt known before,” she told me recently. “Until he began to relate sexually to me, he had been the most important man I’d ever met, a wonderful teacher. He touched my deepest primal self, and I felt the promise of a spiritual intimacy that I longed for with my whole being. I very much hoped that by breaking through to that forbidden area I would somehow, magically, break through to all that was held frozen and paralyzed

within me."

For six years, my friend remained enmeshed in this secret sexual relationship. It healed none of her old wounds; in fact it created new ones. She became a priest, but at the same time, she was guilt-ridden, isolated by secrecy from the rest of the community, and yet unable to pull away. Even after ending the relationship, she guarded its secret for years. She ultimately gave up her priest's robes, left the community and entered therapy to repair the damage.

"As soon as we became sexually involved, any possibility of real spiritual intimacy with him ended," she told me recently. "And so did my trust of my own inner center. It felt like incest to me–it was very physically unrewarding, and after every time, I would feel just destroyed."

My friend's experience was not unique. Presumed taboos against sexual relationships between students and spiritual teachers from Asian traditions are Frequently broken When they end badly, these relationships cause the same damage seen in women sexually abused by therapists: guilt, emptiness, suppressed rage and an inability to trust. In the worst cases, women have tried to kill themselves, have been confined to mental hospitals, or have seen their self-confidence or their religious vocations destroyed.

Jack Kornfield, a psychologist and co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, informally surveyed 54 Buddhist, Hindu and lay teachers in the United States as well as their students. In a 1985 Yoga Journal article, "Sex Lives of the Gurus," he reported that 15 of 54 were celibate. Thirty-four of the remaining 39 - including Tibetan lamas, Zen roshis, vipassana meditation teachers and Indian swamis - had had sexual relationships with their students, ranging from one-night stands to committed relationships ending in marriage. Half of the students told Kornfield that the relationships "undermined their practice, their relationship with their teacher, and their feelings of self-worth," he wrote.

Kornfield, a former Theravadan monk said the teachers' motivation was not always a misuse of power, but a lack of training in the psychological dynamics of transference and counter-transference and "a longing for contact and intimacy, a longing to step out of the isolating role of teacher." Not all the relationships were disastrous, Kornfield added.

Many teachers, from all traditions, including Kornfield, have married students or staff members they met during retreats.

The late Maurine Stuart-roshi, a Zen teacher based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, distinguished between sexuality and sexual abuse when she broke off contact with Eido Shimaoroshi of New York. "I wasn't judgmental about sex, or about a teacher having sex with a student, but in this situation it was an unloving act," she told author Helen Tworkov, who profiled Stuart in *Zen in America*. "It was the misuse of sex—and of women and the manipulations that were so devastating."

While the distinction between sexuality and sexual abuse is a valuable one, others argue that such relationships almost always turn

out badly because of enormous differences in power, experience and hope between the people involved Peter Rutter, M D., a San Francisco Jungian analyst, believes women are drawn into such relationships by psychological wounds: a background of incest, the desire to be deeply seen or the hope of spiritual and psychological healing.

But the promise of healing almost always goes unfulfilled, explained Rutter, author of *Sex in the Forbidden Zone: When Therapists, Doctors, Clergy, Teachers and Other Men in Power Betray Women's Trust*. "The number of healthy relationships that emerge are minuscule," he said in a recent interview "The damage is almost universal, and it is absolutely identical, whether the relationships take place within imported Eastern disciplines or Western psychotherapy." Rutter says the relationships bear the hallmarks, and cause the damage, of incest relationships. "There's the same difference in power, the built-in admiration for the symbolic father, and the inability to displease him or see that he is damaging her."

"These relationships are mostly temporary, and the women are usually discarded," Rutter said. "They break the student's connection to his or her own spiritual source, and that connection can be forever lost."
-----Katy Butler

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Scandals and Improprieties: a list from 1990

Abuses of power and silent collusion in sexual exploitation occur not only in Buddhist communities, but also in Western psychiatric settings and other religious communities as well. Here is a sampling:

The Zen Studies Society of New York: In 1975, 1979 and 1982, the married Japanese abbot, Eido Tai Shimano-roshi, was accused of seducing emotionally vulnerable women students — accusations he has repeatedly denied.

San Francisco Zen Center: In 1983, American abbot Richard Baker, successor to Shunryu Suzuki-roshi, resigned under pressure after affairs with women student -- including his best friend's wife ¬-- were acknowledged.

Zen Center of Los Angeles: In 1983 Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi-roshi, a married Japanese abbot, entered an alcoholism treatment program and openly apologized to his students for affairs with several women students. including a teen-aged girl.

Kwan Um Zen School (Rhode Island): In April 1987, it was revealed that the widely respected and supposedly celibate Korean ten teacher, Soen Sa Nim, had had secret, long-tern sexual relationships with two women students.

Insight Meditation Society (Barre, Massachusetts): In the early 1980s, this American meditation community confronted sexual

boundary violations before they became unmanageable.

Richard Ingrasci, M.D. (Watertown, Massachusetts): In 1989, The Boston Globe reported that three women patients accused lngrasci of fondling them during therapy sessions. Two of the women said they were molested while under the influence of psychotropic drugs, including MDMA, which Ingrasci, the former medical editor of New Age Journal and a holistic physician had earlier lobbied Congress to legalize. Ingrasci surrendered his medical license, ending state disciplinary proceedings.

The Catholic Church in America: By the end of 1988, the Church had reportedly paid $19 million to families who had accused priests of sexually molesting alter boys and other children. At issue was not the small number of pedophile priests, but the church's failure to protect children once problems were known. In several archdioceses, priests accused of molesting were quietly transferred to other parishes, where more children reported sexual abuse.

SYDA Foundation, Oakland, California: Shortly before his death in 1982, Swami Muktananda was accused by close disciples of repeatedly molesting young female devotees, some of them in their early teens.
---- Katy Butler

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