

EDITORS VIEW

The Buddha Stain

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At the further edges, cults are certainly different from other types of communities, whether religious or secular. But aside from the extremes, there can be a large gray area. Which is to say, certain characteristics that are present in most any purposeful community—self-validating agreements about authority; the singular significance of the group’s mission; clear rules of conduct and organization—can, when pushed far enough, lead to cult-like behavior, with damaging consequences.

As I write this, yet another Buddhist community is in the thick of yet another sex scandal: this time it is the Rinzai-ji association of Zen centers headed by Joshu Sasaki Roshi, who is, at 105 years old, one of the old lions of the Buddhist world and one of the last remaining of that handful of teachers who, in the 1960s and 1970s, established the meditation centers and communities that were foundational for the development of Buddhism in the West. On the website [Sweeping Zen](#), two of Joshu Roshi’s priests came forward to address what appears to be a decades-long pattern of sexual misconduct on their teacher’s part.

Writing with searing candor and self-scrutiny, the senior priest Giko David Rubin [describes his struggle](#) to navigate a relationship with a teacher possessed of exceptional gifts and, at the same time, an impaired ability to tolerate criticism or accept the consequences of his own rotten behavior. Mr. Rubin’s dilemma—and it is a poignant one—is that in his efforts to address his teacher’s boorish actions, he appears to have struggled with some of the very qualities—dedication to practice, strong religious aspiration, devotion to his teacher and lineage—that made him a good Zen student in the first place. But at least Mr. Rubin appears to have made an honest effort to recognize and confront what was wrong. From other quarters, Joshu Roshi seems to have received a lot of flattering support for his bullying, deceit, and exploitative conduct. This is how these things typically go. Just as we as individuals usually need a lot of support to get things right, so do we need a lot of support to get things so terribly wrong.

One veteran of the Zen scene told me that the most surprising thing about the breaking of the Rinzai-ji story is that it took so long to be made public. The general outlines of the story have been common knowledge in Zen circles for decades. But Rinzai-ji has always been an insular community, socially isolated from the larger Buddhist community by a self-reinforcing belief in the special significance of their teacher and his transmission. In this regard, they have been able to maintain an attitude—call it “dharma exceptionalism,” for lack of a better word—that was characteristic of many of the Buddhist communities that started at about the same time. Many of these communities, with time and experience, have had their sense of dharma exceptionalism at least mildly chastened by upheavals of their own, and perhaps now this will be true for Rinzai-ji as well.

This is a good thing. Institutions have always been essential to Buddhism’s survival and flourishing, and Buddhism in the West is no different. And it hardly needs saying that membership in a community brings with it a sense of that community’s significance. We need our institutions, and we need to feel that they matter. But communities need to grow and learn and mature, and one of the main ways they do this is through the humbling process of falling short of their ideals.

Institutions, no less but no more than individuals, are marked by what the novelist Philip Roth called “the human stain”—our inevitable failure to measure up to the purity of our ideals. Desire, the very pulse of life, is not something to be mastered; it will always be with us, always causing trouble, undermining our high-mindedness, delighting us and driving us crazy, and reminding us that we are, alas, human. And this apparently applies even to enlightened folks. As the stain of our inability to conquer desire spreads, something else can, if we let it, spread with it. We can move past the confines of parochialism and the sense of moral and spiritual privilege. We can, and we do, meet as a larger community, one that holds and supports each particular one. There is no escaping the human stain, and it is folly to try, but there is always that other spreading thing, that Buddha stain, for us to take refuge in.

—James Shaheen, *Editor and Publisher*