



[Home](#) > Issues

The changing shades of 'Edo Shonin'

by Kooi F. Lim, The Buddhist Channel, June 22, 2007

Petaling Jaya, Selangor (Malaysia) -- The request was simple. The question to William Van Gordon, student of Edward Penney who calls himself Edo Shonin, the "spiritual teacher" of Pine Forest charity was, "When, where, in what tradition, and under whose auspices was Edward Penney ordained as a Buddhist monk?"



<< **Edward Penney a.k.a Edo Shonin a.k.a Edo Yamato**

But after repeated questioning, all Ven Kobutsu Malone, Osho received were non-conclusive, uncommitted and evasive replies. "It is a simple question and requires no fuller response than just the information requested. Any real monk is delighted to tell you the answers to those questions. It is an honor to be able to do so," lamented the Zen master from Maine, USA.

And so, who is Edward Penney who has called himself both Edo Yamato and Edo Shonin? And why is there public interest on this person?

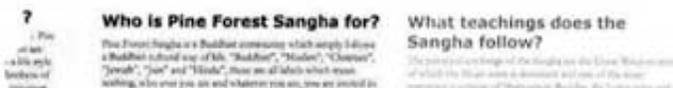
It all began with an expose by the [Daily Mail](#) of the United Kingdom, where an article was published with an appeal by William's mother, Rita Van Gordon saying that her son had changed to become "hostile, closed-down and brainwashed" since he became a "disciple" of Mr. Edward Penney.

"He used to be a bright, enthusiastic, confident young man, devoted to his family," said Mrs Van Gordon. "It's just unbelievable, but we've consulted a cult expert and much of it is a recognised form of brainwashing. I cannot simply walk away and leave William to be destroyed by this man," she says with a heavy heart.

When the report was made public, members of the Buddhist community, especially those with knowledge of Sangha appointments from different lineages began to discuss the "odd" costume worn by Edo Shonin. In a discussion within the E-Sangha Forum, some members noted that he advertised himself as "a Buddhist monk teaching dharma in the Nyingma and Shingon traditions".

The actual source of these claims was a brochure put out by his "Pine Forest" charity where he stated: "Edo Shonin has been a monk in the Nygma and Shingon traditions for 43 years. Born to a devoted Buddhist family in 1957, his monastic education began at 5 years of age."

Edward Penney's claim of his Buddhist lineage as published in a Pine Forest brochure >>



However, an investigation into these claims yielded his true background, supported by information from his father, mother and sister. He is the son of Mr. Edward and Mrs. Helen Penney. Mrs. Penney is still living in Scotland. Edward has two brothers and two sisters, all living.

Direct communication with his family reveals that none of his family were Buddhists. He did not begin a monastic education at 5 years old. He was born in Glasgow, Scotland as Edward Andrew Penney on June 27, 1957. A copy of his Extract of an Entry in a Register of Births (Birth Certificate) can be found [here](#).

"Edo Shonin is no Shingon Monk"

When an ordained Shingon monk from Japan wrote and said that "[Edo Shonin is no Shingon Monk](#)", commenting in particular the style of the garment which he wore, Pine Forest's website made an abrupt change, stating that Edo Shonin had made a "controversial choice not to be affiliated with or 'belong' directly to any specific group, lineage or organization."

Mr. Penney claimed to have been ordained during the time period that he was a student at Plum Village, the famed organization led by the venerated Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. However, an official letter written to Mrs Van Gordon categorically stated that he was NOT a monk while studying there. Unfortunately, efforts to solicit further information from Plum Village about his stay in the community have been ignored.

Seasoned observers are convinced that if he was indeed a Shingon practitioner, he would not have sought ordination with the people from Plum Village, wear Tibetan monks robes, a Zen Kesa and a Tibetan Scholars hat.

A monk's measure of credibility

In other schools, such as the Theravada tradition, the length of ordination is also a measure of credibility. In this school, a monk is only considered as a senior when he has been ordained for more than five years (as measured in the number of annual meditation retreats he has gone through).

Information about a monk's ordained background give vital clues about the person's spiritual training, especially the rigor and intensity of meditation practices. An important aspect of this knowledge is the consistency of his teachings with regards to the main tenets of Buddhism, as expressed in the voluminously written sutra texts.

"Being a monk is hard work," says Sumanasiri, adding that while it is easy to peddle sweetened mantras like 'My religion is Loving Kindness', a true teacher worth his mettle must prove it.

"Like a martial art warrior, a student monk has to struggle to get acknowledgement from his teacher with regards to the state of attainment. It is through this 'spiritual peer review' that one becomes ordained. Without this process, there is no merit in calling oneself a monk," he further elaborates.

"When in time the person assumes to become a teacher, it is the basis of his training, the



knowledge and spirituality gained through a set of discipline and exercise, that is passed on to his students," explains Sumanasiri. "Some schools call this lineage transfer or the passing of the spiritual baton," he says.

A reader writing in to the E-Sangha forum calls this a "standard protocol regarding Dharma teachers."

"A student has every right to question a teacher just as a teacher has every right to question a student regarding qualities and abilities to practice the Dharma," he adds.

A consistency of inconsistencies

Thus far, Mr. Penney has refused inquiries and requests to offer up his Letters of Office or his Teacher's names that he has posted on his past websites, indicating somewhat that he has something to hide.

While Mr. Penney has a history of changing his claims on his website when faced with questions from the Buddhist Community, it is his ever changing tone and awkward inconsistencies over the claims of his monkhood that has become a concern.

In recent weeks the Pine Forest website has been removed and an announcement that the charity has been disbanded has appeared. Sources have stated that a number of trustees forced the closing of the charity due to all of the questions surrounding Mr. Penney amid allegations of financial misconduct and misuse of funds. It is anticipated that the UK Charities Commission will be instituting a full scale investigation into the allegations against Mr. Penney and the Pine Forest charity.

This case is no longer about how William Van Gordon was lost to Pine Forest. It has become an issue about how unscrupulous people have taken advantage of Buddhism's exoticism and lure unwitting western adherents into actions that are antithetical to the faith's true values.

It has become a case that is testing the community's resolve to confront fraudulent claims of monkhood and thereby assist in the process of safeguarding the integrity of the Noble Buddha Sangha. It is up to social justice activists within the Buddhist community to take an active role in continuously observing and reporting over the state of affairs surrounding Mr. Penney and his Pine Forest organization.

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