



## "Monk" with unconfirmed credential runs website rife with plagiarized material

by Jaime McLeod, The Buddhist Channel, July 4, 2007

**LEWISTON, Maine (USA)** -- The Scottish man who has been accused of misrepresenting himself as a Buddhist monk and indoctrinating a young man into becoming his follower and primary benefactor may also be guilty of serious copyright infringements.

Edward Penney – a 50 year old Glaswegian – who uses the pseudonyms “Brother Edo Shonin,” “Edo Yamato” and “Jetsun Lama Br. Edo Yamato Shonin” – has been the director of Pine Forest Sangha, a purported Buddhist retreat center located in Snowdonia National Park, north Wales, since March of 2006, when his primary disciple, 28 year old, William Van Gordon, used his life savings to purchase the £300,000 property. (See previous articles “[A mother's grief: 'The cult guru who turned my son into a zombie'](#)” and “[The changing shades of 'Edo Shonin'](#)”)

An independent Internet search this week revealed that a majority of the text posted on Penney and Van Gordon’s Web site <<http://www.pineforest.org.uk>> appears to have been copied from a number of other Buddhist Web sites. The Pine Forest Sangha’s Web site includes several pages of background information about Buddhist history, teachings and practice, the majority of which is located in a section entitled “About Buddhism.” The landing page under the “About Buddhism” sub-site opens with the following paragraphs:

"Buddhism aims to awaken people to the limitless potential and value of their own lives. Buddhist philosophy and practice bring about a positive transformation in the depths of life, transforming fear into courage, deluded impulses into wisdom, and egotism to compassion.

Buddhism begins with individuals deciding to take responsibility for their own individual lives, reforming first themselves and their immediate surroundings and relations, and then gradually extending their wisdom, courage and compassion into a wider sphere."

A simple Google™ search of that exact text revealed the introduction matches, to the letter, the philosophy statement found on the Web site of Bharat Soka Gakkai, the Indian affiliate of Soka Gakkai International, a lay Buddhist organization whose practice is loosely based on the teachings of the Nichiren sect <<http://bharatsokagakkai.org/philosophy.asp>>.

The apparently plagiarized material was first detected by Ven. Kobutsu Malone-Osho, an American Rinzai Zen priest and Buddhist social justice activist who has closely followed news of Pine Forest Sangha since the U.K.-based Daily Mail printed a story about Penney this past May. The Venerable’s discovery led to a deeper investigation of the Penney site by a freelance investigative reporter, revealing even more similarities to content found on other Buddhist sites.

Beginning in the paragraph immediately following this introduction, Penney’s “About Buddhism” section offers a biography of the historical Buddha, followed by a short passage on the years following his death. With the exception of two un-cited quotes from the Dhammapada, nearly all of the 1,000 words in this passage are copied directly from the book Scriptures of World Religions, published in 1997 by John Powers and James Fieser. The excerpts of the book reproduced on the Pine Forest Sangha site are archived in a

searchable online library maintained by the Faculty of Asian Studies at Australian National University

<<http://dSPACE.anu.edu.au/html/1885/41910/buddhism.html>>. No citation to either the authors or the academic institution is provided, leading readers to assume that the material is Penney's own composition.

"This is absolutely the most amazing compilation of apparently plagiarized material I have ever seen in my life," said Venerable Kobutsu.

"The author/assembler is evidently not aware of the use of Google™ as a counter-plagiarism tool. He is violating copyright laws, and I'm sure the owners of these sites will not be happy to learn of it."

Penney continues to draw heavily from Powers' and Fieser's work throughout his "About Buddhism" section, quoting the book almost verbatim on pages entitled "The Buddha's Last Days and Final Instructions," "The History and Spread of Buddhism," "Division into Two Schools" and "The Beginning of the Vajrayana School."

"Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem," another page under the "About Buddhism" heading, is copied word-for-word from a chapter of *Now is the Knowing*, a book written in 1996 by Ven. Ajahn Sumedho, an American-born monk in the Thai Forest Tradition of Theravada Buddhism. The book, which is now out of print, is available electronically on Buddhnet, a Web site produced by an Australian-based nonprofit organization dedicated to providing Internet users with free and easy access to information about Buddhism <<http://www.buddhanet.net/nowknow.htm>>. As with his other sources, Penney provides no citation.

The remaining two pages of the Pine Forest Sangha's "About Buddhism" section – "Faith in Buddhism" and "Scriptures: The Tribitaka" – rely heavily on material posted on the Web site of the International Kalachakra Network, a loose affiliation of groups dedicated to the promotion of tantric practice, as associated with the various lineages of Tibetan Buddhism <<http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org/dharma.html>>.

The Pine Forest Sangha site also includes a page of "Frequently Asked Questions," which includes the subheading "Are all Buddhists vegetarian?" Penney's explanation as to why vegetarianism is not required of Buddhists is directly copied, without citation, from two other sources. The first portion of his rationale closely mirrors language found in Buddhnet's e-learning library <<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/ganda08.htm>>.

While the Buddhnet version, which was written by Australian Theravadan monk Ven. Shravasti Dhammika, appears in a question and answer format, the wording on the Pine Forest Sangha FAQ is rephrased very slightly to create a more narrative-style structure.

For the rest of his explanation, Penney copies from an essay posted on the personal Web site of Eijō Tom Dreitlein, a U.S.-born Shingon priest based in Japan <[http://www18.ocn.ne.jp/~shingon/Buddhism\\_Vegetarianism.htm](http://www18.ocn.ne.jp/~shingon/Buddhism_Vegetarianism.htm)>.

"The thing that amazes me," said Ven. Malone, "is that he did not even bother to reword anything. Those passages were lifted verbatim, word-for-word!"

In the rare instances in which Penney's writing is does not directly copy the work of other Buddhist teachers and scholars, evidence of his lack of original material is explicit, as in the following passage from Pine Forest Sangha's "Meditation and Teachings" page:

"Each person exists only because all other things exist – all things inter-are. After analysis we can clearly see that the human being is made up of water, clouds, sun, moon, trees, minerals and so forth; if one of these elements is not then the human being is not – this exists because that exists."

Though the preceding excerpt could not be proven to be an exact replication of another writer's work, its wording is little more than a pat regurgitation of Thich Nhat Hahn's distinctive "interbeing" philosophy, outlined in literally dozens of the prolific author-monk's books.

Penney spent several months in 2005 living at Plum Village, the French monastery and retreat center founded by the famed Vietnamese Zen monk, so it is unsurprising that his writing would so closely mirror Nhat Hahn's. Despite this, Penney does not attribute these teachings to Nhat Hahn's Order of Interbeing – which has refuted, in writing, Penney's earlier claim that he was ordained at Plum Village – instead claiming to represent esoteric Vajrayana, a mode of teaching most closely associated with the various branches of Tibetan Buddhism and with the Japanese Shingon sect. In fact, Penney's site had, at one time, included a claim that he was ordained in the Shingon sect. When that assertion was questioned in a letter to the Buddhist Channel by American-born Shingon monk Rev. Gomyo Kevin Seperic <<http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=22,4220,0,0,1,0>>, Penney later changed his site to say only that he represents "a Vajrayana tradition." But the "interbeing" terminology associated with Nhat Hahn and his followers are not characteristic of Vajrayana teachings, as pointed out in Seperic's letter.

"(Penney's writing) sounds more to me like a book report on Thich Nhat Hanh's commentary on the Heart Sutra, The Heart of Understanding, than anything related to Shingon practice," noted Seperic.

Penney seems to refute this very statement on his "Frequently Asked Questions" page, explaining, "We are of a Vajrayana tradition but you should remember that when the Buddha Shakyamuni expounded, there were no traditions such as Hinayana, Mahayana or Vajrayana – to follow him one had only to take refuge ..."

Here, at least, Penney proves himself to be as good as his word; he has lifted content from Web sites maintained by representatives of each of the three major Buddhist schools, without discrimination.

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(<http://www.buddhistchannel.tv>).

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