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Testimony of a former acquaintance with Edward Penney ('Edo Shonin')

by Johannes Cairns, Finland, The Buddhist Channel, July 26, 2007

I was acquainted with [Mr Edward Penney](#) (a.k.a 'Edo Yamato', 'Edo Shonin') in Plum Village in 2004, and was much in the same situation as William John Van Gordon. Here's my story.



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

I am a 22-year-old male student from Finland. Just as William in the article, I was introduced to 'Edo Yamato' during a stay at Plum Village in 2004 (five weeks in total during September and October, at the age of 19). Edo was there throughout my stay. I may even have met William, but I can't recall a young man by that name. There may be mistakes in the following details about Edo - my memory is blurred by time.

The first time I met Edo was during my first full day in Plum Village, when the two of us were assigned to clean the toilets. I remember Edo being kind and talkative, providing me with a soft landing to life in a monastic environment. He was quick to recount impressive stories from his life, and I was awestruck, though slightly suspicious, because some of the events seemed unbelievable. Some of the things he said then and later on about himself and his past included him:

- being a close friend of the Dalai Lama
- having been a Professor of Medicine at Tokyo University
- being a surgeon and having worked as one in relief areas in war zones
- being the head of an entire sect of Buddhism in Japan, which he had abandoned because his students got overly involved in politics
- having been a child prodigy
- being a master piano player, having performed at international concerts
- being carried over the Himalayas on the back of his parents as a child
- having been a monk since a young age and having been educated by great teachers, apparently from various traditions (mostly esoteric Buddhism, both Tibetan and Japanese)
- knowing classical Chinese and Japanese and being fluent in several European languages
- being an expert in Vinaya
- having (lymphatic) cancer and being in constant pain, having to use a Tibetan practice to detach himself from his body at night-time in order to cope with the illness.

As it was my first visit to a monastery, I didn't know what to expect from people there. I even met a wandering ascetic in Plum Village who had been living on alms in Asia and Europe for over 20 years - so I half bought Edo's stories.

Edo had an interesting relationship to Plum Village. He expressed dissatisfaction with the place because:

1. there was not enough room in the schedule for theoretical studies in Buddhism
2. he was kept so busy by the monks:
 - holding guided meditations and tea sessions
 - being in charge of preparing meals
 - working in the monastic library
 - attending lessons in Vietnamese in the monks' quarters
 - claiming the monks had asked him to translate some of Thich Nhat Hanh's books into Japanese (which could well be true, taken that he presented himself as an expert in the language and culture).



<< Penney wearing a patterned hat

These complaints served to make Edo seem a person of high standing in the community, although I now guess he purposefully sought responsibility in order to enhance his image and authority.

Edo's ethics were questionable: he smoked, talked while walking (in Plum Village you are supposed to walk in silence and stop if you have something to say), spoke during noble silence and made critical remarks of the community (for instance, while cleaning the toilets, he told me not to be too thorough, because otherwise the monks would make me clean the toilets every day). I remember an occasion while I was washing the dishes slowly and attentively when he told me to practice quicker mindfulness. I thought the advise was

a strange one, although this attitude could well have suited his apparent background in Japanese monasticism. Edo was also in the suspicious habit of going on private walks with visitors, especially young men, myself included (mostly telling impressive stories of himself and, wielding the authority and credibility he had thus created, making plans about the future).



<< Penney wearing a red hat

While in Plum Village, I sought to become a monk aspirant. My application was refused. Hearing this, Edo made several suggestions about us working together: I could, for instance, ordain and live in one of his monasteries instead and help him with setting up a monastery, school and hospital in Brazil. He gave me no details for contacting one of his monasteries, however, but only exchanged postal and e-mail addresses with me before my departure from Plum Village.

After returning to Finland, I soon received a letter from Edo, criticizing Plum Village and expressing his wish to leave, suggesting we should start up a Buddhist centre in Finland together. Now I became very suspicious and in my reply questioned his intentions and asked him to provide me with more information regarding his background. He replied in a

few months' time with a softer tone but failed to answer my questions. I searched his name on the Web - he was supposed to be renown worldwide - but found no matches.



<< Penney wearing an orange hat

From the very beginning, I had been suspicious of his seemingly manipulative character, and more than once the thought had crossed my mind that he may be a sociopath and as such potentially dangerous to those around him. On the other hand, he was offering me the chance to ordain and be more involved with Buddhist practice in my daily life, which I greatly desired, so I had been somewhat conflicted about his nature. I decided not to be in touch with him for the time being because of these doubts.

Last Autumn I came across the well-designed website of [Pine Forest Sangha](#) and saw Edo's picture and name (though 'Yamato' had changed to 'Shonin') there. Having a peek at the text on the main page and description of Edo, my first thought was that Edo was using the knowledge he had acquired in Plum Village to set up a functioning community, a cult perhaps, around himself. Still, I wasn't sure about this feeling and wrote an e-mail to Pine Forest, asking how Edo was doing and whether I could visit the place. Edo replied to me soon, encouraging me to come by. A part of me wanted to believe in Edo and the place and I almost began to make plans to go there, but my doubts took over and I e-mailed Edo a couple of times, enquiring about his lineage and authenticity.

Again I failed to get a decent reply - Edo's writing was flattering but evasive. I brought the subject up at the chat room here at E-sangha, asking other members of the site to have a look at the home page of Pine Forest Sangha and to share their thoughts about it. I was not the only one with concerns, so a member of E-sangha created a post on the subject. The post was closed very quickly, so I left the matter there. I took note of the discussions raised on this thread and checked the info on www.buddhistchannel.tv.

Reading the story of William, my concerns resurfaced, so I recounted my story on the reply form of www.buddhistchannel.tv. I decided to post it here, too, though I don't know whether this information will pose me a security threat, since I am easily identifiable by it.

For those of you who think criticism is against the spirit of Buddhism and that one should rather remain silent about the wrongdoings in the world than cause damage, I must emphasize the importance of open inspection.

People such as Edo can cause much more damage when others quietly accept their behavior - sometimes one must take the risk of confronting others and intervene. If I can be of any assistance in legal cases that may follow, or if there is a medium interested in my story, please feel free to contact me - I will do my best to recount my relationship with Edo as honestly as possible for the sake of preventing this kind of behavior from continuing in the future.

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