

Sex abuse allegations surround L.A. Buddhist teacher

An investigation by an independent council of Buddhist teachers indicates that Joshu Sasaki Roshi, 105, may have abused hundreds of followers. No charges have been filed.



Joshu Sasaki Roshi celebrated his 50th anniversary at Rinzaï-ji Zen Center in Los Angeles last year. (Irfan Khan, Los Angeles Times / July 21, 2012)



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Paying it forward at a grand sanctuary on Wilshire Boulevard

By Corina Knoll, Los Angeles Times
February 12, 2013 | 11:25 p.m.

At 19, Shari Young was in search of enlightenment. She thought she had found it at the Cimarron Zen Center (now known as Rinzaï-ji) in Jefferson Park and in a Buddhist teacher, a man named Joshu Sasaki Roshi.

But she said Roshi, as his followers call him, began using their one-on-one meetings to fondle her breasts and grope her body. She consented in confusion but left after nearly a year.

That was in the early '60s, she said. A recent investigation by an independent council of Buddhist leaders has suggested that Roshi, a leading figure in Zen Buddhism in the United States, may have abused hundreds of others for decades. According to the group's report, that abuse included allegations of molestation and rape, and some of the incidents had been reported to the Rinzaï-ji board, which had taken no effective action.

"We see how, knowingly and unknowingly, the community was drawn into an open secret," the council wrote, adding: "We have reports that those who chose to speak out were silenced, exiled, ridiculed or otherwise punished."

Paul Karsten, a spokesman for the center interviewed about the controversy before the council's report was completed, said Roshi was too ill to respond and cautioned that the sexual misconduct allegations had not been verified. He could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

The council of Rinzaï-ji oshos — senior Zen teachers ordained under Roshi — however, responded with a public statement: "Our hearts were not firm enough, our minds were not clear enough, and our practices were not strong enough so that we might persist until the problem was resolved. We fully acknowledge now, without any reservation, and with the heaviest of hearts, that because of our failure to address our teacher's sexual misconduct, women and also men have been hurt."

The apology from the oshos is the first of its kind and is seen as vindication by members who said they had suspected such misconduct for years.

The council investigation was spurred by a letter published in November on the website *Sweeping Zen* by Eshu Martin, who studied under Roshi. Titled "Everybody Knows," it excoriated the community for suppressing reports of sexual misconduct.

"It's been sort of a tribal secret for 50 years, and I just wanted to provide an opportunity for people to start talking about this in an open forum that couldn't be shut up," Martin said about his letter. He also hoped to start a public discussion while Roshi was still living; he is 105 and in poor health.

Roshi arrived in Los Angeles 50 years ago and was among a wave of Japanese teachers to tailor Zen Buddhism to Westerners. He quickly became an exalted figure and opened about 30 centers, including one on Mt. Baldy that is known for its rigorous training regimen. It was commonly thought, Martin and other critics said, that if women left Mt. Baldy it was because they weren't tough enough to handle the demanding conditions.

In 1992, Sandy Stewart, who had spent 25 years studying with Roshi, resigned from the Rinzaï-ji board. He cited an "atmosphere of secrecy" regarding his teacher's inappropriate sexual behavior. One of the victims was a woman named Susanna who became Stewart's wife.

After some years passed, Stewart was coaxed back into the Rinzaï-ji community and told that all of the abuse had stopped. He said he then discovered that it hadn't and wrote a letter to the board insisting that the issue be confronted. The response was an onslaught of hate mail, he said.

"People ... thought I was stupid and crazy," Stewart, 75, said. "They said, 'Have you no respect?' and said I should be lashed and beaten."

Even Susanna Stewart, 71, said that for some time she felt conflicted about the abuse she suffered because she also loved and respected her teacher.

Young, who is now 63, said she would have stayed in the Zen tradition if it weren't for the abuse. Instead, she became an Episcopal priest.

"The impact on me was so tremendous," she said. "It's kind of a relief and confirming to know I wasn't just odd. In the church we have this expression, 'The truth will out.' If you've perpetrated damage upon others, at some point you have to face it."

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