

Zen Groups Distressed by Accusations Against Teacher



Rick Scibelli, Jr. for The New York Times

Joshu Sasaki in New Mexico in 2007. Some former students say they were encouraged to believe that being touched by him was part of their Zen training.

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Published: February 11, 2013

Since arriving in Los Angeles from [Japan](#) in 1962, the Buddhist teacher Joshu Sasaki, who is 105 years old, has taught thousands of Americans at his two Zen centers in the area and [one in New Mexico](#). He has influenced thousands more enlightenment seekers through a chain of some 30 affiliated Zen centers from the Puget Sound to Princeton to Berlin. And he is known as a Buddhist teacher of Leonard Cohen, the poet and songwriter.

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Patrick T. Fallon for The New
York Times
Mr. Sasaki's Rinzai-ji center in
Los Angeles. His senior
priests are conducting their
own inquiry.

Mr. Sasaki has also, according to [an investigation](#) by an independent council of Buddhist leaders, released in January, groped and sexually harassed female students for decades, taking advantage of their loyalty to a famously charismatic roshi, or master.

The allegations against Mr. Sasaki have upset and obsessed Zen Buddhists across the country, who are part of a close-knit world in which many participants seem to know, or at least know of, the principal teachers.

Mr. Sasaki did not respond to requests for interviews made through [Paul Karsten](#), a member of the board of Rinzai-ji, his main center in Los Angeles. Mr. Karsten said that Mr. Sasaki's senior priests are conducting

their own inquiry. And he cautioned that the independent council took the accounts it heard from dozens of students at face value and did not investigate any "for veracity."

Because Mr. Sasaki has founded or sponsored so many Zen centers, and because he has the prestige of having trained in Japan, the charges that he behaved unethically — and that his supporters looked the other way — have implications for an entire way of life.

Such charges have become more frequent in Zen Buddhism. Several other teachers have been accused of misconduct recently, notably Eido Shimano, who in 2010 was asked to resign from the Zen Studies Society in Manhattan over allegations that he had sex with students. Critics and victims have pointed to a Zen culture of secrecy, patriarchy and sexism, and to the quasi-religious worship of the Zen master, who can easily abuse his status.

Disaffected students wrote letters to the board of one of Mr. Sasaki's Zen centers as early as 1991. Yet it was only last November, when Eshu Martin, a Zen priest who studied under Mr. Sasaki from 1997 to 2008, [posted a letter](#) to [SweepingZen.com](#), a popular Web site, that the wider Zen world noticed.

Mr. Martin, now a Zen abbot in Victoria, British Columbia, accused Mr. Sasaki of a “career of misconduct,” from “frequent and repeated non-consensual groping of female students” to “sexually coercive after-hours ‘tea’ meetings, to affairs,” as well as interfering in his students’ marriages. Soon thereafter, the independent “witnessing council” of noted Zen teachers began interviewing 25 current or former students of Mr. Sasaki.

Some former students are now speaking out, including seven interviewed for this article, and their stories provide insight into the culture of [Rinzai-ji](#) and the other places where Mr. Sasaki taught. Women say they were encouraged to believe that being touched by Mr. Sasaki was part of their Zen training.

The Zen group, or sangha, can become one’s close family, and that aspect of Zen may account for why women and men have been reluctant to speak out for so long.

Many women whom Mr. Sasaki touched were resident monks at his centers. One woman who confronted Mr. Sasaki in the 1980s found herself an outcast afterward. The woman, who asked that her name not be used to protect her privacy, said that afterward “hardly anyone in the sangha, whom I had grown up with for 20 years, would have anything to do with us.”

In the council’s report on Jan. 11, the three members wrote of “Sasaki asking women to show him their breasts, as part of ‘answering’ a koan” — a Zen riddle — “or to demonstrate ‘non-attachment.’ ”

When the report was posted to [SweepingZen.com](#), Mr. Sasaki’s senior priests wrote in a post that their group “has struggled with our teacher Joshu Sasaki Roshi’s sexual misconduct for a significant portion of his career in the United States” — their [first such admission](#).

Among those who spoke to the council and for this article was Nikki Stubbs, who now lives in Vancouver, and who studied and worked at [Mount Baldy, Mr. Sasaki’s Zen center 50 miles east of Los Angeles](#), from 2003 to 2006. During that time, she said, Mr. Sasaki would fondle her breasts during sanzen, or private meeting; he also asked her to massage his penis. She would wonder, she said, “Was this teaching?”

One monk, whom Ms. Stubbs said she told about the touching, was unsympathetic. “He believed in Roshi’s style, that sexualizing was teaching for particular women,” Ms. Stubbs said. The monk’s theory, common in Mr. Sasaki’s circle, was that such physicality could check a woman’s overly strong ego.

A former student of Mr. Sasaki’s now living in the San Francisco area, who asked that her name be withheld to protect her privacy, said that at Mount Baldy in the late 1990s, “the monks confronted Roshi and said, ‘This behavior is unacceptable and has to stop.’” However, she said, “nothing changed.” After a time, Mr. Sasaki used Zen teaching to justify touching her, too.

“He would say something like, ‘True love is giving yourself to everything,’” she explained. At Mount Baldy, the isolation could hamper one’s judgment. “It can sound trite, but you’re in this extreme state of consciousness,” she said — living at a monastery in the mountains, sitting in silence for many hours a day — “where boundaries fall away.”

Joe Marinello is a Zen teacher in Seattle who served on the board of the Zen Studies Society in New York. He has been openly critical of Mr. Shimano, the former abbot who was asked to resign from the society. Asked about teachers who say that sexual touch is an appropriate teaching technique, he was dismissive.

“In my opinion,” Mr. Marinello said in an e-mail, “it’s just their cultural and personal distortion to justify their predations.”

But in Zen Buddhism, students often overlook their teachers’ failings, participants say. Some Buddhists define their philosophy in contrast to Western religion: Buddhism, they believe, does not have Christian-style preoccupations about things like sex. And Zen exalts the relationship between a student and a teacher, who can come to seem irreplaceable.

“Outside the sexual things that happened,” the woman now in San Francisco said, “my relationship with him was one of the most important I have had with anyone.”

Several women said that Zen can foster an atmosphere of overt sexism. Jessica Kramer, a doula in Los Angeles, was Mr. Sasaki's personal attendant in 2002. She said that he would reach into her robe and that she always resisted his advances. Surrounded almost entirely by men, she said she got very little sympathy. "I'd talk about it with people who'd say, 'Why not just let him touch your breasts if he wants to touch your breasts?'"

Susanna Stewart began studying with Mr. Sasaki about 40 years ago. Within six months, she said, Mr. Sasaki began to touch her during sanzen. This sexualizing of their relationship "led to years of confusion and pain," Ms. Stewart said, "eventually resulting in my becoming unable to practice Zen." And when she married one of his priests, Mr. Sasaki tried to break them up, she said, even encouraging her husband to have an affair.

In 1992, Ms. Stewart's husband disaffiliated himself and his [North Carolina Zen Center](#) from Mr. Sasaki. Years later, his wife said, he received hate mail from members of his old Zen group.

The witnessing council, which wrote the report, has no official authority. Its members belong to the American Zen Teachers Association but collected stories on their own initiative, although with a statement of support from 45 other teachers and priests. One of its authors, Grace Schireson, said that Zen Buddhists in the United States have misinterpreted a Japanese philosophy.

"Because of their long history with Zen practice, people in Japan have some skepticism about priests," Ms. Schireson said. But in the United States many proponents have a "devotion to the guru or the teacher in a way that could repress our common sense and emotional intelligence."

Last Thursday morning, at Rinzaï-ji on Cimarron Street in Los Angeles, Bob Mammoser, a resident monk, said that Mr. Sasaki's "health is quite frail" and that he has "basically withdrawn from any active teaching." Mr. Mammoser said there is talk of a meeting at the center to discuss what, if any, action to take.

Mr. Mammoser said he first became aware of allegations against Mr. Sasaki in the 1980s. "There have been efforts in the past to address this with him," Mr. Mammoser said. "Basically, they haven't been able to go anywhere."

He added: "What's important and is overlooked is that, besides this aspect, Roshi was a commanding and inspiring figure using Buddhist practice to help thousand find more peace, clarity and happiness in their own lives. It seems to be the kind of thing that, you get the person as a whole, good and bad, just like you marry somebody and you get their strengths and wonderful qualities as well as their weaknesses."