

U.S.

Joshu Sasaki, 107, Tainted Zen Master

By PAUL VITELLO AUG. 4, 2014



Joshu Sasaki at the Bodhi Manda Zen Center in Jemez Springs, N.M., in 2007.

Rick Scibelli, Jr. for The New York Times

Joshu Sasaki, who died on July 27 at the age of 107, was one of the most influential and charismatic Zen masters in America, imparting a mix of paradox, personality and transcendental insight to an estimated half-million people during a 50-year career.

He earned the high regard of scholars in the field of contemplative studies. The Canadian singer, songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen served as his personal attendant for five years. And he ordained dozens of Zen monks and nuns, who spread his teaching around the world.

Then, in 2012, a tide of sexual abuse allegations emerged to cast his character and his legacy in a harsh light.

On website discussion boards, former students began voicing what

turned out to be long-festering complaints about Mr. Sasaki, accusing him of engaging in sexual affairs with female students and Buddhist nuns, and of molesting or coercing hundreds of others into having sexual contact with him during one-on-one training sessions at his [Rinzai-ji Zen Center](#) in Los Angeles and at his retreat camps.

They said he would tell them that sexual contact with a Zen master, or roshi, like him would help them attain new levels of “non-attachment,” one of Zen’s central objectives. If they resisted, they said, he used intimidation and threats of expulsion.

An independent panel of Buddhist leaders concluded in 2013 that the allegations were essentially indisputable. The [panel report](#) said that students had complained to Mr. Sasaki’s staff about his behavior since the early 1970s, and that those “who chose to speak out were silenced, exiled, ridiculed or otherwise punished.”

A few women went to law-enforcement authorities over the years, and one had reached out to a rape crisis center, but no charges were ever brought against Mr. Sasaki, the panel said.

Mr. Sasaki had retired from teaching a year before the allegations surfaced. Though he kept his title as abbot of the Rinzai-ji Zen Center until 2013, he never publicly responded to the charges. A group of his senior staff members issued an open letter of apology, admitting that they had known about his behavior and had made only intermittent efforts to address it.

“Our hearts were not firm enough, our minds were not clear enough,” the letter said.

Not all of his adherents concurred in the apology. Some contended that the allegations had been investigated only superficially, or pointed out that no criminal charges had been filed. On websites and online message boards for Zen Buddhists, some argued that even if the allegations were true, Mr. Sasaki would never have acted deceptively or with intent to cause harm.

Harold D. Roth, a professor of religious studies at Brown University and a former student of Mr. Sasaki’s, said he and others found it difficult to reconcile the allegations with their own experience of Mr. Sasaki. Over four decades, he said, he observed a teacher who always conducted himself “in the devoted service of awakening enlightenment in his students” — the experience, he added, that is at the heart of the Rinzai Zen ethos.

“The idea that he was a predator is mistaken,” said Professor Roth, who has recently edited a first volume of Mr. Sasaki’s teachings.

Mr. Sasaki, who was born in [Japan](#), had not been well schooled in Americans’ shifting mores about sexual behavior, Professor Roth said. Referring to Japan’s last feudal period, from the 17th to the 19th centuries, he called Mr. Sasaki “a man of the Tokugawa era.”

Joshu Sasaki was born into a farming family near Sendai, in northern Japan, on April 1, 1907. He became a Zen Buddhist novice at 14, schooled in the 13th-century disciplinary traditions of Rinzai. After seven years of study in Hokkaido, he was sent to Myoshin-ji, the flagship temple of the Rinzai branch, in Kyoto, where he studied for 20 years. He was abbot of a temple in Nagano in 1962 when Rinzai officials in Kyoto, in response to a request from a group in the United States, sent him to teach Zen Buddhism to Americans.

Mr. Sasaki was among many monks who immigrated to the United States after World War II to spread Zen teachings. He was among the very few, though, who hewed to Rinzai, which leads students toward enlightenment with 16-hour days of meditation, abrupt and sometimes shouted interrogations in the koan mysteries (“What is the blown hair sword?”), and occasional whacks on the head with a stick — all in the service of inspiring satori, a life-changing shift (or awakening) of consciousness about themselves and the nature of reality. Samurai warriors used it to help them overcome the fear of death.

Anyone looking for the kind of easygoing Zen popularized by the [British philosopher Alan Watts](#) in the late 1950s was likely to decamp from Mr. Sasaki’s study centers and monasteries. But thousands of others flocked to Mr. Sasaki in the ’50s and ’60s, at the beginning of a surge of American interest in Eastern philosophy.

After opening his Zen center in Los Angeles, Mr. Sasaki founded a Zen retreat in 1971 at [Mount Baldy](#) in San Bernardino County, Calif., and [another](#) in 1972 in Jemez Springs, N.M. (Mr. Cohen’s long relationship with Mr. Sasaki was chronicled in Armelle Brusq’s documentary [“Leonard Cohen: Spring 96,”](#) which was filmed during

the third of Mr. Cohen's five years in residence at the Mount Baldy retreat.)

Zen monks and nuns trained by Mr. Sasaki have established roughly 30 loosely affiliated centers in the United States and Europe. A couple of them have formally cut ties with him in the wake of the sexual abuse scandal.

Mr. Sasaki's death, in Los Angeles, was confirmed by a spokesman for the Rinzai-ji Zen Center. He is survived by his wife, Haruyo Sasaki.

Correction: August 14, 2014

An obituary last Thursday about the Zen master Joshu Sasaki referred incorrectly to the poets Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg. While they both studied Zen Buddhism, they did not study with Mr. Sasaki.

Correction: August 30, 2014

An obituary on Aug. 7 about Joshu Sasaki, a popular Zen master who was accused of repeated instances of sexual abuse though never tried, characterized imprecisely the views of Harold D. Roth, a religious studies professor at Brown University and the editor of a volume of Mr. Sasaki's teachings. Though Dr. Roth questioned allegations that Mr. Sasaki had been "a predator," as he put it, he was not among those who argued, as the obituary said, "that even if the allegations were true, Mr. Sasaki would never have acted deceptively or with intent to cause harm," perhaps suggesting that Dr. Roth would have excused such behavior. In addition, the obituary erroneously merged two fragments of quotations by Dr. Roth: "everything" and "devoted service of awakening enlightenment in his students." He did not say of Mr. Sasaki, "Everything he did was in the devoted service of awakening enlightenment in his students."