

On Authority by Alan Hozan Senauke with Jan Chozen Bays and Grace Myoan Schireson

When ongoing questions of misuse of sexuality or power unfold in a spiritual community, it is rarely a matter of one person's actions. Reading through the painful and heartfelt accounts documenting Joshu Sasaki's sexual relationships with students at Rinzaiji down through the years, we see how, knowingly and unknowingly, the community was drawn into an open secret, and people's ability to practice the dharma suffered. Despite individual and collective attempts to address boundaries, repentance, and rectification, these behaviors appear to have continued over more than four decades. We have reports that those who chose to speak out were silenced, exiled, ridiculed, or otherwise punished.

Understanding that our practice is to bear what is unbearable and not to turn away from reality, how could this be so? We suggest it has something to do with a view of spiritual authority and "enlightenment" that we in the West have created in the name of Zen. To be fair, this is not just a problem of Zen. It arises in various Buddhist communities, and more widely in other religious congregations. We are unfortunately susceptible to enthrallment, which is hardly "seeing things as they really are." There are certain problems that may arise when one sees a teacher as comprehensively enlightened and fails to deal with the certainty that he or she, like oneself, has a shadow or deluded aspect. We imagine that "enlightenment" is separate from or outside of ourselves. The community may attempt to protect the teacher, the seeming embodiment of enlightenment. If we hold such a model, it is often impossible to recognize or admit that there has been an abuse of power. We fear the loss of our enlightened teacher and thus the opportunity to become enlightened ourselves.

In the "Kalama Sutta" (AN III, 65 in the Pali Tripitaka) Shakyamuni Buddha offers the Kalama clan clear standards for discernment of what is wholesome and unwholesome. This teaching has been described as "the Buddha's charter of free inquiry."

Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise...nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher." Kalamas, when you yourselves know: "These things are good; these things are without blame; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness," enter on and abide in them.

The collective integrity of the early *sangha* depended on the individual integrity and spirit of free inquiry held by each monk, nun, and community member. Twenty-five hundred years later we would be wise to value this standard. Enlightenment is not a commodity or an end state that justifies unwholesome or harmful behavior. Realization is an ongoing activity. As the Buddha said, "These things are good; these things are without blame...these things lead to benefit and happiness." We need to return to common sense. We can consult with our own hearts, with our friends, and — hopefully — with our teachers. In the midst of our passion for practice when someone says they've been harmed we need to stop and listen carefully. Beyond all lines of authority, devotion, and enthrallment with the dharma, the essence of the Buddha's precepts is to see that we are fully accountable to each other. Teacher and student stand on the same ground. One may see more deeply or more widely, but all beings are equally Buddha. As Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we must try to prevent harm to anyone.

Witness Council Report Outline

1. General allegations

a. Respondents interviewed or reported publicly

- i. Twenty-five individuals have either sent emails, consulted the Council for confidential interviews, published articles or have done both types of reporting. There are more than fifty pages of these reports. These reports (encoded by number), confidential interviews and published articles are listed in a redacted index to insure anonymity. Twenty-four respondents were Sasaki's students or former students. The numbers below represent the coded reports in which the issues and allegations appear. While there were only twenty-five respondents, there were forty-six documents. The numbers listed refer to the document from which the comment is quoted.

Eleven respondents gave first hand reports (by women) of attempted or actual sexual contact (* used to identify first hand reporters of sexual contact or attempt here and in index), thirteen respondents gave second hand reports of sexual contact, and one respondent (not a Sasaki student) only reported on Sasaki's prison sentence for misappropriation of temple funds in Japan, and Sasaki's disinterest in caring for a child fathered there outside of marriage.

b. Main categories of reported allegations related to Sasaki's sexual conduct

- i. Concerned with abuse of trust/power as religious teacher – all twenty-five respondents
- ii. Sexual relations including kissing, groping of genitals or breasts, viewing genitals or breasts, oral sex, intercourse: twenty-four reported some of these alleged sexual contact
 1. Nine respondents reported the Rinzaï-ji Oshos or Board's knowledge of allegations or to have alerted the Board and the Oshos - 1,3, 4,6,7 10,23, 28, 32,* 37
- iii. Physical assault: 3,8,9, 18 reported rape crisis report filed, 18 also mentioned an assault reported to the Los Angeles District Attorney's office (report of Sasaki assault on student) *37 was assaulted
- iv. Disturbances to the community: 3,10, 17, *23, *37 reported interfering with students' relationship or marriages
- v. Recommending pornography as practice 43
- vi. Complaints filed with public agencies: 7,8,18 mentioned rape crisis report, 18 reported District attorney report for Sexual assault and Children's Protective service regarding Sasaki having sex with minor

c. Reports of other Oshos making sexual demands of students: 3,7,8. Two respondents knew of male to male incident (anal sex or penis exposure), response 17 reported a male to female incident (osho with female student who was mentally impaired)

2. Estimated number of women affected: Based on a number of interviews response 19 extrapolated more than one hundred women, response 35 extrapolated well over one hundred women over the decades, response *38 estimated more than 300. The number of women is hard to estimate response 19, 35, and *38 extrapolated more than one hundred

3. Coercive methods

a. In relation to women/survivors

- i. Offering sexual relations as a Zen teaching (eg non-attachment, emptiness): *2,6,10, 17, 22, 25, *31, *37, 38
- ii. Arguing, berating or insulting women to insist upon their compliance with his demands for sex: 7, 8, 18, *37,
- iii. Offering to marry love interest 8
- iv. Physical force: 3, 6, 7, *31, *37
- v. Interfering in marriage/relationship of students: 3, 17,*23, *37

- b. In order to quiet/suppress community dissent
 - i. Explaining the benefits of sexual relations as Zen practice: *2, 6, 7,10, *22, 17, *31,32, *37
 - ii. Community belief that such relationships were the usual behaviors in Japan *8, 10
 - iii. Sasaki's justifying his sexual touch as that of a doctor: 8
 - iv. Sasaki threatening to resign and withdraw his teaching and leadership: 3,6,17
 - v. Sasaki and community members discounting women and their allegations: 1, 3, 4,6,7, 20,*23, *37
- 4. In retaliation against critics
 - i. Removal of Rinzaï-ji position: 7,8, 15, 18
 - ii. Removal of Rinzaï-ji affiliation from their practice community: 7, 13, 18,20
 - iii. Loss of practice center they had established: 6, 7, 13
 - iv. Contact with respondent's work place (eg. disavowing ordination): 11
 - v. Banning from attending/visiting Rinzaï-ji practice place: 19
- 5. Other confounding factors (e.g., secrecy, special alliances)
 - a. Reports of Sasaki fathering children outside of marriage: 3, 7, 8, 44
 - b. Rumors of rewarding sexual partners with teaching empowerments or sangha property: 3, 7, 8
- 6. Other forms of misconduct related to community control
 - a. Financial
 - i. Retaliation at workplace: 11
 - ii. Retaliation thru removal of practice community (potential means of livelihood): 7, 8, 11
 - iii. Non-standard distribution of 501C3 funds through several Sasaki controlled corporations: 8, 17 Document 26. Money made available to buy favors for Sasaki sexual partners. Use of funds for such purposes outside of religious non-profit charter
 - b. Drug use and violence: Report of use of marijuana resulting in osho shooting a dog, 8, 32, 35 (excessive) alcohol consumption by Sasaki 35
- 7. Organizational structures that may have enabled silence or lack of dissent
 - a. Osho lack of independent teacher status: 4, 6, 7, 8, *23, 25
 - b. Inter-connected Boards of Directors from different practice centers: No independent practice center, all controlled by Sasaki 4,7,8, *23
 - c. Interlinked Corporations, and transfer of funds between different practice centers: lack of financial independence 4, 7, 8, *23
 - d. Lack of informed independent Board of Directors: 4, 7, 8
 - i. Sasaki would resign when allegation was current and troubling and then be re-instated by Board when complainant departed/withdrew: 17
 - e. Separate career track joju (support staff) and donai (zendo staff) which rewarded inji and isolated culturally, physically and through a separate practice schedule Roshi's female attendants (inji) 17
- 8. Long term effects on members
 - a. Lost respect Roshi *2, 3, 4, 6, 7, *22, *23, 27, 28, 30, *37, 42
 - b. Lost respect Zen *2, 3, 4, 6, 7, *23, 27, 28, 30, *37, 42
 - c. Lost practice place 4, 6, 7, *23, 27
 - d. Felt depressed or needed therapy* 2, 4, 6, 7, 10. *23, 27, *31, *37, 42
 - e. Loss of function (eg lost relationship or employment) *2
 - f. Deceased members whose complaints were never addressed 3, 6, 33

Summary of the Findings of the Witness Council Concerning Allegations of Sexual Behaviors by Joshu Sasaki

Purpose

The Witness Council was formed in November, 2012, when allegations arose concerning longstanding sexual behaviors by Joshu Sasaki. Many Zen teachers expressed concern about these allegations. Some had heard rumors for many years, but all said they did not feel they could comment or consider taking action without a foundation of credible information. Because there was an expressed need for information, the Witness Council was formed. The Witness Council consists of three individuals, with extensive experience and training in the field of behaviors by Buddhist and other spiritual teachers, who volunteered to be available to collect and summarize relevant information in a sensitive, confidential manner. The three people in the Witness Council are independent of Sasaki's Rinzaï-ji centers — an important consideration, as many survivors and other witnesses are not comfortable discussing their experiences or concerns openly with members of a group from which they are disaffected.

Methods

The Witness Council collected information from a total of twenty-five individuals. There were twenty-four individuals who practiced at one of Rinzaï-ji's centers from the 1960's through 2012, in three ways: through telephone interviews, through e-mails sent to the Group, and through public documents (sometimes followed by personal interviews). Eleven respondents experienced sexual contact (or attempted contact) and thirteen were second hand reports of such contact. Ten respondents were women and thirteen were men. All twenty-four individuals were current or past students of Joshu Sasaki. One additional respondent (not a Sasaki student) reported on Sasaki's prison sentence for misappropriation of temple funds in Japan, and Sasaki's disinterest in caring for his child fathered there outside of marriage.

All information consisted of statements from individuals. Consistency of accounts among individuals is noted below and in the accompanying document, Witness Council Report Outline. All accounts were accepted verbatim and no attempt was made to verify or further investigate these accounts. Most respondents contacted us by e-mail, and when questions remained we attempted to follow up in person by telephone. Information was collected over a period of four weeks.

Most of the information consisted of firsthand accounts, such as "I was at a meeting when this occurred," or "He did this to me when I went into sanzen." Some were secondhand accounts, by men, of what they had heard firsthand from women.

Summary of Findings

Types of acts described: There were consistent reports of sexual behavior by Joshu Sasaki, often initiated in the formal setting, privacy, and "face-to-face" encounters of the sanzen room. There were many accounts of Sasaki asking women to show him their breasts, as part of "answering" a koan or to demonstrate "non-attachment." Some women repelled these requests

and further physical advances. Many could not because they were physically overwhelmed, and subsequently experienced sexual behavior including kissing, viewing of breasts or genitalia, fondling of breasts or genitalia, viewing or being asked to touch his genitalia, oral sex, and vaginal intercourse. Several women recounted that they were asked to sit on his lap, presumably to be comforted. This physical intimacy progressed to sexualized behaviors initiated by Sasaki. There were no accounts of Joshu Sasaki asking men to show their genitalia in the course of "koan work."

There were accounts of forced sexual and physical assault (against women's protests) which resulted in one report to the Los Angeles District Attorney's office and one report to a rape crisis center. There was another report to a Child Welfare agency concerning Sasaki and a sexual encounter with an underage girl. One person had interviewed women Rinzai-ji students, and three people extrapolated the number of women victims as well over one hundred.

Secrecy and threats: There were a number of reports of coercion and of Joshu Sasaki framing the sexual contact as a Zen teaching, or as beneficial. There were many accounts of his threats to resign if senior students took action to reveal or stop his sexual behavior. There were also accounts which described actions perceived as retaliation against senior students who confronted him about his sexual behavior. These actions included loss of position, loss of ability to attend Rinza-ji events, and severing an affiliated center's connection to Rinza-ji. There were several reports of Joshu Sasaki interfering in students' marriages or other intimate relationships.

Other concerns

There were descriptions of physical and cultural isolation of women who were assigned (often as fairly new students) to be Sasaki's personal attendant (*inji*). *Injis* did not necessarily keep the regular monastery schedule and may have had sleeping quarters separate from the other staff.

There were accounts of similar sexualized/sexual behavior in the next generation of Rinza-ji teachers with their own students.

Some respondents expressed concerns that there was no accountability (such as independent audit) for movement of funds among the several corporations/corporate accounts related to Rinza-ji and that monies from the non-profit accounts were used to buy gifts for Joshu Sasaki's sexual partners.

Other relevant information

Almost all respondents expressed their affection and admiration for Joshu Sasaki and their gratitude for his teaching. One respondent said that her sexual encounters had been beneficial. All other female respondents were distressed by these encounters and the effects on women students, and expressed their dismay that someone so gifted could behave in ways that seemed emotionally and sexually intrusive. Almost all respondents said that they had not at first realized the extent or harm caused by his behavior and some had justified his behavior for many years. Some expressed sadness that they had felt compelled to separate from Rinza-ji and their close sangha "family" due to Sasaki's long term, persistent behavior.

A number of respondents expressed dismay that they themselves and/or the Rinzaï-ji community had not been able to bring an end to this long-term behavior. They indicated that the way the community was structured and functioned had enabled this behavior to continue for many years through rationalizing, acquiescing, keeping or demanding secrecy, threats or even supporting Joshu Sasaki's sexual behavior by encouraging women to participate. Others described occasions when the women victims and men who raised objections were dismissed or ridiculed. They expressed their concern for the victims and others who had left the organization and may have been suffering in silence and isolation. A number spoke of their deep concern that Joshu Sasaki and the Rinzaï-ji community undermined the potential of women students in practice.

We hope that this information will be helpful to the larger Zen community. We offer it to the Rinzaï-ji community as an opportunity to follow up and address the concerns raised by this report. In our experience thus far, Rinzaï-ji representatives have been very cooperative and interested in our findings and have expressed appreciation for our efforts, understanding that a group independent of Rinzaï-ji offered additional opportunities for affected community members to dialogue about this matter.