

## **A ZEN WOMAN'S PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON SEXUAL GROPING, SEXUAL HARASSMENT, AND OTHER ABUSES IN ZEN CENTERS**

Posted by: Myoan Grace Schireson on November 21, 2012

Eshu Martin has published [painful allegations](#) about Mt Baldy Zen Center and Joshu Sasaki's abuse of women students. Rumors about Reverend Sasaki have circulated for decades, but until now, no member of that community has spoken up publicly. What is missing for many observers are the first-hand accounts of women. For a woman to speak up as the object of unwholesome sexual attention is a no-win situation. I was "groped" by a Zen teacher twenty years ago, I still have only told one close friend. I feel ashamed. And I know from experience what can happen when I have come forward.



Myoan Grace Schireson

As a 17 year-old college student, I narrowly escaped a rapist and I got away to call the police. When the police came to interview me, I described my assailant perfectly, recounted all parts of my thought process, impressions and the activity that had occurred with exact details. The comments made by the middle aged adult police officers, recording the attempted rape account from a strong and calm young woman were: "You're not a woman, what is the matter with you, why aren't you crying? He was lucky to get away from you." I was further shamed and blamed and vilified. Even then I knew what they were doing was wrong, but I could find no means to say so. I just had to bear it.

For women to come forward and to report what happened, we need to make deep changes to a global primitive view of women: their need to be both desirable and at the same to be pure. Almost all the women I know, personally and as a psychologist, have experienced one form or another of sexual harassment—ranging from intrusive remarks, being ogled, offers to trade sex for job promotion, brief pats, grabbing, being pinned down, all the way up to violent rape. Women are blamed for men's desire, even in Buddhism (see Diana Paul on Buddha's description of "ensnaring women"). We hear expressions like "She was dressed to kill." Women's beauty is described as aggression towards men. And in short, we learn to live with it—in healthy and unhealthy ways.

I appreciate Eshu's efforts and understand from some of the comments posted in response to his piece that many have had enough of this kind of news. Some protest that we have had enough reporting of this issue, and want it to stop messing with our ideas about Zen. When will it stop? Enni Ben'en (1202-1280) the original founder of Tofukuji, my teacher Fukushima Roshi's temple said: "The Rock of Ages will some day wear away, but when will this suffering end?" Apparently, not any time soon; and while mountains may wear away through natural forces, suffering is only transformed through willing attention. Can we continue to look at this issue, to tolerate our discomfort, and to educate ourselves, our Zen sanghas and even our teachers? Rather than bemoan the outcome, can we lessen our predisposition to be fooled by teachers who act out in this way? Can we prevent rather than protest?

We need to study and understand how people become more susceptible to sexual and other misbehavior in Zen centers when they are supposed to be waking up to reality. There is a variety of reasons. In regard to some of the issues raised in response to Eshu's piece: Yes, we let our defenses down to allow deep change, yes, we develop trust in our teacher, and yes, we are in a different world. Years ago, during a practice period in Japan with eleven other women, I learned just how confusing "foreign context" could be. Standing in the garden of a Zen temple with four other women, a Japanese lay visitor to the temple put both of his hands on my friend's breasts, and squeezed them while muttering some non-recognizable Japanese. We were all momentarily stunned into silence and inaction while he smiled, squeezed and muttered away. Since I was the only one who spoke any Japanese, one woman in the group asked me: "What does it mean?" The question woke me up. I said: "It means the same thing in any language," as I slapped his arms off of her chest and forcibly pushed him away. Not only was there a culture barrier, but we had been instructed to be friendly to lay people since we were considered "nuns of the temple." Was I allowed to do that or had I created an international Zen incident?

How much more confusing would it be to be groped as part of koan practice? A woman would wonder, what does it mean in a private interview with a Zen teacher? Does the groping test my ability to transcend our usual limitations? Does it mean no-self? Is it a koan? I would call this atrocious behavior disguised as Zen practice by another name. In an attempt to respect our sensibilities, I will suggest that this is the same name with which we usually refer to the defecation from a bull's digestive tract which is used to fertilize plants.

Frankly, as some political candidates recently suggested in their distorted views on rape, women have plenty of opportunity to respond to being sexually molested. This can be neither "Special Karma"(as described in Merry White Benezra's novel about practice with a sexually exploitative Zen teacher) nor a koan, not at a Zen center, and not anywhere else. When sexual misconduct occurs, it is actually a crime, not a Zen koan. And it is a cause of suffering that Zen teachers should not inflict on anyone. We have long addressed the potential psychopathology and character flaws of teachers who perpetrate such harm. And we have made statements to address this harm. I will continue to do so. The real work is creating an environment in which women can speak of the incident, and face their suffering with support and wisdom.

I also have some ideas about how women may play enabling roles when it comes to this kind of behavior with Zen teachers, and about the education women may need regarding aspects of their participation in sex and cover-ups within the Zen sangha. Our American practice is the first time men and women have practiced Zen under the same roof. The Zen training brought to America from Japan was designed to address men's tendencies and not women's delusions. Women are practicing a style of Zen that was generally designed to address men's power issues. The Japanese teachers who brought Zen to the West had been trained by other men in all male monasteries. None of them had trained a group of nuns or had to deal with so much and so continuous a stream of sexualized transference from women students. They were unprepared to deal with this issue, nor did they specifically train their successors to deal with it. In many cases, these Japanese and Korean Zen masters and some of their successors seemed to revert to one of the classic privileges of male power—plenty of sex with plenty of women who happened to be their students. And women suffered the sexual intrusions silently.

How can we prevent this kind of thing from happening in Zen centers? In blunt terms, they can't do this without us—perpetrators can't behave this way without permission, cooperation, and silence from women and sangha members in general! If sanghas say NO, it can be prevented. It's rarely a secret. Someone knows. For women in particular, we need to offer a supportive and kind community, AND we need to offer formal Zen training that addresses a potentially gender specific delusion to be pleasing or even seductive, to want to be desired. Some women seek power through being desired by a powerful man. I address the issue of women's sexual agenda in my book *Zen Women*. Scott Edelstein addresses the root causes in *Sex and the Spiritual Teacher*. Peter Rutter describes the psychological dynamics in *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*. Let's study up and get wise.

Everyone who comes to Zen practice is suffering with some delusion; this is to be expected. Some women may bring a particular delusion with them to Zen centers — that ingratiation and seduction are the only way they will ever matter or have power. Of course they bring their suffering into practice, but a Zen teacher needs to see the behavior as suffering and resist gratifying himself sexually even if she throws her naked body in his direction. This female quest for power through seducing a powerful man is a widely held cultural delusion, in my opinion, and one that we as teachers and sangha members need to notice, acknowledge, and address. Some women mistake this sexualized attention for "love", and may value this imagined love more than they value the truth (or reality) and their own well-being. This response and the underlying needs it serves can be seen as a form of addiction. Women's participation in sex with a teacher as "love" may be in part a cultural learning, and may also be associated with biologically determined factors pertaining to women's heightened emotional relatedness, family learning, earlier sexualized trauma or other factors. This delusion needs to be investigated within Zen practice and addressed.

Another problematic role is that of a sangha's female enablers; they may either participate in sex with the teacher themselves or may place the bulk of the blame on the women who do. These sangha women may have their own motivations, perhaps wishing to maintain an idealized and dependent relationship with the teacher, or to be his "favorite". They may fall into believing the familiar stereotype of the evil seductress who brought down the great man. The woman identified as the seductress is banished and the Zen teacher is excused. We have recently seen some of the press coverage of the female vamp who led the poor Four Star General Petraeus astray leaning in this direction. Really? She tied him down and made him do it? Is it any wonder that women will almost never come forward? A woman who has had sex with a teacher is seen as a "fallen" woman and the cause of the problem.

But for me, immediately at the heart of addressing this ongoing harm, is the question of how sanghas begin to learn to set standards for teachers to "do no harm." Sometimes this is a difficult call, but in the situation of groping, sexual molestation, sexual affairs with students, spreading venereal disease, and even generating children in this way, we are not in a gray area regarding harm. We need to do far more to educate sanghas about their role in creating a healthy process and a healthy environment for Zen practice. Fifteen years ago one of my students voiced his reason for leaving Sasaki and Mt Baldy where he had lived for an extended period. He said "It is one thing for a teacher to make these mistakes; it is a bigger problem for me that the sangha does nothing. I cannot abide with that." And this is the dynamic that perpetuates the problem; those who can't stand it leave (in silence or without public protest), and those who accept this behavior, stay and support the teacher. As others have said, we need to speak out even when there is some risk. I applaud Eshu Martin for doing so at this time and note the extent to which the internet is making it easier for people to speak out and harder for perpetrators to hide.

While teachers who behave this way may technically offer Zen, it is not a wholesome practice and the cumulative effects are unacceptable and incompatible with Zen awakening. As a community, I believe we need to say so, and we need to offer specific education to sanghas and sangha members to prevent and address this unwholesome accompaniment to Zen teaching. We can do more to educate and prevent this harm that has become all too common at Zen centers. I am looking forward to a statement from Rinzaiji that promises to address the harm and begin the healing, but our focus should be on all Zen practice places and our own responsibility to see deeply into our own behavior and delusions.


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## ABOUT MYOAN GRACE SCHIRESON



Abbess Myoan Grace Schireson is a Dharma teacher in the Suzuki Roshi lineage empowered by Sojun Mel Weitsman, abbot of Berkeley Zen Center. She has also been empowered to teach koans by Keido Fukushima Roshi, the late abbot of Tofukuji Monastery in Kyoto, Japan. Grace is the head teacher of the Central Valley Zen Foundation and has founded and leads three Zen groups and a Zen retreat center in California. Grace is also a clinical psychologist who has specialized in women and families. She has been married for forty-four years and has two grown sons and four grandchildren.

