

Some Reflections on Rinzai-ji

By Giko David Rubin

I began Zen practice in High School. I spent two weeks at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center between my freshman and sophomore years of college. Then I first met Denkyo Kyozan Joshu Roshi in 1980 when I was nineteen years old. I did my first sesshin a few months later, was ordained by him in 1983, and made an Osho by him in 1999. Between 1995 and 2007 I translated for well over 2,000 hours of public and private dharma talks and meetings. I probably spent more than that number of hours helping to transcribe and correct the translations. Since 2007 I have been in protest and not participating in Rinzai-ji, although I've had a few private meetings with Joshu Roshi.

I am writing because I care about Joshu Roshi and the community. I would like to help in any way I can to bring about healing through honesty. To the best of my knowledge and ability, I will describe how Joshu Roshi, and the community that supports him, has tried to deal with his sexual activity with his female students, and how the inability to do that skillfully seems to have led to a diminishment of his teachings and the practice.

This is a snapshot of my own failure to understand the situation I was (and to some degree am still) in, to care about it enough, and to act skillfully. I offer this to the collage of Rinzai-ji, and the bigger collage of Zen in the West at this time. I ask forgiveness for my failings. I feel that in order to keep the clear loving connection between Joshu Roshi and me I *must* confront him about this pattern of behavior that seems to cause him, and those around him, suffering.

I believe Joshu Roshi is a great Zen teacher in many ways. I say this from my long personal experience with him, as well as my experiences with other Zen teachers. He holds up a beautiful liberating universally healing ideal. We all can experience living, transcending life, dying, and transcending death, fully. We all can experience salvation and liberation.

Joshu Roshi could genuinely offer that ideal, that experience, because, I believe, he could, at times, truly manifest it, and he could recognize it in others. Joshu Roshi also has the ability to sometimes know exactly what a student is experiencing without having to be told. This is quite remarkable, and I believe gives his students a feeling they are in the presence of someone with extraordinary spiritual power. As a young man I sat in zazen and felt my hand spontaneously open on my outbreath, and felt my sphere of consciousness expand with it. Then on the next in breath my hand unwillingly closed to a fist. The next time I saw Joshu Roshi, I bowed in silence as usual, and sat up. At once he looked me in the eye, open and closed his hand, and said, "Now you can be a Zen teacher." How could I not feel this man knew me better than anyone could? I believed I could I trust him completely.

And yet. Over a long period of time I have come to understand Joshu Roshi has many

sexual encounters of various kinds with his students, many of whom are married.

I hope this description is striking some sort of beautiful balance between not saying too little and not saying too much. But. I'll probably miss that balance.

Especially important to me is to be clear that when I say "Osho" or "Inji" I am not implying that all Rinzai-ji Oshos or Injis acted similarly. That is very far from the truth. I would like to emphatically emphasize I am only speaking of my own experience with a relatively few people. I beg you to not paint all Oshos, senior students, or Injis with the same brush. Please, if you know someone associated with Rinzai-ji, or hear someone is, do not assume you know what he or she did or thought after reading this account.

From many stories I was told by men and women, and from my long experience translating, I believe Joshu Roshi sometimes used the way he spoke in sanzen, and even in teisho, to coerce women into giving him sex. He implied that resisting his advances was resisting the cosmic activity itself. He also implied surrendering to his requests for sex may lead to the experience of absolute cosmic unity. He punished some women who would not capitulate to his demands by giving them little or no attention. He coerced women by saying, "This is the only way I can teach you," "You should overcome your ego," "If you don't have sex with me, you are not manifesting *one true nature*," "You say 'my body,' but that is the thought of your incomplete self," "You are the only one I ever touch," "You have the best energy."

Joshu Roshi's Zen, in my experience, both affirmed the individual, imperfect self, and the manifestation of no-self, both. However, regarding this issue of his own sexual activity, he almost always demanded negation of the self, no boundaries between himself and his female students, and dismissed the other person's individuality. This also carried over into his demands of male students to not think about or talk about his having sexual relations with his students.

The argument that his teishos were sometimes sexual coercion is harder to make, but I feel it is true. He went through a phase when he repeated often that following one's instinctual impulses is the same as following the Dharma activity. I don't think he really believed that deeply. He also would sometimes emphasize the idea that "resisting the unification of expansion and contraction was egotistical" so adamantly that I, knowing whom in the audience he was trying to persuade to allow his sexual advances, could no longer serve as his translator in good conscience.

Some senior students and Oshos, although they knew about his pattern of trying to initiate some sort of sex with his students and especially his Injis, encouraged new students to become his Inji, telling them it was special, an honor and a great opportunity. Then when the new Inji complained about his sexual demands sometimes they were told they should give themselves to him completely.

At this point I don't claim to have anywhere near a perfect picture of the facts. However, I have heard the experiences of forty two women, either from them directly or their

husbands or boyfriends:

- Twenty-three of those are no longer practicing with Joshu Roshi and had negative experiences, and many of those have shared their bad experiences with other Buddhist sanghas.
- There was one report to a crisis hotline, one police report, and once I witnessed a woman confronting Joshu Roshi in front of his wife, saying “Try touching me now when your wife is here!”
- Fourteen of the forty-two would probably say they are still Roshi’s students, nine of them obviously are.

Of those, two told me their sexual encounters with Roshi were fantastically helpful, healing some sexual problems.

Five others say only positive, though not so effusively glorious things.

Six other women still practicing with Roshi (or at least saying they are his student) express more of an “I’ve put up with a lot” attitude.

Five others had very short, one time encounters, all of whom said they rebuffed Roshi’s advances with a slap, a laugh, or by changing the subject.

- Eleven out of the forty-two told me in detail how Roshi repeatedly grabbed at them despite their saying “No,” sometimes dozens of times in one day, over many months, and sometimes many years. Two of those told me they were pushed to the ground.
- I have also had extensive conversations with two Japanese monks who, for their own reasons had researched Joshu’s history in Japan. They told me Joshu Roshi has biological children in Japan who were not openly acknowledged as his when they were children. I have since met one of them, and I read an email from another. The monk told me that in Japan his sexual activity was a big concern within Myoshin-ji.

This is an extremely unscientific “survey,” for which all of the information was randomly and freely given, and 90 percent of the information was obtained after 1997. It is very clear that nobody really knows anything close to everything, and the people who know the most aren’t talking in public. It is hard to say exactly what happened because there has not, as of yet, been an open, honest, caring and respectful investigation into what has happened over these 50 years of Joshu Roshi teaching in North America. Any attempt to extrapolate from my description and guess at the full extent of the activity must factor in many things. It is very common for women to remain silent about these difficult experiences, even with their close friends. Almost all of my information comes from Roshi’s later years, when his activity had decreased significantly. It makes it very

difficult to guess, if not impossible.

Each individual story is important for the people involved, and some stories are very complicated. A woman can honestly say she experienced great learning from having sex with him. Some can honestly say they experienced Joshu Roshi as an eccentric but charming old man who flirted a lot. Everyone's experience is true for them. This doesn't mean that everyone who had an experience with Joshu Roshi has a clear view of the bigger picture.

It took me a long time to become conscious of these things. Although I had one or two experiences in my early years of practice that, if I had been more able to hear, could have brought Joshu Roshi's sexual patterns into the light clearly, I was firmly in denial for a long time, and I never talked about it. When I think back on my experience standing on the Mount Baldy main path in the early 80s, when I was shoji, listening to a woman ask for advice about Joshu Roshi fondling her in sanzen - it is like my mind was a vacuum. I don't remember saying one word in response. I had at least one other experience like that. It was not until years later, in the summer of 1997, as some women I knew well started telling me about it when I started to *hear* it.

That is when I first suggested to Joshu Roshi that he have a monitor present in sanzen and no longer have female Injis. He was furious. He slammed his teacup on the table so hard the cup broke, and later called for his Inji to come check his blood pressure. That fall a small group of residents of Mount Baldy, none of us Oshos at the time, got together and talked, and wrote a letter to Joshu Roshi about his sexual conduct. I think there were about 12 of us who worked on the letter. In the final version my ideas of sanzen monitors and no female Injis were taken out, because the majority felt we should take a more respectful, less demanding stance. My intent then was to have Joshu Roshi and the community face the problem, so we could all keep practicing together in a healthier way. I did not have the intent of closing down Rinzaï-ji, or forcing Joshu Roshi to stop teaching. I thought it possible for him and us to face his problem, *and* for him to keep teaching - with some modifications and outside help.

He was very angry upon getting even the much toned down letter, and presented his students with a simple choice, "Either I admit these things and then of course I would have to resign, or I can keep teaching you." The vast majority of students took that seriously and rallied around him to keep teaching. I still regret I could not persuade people to call his bluff.

After that, even though he still had private sanzen time and female Injis, things *did* change at Mount Baldy. Some monks were much more open with women students about Joshu Roshi having a tendency to act sexually towards his students. For a time they no longer tried to claim it was teaching, or deny it, but instead counseled people on how to deal with it. Monks would take women aside, even before they had ever met Joshu Roshi in sanzen, and explain he had some sort of sexual touching problem. "We

couldn't stop it, but here's what you can do if it happens. Firmly saying "No" right off the bat has worked for many women..." Things like that. This seemed absurd, but on the other hand it was probably helpful to some extent.

I still tried further to convince him to change his behavior. I had several long conversations with him about it. I think it is accurate to say I spent more than five hours, over quite a few meetings, pleading and arguing with him to get help with his sex problem, as I called it. I wanted very badly to figure out some way to stay. I loved Joshu Roshi as a teacher, and had studied Japanese hoping to someday translate for him. I had always been happy about my choices to become a monk, translator, and part of this community. Then it was as though the feeling I was part of something beautiful was crumbling. When I tried to talk with him about my concerns he seemed truly unreasonable. This man I considered not just sane, but a wise elder, began presenting me with something that seemed somewhere close to insane, and now felt I could not continue in good conscience.

During our conversations he said all sorts of things. "I am like a doctor. You wouldn't be angry if I touched your wife's breasts or vagina if I were a doctor examining her." "Ok, maybe I have a sickness, but I will be the leader of all those with the same sickness!" "My hand just moves. It's will-less (ishinashini)." He tried to explain the origin of his sexual patterns: "When I was young I didn't know anything about sex, and I was a virgin for a long time. Everyone respected me then. The first woman I was with had to show me how to do everything. I didn't even know women had a good feeling when their breasts were touched. It was seeing the American soldiers walking with Japanese women after the end of World War II that piqued my curiosity. I wanted that too! Then, after I started, I couldn't stop. I wanted more and more."

I feel my experience during this period, when Joshu Roshi and I were often vehemently disagreeing, is evidence that unquestioning obedience to and reverence towards a spiritual teacher are not requisites for a productive relationship with that teacher. In fact it may be harmful to the student and the teacher's development. Outside of sanzen and my translating for him we were often fighting. I think it is accurate to say we both strived to improve our work in sanzen and during teisho, and the content of both did not suffer.

Finally, a few days after I had talked with him for many hours in a hotel room in Austria, he said, "Your idea is right. Thank you for showing me my way is sometimes not good. Thank you for getting angry." We came to agree his sexual behavior is a "bad habit," (kuse in Japanese), and he said he would stop. He also talked about bad habits in teisho, and about how we sometimes hurt people because of them, without admitting in detail what he was referring to. He publicly chanted the sange (repentance) chants several times during teisho, although he didn't specify in public why he was doing sange. I was content to stay and continue translating for him. There was a feeling in part of the community that we who confronted him had succeeded in changing his behavior. A few people thanked me. People said his behavior changed in sanzen, and privately he convinced me he had changed. Even now I still believe he made an effort at that time to change his behavior.

Ten years later, in 2007, more women came forward and said Joshu Roshi had been sexually pressuring them during the period I thought this behavior had ended. I was told by his Injis that Joshu Roshi had never stopped, only slowed down. I was told, “He played you. He tricked you.” (When I heard the new accounts I realized I actually suspected Joshu Roshi had never completely stopped. There had been evidence, for instance, women re-adjusting their robes while leaving the sanzen room. I simply didn’t allow the evidence to come to full consciousness.) The trust I had felt was damaged. I tried to defend my position to my friends and family. I told them I believed he was a very good Zen teacher, but I did not think he was trustworthy about anything to do with his own personal behavior in the realm of sex. It was a hard sell.

In 2007 Gentei Osho initiated a discussion about this issue. Eshin Osho also wrote a very strong letter to Roshi about it. This culminated in a meeting of the Osho Council of Rinzaï-ji in December. I felt I had been very naive in the first 1997 attempt; specifically only working with a small group of students and directly with him. In 2007 we tried to involve the community of Oshos, and even, albeit informally, the board of directors. Instead of being more successful there was a lot more anger expressed towards Gentei and me. People were told not to speak openly because of fear of legal repercussions. Three women wrote very balanced eloquent letters about their confusion caused by Joshu Roshi’s sexual pressuring, and these were supposed to be discussed by the Osho Council. The letters, however, never got an official response from the Oshos. There was no movement towards openly acknowledging the pattern of behavior. At that time I still felt Joshu Roshi should continue to teach and not resign. I felt he should change his behavior, with professional help, and, as was my suggestion in 1997, have no female Injis, and a monitor in sanzen. However, in a nearly identical way as happened then, Joshu Roshi gave the same choice, either I will resign or I will go forward unconstrained.

After the meeting Joshu Roshi began calling people who wanted to discuss his sexual activity his “enemies (taiteki in Japanese). It seemed he was helping to form a party line; to criticize Joshu Roshi is blasphemy. To say he has a serious sexual problem means you don’t understand his teaching. If you are working to have Joshu Roshi face his problem and change then you don’t love him and should leave. The sentiment I remember hearing the most from other Oshos was some version of, “We must weigh the good of Joshu Roshi’s teaching against the bad. The good is incredibly good. He is probably the most enlightened person alive in this world. There is no way to stop the bad, only contain it. He will never change. The good, however, far outweighs the bad. If we try to guide Joshu Roshi towards changing his behavior he will resign and stop teaching, and all the good will be lost.”

I gave up trying to sway the community of Oshos. I am open to criticism about how I tried. I know I simply angered many people, which didn’t help. In the end I ran out of creative ways to be pushy. I then, in protest, stopped all participation with Rinzaï-ji.

Over all of my years in Rinai-ji many people who I admired and who inspired me left the Rinzai-ji sangha. In certain instances I didn't learn until years later it was because of Joshu Roshi's sexual conduct. The choice I was, both implicitly and explicitly, forced to make, between silence and leaving the community, wore on me. I was also treated harshly by Joshu Roshi and his inner circle. Myoshin-ji style Rinzai Zen training, the tradition Joshu Roshi continues, *IS* often harsh. I was accustomed to that. In this instance I had to try to discern if the harshness was coming from compassion, or, as my common sense told me, fear and greed.

When I "came out" and raised my concerns about Joshu Roshi's sexual conduct some Oshos told me I had no Zen understanding and should be beaten with sticks; I was an arrogant blind fool; I had "kindergarten understanding" and obviously had never passed even one koan. Joshu Roshi told me I would never get enlightened if I thought about these things. I was told by one Osho and one senior student I would be blamed for Joshu Roshi's death if I tried to make him change his behavior, and that I would be responsible for ruining his legacy. "You are killing him!" was shouted at me more than once. Another Osho told me that Joshu Roshi had demanded I do a special repentance ceremony if I ever wanted to practice with Joshu Roshi again. When I asked the Osho if he had argued my case to Joshu Roshi, or even asked for an explanation he said he hadn't. I was banned from coming on the property of one Zen Center, and banned from teaching at another. Joshu Roshi began calling me "attached to honesty," and "bakashoujiki" (meaning "stupidly honest") to others and to me.

This same sort of thing happened to other people, too. In many private meetings, Joshu Roshi began calling another Osho who had attempted to discuss the situation "crazy." At the 2007 Osho meeting women who wrote letters about Joshu Roshi's sexual activity were discredited as "seeking attention" or not realizing he was trying to teach them. Women who complained or asked for guidance were told things like, "Maybe you're not ready for this practice," "Joshu Roshi's sexual touching is teaching," "Why not let the old man touch your breasts? What does it matter?"

With some female students Joshu Roshi was more determined, aggressive, and angry. Those women were belittled by other women who had had an easier time keeping him at bay, "How can you not just repel him? He's so old!" Another woman who complained was discredited. An Osho said, "She's crazy. She takes antidepressants."

It is important to point out the obvious, again. There is an amazingly wide range of behavior among Joshu Roshi's Oshos and students. Some people who have been around a long time really didn't know that much about Joshu Roshi's sexual activity. Some people knew a lot and were instrumental in silencing people and working to retain the status quo. Some people knew a lot, but were very distant from Bodhi Manda and Mount Baldy, the two major centers. The extremely decentralized "system" of Rinzai-ji made it possible for some people, most of the time, to not have to think about, or even

know about, Joshu Roshi's sexual patterns. That much of the time we spend together is at silent retreats also contributes to the lack of knowledge. Each of us must decide how to take responsibility for our past actions. Each of us must decide how to make reparations. Each of us must try to understand why we acted the way we did.

And, further, I also would like to emphasize how difficult this is. We who know about Joshu Roshi's sexual behavior and are longtime students, and almost always came to know about the sexual behavior slowly and circuitously, have a lot to digest. We all have found a wonderful teacher. Some of us feel Joshu Roshi had saved us from suicide, or some other very bad situation. Some of us feel Joshu Roshi's Zen is utterly unique. Rinzai-ji is our spiritual home. Anything that feels like an attack on that is naturally resisted with an instinctual fighting spirit. It's hard to give that up. It's hard to be put in the position, (even if that position is only known or felt on a subconscious level, and even if that position isn't really true), of either having to harm one's friend or lose one's teacher and spiritual family.

In 1997 I finally felt no longer in denial. In 2007 I felt that way again. And, again now. Each time I have felt sharply remorseful for my previous lack of clear understanding, paucity of love, and weakness of action. Now I feel that for Rinzai-ji to ever be a healthy organization it must clearly and publicly acknowledge that in significant ways essentially excellent Zen teaching and practice has been mixed with a culture of great dependency on one person. This dependency, and double standard, is in many ways antithetical to Zen teaching.

What can we do as members of this community, and the larger Zen community, to move forward and learn? I like Professor Batchelor's description of "stream entering" being an important milestone (<http://sweepingzen.com/buddhism-and-sex-the-bigger-picture/>). I believe if both teachers and students realize that after some point, once you have the experience of samadhi and insight to a certain rudimentary degree (and exactly what that is, that is an interesting question), your practice is very much up to yourself.

Zen teachers often say a student should not be "attached to his own thinking." This is good teaching. To experience merging into the great natural activity (the dharma activity in Joshu-ese) we need to replace our own thinking with the sound of the wind, the floating cloud, the flower opening, the sun blaring, the moon slowly rising, our own heart beats, our breathing. Further, the strong demand in Joshu Roshi's Zen to do that completely and enter the Samadhi of no conflict, and further, to never be satisfied with the depth of our practice is commendable. There is a great humility in his sangha in some ways, at least as we face ourselves.

However, we do not need to replace our thinking with someone else's thinking. We do not need to replace our past identity with a new identity as an obedient, good student to a Master.

And, also, even as we know our thinking is incomplete, we must keep listening to our own voices. Our own is the only voice we have. Even when, for example, we judge a teacher to be good or choose a practice to do, we are listening to our own voice. Zen practice that over-emphasizes a sort of hostility towards our own thinking is fertile soil for “denial.” Perhaps we Zen teachers need to find a way to underscore the wonderful preciousness of our own thoughts, even as we teach how to transcend them. If we watch carefully how we know our own thoughts, and unify with them, that unification is no different from our unification with the sound of the wind, the smell of the incense.

Teachers with amazing spiritual gifts can also have serious psychological issues. We must, I believe, simply hold everyone to the same standards of not harming others, being honest, facing our problems, and so forth. The notion that a student should not question her teacher for fear of cutting off the spiritual connection between them is false.

I still feel somewhat “in the bubble” as my monk friend refers to being enmeshed with Rinzai-ji. Darn it! I *do* think Joshu Roshi manifests a wonderfully unique Zen, when he’s on his game. I do not want to rid myself of the simultaneous breathing, four phases, expansion and contraction, absolute large and small, up before 3am and yaza in the snow with the coyotes, manifestation of Zero - style Zen training I was raised on. On the other hand, the behavior of the inner circle of Rinzai-ji, including Joshu Roshi himself, where a culture of double standards and dependency was formed, partly around a pattern of sexual behavior people thought could not change, must, I believe, be called, (as Joshu Roshi liked to say), *ge ge no ge*. Lower than the lowest of the low.

The thing that I hope will be considered carefully is how it is possible for those two things to come to exist with each other.