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Joshu Sasaki

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I was a monk at Mt. Baldy. I did my first training period there in 1974-5 and ordained as a monk in April of 1977. I resigned in January 1982. The circumstances of my resigning are directly related to the larger issue of Sasaki's sexual improprieties. I am writing to you because I wish to speak up for both myself and for a woman who has since died.

When I first started hearing rumors of his behavior with women in sanzen I discounted them. In my naiveté, I thought it impossible that he could do such things and I thought that either people were making it up or he must be testing women in some way I could not quite discern or that they must be throwing themselves at him out of a misguided desire to be special – or something like that.

It wasn't until his Inji, who was engaged to be married, came bursting into my room at Bodhi Mandala in New Mexico after lunch one day during an autumn sesshin, sobbing and saying, "He won't leave me alone", that it finally dawned on me that this was real. Until then I truly did not believe any of the rumors because of my own conditioned ignorance. The Inji was a close personal friend of mine and I cannot describe how disturbing this was for me. I was the jikijitsu at this sesshin, but I was so stunned that I walked out the door and up onto the mesa still wearing my robes and zoris. I sat up there all day trying to resolve this conundrum: the teacher that I believed in and trusted and committed myself to was, through his own unrestrained desires, causing others to suffer. Could I continue to trust him? Could I believe in him? Could I remain a monk? What did it mean if I left him? I returned that evening in a confused state that took months to resolve. I said nothing to Roshi and he did not make mention of my absence. I believe that that was the last time this particular Inji did sesshin with Sasaki. She has since passed away.

Because of my own personal history and, I think it would be honest to say, my cowardice, I never told Roshi how upset I was and why I was so upset. Still, as much as I was committed to practice, I could not remain with Roshi because to do so would mean that I saw nothing wrong with his behavior, that it was acceptable to cause suffering, that the dharma could be set aside in particular situations by particular people. I knew that I did not believe any of these things and after several months of anguish I resigned. Even then I did not tell Roshi why I was leaving - only that I could "no longer fulfill my responsibilities as a monk."

Resigning as a monk was devastating for me. I felt I was a failure because I had "failed" in my attempt to make the best use that I could make of my life – to get clear and to help others do so as well. It took almost 14 years before I again began to practice seriously. I did practice off and on, visiting other teachers and Zendo's. Even when I began to sit regularly at the NY Zen Center with Myotai Sensei I did not go for interview for the first two years. I was terrified of committing myself only to be betrayed, and of again "failing" to make the best use of my life. Fortunately, I was able to find that I could trust the teachers in the Mountain and Rivers Order. Still, it took me a long while before I could again fully commit myself. I did eventually take Jukai with Daido Roshi in 2007. Twenty-five years after leaving Mt. Baldy.

I greatly regret my silence and my failure to confront my teacher. If I had spoken up perhaps it would not have taken this long for all this to come out and much suffering could have been avoided. For that I am truly sorry.

Stephen Sanjo Wilder