

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 long-standing 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 Rinzai-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 Rinzai-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). Twelve 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-five 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 Rinzai-ji events, and severing an affiliated center's connection to Rinzai-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 Rinzai-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 Rinzai-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 Rinzai-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 Rinzai-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 Rinzai-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 Rinzai-ji community as an opportunity to follow up and address the concerns raised by this report. In our experience thus far, Rinzai-ji representatives have been very cooperative and interested in our findings and have expressed appreciation for our efforts, understanding that a group independent of Rinzai-ji offered additional opportunities for affected community members to dialogue about this matter.