

Zen abuse: My own painful response

By Leslie Linthicum / Of the Journal on Sun, Feb 10, 2013

Last Sunday on this front page, my colleague Mike Gallagher told the story of a Japanese Zen master, now 105, whose sexual conduct with female students spanned decades.

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UpFront

From the outside, the groping and forced sexual acts look inappropriate, scandalous, indefensible.

Today, I'd like to give you a look from the inside.

My husband was a student of Joshu Sasaki Roshi for more than 20 years after picking up a book about mindfulness meditation during a particularly rough spot in his life and then finding a spiritual home at the Albuquerque Zen Center, one of the Sasaki Roshi's outposts in New Mexico.

Zen Buddhism was a lifesaver for him, and he found his one-on-one koan practice with the roshi during retreats to be powerful. Five years ago, he took his vows and became a monk. A few months after that, he started to hear rumors that the roshi had groped female students. Later, he heard firsthand accounts from several women.

In September, he was asked to take over the Albuquerque Zen Center as the resident administrator. In November, our moving plans under way, the depth of the sex scandal was revealed on the Internet – a detailed accounting of a pattern of abuse that involved many more women than we knew and more than groping. No one in the organization disputed the allegations, and still the roshi did not apologize or step down.

In December, we canceled the move, unpacked our boxes, and my husband resigned after 23 years with the organization. He is now a monk seeking a new spiritual home, and we are a family searching for answers to questions that seem surreal.

Why did he stay when he knew about a few women and groping but leave when the picture grew to include more than 100 women and more harmful abuse?

How could an organization built around a teacher turn a blind eye to the harm that teacher was doing to women?

How could serious practitioners of Buddhism, which teaches compassion and clarity above all, act so callously and be so blind?

What on earth were we thinking?

In our household these days, there is much debate, anguish, self-reflection, sadness and shame.

I'm a bit of an outsider to the Zen world. Meditation is not my practice, but I've seen it up close and understand quite personally its power to transform. When I learned about the roshi's uninvited touching years ago, my reaction was disgust and an end to my financial donations. But when I talked about Zen practice and Sasaki Roshi to family and friends, I didn't tell the full story. Somehow, I thought that was a suitable response.

I never would have imagined I would be associated with one of the newspaper's big front-page investigations. This one, like many, started with an anonymous tip. And when I read the story last Sunday and saw the scandal spelled out in nauseating detail, the inadequacy of my own response over the past few years became painfully evident. When the clouds part, it's easier to see your shortcomings.

I've wondered recently what it must have been like to be among the first families in the Catholic Church to stand up and report abuse at the hand of a priest. Terrifying and lonely, no doubt. And I've wondered about those who resisted the truth of the scandal in the Catholic Church even as its enormity became clear. Mustn't that have been lonelier still?

In this Buddhist clergy abuse scandal, the victims weren't children, they were adults, and that allows for layers of nuance that doesn't exist with child abuse.

Many of the roshi's female students reported no inappropriate conduct, only good Zen practice. Some of the women who were grabbed told him no and he stopped. Some of those who were molested left and never came back. Others understood it was inappropriate but still believed the roshi to be a great Zen master and continued to practice with him. Others say the roshi reaching into their robes and touching them sexually or asking them to touch him was exactly what he told them it would be – a path to deeper teaching.

A hundred people; a hundred truths. But also one truth: When we cause another pain, we say we're sorry and we don't do it again. Why was this so hard for a community of Buddhists to understand? Why didn't they demand that of their teacher?

For many people in Albuquerque, I suspect geography helped to cloud the thinking. Sasaki is a larger-than-life character who lives in Los Angeles. Although the Albuquerque Zen Center is under his spiritual direction, he has little to do with the day-to-day activities there. It was easy to ask what any of this had to do with us.

More questions for the face in the mirror:

If we ignore the harm done by others (so convenient), are we also practicing harm?

If we've hidden some of the truth, isn't that the same as lying?

If we put the teacher before all else, have we really learned anything? If the teacher allows that, does he have any business calling himself a teacher?

What stories do we tell to let ourselves off the hook?

If you're wondering why I've chosen to spill out my disquiet to you on your peaceful Sunday, well, I wonder too. I suppose it's because writers try to make sense of things by writing. And because 50 years of secrets are what is tearing this organization apart. I think it's time to stop keeping them.

UpFront is a daily front-page news and opinion column. Comment directly to Leslie at 823-3914 or llinthicum@abqjournal.com. Go to www.abqjournal.com/letters/new to submit a letter to the editor.

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Suggested Reading:

- [Zen 'Master' Molested Students in N.M.](#)
- [The Painful Truth About 'Culture'](#)
- [Column on Guns Triggered Broad Response](#)
- [3 Arrested in BernCo Child Abuse Case](#)
- [Talk to Your Kids About Sex Abuse](#)

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