



RELIGION

105-year-old Zen Master Also an Alleged Serial Sexual Harasser

 **Katie J.M. Baker**

Buddhist teacher Joshu Sasaki is a legend: the 105-year-old has worked with thousands of people (including Leonard Cohen) at his two Los Angeles Zen centers and one in New Mexico, spreading his teachings through his chain of about 30 affiliated Zen centers around the world.

But according to a recent investigation by an independent council of Buddhist leaders — and many of his former disciples who've tried to speak out for decades but were shushed up — he's also used his stature as a famous roshi (master) to get away with groping and sexually harassing countless female students.

Here are just a few examples from this *New York Times* piece:

In the council's report on Jan. 11, the three members wrote of "Sasaki asking women to show him their breasts, as part of 'answering' a koan" - a Zen riddle - "or to demonstrate 'non-attachment.'

[One former student] said Mr. Sasaki would fondle her breasts during sanzen, or private meeting; he also asked her to massage his penis. She would wonder, she said, "Was this teaching?"

Susanna Stewart began studying with Mr. Sasaki about 40 years ago. Within six months, she said, Mr. Sasaki began to touch her during sanzen. This sexualizing of their relationship "led to years of confusion and pain," Ms. Stewart said, "eventually resulting in my becoming unable to practice Zen." And when she married one of his priests, Mr. Sasaki tried to break them up, she said, even encouraging her husband to have an affair.

We're finally hearing about all of this now because Eshu Martin, a Zen priest who studied under Mr. Sasaki from 1997 to 2008, decided to bypass the "Zen culture of secrecy, patriarchy and sexism" and post an expose on SweepingZen.com.

But until then, Sasaki's supporters had either covered up or dismissed complaints for years. One monk once told a woman who complained that "He believed in Roshi's style, that sexualizing was teaching for particular women"; his theory (which is apparently a common one) is that "such physicality could check a woman's overly strong ego." Another woman said Sasaki told her that "True love is giving yourself to everything."

Sexual harassment in the Zen community is complicated by the relationship between Buddhist teachers and students, which often transcends (or at least can't always be judged) by Western standards of appropriate behavior, making the boundaries harder to suss out. "Outside the sexual things that happened," one woman said, "my relationship with him was one of the most important I have had with anyone."

That may very well be true, but the excuses this famed luminary allegedly used to coerce women into touching him and being touched ("True love is giving yourself to everything"? PLEASE. I think I heard that one back in middle school.) are deplorable.

[NYT]