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Joshu Sasaki and the Challenge of Sex Scandals in the Zen Community

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By now, most everyone in the Zen Buddhist world has heard the news that Joshu Sasaki purportedly misused his position as a Zen teacher for his own sexual gratifications with many of his female Zen students. It's not been the best of times for the Zen world, I'm afraid.

According to a [report by an independent council of Zen teachers](#) assembled to hear the stories of those affected, these sexual encounters were often initiated "in the formal setting, privacy, and 'face-to-face' encounters of the sanzen room." Sanzen is a ritualized private meeting between a Zen student and Zen teacher. Their report also stated that there were reports of coercion and that Sasaki would at times frame the sexual contact as being a form of Zen teaching, or otherwise beneficial to the student. The council did a terrific job, considering morale and support for such an endeavor sure seemed to be at a low in the Zen community at large. It felt as though we'd arrived at some snapping point for readers who were sick of the coverage. The council, in my opinion, really deserves the thanks of the community. They collectively put in a lot of hours to offer us their report.

I am the editor at the website *Sweeping Zen*, where this story was first written about (see: *Everybody Knows*) by one of Sasaki's former students, [Eshu Martin](#) of the [Victoria Zen Centre](#). Eshu's initial piece was an icebreaker of sorts, a shot across the bow that quickly grabbed the attention of many. Martin alleged a history of abuse and cover-ups involving his former teacher that stemmed his entire career. He received considerable backlash for his piece, accused of being nonspecific in his accusations. And, while it was partially true, readers did not know that at the time there was more information at his disposal which would and could be used if necessary. It was not released instantly because much of it needed to be said by Giko David Rubin, a priest ordained by Joshu Sasaki and his translator of many years (see: *Some Reflections on Rinzai-ji*). When Giko's reflections on his experiences at Rinza-ji and of Sasaki were first published, the mood was rather somber. It remains one of the most detailed and painful articles I've ever had to publish in my work at the website.

With Giko, attitudes were changed. This was information that came from someone that Rinza-ji insiders and supporters knew well and could trust. Because Eshu was a former student heading up a Zen center that had broken away from Rinza-ji years earlier, many suspected he was seeking revenge upon his former teacher and sangha. Whatever you may think of Eshu Martin's role in all of this, and I believe his intentions were noble, one must acknowledge that it was he who got the ball rolling on uncovering all of this, at long last.

Sweeping Zen, for its part, was also not very well-loved in the thick of all of this, either. Some readers felt we lacked sensitivity in addressing the topic, while others found it to be run-of-the-mill tabloid journalism. It's always a challenge to open yourself up to disapproval, though you know going in that it'll be given, no less! At a certain point, for those who are close to this work, you either shut down, ignore it all and do your work, or sort of dance somewhere between those two extremes. In my case, as the editor of the publication, I did quite a bit of dancing between the two. It was a very challenging time for me personally and it's not a place I want to be returning to any day soon. I do know that nothing which those of us involved in shedding light on the story were going through were in any way on par with what some of these women endured and experienced, though it does say something about the toxic nature of what's involved here in stories like this.

[Kobutsu Malone](#) is the person behind the Sasaki Archive, which helps document this entire debacle. Over the years Kobutsu has also worked on bringing Zen practice to America's prison system. The documentation work he is involved in has proven to be an invaluable resource for the media when they need to research stories like this involving Joshu Sasaki. I asked Kobutsu why he decided to take on the Sasaki Archive as a project.

"I took on the archive because it was needed to agglomerate all of the news material in one place similar to the [shimanoarchive.com](#)," said Malone. "I knew that it would become an invaluable reference source in short order. While other sites encouraged dialog, I did not. The [sasakiarchive.com](#) stands alone as the concise go-to source of materials in the case."

The internet has really been a game changer when it comes to shedding light on abuses of power in the Buddhist community. What used to be found in dusty chapters of a book can now be explored more easily and more in-depth on the web, allowing readers to better understand the scale of the events in question. Its work like that done by Kobutsu that helped, in part, put the New York Times and LA Times on the scent of this story more recently. And, really, that's why we're writing about it still, in many respects. When news organizations like the New York Times run a piece, you tend to stand up and take notice.

I know that many Zen practitioners would like to see this coverage go away. To many, it's time to move on. I get why they want that. This whole thing appears to reflect undesirably on the Zen tradition, and many have criticized the mainstream press for having stereotyped the entirety of our Zen institutions. There's some truth to that. With that said, this isn't exactly a story that lends itself well to backslapping. And, moving on? I thought that's how we got here.