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Subject: My experience with Joshu Sasaki Roshi
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To: sasaki.archive@gmail.com

To Zen students concerned about the inappropriate sexual behavior of Joshu Sasaki Roshi,

From the mid sixties--(don't remember the exact date) until early summer of 1973, I studied Zen with Joshu Sasaki Roshi. This year a friend told me about the Sasaki Archives. I looked into it and was shocked and dismayed to learn that the Roshi continued to behave inappropriately for so many years and into his advanced old age.

I decided that I would add my experience. In retrospect, I am not happy with my own secret involvement with the Roshi, so this is a little difficult.

When I first went to the Roshi's house in Gardena, he made advances which I at first pulled away from, but he persisted and I gave in. He impressed on me that this had to be kept secret. I imagined in a naive, deluded way, that there was a deep spiritual connection between us and that I was "the only one". I eventually began to suspect that this may not be the case, but the affair went on with secret meetings until the move to Cimarron Zen Center, now known as Rinzei-ji Zen Center. Then he suddenly announced to me that the relationship was "no more". Gisela (later Gesshin) who showed up in 1967, was to be his Inji (and I understood, his lover). I was devastated, but then imagined that I was to learn the lesson of detachment, which is why I stayed on. In not too long a time, the Roshi's secret dalliances continued with me, behind Gisela's back. I eventually moved into Cimarron and for a few years this situation continued. I became pregnant at a certain point and offered to move out and support the baby on welfare, but ofcourse he wouldn't hear of that. "I cannot educate!" he said. He was going to get Dan Sunada, one of the Roshi's greatest supporters and a member of the original Rinzei-ji board of directors, to finance a trip to Japan for the abortion as at that time it was illegal. I had a family friend in L.A. who found a doctor. The Roshi paid for that and he must have been greatly relieved. I never told anyone at the time, including my friend, who the would be father was. Believing that the Roshi was a great teacher, I kept holding on to my secrets to protect him. I was aware by this time of his approaches to many women students in Sanzen. After the abortion the sneaked intimate relations eventually stopped. He worried about getting old and becoming impotent. He had always annoyed me by trying to pair me off with one person after another but now this effort was in earnest, as if to get me off his conscience. He even offered to see that I was "taken care of" as I grew old if I didn't get married.

My sister wanted me to spend the summer of 1973 with her, and friends at Cimarron were driving East, so I finally escaped. but not entirely. In the summer of 1974 I spent a month or so at PahTempe Hot Springs in Hurricane, Utah as a caretaker to see if it would be viable as a purchase for Rinzeiji. So for a few years, I still thought of the Roshi as being a great Zen teacher, and he may be, but I never wanted to study Zen again. For several years there was a Zen center two blocks from where I live now, and I couldn't get myself to go. I turned to Tibetan Buddhism and have stayed with that since 1979.

As I look back on my experience with the Roshi, I feel, in many ways that it was a mixed situation in that while I learned something positive from experiencing Zen, the personal situation with the Roshi was damaging. Keeping it secret was damaging. But I was a willing actor in the whole thing. Maybe that is what horrifies me now.

Donna Swensen
(at that time, Donna Johnson)