

Reflections on Joshu Sasaki Roshi and the Rinzai –Ji organization

I was a student of the Roshi's during two dai rohatsu sesshins during two winters, in the early-mid 1990's. I lived at the Bodhi Manda Zen center for approximately 2 months in each of those two years and did 5 intensive sesshins with sanzen with the roshi. This is a small amount of time compared to the many monks, oshos, nuns and other students the Roshi has had. I think it is interesting that so few people have come out with testimony and none since 8/2013, reported here. The major players in the organization have only issued a blank statement that their practice was not deep enough to speak up sooner and that they will not stifle anyone from revealing their feelings on the matter. Given the Roshi's age and health it sounds like it was time for him to step down regardless of whether or not this scandal was made public, so for the most part, many members of the Rinzai Ji organization waited until the last possible moment to confront this story. What perplexes me is why we don't hear from them, even if its mixed emotions like Giko had or people coming to the Roshi's defense or people kicking him while he's down.

My only speculation is that the higher ups in the organization are worried that legally they might be liable if they admit to knowing about this sort of thing all along and not doing anything about it. Zen centers are filled with young people, because young people are the ones most likely to be willing to take the huge risk it takes to come and meditate basically full time for self-reflection, and to find answers to the questions they have about the meaning of their existence. There were a huge number of young women put in harm's way by those in charge at the Mt Baldy and Bodhi Manda Zen center, that didn't receive any warning. Later on, the conscience of some of the oshos and others dictated that they warn the most beautiful of the women who they thought would be targeted. There is the case of the letter written to the Roshi in the early 1990's but this information was not made public to students attending the centers and was only revealed publicly recently. I think the main reason these people are silent is that they don't want to open themselves up to ridicule or criticism or even legal issues. I don't think this is a very good reason. The same people who could keep a secret for up to 40 years are keeping it a while longer. No charges were filed in California and the charges filed in New Mexico were dismissed. If the Roshi has escaped all legal ramifications, then surely, so have the oshos, and others in charge. The reason I am so perplexed, is that I had a much shorter period of involvement with the Roshi and Rinzai Ji, and I feel like I need to make sense of what happened in a public forum. Giko Rubin was torn up to the point that he researched the issue thoroughly and made public a huge amount of information, but there are members within the organization with much longer and more intimate relationships with the Roshi, that we haven't heard from.

Someone has wondered if this scandal spells trouble for Zen in America. I think it does. With this scandal, and the one with Eido Shimano Roshi in NY, I think it throws into question everything about the precepts of Zen organizations. I used to look at the black robes and white hoops as a dignified choice that people made to try their hardest to understand the nature of their experience and their existence. Now I see people hanging on to dead and stale traditions and ignoring the fact that the Zen religion as it is practiced has too many opportunities to turn a blind eye to what is really going on.

When I was in the Rinzai-Ji organization, one nun told me that the roshi sometimes touches the women. In my sanzen, the most I would do was shake his hand. It was sort of a pantomime of a formal introduction to make me aware that I was meeting another conscious human being, which is a big responsibility (at least that's one of the things I got from it). This nun said sometimes when he feels up the women, it is as a teaching tool but sometimes he just wants to get off (almost a direct quote). This was disparaging news but I didn't know what to make of it. The male students had a different experience. We were in a battle with ourselves just to get through the sesshins as we were meditating 10-18 hours a day (as were the female students). I was concerned with understanding my experiences and being open to new experiences be they satori, awakening, psychic experiences, energetic experiences, humorous experiences, enlightening, even out of body experiences, or thoughts that perhaps there was something beyond or before experience. Chasing the moment before experience takes a lot of concentration (but I digress).

I suspect the more serious members of the organization did a quick cost benefit analysis in their head whether consciously or unconsciously, and it went something like this: I could give a crap about these women and jeopardize my chances at understanding and enlightenment and awakening or I could ignore it and focus on the only thing I can truly control, which is myself. In the defense of the males in the organization, the Roshi is around 5' 1" tall, and was in his 90's at the time so the idea that these women were being physically overwhelmed, did not seem possible. Of course, they probably weren't physically overwhelmed but the power dynamic was such that they were mentally overwhelmed and the Roshi must have known that and quite frankly took advantage of that.

The whole situation was ripe for abuse for so many reasons. 1) Sanzen (private meetings with the Roshi during intensive retreats or sesshins usually centered around manifesting the answer to a koan) is secret so very few people "told" on the Roshi about their experience, at least at first. We were told to not talk about what happens in the sanzen room presumably because it would jeopardize our chances and others' chances for an authentic, unfiltered experience in the sanzen room. I get this and I agree with the reasoning in general, but it did make the sanzen room an opportune place for abuse. 2) Since sanzen was secret for oneself, who is going to start talking about someone else's sanzen. That is doubly sacrilegious.

There is no doubt that the higher ups in the organization did everything to protect the Roshi from any criticism by giving him elevated status themselves and by furthering the myth of his elevated status. There are many testimonials of the Roshi being psychic or at least of being a great teacher and understanding everything that was presented to him in sanzen. This latter idea is the premise of sanzen, the Roshi is the final authority on whether you are ready for another koan or the final authority on the teaching method used to help you gain awareness. Sanzen works because we as students believed in the Roshi. We worked so hard in meditation or zazen because we wanted to show him our understanding. Also, part of what was appealing about the experience of sesshins was that the experience was so foreign to most of us. The rituals were exciting, the practice was exciting and despite it seeming on the surface to be incredibly rigid, the mental states

were exciting because there were basically no rules about where your mind could go. I think for many westerners, it was easier to attribute special elevated status to the Roshi because he was Japanese. He was/is a novelty. He is the very oldest in a short list of Roshis that basically brought Zen to America from Japan. He looks like a cross between Yoda and the Buddha, and I mean that in a complementary way. He carries a gnarled stick like Yoda would. It is not his fault that he looks the part of a venerated knowledgeable wise-person, but he definitely took advantage of this fact as well.

I think the students, monks, and oshos all put him on an elevated status and I can't speak to other Zen centers, but this was cultivated by the staff at Bodhi Manda. We weren't supposed to really make eye contact with him or approach him outside of sanzen, for example. People attributed basically supernatural wisdom to him, including myself. He would tell you something like "when you are in the hot springs: 'Awwwwwww'" and lean back and suggest complete relaxation. Then later that day I would be in the hot spring and lean back and relax and audibly go "Awwwwwww", then all of a sudden think the Roshi knew, but on the other hand who doesn't go "Awwwwwww" when going in the hot springs after meditating almost every waking hour. More to the point, is that there are all sorts of supernatural seeming, psychic and other connections that happen when living in a community of people who are not talking but meditating almost every waking hour. The weirdness is intoxicating. The fallacy was to attribute all of these or even a fraction of these weird experiences to the Roshi. In this way, he got more credit than he deserved for all of our hard work. Now, one could argue that he saw through our difficulties and because of his amazing level of experience, he did have some insight that others wouldn't have had when it came to mental states, zazen and teaching students how to become more aware. It seems clear that he did/does have the experience necessary to be a great teacher. What is so hard to understand is that he would take advantage of the fact that he understood how fragile people's mental states were, and use this knowledge to then basically take advantage of them.

Some people think that being a Zen Buddhist has the danger of turning someone to nihilism. This may be partly true in the sense that some awakening experiences might give someone such a big picture that one might believe the concepts of good and evil are just concepts and that they don't really exist, but even in the widest, most global consciousness and maybe more so, in the widest most global consciousness, one would instinctually not take advantage of another human or not hurt another human. Furthermore, as others have pointed out, doing no harm to other beings is a priority in Buddhism so even if one is not compelled to be kind and respectful, the "rules" might dictate it. The following questions come up: Did he know he was hurting people and just not care? Did he not see women as fully human beings worthy of respect? (growing up in Japan in the early part of the last century had some different cultural values than we have today, to say the least) Or did in many cases, he not know or not think he was hurting people? I think it's clear there were some psychological issues going on and that he had some remorse for his actions but not enough to stop doing it. If one of us left our home at age 14, to live a monastic life, as Roshi did, would we feel like we missed out on something? It is sort of a rhetorical question, since I think the answer is "yes". It is fruitless to give my own psychological analysis since I am not qualified and we don't have enough information, but it is easy to draw one's own conclusions.

The experience at the Zen center was tremendously meaningful and illuminating to me personally, even though I spent only a short time there. The quote at the top of the page, “I suffered the Roshi’s sexual abuse and it was the closest I ever got to god”, suggests deep denial or it suggests that what the Roshi did was an acceptable form of teaching methodology. I can’t shed any light on that for that one person quoted but for others it was not an acceptable teaching methodology, to say the least. The poem “Roshi you are a sexual abuser” by Chizuo Karen Joy Tasaka, in particular could sway anyone to see the events from the victim’s point of view.

I think it’s interesting that Giko David Rubin and an earlier translator were in particular, moved to contribute vital information in this puzzle of what happened. When you are in sesshin, the only spoken words you hear (beside chanting) is the Roshi’s teisho, but the only comprehensible words you hear are from the translator. This is a huge responsibility. They become the literal mouthpiece of the Roshi. (If you want to get histrionic about it, one could wonder if only hearing the spiritual leader’s words for an entire week is representative of a cult but that’s another matter). I think the translators felt the deep responsibility they had in this interaction between the Roshi and the students, and Giko seemed very intent on searching through his memory of the teishos he translated to see if there was ever a case of the Roshi trying to manipulate the students for sexual gain through teisho. He came to the conclusion, sadly, that there were instances of that. The other translator from earlier, perhaps the 1980’s, made it clear that he wanted all of the translations he had made of teishos (teachings or lectures) to be destroyed immediately because presumably he thought they were tainted. This is incredibly damning in my opinion. Someone who knew the Roshi well, and could literally understand him like almost no one else, would want the records of his translations, which are the records of the Roshi’s teachings, to be wiped out. The message I carried away from this is, whether or not these teachings are wise or interesting or useful is irrelevant given that the man who made them was uncaring and callous. I didn’t know the Roshi well enough to make that conclusion, but someone who did know him well, did come to that conclusion.

I wrote this piece because I have a heavy heart. The Roshi was a hero of mine; he was an ideal, and an inspiration, that is why the reality is harder to accept. To get his approval, felt like a rare and wonderful thing. I don’t know how much of this was due to his intrinsic power and how much of it was from the mythology that was built up in my own head. This mythology, I am ultimately responsible for, but it definitely was fertilized and aided by the people in the Rinzaï-Ji organization. I don’t think that all of the information about the Roshi, invalidates our experiences with him or our experiences at the Zen centers under his tutelage. It does, however, not only alter how I think about the Roshi, it also changes how I think about Zen and Buddhism, in general. Someone wondered somewhere, if the students are not above the teachers, not wiser than the teachers at least some of the time. This idea probably occurs to anyone that has had a profound experience at a Zen center but I got the feeling it was considered blasphemy by most in the organization. In the end, we can only hope that all the students, nuns, monks and oshos have some awareness that the Roshi did not.