

The MU News

All MU, All the Time

Saturday, June 28, 2014

Joshu Sasaki, Mt. Baldy Troubles

[Because this post is so long, I've made it available for download. Click to download [pdf](#) or [epub](#).]

[Also, there is now a [web page](#) devoted to Joshu Sasaki's sexual abuses]

A couple of months ago, a woman I've known for much of my adult life called me and asked me how I would feel about her heading down to Mt. Baldy Zen center.

She knew what I had told her about the place, and she had read some things that I had written on an old blog of mine, so I was a little put off by the call. I didn't know what she was up to. I told her that she knew what I thought, and that I probably wasn't the one to offer input of the sort that she wanted.

But she persisted, and it became another one of those Zen conversations-that-isn't-a-conversation.

She said maybe it was time that I forgive Mr. Sasaki.

I told her I've got no reason to forgive the old man, since I wasn't angry at him, and that he is retired anyway. I told her that I don't read the newsletters. If she went down there, it would probably be one of his students who had taken over the place.

She told me that Zen changed her life, and that it really helped her, and that the insights are priceless. She said one can never really "leave" Zen, since one always has to come back.

I thought "Here we go again..."

I told her I saw things very differently from how she saw things, and that the word "Zen" probably means something different to the two of us, and I pointed out that I wasn't about to tell her what to do.

In fact, she was, in a way, telling me what to do. If Zen practice leads to all those nice-sounding words, then how about some "acceptance" of those

who are not “Zen”, (no matter what one’s perception of the word might be)? Lots of people don’t meditate at Mt. Baldy. Lots of people never even heard of the place. It doesn’t mean they are all broken, somehow.

I reminded her about some of the stories that came out about Mr. Sasaki, a few years after my experience. The stories hadn’t yet come out, at the time I was there. I asked her how did she think I knew? From my hatred of the man? Was I ever speaking in hatred?

She said she did not wish to dwell on another person’s blemishes. She said it is unhealthy to do so.

She added that I was the most honest person she had ever known, then offered that this was why, perhaps, I “had so much trouble” at some of the monasteries. She added that it was wrong to judge others for their failings.

Then I asked her what she would do if she saw a man standing in an alley groping women and thieving money. What if this man were arrested by the police? Would she speak to the policeman this way? Would she tell the policeman that he has to forgive? Is the policeman angry? Would she consider the policeman mentally unhealthy? Is the policeman “dwelling on blemishes”?

She said “I never said they should not be punished”. Then she told me she was probably heading down, and, laughing, asked if I could ever forgive her for going.

I found a way to get off the phone. I wasn’t even talking about punishment, and I was getting tired of being viewed as “unhealthy”, or “troubled”, “judgmental”, etc. I had just been watching the sunset, while sipping tea with my girlfriend. The call felt like a small assault – the kind of conversation I try to avoid now.

In fact, I had tried to avoid talking about Zen in this one, too.

This recent conversation served as the impetus for me to re-launch The Mu News. So I’ll write again on this blog, just so I can air my thoughts. This way, I don’t have to be steamrolled, like on this phone call, all the time, when the subject of “Zen” comes up.

Writing about Zen is a very difficult thing – especially if you are writing

about teachers like Mr. Sasaki and Mr. Shimano. It is difficult because the voices in the Zen community are so intensely polar. Zen students see the holders of the Zen form as sparkling icons of spiritual purity, albeit with occasional, forgivable failings. Detractors, usually ex-students, express such vitriol at their perceived betrayal that they can barely articulate what it is they are trying to say. Amidst the cool stoicism of the greater Zen community, such erratic behavior doesn't help their cause. They are dismissed, labeled as "troubled", or cast out.

The two sides are therefore so far apart that there is no real communication between them.

Regarding Mr. Sasaki, I have to say up front: I am a detractor.

But before I tell the story of my time at Bodhi Manda and Mt. Baldy, I'd like to express my thoughts on this gap – the one that I have just described. I admit that I have a measure of personal pain wrapped up in my Zen experience. I've backed away from a lot of people who were once very close friends. I feel a weight that comes up during conversations like the one at the beginning of this post. I have had hundreds of such conversations – literally hundreds. It is painful for me to say good-bye in this particular manner. Some years ago, I gave up on the idea that that communicating with Zen people was even possible – at least, when the subject of Zen comes up.

The fact is, if somebody shows up at Mt Baldy, things are likely to go well for them. The same is true for Bodhi Manda. If someone shows up to sit sesshin in Felsinor, with Eido Shimano, he or she will likely leave feeling enriched. The sitting will do that. Over the last few decades, that is the way it has been, despite all the turmoil.

This is the thing. Everything is fine in Zen if you stick to the protocol. If you display faith and reverence in these "masters", they will reward you with their brand of "Zen", and it is unlikely that you will ever witness anything unsavory. Mr. Sasaki, like Mr. Shimano, is highly skilled at personal presentation. He chooses his words extremely carefully, and is almost always perfectly polite.

But what happens if you stray from the protocol? What if you take a little step outside for a second?

This is what I did, with Mr. Sasaki. I didn't even really mean to do it. I had nothing against Mr. Sasaki, just as I had nothing against Mr. Shimano, up at DBZ.

But this is where you come up against the man's true character. You actually don't get to see it any other way.

I first met Mr. Sasaki in the first month of a half-year trip I took, with my truck, around the country, visiting friends, family, and Zendo. I noticed that there was going to be a sesshin at Bodhi Manda, and my route was taking me close enough to attend. I mailed in an application and spoke on the phone to a woman, "Gail", who worked in the office. I asked her if I could show up early. This is something I like to do – I like to say hello and meet and work with the people I'm sitting with. There is always a little more work right before a sesshin. I like to help out. Most places will let you do this.

"Gail" is a fake name. I can't remember any of the dharma names of the people I met. I am going to make up fake names here.

I had a great time at Bodhi Manda. There were a lot of good people there. It is a very small place. There are only a few different rooms, so you are almost always standing next to the same 5 or 6 people. You end up getting to know them pretty well.

Something happened between me and a woman from South America who I had never met. People saw or heard about it and started talking. I am not going to write about it here, because it feels wrong to. But people were very friendly, and were asking me about it.

I think this is why things went so well. Because everything was very pleasant over at Bodhi Manda, except for my time with Mr. Sasaki. I wasn't very bothered by Mr. Sasaki, then. I was just passing through New Mexico.

As is the case with most Zen places, there is a kind of gap between visitors/residents, and monks. And, there is a greater gap between monks and the "master". There are these layers of formality to the Japanese tradition. If you are a visitor, the monks and/or nuns are your bosses, and you don't ever see the master, except during formal, controlled periods.

I first saw Mr. Sasaki in one of these periods. A monk had announced that Mr. Sasaki would answer any questions that people had. But the questions had to be written on a piece of paper, and passed to the monk. Mr. Sasaki, the next day, would sit in front of a small assembly, and provide answers.

I didn't like this, actually. Why not just sit there and answer questions as they come? Zen isn't like History class. The idea that someone would pick and choose questions to answer, and prepare his answers overnight, left me with disinterest.

I didn't write down any questions, and I was very bored during the assembly. It went on for a very long time, and I found it uninteresting. The fact is, most people see Zen like History class. They are there to "learn Zen". I just don't see it that way.

The next day was a flurry of work and a small, formal introduction to the "teacher". You buy a box of incense and package it up with some money and hand it to the master in a little ceremony. You have to do this if you are new. I was new there. I think there was only one other new person.

Finally the meditation retreat started and I was very surprised to see that there were five (four or five... I can't remember exactly – I'll say five here) meetings with the "master" per day. I had never been to a place that had that many personal interviews. I had sat at many monasteries. When they are voluntary, I usually skip the personal interviews, except for one at the end, where I show up just to say thanks.

I was curious about the five interviews. I made a mental note.

In my first meeting with Mr. Sasaki, I did all the bows, and sat down. Mr. Sasaki said some very complimentary things, which I will not repeat here. Then he asked me "What do you say when you meet a famous Zen master?"

I said "hello" and Mr. Sasaki offered his hand. I shook it. Mr. Sasaki laughed, a little.

We chatted a little bit about where I was from, and why I was there, and suddenly my mental note appeared in my head, and I asked Mr. Sasaki about the five personal interviews. He affirmed that yes, there were five.

The rules of all monasteries are different. Sometimes you sign up, sometimes you go to a different line if you wish to attend the interview, and sometimes the whole Zendo goes, one by one. I wasn't clear on the rules, and, as I had mentioned, five just seemed like a lot of personal interviews per day.

So I asked Mr. Sasaki if the interviews were mandatory – If I had to go to them all.

Mr. Sasaki immediately stiffened. He then launched into angry insults, calling me a “stupid American”, calling me “arrogant”, and so on. It was maybe ten seconds or so, of these types of insults.

I was surprised by the reaction. I didn't see any reason at all for the guy to be angry. To appease him, I said “no no I'll go! I was just asking...”

He continued his insults again for a short while, and I started to feel cornered. He was challenging me to explain myself, while still calling me “stupid”. He asked what did I think I'd do?

I had already told him I would come for the interviews, so I had considered the matter settled. Now, I had to answer some questions.

So I said I didn't know what I was thinking, and that it's OK, I'd come, if that's the way it is.

I can't remember this part perfectly, but the guy was still angry. He was still calling me arrogant. Somehow I ended up mentioning that there was a small back room that seemed empty, down near the far end of the Zendo. I had noticed it while cleaning, so I mentioned that people could sit there, during interviews. But the only reason I had said this was because Mr. Sasaki, in upset, was demanding to know what I had been thinking. I had already said that I would come, a couple of times, actually.

Mentioning the little room, of course, was the wrong thing to say. He called me more insults, then said I had to come, and he rang me out with his bell.

Throughout this, there was a language problem, and Mr. Sasaki was over a hundred years old – so there was a hearing problem as well. And the guy was angry. The conversation didn't go smoothly, after the handshake.

That was the first conversation that I had with the man. I was called arrogant, and stupid, and “American” and some other things that I could not understand with because they were in Japanese or because they were growled in such a way that I found them unintelligible.

This really didn't affect me so much, as I had seen behavior like this before, in Zen. The reaction was not unlike Mr. Shimano's, at DBZ – only Mr. Shimano was more conniving, and less up-front with his disdain. It had been a few years, though. I had been to perhaps a dozen sitting centers since DBZ. I feel there are big problems in Zen Still, you don't come across characters like this very often.

What is surprising is that so many people consider this attitude benevolent, somehow, or to someone. I never in my life saw it that way. What I saw was a little man with such a need to be worshipped, that he would lose his temper if someone asked a question about perhaps meditating silently, in a silent meditation retreat. Mr. Sasaki and I had been in the middle of friendly chit-chat when I asked him my question. I had no intention of upsetting him.

Things calmed down after that, though.

There are so many interviews at Bodhi Manda and Baldy that they are impossible to remember.

Through the week, Mr. Sasaki never wavered from his “teacher” role. I was just never so interested. I had simply wished to sit, and I had considered the interviews a bit of an interruption.

There was one time where Mr. Sasaki asked “where are you?” at the moment I sat down, and I pulled the mat over my head, hiding under it. I was bored when I did this. Like I said, I just wasn't interested.

Mr. Sasaki had laughed and said “no, no...”

There are some other things he did. He would sometimes ask, rapid-fire, about some things in the room, like the candle, then again “where are you?”

I'd point to the candle, or I'd make a little flame sign over my head, and

he'd say "haha, no, no..."

But most of the time he was telling me to try harder and I was asking him why? Why would I want to?

The thought had occurred to me to just ask him to ring me out, but I didn't wish to insult him. I thought I would just keep showing up and waiting it out.

I wasn't at all interested in Mr. Sasaki's koans. I didn't consider them interesting.

Worse, I didn't consider some of them "real".

This is a difficult thing to talk about, because a) people have such great faith in their "master" that you are of course a moron for considering such a thing, and b) maybe of course I'm wrong and there's some trick I didn't see.

I understand that Mr. Sasaki's students will all call me all sorts of bad things (indeed arrogant) for saying that, but this is how I see it. There are a lot of stupid-sounding questions someone can ask that mean something. "Who lives on the dark side of the moon?" means something. "How far away is the sky?" has an answer.

Mr. Sasaki claims, in his little biography, that his "teacher" once asked him how old he was, and he had answered that he is as old as Buddha.

OK this would mean something too, if he didn't just steal it from someone else.

Maybe he did steal it, because some of what Mr. Sasaki was saying just didn't seem to lead to anything, to me. It just seemed like he was throwing in some nonsense, on purpose. I surmised that he might be doing this solely for the purpose of cementing his image of "master" A student says "I don't know", and he almost automatically assumes the "master" has seen to some depth that he has yet to explore.

This is actually a very sick, and dangerous thing, in Zen. Judging from his blow-up on our first meeting, he seemed like the kind of guy who would do this. A lot of people do this, actually. There are a lot of Zen masters

who are perfectly happy to ask the questions, while understanding, perfectly well, that they themselves have never come to a true resolution.

Anyway, I had seen a lot, in monasteries. I was used to it. I just wanted to sit. I was just visiting New Mexico for a couple of weeks. Mr. Sasaki continued being upset that I wouldn't "try harder" and I kept coming in and waiting there for the bell.

There were a couple of times that Mr. Sasaki accused me of doing something that I wasn't doing. It is impossible to go into detail, but what he would do in the interview is say "stop doing what you are doing. You were doing it the whole morning while you were sitting" and then he would pucker his lips as if he were kissing someone. He'd say "it is like.." and then he'd make his kissing face.

This would, of course, disgust me. So when he'd say this I'd tell him I wasn't doing, to him, what he was talking about, and I would, as always, just wait for the bell.

I of course noticed how boring Mr. Sasaki's dharma talks were. He has something against "American democracy", and offers this disdain often. There are a few other things he keeps repeating, every talk. He keeps talking about "no subject/object", and how nobody besides him understands it, and he very much loves the mettle of the Japanese people, especially as compared to Westerners.

As far as his dharma talks go, this is pretty much what you get.

I had to serve dinner a couple of times, and there is a complicated procedure at Bodhi Manda. I got through it with some helpful finger pointing from the nuns. The first time, when we bowed out, the woman who was in charge of teaching me how to serve said "It was interesting to watch the long-time student, and to compare it to the new student". Then, after the second time I served, on the last day, the same woman said "it was VERY interesting to watch the difference in the way both of you serve".

I wondered why she stressed this. Each time my serving partner had been the very serious monk who, in the Zendo, would yell about people's mudras. In Mr. Sasaki's monasteries, meditators have to hold their hands with all their fingers straight, and touching at the tips, with the thumbs straight (and also touching) above them. You have to suspend your hands in

the air, like this. The effect is as if everyone in the Zendo is holding an invisible apple pie down near their belly button.

My fingers would drift around in the Zendo and I would often be the target of the very serious monk.

There are a lot of characters like... exactly like.... the very serious monk, in Zen. I am not at all like these characters, in my life, or in a monastery. I wondered what exactly the woman was looking at.

Like I said, except for the personal interviews (and dharma talks, I suppose), I had a good time at Bodhi Manda. Throughout the week, I had, now and then, thought about the little ridge of hills behind the Zendo, and I climbed up and hiked along the ridge with a guy I had met – Charlie – who I'd keep in contact with, a little bit, for a few years after I'd left the place. He was a good guy.

I went into the office to pay and “Gail” was there. She was a very sweet woman. We talked for awhile and it turned out we had a mutual friend. She said I was very welcome at Bodhi Manda, and, in fact, offered that I didn't have to pay, and she thanked me for coming.

I was moved by this, so of course I told her that I'd pay full price, to which she said “half!” and I said no, I'd pay full price, and I wrote out a check. We agreed that perhaps we'd see each other again if I made it to Mt. Baldy in a few months. She said our friend might be coming. I had told her that it was a good possibility I'd be there.

I left in the morning, after helping to tidy up the kitchen with the people who had come in to cook for the week. It was nice to get to talk to them, as some of them had come up the mountain just to help cook. Happily, they had already done some baking, and they handed me a stack of delicious, warm muffins for my drive.

I left before daylight, in my pickup truck, heading out toward Santa Fe, with a pretty little dusting of snow, on the road.

So Bodhi Manda was alright. I wasn't a fan of Mr. Sasaki's, but so what? There didn't seem to be any harm being done, and the people seemed so nice there. It was mostly happy times.

I was in Tahoe for Thanksgiving, with friends, and I visited Green Gulch (where I'd stayed before) and Zen Mountain Center and Deer Park – both in Southern California. All of this took a few months. I met a lot of people. I really enjoyed this trip.

When I showed up at Mt. Baldy, it immediately started snowing, only an hour or so after I parked my truck. I was there only a few days before the silent meditation week. I ran my bags up into my assigned cabin and, in an hour or so, I could no longer see my pickup, down the hill. It had vanished under the snow, with everything else, except for the trees, and little corners of the compound buildings.

This meant that, immediately, we were put to work. I was in a cabin with two others. They had both been there for some time – at least a couple of months or so. There was also a monk from the office and a guy who was a little older – maybe 50 or so. Our job was to shovel snow off the roofs of the buildings, so they would not collapse. There was that much snow.

So for three days, we were getting up early, and going to sleep late, as we worked against the storm. I had noticed, while we were working, that one of my roommates, every now and then, would say “hmmm Marcus isn't here, of course”. He would repeat this, now and then, through the three days. The other roommate would just nod.

When he'd say this, I'd ask “who is Marcus?”, but nobody answered.

Marcus is a fake name that I am using because I can't remember any names from Mt. Baldy, except for “Mr. Sasaki”.

As for Mr. Sasaki, he was down in Los Angeles. The office monk was in regular contact with him, keeping him updated on how the work was going. In the dining hall, I once overheard the office monk talking about me. He was saying that a new person had shown up, who was very strong, and who could shovel a lot of snow. He was repeating, on the phone “a strong boy! a strong boy!”, which is the funny way you have to talk, sometimes, when there is a language barrier.

Later, a woman who would later show me how to clean the dining hall asked me if I had heard the monk talking to “Roshi” about me. I said yes, and we laughed.

On the day before the retreat, I finally found out who “Marcus” was. Marcus was the head monk, who had remained in his cabin, with his girlfriend, while the rest of us were shoveling snow.

He suddenly appeared as work was nearly finished. But it actually wasn’t finished. Marcus announced that “Roshi” didn’t want to be picked up in the 4 wheel drive Subaru. He wanted to be picked up in the Lexus, which had been buried deep, by the snow plow. Having made his entrance, Marcus assumed command, and started barking orders. We went to work of digging out the luxury car.

This is a bad sign, by the way, in a meditation center. Personally, I like hard work, but I’m not an idiot. I get tired, and a few days of all-day snow shoveling on rice and beets will wear you out. I was an engineer, and I was a game programmer. I made good money, but I prefer the outdoors. Part of the reason I have lived in so many meditation centers is because I like the physical, cooperative work. I like the life.

But there is the question of morale. It is harder to like the life when you are being bossed by someone who has been sipping hot chocolate with his girlfriend in his cabin for three days, only to jump around like a drill sergeant a couple of hours before “Roshi” is about to show up.

So I now understood why my roommate kept saying “Marcus isn’t here, of course...”.

I’ve seen this in a few places. It is a sign of something, and it is not at all a healthy thing. It was this way (heavily!) at DBZ. I never understand why these characters aren’t embarrassed, about themselves. Where you see this pattern among the leadership of a meditation center – all authority with seemingly no notion of responsibility, you can always expect trouble. For some reason, these characters are placed in these high positions, by the “master”.

What is that reason?

Loyalty.

This sounds like a good word, but in Zen, it actually is never a good word.

We got the car out, and everything went OK. There was some talk about

postponing the retreat for a day or so to allow more people to come up the hill, but it was finally decided that things would go on as scheduled. “Gail”, from Bodhi Manda, never showed up, and neither did our mutual friend. This made me a little bit sad.

The retreat started, and I quickly realized there would be almost no silent sitting. There was a new enforcer that had been brought in. He was a tall, heavy-set, older monk “Luther” (another fake name) -- 50 years old or so -- who, if I had to bet, I’d say he never sat through more than one sit a day. I mean that seriously. I would take that bet. His job was to wield the kesaku – the stick that Rinzai Zen monks sometimes whack each other with. And he took his job very seriously, bounding up and down the meditation hall, and screaming things like “WAKE UP!!!!”.

With the short periods (maybe ½ hour sitting periods at Baldy), the five interviews, and now Luther stomping up and down the Zendo, I understood very quickly that there would be precious little silence during the retreat – a funny thing, actually, for a silent retreat.

Well, you can still meditate.

Or maybe not.

I quickly became the favorite target of Luther. On the second day, he was waiting for me outside of the laundry room, and he said “come here”, sternly. Of course, I followed.

Luther lectured me about the way I was holding my hands -- my mudra. He said my mudra was “atrocious”, and he told me I had better make it better. I just kept nodding, until he seemed finished.

We both said “OK” and we parted.

In the meditation hall, I often failed to hold my hands to Luther’s standard, and he kept screaming, and formally requesting to hit me with the stick. Of course, I always accepted.

I wonder what would have happened if I didn’t accept? Maybe I should have, once, just for laughs. I didn’t think of it, then. I was thinking of a way to make sure Luther wouldn’t have a reason to scream. I didn’t want to be the cause of everyone having to hear this guy yelling.

I didn't know what to do about my hands. I can't feel them when I sit. I have no idea what they are doing. Usually, in the first couple of days of a retreat, I keep one finger on my right hand touching another finger on my left hand. I do this just so I know they are together – I can feel the point of contact. Later on in the week I just let them fall to my lap however they land. Sometimes I open my eyes and look at them, and they look, to me, like two small squirrels, curled up together in the folds of my legs.

This reminds me. Another Zen master, after sesshin, once asked me why I touch two fingers together the way I do when sesshin begins. I said “because I can't feel them, and...”

And he suddenly boomed “STOP LYING!!!! TELL THE TRUTH!!!!!!”

I had no idea what the hell it was that had upset him. That was Denko Osho, in Denmark.

Zen masters, and many monks, often seem unbalanced, to me.

What to do here? The retreats at Baldy aren't cheap. Unless I spent my meditation time trying to hold my hands like I was serving apple pie to the British royal family, Luther was going to be on me for a week. I wasn't so happy about wasting my meditation time on Luther's upset.

I tried some different things. When I'd hear him stand up, or when he'd walk past me, I'd snap my hands into position. But he didn't like this either and, to tell the truth, I didn't like the idea of having to consider the man's worries, all the time.

Finally, I just figured I'd let him do what he wanted. I'd try to hold my hands in the Baldy Mudra, but if they moved, so be it. I'd sit and Luther would just have to yell, if he thought it was that important.

This attitude seemed to upset Luther greatly, and he started to block me, now and then, as the group was walking out the Zendo. He seemed really upset, which I considered ridiculous. So, I just kept nodding and nodding.

But nobody enjoys getting yelled at. It wasn't like Luther was offering anything particularly interesting. He was just calling me names, and judging my hand formation as “horrible”, “atrocious”, etc., and

admonishing me to do what he said.

But, as explained, I couldn't, so I didn't, and the time finally came, later in the week, where I felt like not bothering to listen to him anymore.

I noticed Luther didn't appear to be much of an athlete. He was a big man, who struggled heavily in his steps, especially on the packed snow of the drive, where he was often waiting for me. & While walking, among all guests, he seemed to have the most trouble – trouble enough so that I wondered if this was why he never sat through a period. Maybe he didn't have any flexibility in his legs. Maybe they hurt too much. Maybe that's why he preferred to stroll up and down the Zendo with his stick, so much.

In any case, I realized I could very easily avoid him, so that's what I started to do. When he'd block me after a sit, I'd nod hello and step quickly left, or right, and just glide past. Luther would make an attempt to regain position, waving his arms clumsily to keep his balance, but I'd already be past him.

Except for the noise in the Zendo, which I wasn't making, I considered the problem solved.

But this method didn't work either. After a couple of my nimble escapes, Luther enlisted the head monk – Marcus -- the one who hadn't shoveled – to help corral me. There was nothing to do, but what I had done before – stop, listen, and keep nodding. That's what I did while both these men stood inches from me, and yelled at me.

Finally, at the conclusion of his rant, Marcus was yelling “CAN YOU DO THAT!? CAN YOU DO THAT!?”

I was about to explain the problem -- about how I can't feel my hands, so I started saying “I don't kno...”

But Marcus interrupted, yelling “YOU DON'T KNOW!?!?!? YOU DON'T KNOW!?!?!?”

I looked out to the trees, considering this an absurd situation to be in. I figured I'd just stand there until these guys were finished.

Finally, Marcus yelled “JUST DO IT!!!!” and he turned around.

This was actually the last time it happened, though. It was maybe the 5th day of sesshin. Aside from some more screaming in the Zendo, that was it.

It is funny, what happens in these places – the types of people who show up. I don't know what they are thinking. You can't reason with them. I suppose they consider themselves heavenly agents of *other people's* ultimate acceptance.

This is, once more, where we get into that mile-wide definition of “Zen”. Marcus' definition of the word is nothing like mine.

My time with Mr. Sasaki went even worse than it did in Bodhi Manda. In my first interview with him, I was wondering if he would recognize me. He did. Embarrassingly, he reached down and pinched my cheek to say hello. He said I had very fine features and asked me what my background was. We talked a little bit, then he rang me out.

As the week went on, Mr. Sasaki went back to the same little questions he was asking me at Bodhi Manda. I was even less interested in his interviews than I was last time, if that was possible. He seemed to react to my indifference with mild anger, which he would express with little one-word outbursts: “stupid!”.

There were a couple of times where he implored “TRY!!! TRY!!!” and I would shrug my shoulders and try to ask him why? This was beginning to get on my nerves, actually. Why would I want to get wrapped up in this? There was no way I could, anyway, because I didn't feel like I wanted to. I could care less what Mr. Sasaki thought of my “insight”, and I wasn't interested in telling him what I thought of his. I was there to sit. I was wishing he would leave me alone.

As a joke to myself, I once walked in and acted Samuraii, making efforts to appear stoic and soldier-like, the way I had seen some Rinzai Zen monks behave, including Marcus, and Luther; extremely serious, and stern. I did the bows a little more slowly, with more control. I moved like a guy in a Kurasawa movie, which isn't normal, for me. Of course, this way of moving is easy to emulate. Anyone can do it.

My joke worked, actually, when I did the same movement that I had done once in Bodhi Manda, in response to a question about a candle. This time,

Mr. Sasaki had said “Ahhh good!! Good!!! Better!!!”.

I had just done this to see what Mr. Sasaki would do. Walking out, I pondered the question: Just how shallow might this place be? It seemed to me, from the first time I had met the man, that the only thing he was interested in was his lofty position as “master”. Is that all he wanted? You behave like a programmable robot, you are OK here? I had walked out of this interview laughing, to myself.

He also gave a couple of speeches that I found curious, and annoying. I would eventually bring them back to him.

Early in the sesshin, on perhaps the second day, he said, in a teisho, “Sometimes a new student arrives, and he says things about the master. He makes claims about the master’s insight, or he tells stories. Sometimes such a student can sound convincing. But he is not telling the truth. He is doing this because of his own ego. This is ego!”

Was he talking about me? I was actually the only new student there. It was a small crowd, because of the snow. My roommates were new if you compared them to the monks, but they had been there for a while already, and they were, as most Zen students are, very respectful of Mr. Sasaki.

I had never said anything about him. Nobody had said anything about him that I had heard, except the sort of sticky, saccharine things you often hear in “spiritual” places when people mention their “master”.

Was he paranoid? I was thinking this was the case. As I had mentioned, I had some experience with Eido Shimano, who was constantly plotting and scheming against perceived threats, well before they knew themselves to be his enemies. You live an extremely dishonest life, you have to end up thinking this way.

What was going on with Mr. Sasaki? He was covering bases that nobody was running.

Another time, a bit later on during the retreat, he said something similar. Again, he was talking about a “new student”, but this time, he wasn’t coming from any angle, he was just insulting the “new student”, saying that sometimes someone can appear calm, and can be strong, and can have many good features, but this is nothing! He said such a student doesn’t

know “no subject-object”, and that people shouldn’t be fooled!

Like I said, I was the only new student there. Also, I had received some similar compliments, while shoveling snow. It was possible that he was just talking about any old new student, in any time, but, given his little outbursts of anger in our interviews, it dawned on me that this was probably not the case. He was probably talking about me.

That was annoying. Actually, it is annoying even if he were not talking about me. If you take out the self-promotion from most Zen masters’ rhetoric, you’d be left with a sweet silence.

I have been to many monasteries. By the time I was in Baldy, I was OK with the fact that not many people are even really interested in what they talk about every day. That is just the way a lot of masters are. It is a funny choice of life, for me – to say things again and again, in talks, without even being curious enough to find out about what they mean.

A woman who ran a Zen monastery once told me, in friendly conversation: “We don’t know what we are. Nobody knows!” She was saying this in support of an earlier point, regarding freedom. Her idea was that since nobody knows anything, we are free to do anything.

I didn’t say anything, but I was surprised that she didn’t feel uncomfortable teaching Zen.

That is what I am talking about. How come none of these characters feel uncomfortable? Wouldn’t you want to find out BEFORE you started talking about it every day? Else, what have you really got to say, except what other people have said?

This woman was, at least, basically honest.

Mr. Sasaki, on the other hand, was beginning to get on my nerves. By this time, over the course of two sesshins at Bodhi Manda and Baldy, I had been called stupid and arrogant, “American”, ego-riddled, etc. etc. many many times. And the only reason Mr. Sasaki had for doing this was my disinterest in the personal interviews. I had barely said anything to him, except to ask “Why?” when he would tell me to “TRY!!! TRY!!!”

Now he was giving speeches like this?

Along with this, there were those two enforcers, Marcus and Luther, bearing down on me.

I have to say, personalities like Marcus and Luther don't really bother me in monasteries. I consider them sort of crazy. They think that what they are doing is extremely important.

But that is the problem, in the world. The crusaders thought they were doing something extremely important too, bringing "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" Eastward, from Europe, slaughtering the families who were living in glaring ignorance of this great teaching...

I GUESS...

A lot of Zen people say "That's Zen! It's tough! Can't take it? Try Yoga!"

It is not that I can't "take it".

Anyone can "take it", you idiots.

It is just pointless, and it masks a dark purpose.

And the truth is, if either Marcus or Luther behaved the way they did in a restaurant, screaming about a dinner guest's hand formation, then people in white coats would show up, after a while. And these nice people would take them away to a happy place, where they could wear pajamas all day. And they would be served cherry Jello with their happy pills. Cherry Jello! And they would spend their nights in a gentle slumber, in a cozy room, where even the walls are nice and white and fluffy, just like the clouds.

That's how I see it. There is no reason to react to this people. They are just crazy.

But with the teacher, it is another matter altogether. In my view, they are responsible for this craziness. Indeed, it is part of what they "teach", despite the fact that they will never express this, in explicit words. They always know what is going on. This is actually the way they want things to be. They are looking for loyalty, above all else. They actually aren't looking for anything else. They are looking for the type of person who will go nuts about people's fingers, just because they are told that shape of

people's hands is very important.

Now that's loyalty.

I had only wanted to sit still, and to help others sit still. Why is that so hard to do? Was it impossible for anyone to consider leaving me alone? I had to deal with Mr. Sasaki's constant little insults in the interviews, and I had to deal with the monks who belonged in the crazy house, surrounding me, screaming into my ears, about hands. I had to listen to Mr. Sasaki's paranoid rants against some terrible, dark arch-enemy of Buddha, this "new student".

Having lived at DBZ, I had seen much worse. But all of it was still annoying. I was paying 600 bucks for a stream of insults from three different people, and there were hardly any silent periods. Luther had made sure of that, thumping up and down the Zendo.

So the next time Mr. Sasaki started in with his insults during personal interview, I answered back, a little. He was saying something about "stupid American" to me when I interrupted and asked him "What is Japan?"

This startled him, and he asked me a couple of times what I had said. I didn't like having to repeat myself, but I said, louder and louder, a couple of times, "What is Japan!"

I don't want to explain my question. Japan is lines on a map. America is lines on a map. I was tired of Mr. Sasaki talking about these things, as if they meant something important.

Actually, if Mr. Sasaki knew anything about the thing that he talks about every day -- "no subject/object", he couldn't talk the way he does. There are things that just disappear from the mind's vocabulary, on the way. The heart-divisions disappear. We are not "Japanese", and we are not "American". Nobody is, actually. You have any tie to these things, you don't have any right to talk about "Zero-state", or any of the little phrases Mr. Sasaki repeats, over and over.

This is why people like Mr. Sasaki are hard for me to watch. This is why I'm not interested in talking to them. They will never have anything new to say. They have only been taught the words.

I have learned through experience that there is no point in talking much about them, because their followers just assume there is something terribly wrong with you if you do.

But this is why it is difficult. The truth is, there probably isn't a human being who came through Mr. Sasaki's monasteries who would behave the way he does if they were in the same position. You take a random guy off the street, give him a stack of hundred dollar bills, and tell him to go teach meditation down in Paraguay, the guy is not going to go down and start lecturing the Paraguayans about how they lack "American fortitude". He is not going to go down and start decrying the Paraguayans for their country's political system, or for their funny-sounding language. He is not going to go down and start calling them "stupid Paraguayans". That would amount to comically ridiculous behavior.

Who would do this? Who would behave this way? Almost nobody.

This is "subject/object" to an absurd degree... "American/Paraguayan", "Great Master/Idiot", etc.; Someone who sees this way lives by these divisions. It is a false way to see.

If it isn't true in the heart, then it isn't true. You can repeat a phrase over and over. It doesn't matter how many times you say it. Mr. Sasaki, in reality, isn't even interested in the heart of the phrases he repeats again and again. He is interested only in using the words to capture followers and hold worldly position above them (an immediate hypocrisy, actually, in the case of this particular phrase). It is the oldest game in religion.

There are a lot of people playing this game. But that doesn't mean it isn't corruption. It is terrible corruption.

You have this fact – nearly everyone is closer to Mr. Sasaki's "no subject/object" than Mr. Sasaki is – including most people you meet in your regular, everyday life.

And then you have this other fact – that everyone in Mr. Sasaki's monastery believes the opposite – That Mr. Sasaki understands "No subject/object" better than they do.

Zen is set up this way, in these places. There is a worship of form, and its

flag bearers. The thought is that the worldly hierarchical form is justified by a corresponding (and unseen) spiritual equivalent.

But that thought is based on carefully manufactured lies.

Real insight is formless. A “master” can spend his entire life asking students “what color is it?” to test a kensho, but if he still has, in his heart and in his eyes, master/not master, American/Japanese, monk/layman, etc. etc. then he has never really even had a glimpse. A real kensho would embarrass him, actually. He’d see for certain how silly his thinking had been, and he’d see how much there is to do.

Where do such divisions come from? Not from what you have seen (or will see).

Why are there so many characters like this? You have to just watch these men dangle mystical phrases in front of their students, like carrots on a stick, but with no understanding of their own.

They truly are not even interested.

It is a very selfish mis-use of people’s trust, because of what it leads to.

But I had said I didn’t want to explain my question. So I’ll stop talking about it.

Mr. Sasaki didn’t respond to my question. I had to repeat it 3 or 4 times, very loudly. Then he said “ahhhhhh; GOOD!!!! GOOD!!! HAAA HAAA HAAA GOOD!” and immediately asked me again about where I was from. This wasn’t a “Zen” question. He didn’t mean it that way. He was just changing the subject. I don’t doubt that he understood what I was talking about, but, as I’ve explained, Mr. Sasaki isn’t interested in these things. He is interested only in maintaining his lofty “Zen master” perch. He is constantly blowing smoke.

The next day was the day that a bunch of these things I had mentioned happened at once. Mr. Sasaki gave his second speech about the dangers of believing anything a hypothetical “new student” who seems to have good qualities might say (in a silent retreat?), and the monks who are very interested in other people’s hands had corralled me on my way out the Zendo, after a sit. I described these events earlier.

So I was in a bad mood. I was growing tired of the place. I had just wanted to sit and to help others sit. I was paying full price. I didn't see why I had to deal with Mr. Sasaki's insults and temper tantrums, or those of his monks, Marcus and Luther. Usually it is OK to just show up and sit. Almost everywhere else in the world, it is OK. I had just been at Deer Park and Green Gulch and ZMC in the previous few months. It was OK at all these places to just show up. Nobody got angry about somebody sitting still at those places.

Why the upset?

Why, especially, the paranoia? I'd seen this before, actually. I knew what it meant.

So the next time I walked into the interview, I decided to talk about it. When Mr. Sasaki reached for his bell, I grasped it in a manner that so that it wouldn't ring, and I told him to let go of it, so I could put it down. He tugged on it a couple of times, but he was over 100, at the time. He finally let go and I put the bell down.

I told him that I only showed up to sit. I asked: What was wrong with that? I told him he never knew "no subject/object", and I pointed out that I wasn't doing anything to him, or against him. I had to mimic Mr. Sasaki for some of the things I was saying, so he would understand what I was talking about. I hunched over and barked out insults and little speeches in a Japanese accent. He understood. I told him I hadn't said anything about anyone, to anyone, and that I was just shoveling snow all day, before sesshin. I told him to tell his monks to keep away from me. Then I handed him his bell back.

The last day or two was uneventful. Perhaps the monks got tired of screaming. I doubt Mr. Sasaki said anything to them, but there was finally some peace and quiet in the Zendo.

In our last interview, Mr. Sasaki told me a story about a meditator from the past with "fine features". He said it is easy to think that this man had the best life in the world, but that things were probably, actually, very difficult for him. Then he said he is an old man who will not have a chance to see what Zen will be, and in what manner it will evolve, in the West. Finally, he said, to me "the whole world is open to you... just... not... here..."

This was a friendly enough talk. Leaving monasteries, I'd been told "DON'T COME BACK!" in worse ways (DBZ). I said good-bye and left. For some reason, there was a final (two hour!!!) lecture to end the sesshin. Nothing new was said, by Mr. Sasaki. There were some more criticisms of "American democracy".

I myself am a critic of what "American democracy" has become, but I remember wondering, while waiting for Mr. Sasaki to finish, just why he chose this particular battle, which always seemed a little out-of-nowhere, during his talks. Was Mr. Sasaki justifying his totalitarian position? Obviously, yes. But why did he feel such a need to do so? Everyone up there, except for me, seemed to put their full faith in the man.

So why would he feel he had to talk about it so much? Where was the threat?

Later on, after I'd left, I was thinking that maybe somebody up at Baldy had gone through something akin to what I had gone through at DBZ. Maybe someone wished to create some openness and transparency up at Baldy in the past, and perhaps this person had his ideas rebuffed by Mr. Sasaki and his followers, on the basis of the ideas being this (apparently, spiritually infantile) "American democracy".

That might be the case. A lot of Zen people talk like this, dismissing helpful ideas by invoking numbingly empty phrases, over and over and over. You see this all over Zen (e.g. "too much thinking!" "words, words, words"). Maybe that happened at Baldy. Actually, it probably did. If by chance someone is reading this post who happened to go through what I had described, I feel for you.

After the talk, I remember saying "whoa! Two hours of lecture at the end of sesshin!" to one of my roommates, and he just got quiet. I realized he considered my comment inappropriate.

I was eager to leave – to get down the hill, find a little café and sip a coffee down among the normal people -- where nobody will scream at you, no matter how you hold your cup. I went to the office to pay, and said good-bye to the monk there, who was sitting in the back of the room. He was a good guy, like most of the guys I had met up there. Marcus was there too, sitting at the desk. I nodded to Marcus, but he decided not to acknowledge

me, and to, instead, glare toward the bottom of the door. Unfriendly. Was he still upset? Except for my “I don’t kn...”, I hadn’t ever spoken a word to him.

Maybe Marcus was going through something. I had overheard him talking to others about having to leave the place. He had been there for a long time – 15 years, I had heard. Maybe he was worried about what he would be doing.

I passed Mr. Sasaki’s assistant, a young Japanese woman, on the way out, with my bags. We had never talked, but she stopped and asked where I was from, and we chatted for a minute or so. She was somewhere beyond extremely pretty, so of course it was enjoyable getting to say hello, even if it really meant good-bye.

A couple of months after I left Mt. Baldy, I started a blog, called The Mu News. I did this mostly because of my experiences at Dai Bosatsu Zendo, and Mt. Baldy. I considered what Mr. Sasaki was doing to be a selfish, and ultimately dangerous thing. I had commented, here and there, that Mr. Sasaki was doing the same thing Mr. Shimano was doing. They deceive the same way, and for the same reasons.

It isn’t an easy thing to talk about. I lost a close friend over this conversation.

She saw it like this: “Why the hell would you badmouth a 100 year old Zen master? What the hell is the matter with you?”

It was a sad time, for me.

I didn’t know about the stories, at the time. They were a big secret. The stories hadn’t come out yet, about Mr. Sasaki. Just as was the case when I left DBZ, I had told people the stories were coming. There was no way they wouldn’t be, from what I had seen of the character of these men. There was a reason why Mr. Sasaki behaved the way he did. There was a reason he clings so desperately to his the image he projects. Everything he has ever had depends on it. All the worship, all the status, and all the women.

I hadn’t done anything to the man, other than ask him if I could sit silently in his silent meditation retreat. What else? I didn’t show enough worship?

I feel stupid acting samurai, outside of a costume party. And, I can't help being a generally relaxed guy. I actually can't help it.

I suppose that this was enough of a threat to him – enough for the stream of insults, and the paranoid speeches.

When all the stories finally came out, I found myself hopeful that people would get together and chat, and that something new would happen. Zen can be a healthy, open, dynamic, interesting, cooperative, and enjoyable thing. It can be a safe and supportive thing.

But you don't see it. You never see it. When the stories break, and everybody starts talking, you see a few people starting to dominate things. They make long speeches about their "great regret" for all the harm that was done.

That is a nice thing to say, and it is an easy thing to say, when, suddenly, the spotlight is shining on you.

But what were these people doing, for all those decades, when the spotlight wasn't shining on them?

What were the Baldy monks doing? What was Ms. Chayat doing, for example, up at ZSS?

Weren't these the same people who were helping to keep things quiet? Weren't some of them actively working to silence, or discredit those who tried to talk about what was going on?

Of course, they were.

Loyalty.

Like I said at the beginning of this post, I am not a fan of Mr. Sasaki's. While Zen people will claim that I am speaking in hatred, I am not. But I am often sad, when I think about Zen, and the reason that I am sad is because I love living in monasteries – especially ones where you don't have to walk in slow motion, but I cannot because of all the bullshit, and how people are forced to bury their heads in it.

You can see it:

Some women reported the Baldy monks ignoring their distress when they reported being molested by Mr. Sasaki. Worse, some reported that they were treated as though their distress were a function of their own “spiritual immaturity”.

So here is a question: Would these monks have behaved the same way in a different setting?

I doubt it. I’ll bet that, if any of them had met a woman in distress at a baseball stadium, these guys would have done what every decent person would do. They would have helped out. They would have bought the woman a tea or something. They would have handed her a blanket, helped her make some phone calls, walked her to her friends, etc. That is just the normal thing to do.

So: Why not at Mt. Baldy?

Mr. Sasaki takes his little phrases, ties them to a string, and pulls them along a dark path. He really never had any interest in what his little phrases meant. He just wants people to bite at the string, and to follow along.

It isn’t a good thing.

Because isn’t this the case: Focusing so strictly on the form, and with a group operating under the deeply held (and unquestioned) belief that the “master” administers the form in an as-yet-unseen benevolence, what happens is this:

People become less and less sensitive to the real needs of others, rather than more and more sensitive.

Isn’t that obvious?

This is the danger of sitting with false teachers. People are hurt. People are stolen from. People are taken advantage of. The tremendous corruption in worldly matters is actually a natural outcome, because it takes a certain type of character to lie the way Mr. Sasaki lies, in the first place. There is no benevolent reason to do it.

From my perspective, “teachers” like Mr. Sasaki are the worst type of criminal, because there is no passion in their crime, and there is therefore no excuse. It is the ugliest type of fraud. Financial fraud takes advantage of people’s greed. Not so nice, but what can you do?

This is different, because what people like Mr. Sasaki are doing is taking advantage of something that is very good, and pure, in people – the wish to make sense of this world, so that we can know, always, that we are being our best, for others.

This is all that people want, really – to know this, moment by moment.

How could anyone take advantage of this wish? How could anyone say “oh hooray! People believe my lies! They think I speak from insight! An opportunity!” and cheer the money, sex, and power that this little charade brings?

That’s how Mr. Sasaki has decided to spend his life. He speaks every day about “no subject/object”, but pulls his little string the opposite way – toward personal privilege, false belief, separation, and worship.

He’s just lying, and lying.