

Joshu Sasaki Roshi, 1907-2014: Zen master mired in sex scandal spent decades shielded by loyal students



Joshu Sasaki Roshi a 107-year-old Japanese immigrant who had taught a strict form of Zen Buddhism in Jemez Springs, died Sunday in Los Angeles. Courtesy ngelight/CC-BY-SA-2.0/Wikimedia Commons

Posted: Thursday, July 31, 2014 8:00 pm | Updated: 11:09 pm, Thu Jul 31, 2014.

By Steve Terrell
The New Mexican | 2 comments

Joshu Sasaki Roshi, a 107-year-old Japanese immigrant who had taught a strict form of Zen Buddhism in Jemez Springs, died Sunday at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles of age-related causes.

Sasaki Roshi, who had taught at the Bodhi Manda Zen Center in Jemez Springs beginning in the early 1970s, and also at a Zen center in Mount Baldy, Calif., became one of the most influential Zen masters in the U.S., but in the last years of his life, he became mired in a sex scandal. Dozens of female students and attendants had accused him of fondling them and, in some cases, manipulating them into having sex with him.

Though no charges were ever filed, Sasaki Roshi's organization apologized for not dealing with their teacher's sexual behavior.

According to the website of the Mount Baldy Zen Center, Sasaki Roshi was born in 1907 in rural Japan. He became a novice at the age of 14 in the Rinzai tradition of Zen Buddhism.

The Bodhi Manda website says Sasaki Roshi came to America in 1962, "when a group of people in Los Angeles asked Myoshin-ji, Japan's largest Rinzai school, to send a teacher. With interest in Buddhism growing in North America, a Zen community steadily flourished around him." He began teaching at the Jemez Springs center in 1973.

Officials at Bodhi Manda couldn't be reached for comment.

Eventually, Sasaki Roshi headed a network of about 30 Zen centers in North America and Europe. He had at least one celebrity student, singer and poet Leonard Cohen, who spent much of the 1990s secluded at the Mount Baldy center.

According to some of Sasaki Roshi's former students, rumors of his sexual misconduct had been whispered for decades. In November 2012, a Zen osho (priest) named Eshu Martin, who had studied with Sasaki Roshi for 13 years, published an article on a Zen website called SweepingZen.com, laying out the allegations against his old master.

"His career of misconduct has run the gamut from frequent and repeated non-consensual groping of female students during interviews, to sexually coercive after hours 'tea' meetings, to affairs and sexual interference in the marriages and relationships of his students," Martin wrote.

"For decades, Joshu Sasaki Roshi's behaviour has been ignored, hushed up, downplayed, justified, and defended by the monks and students that remain loyal to him," Martin wrote. "... For many years, I have struggled with my own part in this calamity; I have known but have not spoken out."

About a month later, an osho ordained by Sasaki Roshi — Giko David Rubin, now an Albuquerque resident — also came forth with a lengthy piece on SweepingZen.com that went into even more detail. Rubin said he first met the master in 1980.

In his article, Rubin, wrote, "I have heard the experiences of 42 women, either from them directly or their husbands or boyfriends." In 1980, he said, a woman told him Sasaki Roshi had fondled her during a private session. In 1997, he heard similar accounts from other women he knew well.

Rubin said women told him that Sasaki Roshi "implied that resisting his advances was resisting the cosmic activity itself. He also implied surrendering to his requests for sex may lead to the experience of absolute cosmic unity. He punished some women who would not capitulate to his demands by giving them little or no attention."

Rubin said he confronted the teacher about his sexual behavior in 1997 and suggested to Sasaki Roshi that he "have a monitor present in sanzen [private interviews with students] and no longer have female Injis [personal attendants.]"

That made Sasaki Roshi furious, Rubin wrote. "He slammed his teacup on the table so hard the cup broke."

Later that year, Rubin and about a dozen students, monks and nuns wrote Sasaki Roshi a letter suggesting that new female students should be informed "of the possibility that you will approach them in a sexual manner."

This also angered Sasaki Roshi. "He presented his students with a simple choice," Rubin wrote. He told the students he would admit the misconduct and resign, "or I can keep teaching you." Rubin said a large majority of the students "rallied around him to keep teaching. I still regret I could not persuade people to call his bluff."

But later, Rubin said, Sasaki Roshi admitted he had a "bad habit," and for the next several years he appeared to make a real effort to stop his sexual misconduct. But by 2007, more women had come forward, saying Sasaki Roshi "had been sexually pressuring them during the period I thought this behavior had ended. I was told by his Injis that Joshu Sasaki Roshi had never stopped, only slowed down. I was told, 'He played you. He tricked you.'"

The matter was brought to Sasaki Roshi's Council of Oshos that year, but at that meeting, the priests belittled women who had written letters complaining about Sasaki Roshi, Rubin said.

About two months after Rubin's article was published on SweepingZen.com, the *New York Times* picked up on the story. The *Times* interviewed women who said they "were encouraged to believe that being touched by [Sasaki Roshi] was part of their Zen training."

Sasaki Roshi's obituary in the *Los Angeles Time* this week quoted Gento Steve Krieger, the head monk at Sasaki Roshi's headquarters in Los Angeles, saying the center was "still working through many issues and reaching out to the people who were harmed."

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