

## Report to sasakiarchive.com on the BMZC Board

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The history of sexual abuse by Joshu Sasaki has been pretty thoroughly documented in these archives. In northern New Mexico, and probably elsewhere, the consequences for individuals and sanghas are still unfolding, as the archive postings since August 16, 2014, document. Briefly, there were two significant eruptions of protest. In 1988 a member of the Bodhi Mandala Zen Center (BMZC) Board brought up the sexual abuse issue (which she had experienced personally) in a board meeting. She was treated with some hostility for doing this; subsequently she and a number of other people who had been living at Bodhi left and moved to Santa Fe. The second major eruption occurred after Eshu Martin's infamous posting "Everybody Knows" on November 16, 2012. A large majority of the full northern NM sangha reacted with horror and moved to disaffiliate from Rinzaï-ji, Sasaki's organization. This was opposed by the Abbots of BMZC, the Albuquerque Zen Center, and their loyal followers, which further incited the sense of outrage and betrayal which most of the sangha felt, concerning not only the sexual abuse but the long-term cover-up which had concealed this from them.

A very messy situation. Two and one half years later, however, the Abbots and the BMZC Board have posted on this archive (see the preceding three posts) an apology for what they did and a plea for forgiveness. With respect to the immediate cause of the fracturing of the sangha into two factions – the sexual abuse by Sasaki – there would now seem to be agreement that the sexual abuse, the cover-ups, and the continued loyalty to Sasaki were all wrong. If so, the obvious next step would be to try to find some way to work through the hostility and vitriolic exchanges that had taken place earlier. In line with this, the BMZC Board held a retreat devoted to healing the trauma suffered by women who had experienced the sexual abuse (see postings from October 9 to November 18, 2014).

Unfortunately, no progress has been made toward healing the wounds incurred by members of both factions during the initial hostilities and as a result of the actions of the Abbots and the remainders of the Boards (after many of their members had resigned). In fact, the situation has probably gotten worse, and that is the subject now.

I write this report as a sort of spokesperson for a group of seven who have stayed in fairly close communication over the past year (not because I was chosen or especially qualified, but because everyone else was too tired and pessimistic). The group consists of two oshos, two monks, and three former members of the BMZC Board. We have been watching what the BMZC Board has been doing (and we will continue to watch) and sending emails around among ourselves.

From the start, the group has shown unanimous agreement on two questions, which over time have only emerged more sharply. First, why is the Board doing nothing to move toward reconciliation of the two factions? Here is what Sandy Gentei Stewart, first Abbot of BMZC, recently submitted to the Board concerning this question:

It is clear to me that the past must be dealt with before proceeding into the future. We could ignore the past and forge forward, but this would leave unresolved a considerable toxicity which would inevitably seep to the surface and which already is keeping a good number of the sangha away on account of a lack of accountability for past actions and inactions.

The teachings of the Buddha begin with the premise of the truth of suffering. It is clear that the actions of Joshu Roshi, in particular his sexual relationships with his female students, have caused a great deal of suffering. It is also clear that this abuse could not have continued without its acceptance by his boards of trustees and by his oshos.

Many persons who have come to our Zen practice in recent years may not have experienced or heard about what went on. These matters have been presented in some detail on the Sasaki Archive web site. Many of those who were very dedicated and enthusiastic practitioners were so hurt and disillusioned by these events and by the lack of understanding among those who allowed the abuse to continue while ostracizing those who were complaining that they left the practice and continue to feel very angry on top of their hurt.

It is admirable that the current board and abbess of the Bodhi are dedicated to cleaning up whatever unfinished business there might be. My thought is that the persons who have been hurt need to be given the forum that they wish, so that they feel comfortable in sharing their stories and confident that those who they feel have contributed to their suffering will be open and honest in accepting responsibility for their particular parts in the decades-long saga.

It would be possible for the board, abbess and sangha to think that it is too much trouble to give succor to a few persons who have not had much connection with the Bodhi in recent years, despite their often valuable participation in the past. There may be some who think those with outstanding complaints should just get over it and accept the general, broad-brush apologies that the board and abbess have given. This is tantamount to sweeping dirt under the rug.

Thank you all for your efforts and best wishes for a healing time together.

The Board did not reply to this, but when Sandy asked some members individually he was told that the Board had decided that his statement cast shadows on the healing process and thus made him unhelpful as an advisor along the way. The fact that the Board didn't inform him directly of their decision fits their pattern of behavior – they've never responded to my emails either. When he reported this to our group, one of us commented, "Their response to Gentei exposes the 'healing process' to be the trivial bit of theater we have long suspected it to be . . ."

Which brings up the second question that has long puzzled us: "What does the Board really mean by 'healing process'?" The formal council structure used in the first retreat is excellent for some purposes, e.g. getting out feelings about sexual abuse, but to move two

groups that have been in conflict toward some degree of understanding, they need to sit down together and start talking to each other. That's the way it has been done throughout human history. Accordingly, I decided to send emails to a senior member of the Board and to the Abbot, suggesting that if they were interested in healing they should contact a specific person (who I named in each case) with whom they had been quite close prior to the scandal, and with whom considerable conflict had occurred after the scandal. My suggestion was that they could offer a personal apology (now that their attitudes about the scandal had changed and they had apologized to the whole world through the internet), and suggest getting together for a talk.

The BMZC Abbot followed up on my suggestion and invited her "opposite party" to meet and talk. The senior member of the Board, however, wrote back saying that his opposite party "had permanently burned his relationship with me. It didn't have to go this way, but he has created his own hell. There are too many people who want my help for me to worry about someone who doesn't."

What does this last statement mean? I take it to indicate that when the Board talks about healing, they mean the healing of other people, not themselves - the "healing process" is intended to work only in one direction. And all the talk about "forgiveness" means that other people are supposed to forgive the Board for its bad behavior in the past, but not that the Board is about to forgive other people. All in all we have a Board that either sees itself as superior, above the lives of ordinary people, or perhaps, a Board that feels distrustful and threatened by those of us who have been around long enough to know what happened in the past.

But at the same time, we have the difference in behavior of the Abbot and the Board member. How to understand all this?

I'm a sociologist, and for me the obvious place to start is the fact that barely two and a half years ago the three dominant leaders of Bodhi were, by their own admission (see their apologies), devoted members of a cult. It is not easy to leave a cult – there is a huge literature on how wrenching and torturous this process is. Cults are notoriously suspicious of the outside world, which is regarded as impure as well as inferior. This was certainly evident in the insularity of the Sasaki cult. Cults typically shun ex-members, who are now regarded as unclean and potentially dangerous. That may have something to do with the way the Board is now warmly open to new members and protective of those who remained loyal after the scandal, but suspicious of those who, 2½ years ago, opposed the current Board leadership. One of the appeals of the retreats may be that they provide a way of screening and purifying prospective members while keeping away those who might cause trouble.

People who leave cults must also give up values and beliefs that have been central to their lives. The most salient here is probably what some of us call the myth of Sasaki as a great teacher. The evidence that it is a myth starts with the fact that Sasaki left behind no

successor – he refused to name one because he didn't feel that any of his monks or oshos had awakened sufficiently to qualify. OK, why not? There are many awakened Buddhist teachers in the U.S. and Europe now, several with awakened students and successors of their own. Why wasn't Sasaki able to accomplish this? First I argue that despite all his other faults, he was intimately familiar with awakening and was committed to holding others to the same standard (this is discussed at greater length in my book). I think he truly wanted to help others attain it. Unfortunately, he was even more interested in using his charismatic power to make his followers psychologically dependent on him, and to use that to control them. But here we have a contradiction – people who have entered into that kind of dependent state (i.e., become cult members) are not going to be capable of opening up to awakening. Hence, Sasaki can be considered a good teacher only for students who remain free of him.

For all these reasons, it would be easier for some people to free themselves from the emotional hold of the Sasaki cult than others, and for some people to move through the process of freeing themselves more quickly than others. So my suggestion is simply that the Abbot has made a lot more progress along her path than the senior member of the Board has. But that is not a moral judgment – we have to work with what we are. I wish them both well as they continue with their lives.

Finally, I want to end by emphasizing that this report focused only on two questions: why does the BMZC Board essentially ignore the existence of all the people who rose in opposition when the Sasaki scandal broke in 2012, and what does the Board really have in mind when they talk about the “healing process” so incessantly? There is much more than this going on at Bodhi, and I want to also acknowledge the good work that is being done. When I take my dogs out for a walk I occasionally run into someone who is out walking his dog, and we chat. He tells me that, as a beginning meditator, he has really benefitted from driving up to Bodhi on Saturdays to sit with Hosen.

Bravo! That's what this is all about.