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EVERYBODY KNOWS — KYOZAN JOSHU SASAKI ROSHI AND RINZAI-JI

Posted by: Eshu Martin on November 16, 2012



By Eshu Martin

Joshu Sasaki Roshi, the founder and Abbot of Rinzai-ji is now 105 years old, and he has engaged in many forms of inappropriate sexual relationship with those who have come to him as students since his arrival here more than 50 years ago. His career of misconduct has run the gamut from frequent and repeated non-consensual groping of female students during interview, to sexually coercive after hours “tea” meetings, to affairs and sexual interference in the marriages and relationships of his students. Many individuals that have confronted Sasaki and Rinzai-ji about this behaviour have been alienated and eventually excommunicated, or have resigned in frustration when nothing changed; or worst of all, have simply fallen silent and capitulated. For decades, Joshu Roshi’s behaviour has been ignored, hushed up, downplayed, justified, and defended by the monks and students that remain loyal to him.

Based on my own experience as a student and monk in Rinzai-ji from 1995-2008 and many conversations during that time and since, it seems to me that virtually every person who has done significant training with him, the Rinzai-ji board of Directors, and most senior members of the Western Zen community at large know about his misconduct. Yet no one to my knowledge has ever publicly spoken out. Certainly, as an organization, Rinzai-ji has never accepted the responsibility of putting a stop to this abuse, and has never taken any kind of remedial action.

For many years, I have struggled with my own part in this calamity; I have known but have not spoken out. I have watched the situations with Eido Shimano and Genpo Merzel unfold, and I have been overwhelmed by the courage of those brave Zen folk who have stood up to speak the truth, knowing that it would be painful, and would have very real repercussions in their lives, and in the lives of those around them. I have been reminded of the strength and courage that is required to speak the truth when it calls into question an individual of such high standing.

I have decided to come forward now because to allow this kind of abuse to go unacknowledged, when so many of us know it has been happening is, in my opinion, inexcusable. I will not be silent any more. I feel that to ignore the damage caused by Joshu Sasaki and the leaders of Rinzai-ji who allowed it to continue is both a huge disservice to those who have been abused, and a lost opportunity for all of us to learn from our mistakes. I feel obliged to speak the truth about this matter, insofar as I am able to know it. I believe that only by doing so is it possible for any healing to begin. I hope that I may be an example for others, so that they may find the courage to speak out about their experiences with Joshu Sasaki and Rinzai-ji. My hope is that by being accountable to each other, and working together, honestly and transparently, we will all be able to proceed more clearly into the future.



In February of 2011, I contacted several Rinzai-ji Oshos personally and expressed my hope that they would begin to address this issue. I received two responses; the first, from Eshin Godfrey Osho that said, "You ask that I make every effort to address the issue you see of 'inappropriate conduct of Joshu Sasaki Roshi with female students'. This is exceedingly presumptuous of you... not being in the family I do not see you are in a position to expect it." The second response was a brief reply from Koshin Cain Osho that promised a later response, which has never come.

My own personal relationship to Rinzai-ji has been rocky to say the least, and I am no longer a member of their organization. It would be easy to turn the spotlight onto my relationship with Rinzai-ji, and I fully expect that will happen. I am prepared to discuss openly what I know, and how I know it as we go forward. This article is an opening statement for what I hope will be a much broader conversation. I would like to keep the primary point in focus. Whatever conclusions are drawn about me, and my history with Rinzai-ji, it in no way changes the facts regarding Joshu Sasaki's sexual abuse of students these many years. I hope that other more well-established members of the North American Zen community, who have also long known about Sasaki Roshi's sexual misconduct, will step forward to voice their own concerns, so that I do not remain alone in speaking out.

It is my sincere hope that the Oshos and Directors of Rinzai-ji will talk about this issue publicly and accept responsibility for the personal and organizational shortcomings that have allowed this abuse to go on for so long. My hope is that the healing that has been denied to so many victims can finally begin.

All photos provided by Eshu Martin.



Eshu Martin Ordination Part 1 – Mount Baldy Zen Center – January 17, 1999 from Victoria Zen Centre on Vimeo.

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ABOUT ESHU MARTIN



Eshu Martin (born 1972) has been the guiding force behind the Victoria Zen Centre since his arrival in Victoria in 1995. Ordained by Kyozan Joshu Sasaki Roshi in January 1999, Eshu practiced in the Rinzaï-ji lineage of Rinzaï Zen until February 2008. His continuous practice is complemented by his extensive front-line experience both with youth in the care of the Ministry for Children and Family Development, and most recently with Mental Health and Addictions Services for the Vancouver Island Health Authority. Since November of 2005, Eshu has been dedicated full-time to the practice and development of the Victoria Zen Centre and the Buddhist community on Vancouver Island.

