

MAEZUMI, TAIZAN

Hakuyū Taizan Maezumi (前角 博雄, February 24, 1931—May 15, 1995), aka Hirotaka Kuroda, was a Japanese-born Soto Zen priest with dharma transmission in both the Rinzai Zen school and the Harada-Yasutani lineage.(1) Along with other seminal figures like Shunryu Suzuki and Dainin Katagiri, Maezumi roshi played an important role in helping to establish Soto Zen practice in the United States. James Ishmael Ford, a Zen priest and an American Zen historian of sorts, writes, “Taizan Maezumi is probably the most important koan master to come West...the first Zen teacher in the West to receive formal Dharma transmission in the Soto, Rinzai, and Harada-Yasutani lines.”(4)

His legacy is one of inspiration and tragedy. Widely acknowledged as an individual with insight, Maezumi also suffered from alcoholism and engaged in romantic relationships with some of his female students.(4) He died on May 15, 1995 in Japan after a night of heavy drinking, returning home and drawing the fateful bath in which he fell asleep and drowned. According to James Ishmael Ford, this incident appears to have occurred following a long period of abstinence.(4) According to authors Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright in their book *Zen Masters*, “Maezumi was by all accounts an impressive Zen master – someone who it was impossible not to love and respect – but with weaknesses and vulnerabilities that derived from the simple fact that he was also finite and human. While living a truly profound and visionary Zen life, Maezumi Roshi was at the same time mortal and vulnerable to the tragedies of life.”(3)

Biography

Hakuyū Taizan Maezumi was born Hirotaka Kuroda in Otawara, Tochigi Prefecture, Japan on February 24, 1931 to Yoshiko Kuroda-Maezumi and Baian Hakujun Kuroda (a respected Soto Zen priest).(1) He was third eldest of eight brothers, four of whom went on to be Soto Zen priests.(4) Ordained as a Soto Zen monk at age eleven on March 25, 1942 and given the ordination name Taizan (meaning, *Great Mountain*)(4), Maezumi received degrees in Oriental Literature and Philosophy from Komazawa University; he also did some Zen training at one of the two main training monasteries for the Soto-shu in Japan, Sojiji.(2) He took on his mother's family name Maezumi when the last of the males in her family passed away and used the Sino-Japanese pronunciation of his first name, changing it from Hirotaka to Hakuyū.(4)

1. [Appreciate Your Life: The Essence of Zen Practice \(Shambhala Classics\)](#) \$21.93
2. [On Zen Practice: Body, Breath, and Mind](#) \$12.30
3. [The Hazy Moon of Enlightenment: Part of the On Zen Practice collection](#) \$15.50
4. [Teaching of the Great Mountain: Zen Talks by Taizan Maezumi](#) \$14.95

Ads by Amazon 

Maezumi received dharma transmission from his father, Soto Zen priest Baian Hakuju Kuroda, in 1955(1), performing his Zuse ceremony at both Sojiji and Eihei-ji that year, according to tradition. While at Komazawa University, Maezumi met the late lay Rinzai Zen teacher Koryu Osaka roshi, who he continued maintaining a relationship over the years and received dharma transmission from later, in 1973.(4)

Los Angeles

Taizan Maezumi arrived in Los Angeles in 1956 and served as a missionary Soto Zen priest at the Japanese Soto-shu's American headquarters, Zenshuji Soto Mission (see <http://www.zenshuji.org/>).(1) While serving the needs of his Japanese-American congregation at Zenshuji in Los Angeles, Maezumi also had a growing number of American students coming to him for instruction. He spent a couple of years studying English at San Francisco State college.(4) In 1967, following almost a decade of service to the temple, Maezumi roshi left Zenshuji and established the Zen Center of Los Angeles with some of his American students.(7) Also around this time Maezumi married and started to have children.(1)

He also attended the opening ceremony that year for Tassajara, the first Soto Zen training monastery in the United States established by Shunryu Suzuki roshi(3); 1967 was also the year that he met Haku'un Yasutani, then the head of the Sanbo-Kyodan in Japan (beginning formal studies under him). During this period, Yasutani roshi would sometimes visit the Zen Center of Los Angeles to touch in on Maezumi's koan work and also to lead sesshin and retreats.(3) Maezumi roshi completed his koan studies under Yasutani roshi and received his dharma transmission in 1970.(4) In 1973, Maezumi roshi also received dharma transmission from Koryu Osaka roshi, the lay Rinzai Zen teacher whom he met years earlier as a student at Komazawa University in Japan.(4)

During the 1970s, the Zen Center of Los Angeles experienced great growth.(3) It was a residential Zen center, with members of the sangha living side-by-side. When it first began, it was largely a Latino neighborhood consisting of people from places like Guatemala and El Salvador. Over time, the Zen center

bought up a good portion of their block and also a large building the next block down (one which proved to be a maintenance nightmare). In the early 1980s membership was at all-time highs, a period which tapered off when Tetsugen Bernard Glassman, John Daido Looi, and others left to go back to New York. Also in the 1980s the neighborhood became part of Koreatown and the demographic and nature of the neighborhood changed.(5)

In 1976 he founded the Kuroda Institute of Transcultural Studies, today known as the Kuroda Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Human Values, affiliated with the University of Hawaii. Maezumi was also active in encouraging the formation of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association (SZBA) – a loose organization of North American Soto Zen teachers which fosters dialogue between the various, dispersed lineages of Soto Zen in North America.(4) The SZBA was established the year after Maezumi's death in 1996 and consisted originally of teachers in the Maezumi roshi and Suzuki roshi lineages. Founding Board members were Tenshin Reb Anderson, Chozen Bays, Tetsugen Glassman, Keido Les Kaye, Jakusho Kwong, Daido Looi, Genpo Merzel, and Sojun Mel Weitsman.(8)

Death

Maezumi died on May 15, 1995 in Japan after a night of heavy drinking, returning home and drawing the fateful bath in which he fell asleep and drowned. According to James Ishmael Ford, this incident appears to have occurred following a long period of abstinence.(4) He is survived by his wife Martha Ekyo Maezumi and their three children, Kirsten Mitsuyo, Yuri Jundo and Shira Yoshimi.(2)

Alcoholism & Sexual Misconduct

In 1983, during a monthly meeting which was being filmed by documentary filmmaker Anne Cushman, some female sangha members chose to use the opportunity to disclose their sexual relationships with Maezumi roshi. According to Al Fusho Rapaport, once a member of ZCLA, "That's when the big meltdown happened and a lot of people left."(5)

Maezumi roshi also publicly admitted that he was an alcoholic during this period and sought treatment at the Betty Ford Clinic. Some scholars, experts and former students have considered the role alcohol may have played in Maezumi's fulfillment of a Zen master role to students. What may have seemed like drunken behavior in a stranger might have been interpreted by disciples as proof of an awakened, spontaneous lifestyle.

Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright have written in their book *Zen Masters*:

“It may be that over time liquor came to play a particular role with Maezumi’s Zen personality. He was known to have a highly attuned sense of humor while drinking. Students recall quick-minded jokes and puns, even occasions when Maezumi would break into hilarious skits such as geisha impersonations.”(3)

The pair go on to write that:

“...there could have been a significant relationship developing over time between alcohol consumption and the spontaneous and unique verbal behaviors expected of an authentic Zen master.”(3)

According to the book *Buddhist Studies from India to America: Essays in Honor of Charles S. Prebish*:

“ZCLA has been through a serious scandal in 1983 (partially growing out of a culture of alcohol abuse, led by Maezumi), Maezumi’s sudden death in 1995, and another scandal that resulted in his first successor as Abbot being displaced. Though these events, especially the first, damaged ZCLA, there has been no mass exodus of its students to other teachers or centers. ZCLA continues to be one of the largest Zen institutions in the West.”(7)

Remembered

In his past interview here at Sweeping Zen, Maezumi’s dharma successor and current President of the White Plum Asanga Gerry Shishin Wick, remembers:

“Like many of the Asian teachers who came to the West, Maezumi Roshi spent his teaching life spreading the Dharma to Westerners—he was able to make a heart connection with his students. He was both gentle and fierce when he needed to be. Although Maezumi Roshi was a Soto priest, he also succeeded the Dharma from a lay Rinzai teacher, Koryu Osaka Roshi and from Yasutani Roshi who melded the two major Zen traditions of Soto and Rinzai. So Maezumi Roshi’s students were offered the best of both traditions—the intense koan study of Rinzai and the silent illumination of Soto. The depth and influence of his training can be gauged by the diversity and influence of his successors, including: Bernie Glassman, Genpo Merzel, Daido Looi, Joko Beck and Jan Chozen Bays.

My experience is that in the dokusan room, Maezumi Roshi was highly skilled in cutting off delusion and directing the student to deepen his or her realization and practice. He had some character flaws,

which have been well publicized, but his primary focus never wavered from sharing himself and his understanding of the Dharma with his students. He was always accessible to those who were serious about their Zen practice.”(6)

Former ZCLA resident Al Tendo Fusho Rapaport, himself a lay Zen teacher, was not close to the late roshi but remembers:

“Maezumi roshi was a huge adherent of Dogen Zenji and he gave some wonderful talks on Dogen Zenjis’ works that I only understood a portion of at the time. But, having reflected back on some of those talks, I have realized that he was coming from a very deep perspective. I now feel that teachers who have alcohol and sexuality as an issue with students just haven’t worked on that part of themselves, probably because they’ve never had any training in that regard. It doesn’t mean they haven’t had deep awakening, in a different sense. So, many of his talks were wonderful. I had had some personal interactions with him at events that were really interesting. He had a very powerful presence, even when falling down drunk.”(5)
