



White Plums and Lizard Tails: The story of Maezumi Roshi and his American Lineage

BY NOA JONES | MARCH 1, 2004



The story of a great Zen teacher—Taizan Maezumi Roshi—and his dharma heirs. Finding innovative ways to express their late teacher's inspiration, the White Plum sangha is one of the most vital in Western Buddhism.

Spring is blossom season in Japan. Drifts of petals like snow decorate the parks and streets.

On May 15, 1995, in this season of renewal, venerable Zen master Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi Roshi wrote an inka poem bestowing final approval on his senior disciple, Tetsugen Glassman Sensei, the “eldest son” of the White Plum sangha, placed it in an envelope and

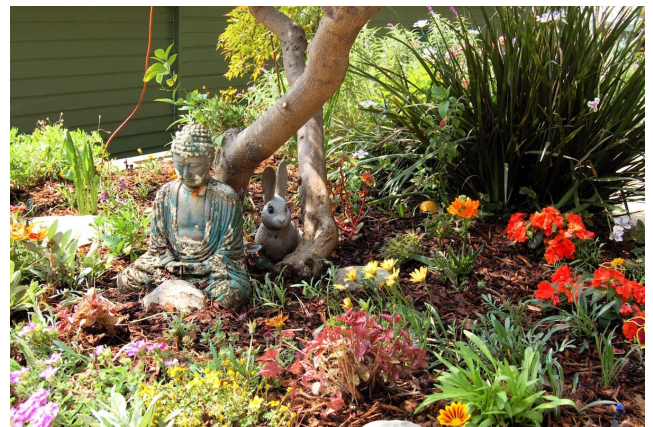


Photo by [Big Mind Zen Center](#).

gave it to his brothers. Hours later, before dawn broke over the trees of Tokyo, Maezumi Roshi drowned. His death shocked his successors, students, wife and children, and the Zen community at large. At age 64, he was head of one of the most vital lineages of Zen in America; he was seemingly healthy, fresh from retreat, invigorated by his work and focused on practice. Recently elected a Bishop, he was at the zenith of his sometimes rocky relationship with the Japanese Soto sect. But before he'd barely started, he was gone.

Senior students scrambled for tickets and flew from points around the world to attend the cremation in Tokyo. Three months later, at the public ceremony in Los Angeles, Maezumi Roshi's adopted home, Jan Chozen Bays read a poem to an eclectic crowd of mourners—11 of Maezumi's 12 first generation successors, including Glassman (now also known by his clown name, Bernie the Boobysattva), Dennis Genpo Merzel and John Daido Looi, plus third and fourth generation dharma heirs, rabbi roshis, professor successors, Catholic priest senseis and others. Chozen Roshi wept as she recited:

I knew the watch and glasses
but not the face they said was yours
there cold in drifts of white flower petals.

They said it was your body
we carried in kesa-covered box.
How could I know?
Before you always carried us.

Soon they bring us sharp white bone pieces.
Wait!
Now I know you.
Now I know you.

Losing your teacher. Imagine setting sail in a shark-infested, choppy ocean without a ship, without clothes even. The loss of a spiritual guide has sent populations spiraling into a state of confusion throughout history. All Buddhist schools have known the perilous vacuum left by the death of a guru or a roshi. Shi'ites and Sunnis wasted no time starting wars upon

Muhammad's death. Sons and daughters battled in the void that Swami Muktananda left behind. The Mormon Church divided into twelve quorums following the execution of Joseph Smith. Even baboons are prone to quarrel when the dominant dies.

And so there they were, over five hundred students suddenly naked and at sea. Would they sink? Dissolve into other sanghas? Float to other gurus? Or would they learn to swim?

Taizan Maezumi's own journey began at sea in 1956 when he bought a one-way ticket on a freighter to Los Angeles, where he would assume a position as priest under Bishop Togan Sumi at Zenshuji Temple, the Soto headquarters of the United States. "He came with a mission," says Daido Roshi, abbot of Zen Mountain Center in upstate New York, "not just to transmit the dharma to his immediate successors, but to envision the future generations and what they would need."

At the time, many traditional institutions in Japan were declining into bureaucracies. Monks survived by performing rituals—Yasutani Roshi called them "funeral directors." But in the West, outmoded models of God and religious systems were being tested by the progressive elite, proto-hippie beats and academia. The Zen stirrings of Alan Watts, Gary Snyder and other early students attracted seekers who, though maybe a bit doe-eyed, showed great enthusiasm for authentic study. "Those days I think Zen across the board was a hippie Zen," says Daido Roshi. "It was more romance and fascination with the aesthetic than a religious calling."

Many found the teachings of D.T. Suzuki, which lead East Coast scholars to Eido Tai Shimano Roshi and Phillip Kaplaeu. Shunryu Suzuki Roshi was attracting students in San Francisco, but the Zen Center and Green Gulch were still a twinkle in his eye. Southern California was without a major center and without a teacher.

Maezumi, then only a sensei, was an unknown, but he had qualifications, training and a valuable rebellious streak. He was a product of World War II: during the occupation of Japan, a group of American soldiers used his family temple to house anti-aircraft missiles. He was a curious teenager eager to learn English, and free lessons came in the form of hanging out with the soldiers. They also taught the young monk, ordained at 11 like most

boys born into temple families, to smoke cigarettes and drink beer.

Maezumi's father, Baian Hakujun Kuroda Roshi, head of the Soto Sect Supreme Court and one of the leading figures of Japanese Soto Zen, sent the young Taizan Maezumi to live with the famed Rinzai teacher Osaka Koryu Roshi. Departing from his family's tradition, Maezumi studied koans with Koryu Roshi and went on to receive degrees in Oriental Literature and Philosophy from Komazawa University. He then finished his early training at Soji-ji, one of the two main Soto monasteries in Japan. When he received shiho from his father in 1955 (shiho is the dharma lineage transmission that authorizes a person to teach), he became a Soto sensei.

What made Maezumi Roshi so extraordinary was his official recognition by both major schools of Zen. Haku'un Yasutani Roshi of the Rinzaï sect approved him as a teacher in 1970, as did Koryu Osaka Roshi in 1972, both bestowing shiho and inka (the Rinzaï tradition of final approval). Transmissions by these three masters—his father, Haku'un Yasutani Roshi and Koryu Osaka Roshi—confirmed him as an independent teacher and dharma successor in three separate lineages.

But it was the American soldiers and their English lessons that gave Taizan Maezumi Sensei the edge he needed to be sent across the Pacific. The Japanese Mission in Los Angeles needed an English speaker—but not to teach Zen to Americans. “The Japanese community often suffered under painful racial prejudice and wanted to gather together for comfort in familiar rituals,” says Chozen Roshi. “They wanted keep to their culture and language alive for their children.”

This meant, for Maezumi, performing funerals and marriages, not formal Zen practice. He dug in nevertheless, enduring long hours at the Soto Mission, completing his own koan studies, performing memorials and services while moonlighting as a translator, writing fortune cookies, working as a gardener and never forgetting his vow to serve the dharma.

By the late 1960s, American students in Los Angeles started sniffing around Little Tokyo for a teacher. People like Bernie Glassman (then an aeronautical engineer at McDonnell-Douglas) and Charlotte Joko Beck had already tasted what Zen practice had to offer, but

were seeking direct, ongoing contact with a master. Maezumi Sensei, though still busy serving the Japanese community, answered the call.

He began holding gatherings in a room at the temple. His orientation towards zazen, sitting practice, set him apart from the bishops who ministered to the Japanese congregation. Maezumi Roshi's style was warm, dynamic and direct. He lettered a sign on the zendo reading, "If you want to clarify the Great Matter of life and death you are welcome. Otherwise, better get out!" Buddhanature was "so obvious—" he would say, "right before your eyes."

"He could see through the camouflage of personality and talk straight to the seeker beneath," says Chozen Roshi.

"His task was to introduce Zen to us," says Glassman. "We were to swallow what we could, and then manifest it in our way, and spit up what didn't make sense for us."

Word spread quickly. Maezumi Sensi left the temple and moved to an apartment, then into a house in the heart of Koreatown. He threw himself into teaching. "His life belonged to his students," says Daido Roshi. "He gave himself completely to the teachings."

Under his guidance a sangha came together and matured. The dilettantes left and serious practitioners stayed. What developed was White Plum Asanga, one of the most successful lineages of Zen in the West. Through Maezumi's teachings and transmissions, a community of well-trained yet individualistic students took root. "He had a really great vow to spread the dharma and help people realize the nature of life," says Wendy Egyoku Nakao Sensi, a third generation dharma heir who received transmission from Bernie Glassman. "Roshi was so clear about it that it didn't really matter when the obstacles came."

From the start the program was rigorous, with an emphasis on zazen and weeklong practice sesshins. The main course was traditional koan study—memorization of and reflection on hundreds of paradoxical passages whose very impossibility points to the nature of ultimate reality. Each koan requires intense one-on-one time between teacher and student; they will wrestle with the paradox until the master feels the student has grasped its meaning,

transcended it and is ready to move on to the next. Such immediate contact with Maezumi helped solidify their trust in him and vice versa.

Egyoku Sensei is now abbot of Zen Center of Los Angeles Buddha Essence Temple, the “mother temple of the lineage” established by Maezumi Roshi in 1967. She says that, around the time Maezumi Roshi started it, ZCLA attracted determined Zen students. Scores of them. The center began swallowing up neighboring properties, eventually occupying an entire city block. Genpo Roshi and Bernie Glassman quit their day jobs and became residents.

As visiting teachers in Boulder in 1976, Glassman and Genpo Roshi observed the naissance of Naropa Institute and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s energetic sangha. Genpo Roshi says he parlayed lessons learned from Trungpa Rinpoche (he calls Rinpoche his “dharma uncle”) into organized community-building of the White Plum sangha. The LA sangha mushroomed. “From a group of eight resident members in 1972, we had more than 100 people sitting zazen on a daily basis,” recalls Genpo Roshi. Though the numbers were high, Maezumi Roshi maintained deeply personal relationships with his students. He began giving mind-to-mind transmission, a tradition that linked his students to the great masters of the past: Yasutani Roshi, Soto sect founder Dogen Zenji Roshi, Bodhidharma and Buddha Shakyamuni himself.

The LA center was the first of six that Maezumi Roshi founded in the United States, South America and Europe. He was meticulous about following the forms of his tradition, and this meant getting the paperwork done correctly. He formally registered each center, each dharma heir and every monk with Soto Headquarters in Japan.

Meanwhile, he was also building his own family. He married Martha Ekyo Maezumi, a cultural anthropology student, in 1975 after two years of courtship. They had three children together, Kirsten Mitsuyo, Yuri Jundo and Shira “Yoshi” Yoshimi. But, Ekyo admits, “his focus was always on his students and their practice. We wanted some time and attention too but it wasn’t always there. It was unfortunate, but we all adored him and enjoyed as much time as we could together. It certainly wasn’t easy.”

Doctors often tell elderly patients that having a small heart attack is a blessing. Seismologists consider little earthquakes good news. These little episodes respectively strengthen the cardiovascular system and release the pressure of the earth. This principle could be applied to the White Plum sangha, which in 1983 suffered a crisis that arrested hearts and shook the ground for many students.

When Maezumi Roshi admitted in public that he was an alcoholic, he did so with deep remorse. But remorse alone could not prevent a mass exodus. Puritanical American idealism with its unrealistic expectations led many to assume the master was above vices. “In fact he was a great teacher with unresolved issues,” recalls long-time student John Daishin Buksbazen. “It knocked the idea of the perfect guru into a cocked hat.”

Seeing their Japanese master at a human level forced students to re-examine their own motivations. Why had they come here? Some came to work out personal problems, seeking salvation, seeking answers to the great “Who am I?” and “What is reality?” questions. Others came looking for bliss experiences without drugs. And some were merely attracted to the exoticness of Zen aesthetics and form. Whatever the reasons, suddenly they had to assess what practice meant to them and jettison the rest. ZCLA began to sell off its properties. Many made a permanent break from the group, including Maezumi’s third heir, Charlotte Joko Beck.

One of those who felt the crisis most keenly was Ekyo Maezumi, Roshi’s wife. But she speaks without a trace of bitterness. “It helped the students to see that the teacher wasn’t omnipotent and the teacher was human,” says Ekyo. “It made each person realize that they were responsible for their practice.” Using money sent from Maezumi Roshi’s mother, Ekyo moved the children to Idyllwild, a small California mountain community. With time, she gained perspective: “I can take it as a learning experience.”

There were others who felt the same. In a revealing documentary shot by Ann Cushman at the time of the crisis, one student expressed heartbroken joy with his fallen guru. “Disillusionment is great,” he told the camera crew. “It means I’ve stopped being illusioned and from that point of view my relationship with the teacher has worked. I am not angry, but

free.”

Genpo Roshi was not fazed. “Many of us were already quite independent, so I think we were not as hard hit,” he says. “So much depended on where you were in your practice. I always felt with Roshi that the deepest connection was to his realization and understanding and that was never shaken by how he manifested in his life.”

Egyoku Sensei found the sangha ultimately resilient. “This community has an incredible capacity to regenerate itself.” She likens it to a lizard. “Its tail is cut off but it keeps coming back. That event doesn’t define us. It was a pruning. Life pruned us. We had to look at it and ask what does the sangha need to grow again?”

Like the abrupt removal of training wheels, the episode was scary and then exhilarating. While Maezumi focused his efforts on the Zen Mountain Center in Idyllwild, senior students began fanning out, setting up their own orders and experimenting with the form. “Through training, all the talents and knowledge we had developed for our own success became tools for the dharma,” says Chozen Roshi.

And for the most part, those talents were channeled to serve others. Glassman had already moved east to set up the Zen Community of New York. He began drifting apart from White Plum as an institution but stayed connected to the practice and lineage through his interpretation of Zen as social action. He founded the much-written-about Greyston Bakery and the more recent Peacemaker Order. Daido Roshi, originally a military man and an artist (a student of the legendary photographer Minor White), emphasized monastic Zen meditation and koan study at his center but with the radical change of training men and women together. He also started a publishing company, a prison program and various environmental initiatives.

Genpo Roshi, once a competitive athlete, was one of the most experimental teachers of the second generation. After teaching in Europe and establishing the international Kanzeon sangha, he settled in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he developed the Big Mind technique, a blend of Jungian psychology and Zen. Genpo Roshi discovered that by asking a few Socratic questions, he could “bring about a transcendent experience, opening up the Zen eye or

Buddha eye.” It’s a bold statement.

“I am sure this seems like a quick fix and in a way it is, but Zen has always been known as the sudden school. Zen masters are always seeking ways to create a sudden enlightenment so it is well within our tradition to be non-traditional,” says Genpo Roshi with disarming confidence. “Zen teachers have always been a bit bizarre.”

“We don’t have to all do what Genpo is doing because he is doing that,” says Egyoku Sensi, who is busy with her own groundbreaking ideas. “But we can respect and trust that expression and learn from his experiences.”

“One of the things about Zen is that it has the ability to take the shape of the container it is in,” explains Daido Lorie. “The fundamental teaching is the same—which is basically awakening and realization—but the upaya, the skillful means people use, changes.”

It takes considerable skillful means to find trustworthy students. The White Plum sangha is comprised of the 12 direct lineage holders of Maezumi Roshi, and all of four generations of their heirs. Glassman was the first to name his own successor, giving shiho to writer Peter Matthiessen, who founded Sagaponack Zendo. Glassman went on to ordain 16 others, including rabbis, Catholic priests and poets. He sought people who would not emulate him but who could “realize the essence of Zen, strictly realizing and actualizing the oneness of life.” How each student interpreted or manifested that was up to the individual. The only constant was an emphasis on daily zazen practice. “But for me that’s like emphasizing eating as part of the day,” says Glassman.

About fifty successors have since been named in the lineage worldwide but even with White Plum’s annual meetings, it’s hard to keep track. Daido Roshi likens it to a large extended family. “I know some of the successors,” he says, “but they have successors who I wouldn’t know if I ran into them on the street. The one thing that connects us is that we came from the same teacher.”

Naming heirs involves traditional, esoteric shiho ceremonies that take place over the course of a week. Details are not for public discussion. But everyone would say that naming an heir

is profoundly personal. “What we are talking about is human experience which is a very difficult thing to put to words except poetry,” says Daido Roshi. How does a teacher know how his or her heir should be? “It is like asking someone how he knows he is in love. It is an intuitive sense of recognition. Not so rational.”

“You know when you know that they know what you know,” says Genpo Roshi. “You see that they see through the same eyes.”

After things settled down, Maezumi Roshi continued teaching, holding retreats and leading his students to (paraphrasing Dogen Roshi’s words) study the self, forget the self and be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas. “He had the meatiest, juiciest time as a teacher ahead of him, he was reaching a nice ripe old age,” says Genpo Roshi. But just when the sangha seemed to be riding smoothly, their teacher let go. On the spring day when Maezumi Roshi died, it was again time to prune.

In his will, Maezumi named Bernie Glassman as president of White Plum. Glassman assumed the role, convening an annual meeting with all the heirs, seeing to appointments and guiding the sangha, but only until the dust settled. The group still meets once a year, usually in the early spring, but Glassman no longer attends. And while he will always be part of the lineage, he does not consider himself part of the organization. Genpo Roshi is the current president of White Plum. “I think I am vice president,” says Daido Roshi. “It’s not that formal. We hang out, usually for a couple of days. It’s celebratory and at the same time business.”

Egyoku Sensei was put in charge of ZCLA after several bumpy attempts at reorganization. Maezumi’s shoes were not easy to fill. “Our founding teacher had died. We had to strip it down again,” she says. “We had to ask, ‘What are the ingredients left? What was our legacy? Who is willing to work?’”

It took time and a forceful act of nature for Egyoku to accept her new role. In December 1997, a fire started by a space heater in what used to be Maezumi Roshi’s residence at ZCLA, where Egyoku Sensei was trying to make her home. Afterwards, a fireman took her to survey the room, gutted and charred. Suddenly, Maezumi Roshi appeared by her side. “Something

is gone now,” he said. “That’s a good thing, Egyoku. Now do what you have to do here.” She finally felt a release that allowed her to completely overhaul the center. “Nothing has been left unturned. But someday it will be cut back again.”

The successors all seem to agree that Maezumi’s trust in them is the backbone of the strong legacy. It allowed them to own the teachings. “It’s not about preserving something, it’s about making it grow,” says Egyoku Sensei. “It was not for him to develop American Zen in the West. His job was plant the seeds. What it would look like, how it would manifest, was up to us. He had tremendous faith in us.”

Genpo Roshi recalls that just before his death, Maezumi Roshi said he felt he was a hindrance to the dharma taking root. “In a way, his death was a gift—it freed us. The ball was handed over and we had to develop new ways of approaching the teaching in the West.”

And that meant tweaking tradition. Genpo Roshi decided not to make any drastic changes for at least a year. “I knew this would be a rocky time and a time to just grieve,” he says. “After that I started making lots of changes.”

With Genpo Roshi in charge, Glassman was free to focus on building the Greyston Mandala and his international Zen Peacemaker Order. He renounced his monastic vows and gave up his elegant Zen robes in favor of street clothes and a clown nose. The term “traditional Zen” does not compute with Glassman. “Maezumi Roshi was not carrying out the tradition of the Japanese Soto sect when he came here,” he says. “The Soto sect of Japan was not carrying out the traditions of Chinese Zen. You have to be careful with the word ‘traditional.’ We honor a lot of eccentric people.” He likens it to Snow White’s seven dwarves, each with his own style. “And I’m Dopey,” he says.

But it is unlikely that Dopey could have established a multi-million dollar commercial enterprise that not only provides tasty cakes and bread but also supports a network of community development organizations. Which is what Bernie the Boobysatva and his successors have done in the name of Zen. Greyston Mandala now employs several hundred people in Yonkers at its highly successful bakery, and serves a few thousand more by providing housing, an AIDS clinic, childcare and other services. Construction on a new \$10

million complex designed by Maya Lin is under way.

Glassman continues to clown at refugee camps, meet with Israel peace groups, and has developed an “internet of activists and activist groups” he calls Indra’s Net. “Each one of us is a jewel in the node of a giant net,” he says, “and each jewel reflects every other jewel.” By linking up, “we can be a more active force in social change.”

The sangha did not sink after Maezumi’s death, it did not dissolve. Buoyed like petals strewn on the water, the heirs of Maezumi Roshi are going their own way—from streets of New York to Salt Lake City to Tel Aviv to an island off of the Dutch coast. Egyoku Sensei, a natural born organizer, has masterfully restructured ZCLA, creating a model of healthy center administration based on shared stewardship. She also introduced a lineage of women to the sangha by researching great female masters of the past, like the first Buddhist nun, Mahaprajapati Gotami Mahatheri, and including their names in the chants. Chozen Roshi, a pediatrician and a mother, has focused on what she calls a “family-style” Zen at her center in Oregon “with an eye on abuse of power and boundary crossing issues.” Genpo Roshi recently gave shiho to two new successors and teaches Big Mind seminars around the world. Maezumi’s children are also blossoming—Yuri is heading off to study French cuisine at the Cordon Bleu, Yoshi is on the dean’s list at UCSB and Kirsten is pursuing an acting career in Hollywood.

“To me, Maezumi’s genius lay in his ability to see the buddhanature and also teaching potential in many different kinds of people,” says Chozen Roshi. “There are some Zen teachers who have no successors or maybe one or two. Maezumi was more the Tibetan style—scatter the seeds widely, some will grow and some will not. We won’t know for several generations which of his successors have established lineages that will continue.”

What we know for sure, though, is how Maezumi Roshi felt about the dharma. On the evening of his death, in the inka poem he wrote to Bernie Glassman, he said,

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