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Humanizing the Image of a Zen Master: Taizan Maezumi Roshi

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Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi Roshi (1931–1995) was the founder of the Zen Center of Los Angeles and one of the seminal figures in the history of American Zen Buddhism. His charismatic image as a Zen master helped define Zen for American culture, and by virtue of his giving authorization to twelve dharma heirs, his legacy continues to shape the further development of Zen practice in the West. Although he was an impressive and ground-breaking Zen master by any standard, the story of Maezumi Roshi's life is not without ambiguity and controversy. Indeed, it is difficult not to sense some degree of tragedy in this story. This double-edged complexity in the life of the Zen master is the primary element that differentiates the account of Maezumi's life from the idealized narratives of classical Zen masters, and for that reason is one significant factor that defines both his personal image and the image of contemporary American Zen.

The first part of this chapter is a biographical account of the life of Maezumi from his early training in Japanese Zen Buddhism through his formative work in the American Zen tradition to the difficulties that shook his career and to his death in 1995. The second part explores the image of Maezumi Roshi as a Zen master. It asks what this image is, how it has been formed, and to what extent Maezumi's Zen image aligns with the paradigmatic lives of the classical Zen tradition.¹

The Life of Hakuyu Maezumi

Hakuyu Maezumi was born directly into the cultural world of Japanese Zen Buddhism on February 24, 1931, in Otawara City, Tochigi prefecture. His father, Hakujun Kuroda Roshi, was an important priest in the Sōtō lineage of Zen Buddhism, serving in a variety of important administrative positions, including head of the Sōtō sect's Supreme Court.² Partly as a consequence of his significant position within the Zen sect, all six of his surviving sons would later become Zen priests. Although Maezumi was one of six brothers in the Kuroda family, rather than adopt his father's surname, as would have been customary, he was given his mother's family name—Maezumi—in order to perpetuate that family name, since his mother had no brothers to extend their lineage.³

Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the beginning of the Pacific segment of the Second World War, Maezumi at age eleven was ordained a Sōtō Zen monk on March 25, 1942.⁴ Given the ordination name Taizan, meaning Great Mountain, he began the discipline of Zen training at his father's temple, Koshinji.⁵ Although simultaneously attending the local school, the young novice was focused on Zen training, which he already knew would be his lifelong vocation. Maezumi began to learn English in his teens through contact with American soldiers who were stationed in his home area after the war. During one period, American occupation soldiers employed his father's temple as their base, giving the young monk direct contact with American-English language and culture, a factor that would affect his entire life and career.⁶

At the age of sixteen, while continuing his training to become a Sōtō priest, Maezumi left home to go to Tokyo to begin study under Koryu Osaka Roshi, a lay Rinzai Zen master and friend of Maezumi's father.⁷ Koryu Roshi focused on Zen training for the laity, an emphasis that would years later be of great significance to Maezumi. Maezumi's work with Koryu Roshi was also the first step in his hybrid Zen education, which blurred the traditional boundaries of separation between the two most prominent Zen institutions in Japan. Four years later, he began his university studies at Komazawa University, the primary center of Sōtō Zen education, graduating with degrees in East Asian philosophy and literature in 1954.⁸ A year later, at twenty-four years of age, Maezumi was given dharma transmission (*shiho*) by his father⁹ and completed his training at the two principle Sōtō monasteries, Eiheiji and Sōjiji, where he performed the "honorary abbot" or *zuise* ceremony that same year.

A Zen Priest in California

Probably because of his English-language skills, Maezumi was given the assignment by the Sōtō School of Zen to travel to the United States to serve Japanese immigrants as a priest in California. Traveling with an inexpensive one-way ticket on a freighter ship, Maezumi took up residence in Los Angeles in 1956, at the age of twenty-five.¹⁰ His assignment was to perform priestly duties at Zenshuji Temple, the Sōtō headquarters in the United States, at that time under the leadership of Togan Sumi.¹¹ Although this work was often conducted in Japanese, there were numerous English-language dimensions to the task, including ministering to the second and third generations of Japanese immigrants, for whom English was becoming the dominant language. Maezumi studied English in Los Angeles at Pasadena City College and later at San Francisco State University, where in 1959 he would meet Shunryu Suzuki and other early pioneers in American Zen.¹²

Maezumi's responsibilities as a Sōtō Zen priest stationed in California included weekly services, funerals, memorials, weddings, and other ceremonies required by the immigrant population of California. These were difficult times economically, in Japan and in the United States, and Maezumi held a series of part-time jobs to make ends meet, working whenever he could as a gardener and a translator for Japanese businessmen in Los Angeles. At one point, Maezumi is reported to have composed fortunes for Chinese fortune cookies!¹³ Maezumi was married during this period, but the marriage was unsuccessful and ended in divorce.

In spite of the widespread lack of interest in rigorous Zen training in his new environment, Maezumi continued his own advancement in the study of Zen after arrival in the New World, engaging in meditation, *kōan* study, and textual study whenever he had the opportunity. He read Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* with Reirin Yamada Roshi, the bishop of the American Sōtō mission, and engaged in serious *kōan* study with Nyogen Senzaki, a Rinzaï Zen teacher who was at that time teaching in Los Angeles. Senzaki was the first Zen teacher to reside in the United States and had already accepted several European-American students interested in Zen, among them Robert Aitken.¹⁴ His influence on Maezumi includes the previously unimaginable idea that Zen practices might be of interest to people whose heritage was not originally Buddhist.

Indeed, by the late 1950s that interest was already developing in San Francisco among a handful of Beat poets and writers. What was particularly attractive about Zen, however, was not the rigorous *zazen* and *kōan* study that Maezumi and others would be teaching a decade later, but rather the unusual discourse and eccentric behaviors of the masters of the "golden age" of Chinese Chan

described in the classic literature of Zen, which at that time was being translated and narrated by D. T. Suzuki. Given the character of postwar American culture, the discipline of Zen was not what would initially attract attention to this spiritual tradition. In spite of a lack of interest among his own parishioners at Zenshuji in Los Angeles, Maezumi held weekly *zazen* meditation sessions at the temple. It would not be long, however, before interest in Zen meditation would spread through the youth movement in American culture.

Perhaps most significant for the formation of his identity as a teacher of Zen, Maezumi met Hakuun Yasutani Roshi, becoming a disciple in the early sixties just as Maezumi was forming the Zen Center of Los Angeles and bringing his interest in *kōan* studies to fruition.¹⁵ Yasutani and his teacher, Daiun Harada, were instrumental in the revitalization of Zen in Japan that was beginning to take place after the war. These teachers combined Rinzai and Sōtō styles of teaching in a way that ignored the traditional bifurcation between these two schools of Zen. They revised Rinzai *kōan* practice in the setting of Sōtō emphasis on *shikantaza*—“just sitting.” Yasutani stressed rigorous discipline in Zen training and focused on the prospects of “sudden awakening” as the goal of Zen. Eventually this would be the formula for Zen that would attract non-Asian interest, and the success of a book by one of Yasutani’s students—Phillip Kapleau—would lay the foundations for American Zen by describing rigorous Zen practice in a way that would attract a widespread following. Yasutani was the Zen master featured in Kapleau’s *The Three Pillars of Zen*,¹⁶ and his fame spread quickly in the United States and Japan. When Yasutani visited the United States for lectures and *sesshin* trainings, Maezumi served as translator and interpreter.¹⁷ Their relationship was fundamental to the Zen identity that Maezumi was fashioning during that period of time.

In 1969, Maezumi returned to Japan to complete his *kōan* training under Yasutani Roshi, placing the newly formed Zen Center under the leadership of his foremost student and eventual heir, Bernie Glassman. Fourteen months later, in December of 1970, Maezumi Roshi received *inka* approval from Yasutani Roshi.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in 1970 Koryu Osaka Roshi, the friend of Maezumi’s father and the Rinzai Zen teacher with whom Maezumi had studied in the fifties while at Komazawa University, came to the Zen Center of Los Angeles, there renewing the teacher-student relationship that the two had cultivated years earlier. Over the next several years Maezumi completed his *kōan* training with Koryu Roshi and, in 1973, received *inka* authorization in his lineage as well.¹⁹ This series of relationships put Maezumi in the unusual position of having received Zen authorization from three different Zen masters in three distinct lineages, Sōtō, Rinzai, and the Harada-Yasutani line.

Maezumi Roshi at the Zen Center of Los Angeles

Due primarily to the widely read literature of the Beat poets and the books of D. T. Suzuki, serious interest in Zen among European-Americans began to develop in the mid-sixties. Several non-Japanese Americans began to attend Maezumi's weekly *zazen* gatherings at Zenshuji in Los Angeles to experiment with these novel practices. Purportedly because some parishioners and the other priests were skeptical or critical of this outreach to those outside of the Japanese community, Maezumi soon moved his meditation group out of the temple, first into an apartment on Serrano Street in the Wilshire district and then, in 1967, into a house in the Korea-town section of central Los Angeles.²⁰ The house was named the Los Angeles Zendo and was incorporated under that name in 1968.²¹ Soon thereafter the name would be changed to the Zen Center of Los Angeles. Maezumi's father, Baian Hakuju Kuroda, was named the honorary founder of the institution, which was registered as a Sōtō temple and given the name Busshinji—"Buddha Truth Temple."²² There was a profound sense that something important was about to happen to the dharma in the United States. Maezumi attended the opening ceremony for the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in July of 1967, joining Suzuki Roshi, Katagiri Roshi, and other important Zen teachers at this historic event. No doubt Suzuki's remarkable success in San Francisco impressed Maezumi deeply.²³ Yasutani Roshi began a series of visits to the Zen Center of Los Angeles in the late sixties both to work with Maezumi on his *kōan* practice and on occasion to conduct some of the earliest and most influential *sesshins*—meditation retreats—in American Zen history. At that time Maezumi was just completing his own studies with Yasutani, becoming a *roshi* of full standing in the Japanese Zen tradition. Receiving *inka* approval from Yasutani Roshi solidified Maezumi's authority as a Zen master in America just at the moment when attention to Zen in the West was about to boom.

And boom it did. The Zen Center of Los Angeles (ZCLA) grew exponentially in the early seventies, and by the end of that decade it was clearly one of the most vibrant and significant religious institutions in Los Angeles. Interest in Zen had continued to develop among non-Asian Americans, and Maezumi Roshi's persona captured the attention of hundreds of new converts to *zazen* meditation. Urban properties adjacent to the original Zendo in Los Angeles were purchased for residential and religious purposes. At its height in the early eighties, ZCLA occupied almost all of one full city block, including several multistoried apartment buildings. Among the youth of America, Zen symbolized what was new and exciting about the globalization that was transforming American culture, and the rapid growth of ZCLA embodied that symbolism brilliantly.

The regimen of practice at ZCLA was rigorous and for the most part orthodox. Traditional Sōtō ceremonial procedures were painstakingly learned, practiced, and maintained. Trainees and visitors spent long hours in *zazen*, including week-long *sesshins* at regular intervals. Woven into this meditation schedule was a traditional *kōan* curriculum. Maezumi and other senior teachers assigned *kōans*, taking the mental and spiritual disposition of each student into account. The psychological pressure behind *kōan* study was accentuated through the requirement of periodic *dokusan* practice—one-on-one private interviews between master and disciple with the intention of pushing the *kōan* through to its conclusion. Visiting teachers from elsewhere in the United States and Japan were regular guests at ZCLA, often giving *teishō* lectures and performing the traditional ceremonies of Zen. Although Maezumi would encourage his American dharma heirs to innovate and to build a truly American Zen tradition, at his own center he would maintain strict adherence to orthodox Sōtō practices, thereby offering a meticulous transmission of the dharma in a new setting.

In 1975, Maezumi married Martha Ekyo Maezumi, with whom he had three children, Kirsten Mitsuyo, Yuri Jundo, and Shira Yoshimi, who were raised at ZCLA and later in Idyllwild.²⁴ Their lives unfolded at the very center of this extraordinary development in American religion and added an element of domesticity to Maezumi's image that departed to some extent from the monastic environment that the Zen master was intent on cultivating. Although Maezumi was by all accounts a loving father, his attention was clearly focused on the historic Zen enterprise that he had founded.

Under the lens of this focus, the Zen Center prospered as no one could have imagined. Membership lists grew weekly. Dozens of new and curious visitors arrived at the center every weekend to be introduced to Zen practice. Hundreds of lay practitioners became regular members who would frequent the center for meditation and instruction. And through the early eighties, over a hundred full-time practitioners resided at ZCLA, doing *zazen* morning and night every day and engaging in regular week-long *sesshins*. Publications such as an early book entitled *The Way of Everyday Life* and a Zen periodical called *The Ten Directions* began to be disseminated and were being read all over the English speaking world, focusing more and more attention on Maezumi and ZCLA. New affiliate centers began to be formed. Maezumi and his principal students envisioned a network of interrelated Zen centers throughout the United States, North America, and Europe, and began to implement a plan. Land in the San Jacinto mountains near Idyllwild, California, was purchased, and a Zen Mountain Center for *sesshins* and intensive training was launched. In 1976, Maezumi founded the Kuroda Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Human Values as an educational arm of ZCLA to encourage scholarly attention

to the Zen tradition.²⁵ The institute organized and funded conferences, colloquia, and publications.

Although initially a counterculture movement, as the Zen movement morphed into a mainstream cultural institution; Zen practice in Los Angeles became increasingly established across the full socioeconomic spectrum. Practitioners included physicians, attorneys, psychiatrists, and professors, along with carpenters, electricians, and professionals from all occupational fields. Maezumi Roshi gave the Buddhist precepts to over five hundred people, ordained sixty-eight priests, and gave dharma transmission to twelve of his closest students.²⁶ At its height in the early eighties, the Zen Center of Los Angeles was one of the most vibrant and exciting religious institutions in the country, and Maezumi Roshi was the most widely known and admired Zen master in the West. For many people, his image symbolized the spiritual brilliance of Zen.

Crisis at the Heart of Zen

In 1983, at the height of Maezumi's influence and the success of his innovative Zen organization, two crises brought an end to the upward surge of his Zen movement and began to undermine the Zen master's image. One of these was the disclosure that Maezumi had had sexual relationships with several of his female students, including one of the recipients of his dharma transmission. This disclosure immediately split the community, throwing it into turmoil and controversy. While the "free-love" atmosphere of the seventies certainly prevailed at the Zen Center as a widespread assumption, it nevertheless shocked practitioners that the Zen master had compromised his position of authority as a spiritual leader and had violated his marriage in this way. Simultaneously with that troublesome disclosure, a second revelation further damaged Maezumi's image as an authentic Zen master. Although his alcohol consumption practices were relatively well known at ZCLA and up to this point generally accepted, this was the moment when both Maezumi and the community realized that his drinking was out of control.²⁷ Under enormous pressure and in emotional turmoil, Maezumi openly discussed the difficulties his drinking had caused and voluntarily checked himself into an alcohol rehabilitation center to address the problem.

Meanwhile, in his absence, Zen Center practitioners attempted to reconcile themselves to these now widely perceived shortcomings in the Zen master whom they had previously considered invulnerable to worldly problems. Many practitioners left ZCLA in anger, disappointment, or disillusionment. One dharma heir, Charlotte Joko Beck, having already departed Los Angeles to form a new center in San Diego, renounced affiliation with ZCLA and with Maezumi.²⁸

Although Maezumi returned to the Zen Center in less than a month, now seemingly in control of his drinking, other problems related to these crises continued to compound. Membership roles at ZCLA shrank quickly and dramatically within months after these disclosures, and the once-thriving organization was struggling to maintain itself. As monthly bills began to pile up, properties adjacent to the Zendo were sold, and over the next several years ZCLA was scaled down to a considerably diminished level of operation. By the time Maezumi had worked through his remorse and gathered himself to the point that he could respond constructively to the situation, the damage had already been done. ZCLA was a shadow of its former prominent self. Maezumi's wife and children had left their home at the Zen Center and had moved to the mountain community of Idyllwild near the Zen Mountain Center, and only a handful of faithful practitioners remained in residence at ZCLA.²⁹

Deeply apologetic and remorseful about the damage he had caused, Maezumi struggled to regain himself spiritually. Close associates recall that it was many years before Maezumi returned to anything like his former exuberance and confidence, the spirit of Zen that had so animated his teachings. Even then, the damage to the reputation and standing of ZCLA would not abate, and although the Center continued uninterrupted through Maezumi's life, it would not recover the powerful spiritual image that it once radiated. Maezumi continued his practice of teaching for over a decade beyond the crisis, gradually winning back former and new members, but the memories and effects of failure would never be entirely thrown off. One effect of the crisis, however, was that leading disciples of Maezumi took the occasion to disperse around North America, founding Zen centers in Maezumi's lineage elsewhere, while beginning the long process of experimenting with innovative formulas for a truly American Zen. Although Maezumi was himself tarnished by the diminishment of ZCLA and its reputation, his heirs would extend the tradition through the formation of Zen centers all over the continent.

Death of the Zen Master

Very late at night on May 15, 1995, Maezumi Roshi died suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of sixty-four while visiting his family and Sōtō Zen leaders in Japan. Controversy surrounds Maezumi's death, as it had the later part of his life. Receiving the news of Maezumi's death by telephone, and in a state of shock, ZCLA leaders flew to Tokyo to attend the Japanese funeral services and cremation. They were told by family members in Japan that their teacher had died of a heart attack in bed. This understanding of Maezumi's death still held sway three months later, when an elaborate memorial event was held at

ZCLA on August 27, 1995. Over the next few months, however, it was learned that in fact Maezumi had drowned in the bathtub of his brother's house while under the influence of alcohol. This fact had been concealed by Maezumi's Japanese family in order to maintain the dignity of his substantial legacy. Even Maezumi's wife and central circle of students had been unaware of the actual cause of his death.³⁰

The truth about Maezumi's death came to light when Wendy Egyoku Nakao, Maezumi's eventual successor at ZCLA, obtained a copy of the death certificate from Japan so that the Zen master's family could qualify to benefit from the life insurance policy that had been taken out in his name. The death certificate specified the cause of death as drowning and noted the presence of alcohol in his blood.³¹ When confronted with this discrepancy, Maezumi's brothers would disclose the full story. Maezumi had been at the family home and temple, dining and drinking with his brothers, but had planned to travel back to Tokyo that night to be with another of his brothers and to stay there. Although clearly exhausted and advised against this journey, Maezumi set out for Tokyo by train. Apparently asleep, he missed the appropriate train station, thus extending his journey even further. When he finally arrived at his brother's home late at night, Maezumi announced that he would bathe and then go to bed. The next morning, Maezumi's brother found him drowned in the bathtub.

Concerned that the alcohol-related circumstances of Maezumi's death would undermine the Zen master's international reputation, his brothers decided to withhold the truth. When asked for an English translation of the death certificate for insurance use in the United States, they did not comply. But when the Japanese-language certificate arrived in Los Angeles, it was translated, thus initiating what would still be a slow process of full disclosure.³² It was decided at ZCLA not to make a general announcement of these death details, since what had been thought to be the cause of death had already been announced publically. Gradually, however, the truth leaked out and began to circulate as a rumor among ZCLA leaders until, finally, in 1997, the ZCLA Sangha was given a full and formal account of the Zen master's death.³³ From that point forward, Maezumi's death would be yet another element of controversy shaping the image of this important Zen master.

The Zen Image of Maezumi Roshi

How do the sources of our knowledge of the life of Maezumi Roshi differ from those through which we have come to understand the classical masters of Zen?

How do we know about the Zen masters of antiquity? The evidence available to us is limited and very specific in orientation. Images of classical Zen masters come to us through literature written by later participants within each master's Zen lineage and were composed with the intention of cultivating the mythos of these masters and the lineage as a whole. As we can see in many of the essays in this volume, narratives giving account of the lives and personas of Zen masters in earlier epochs of Zen history bear remarkable resemblance to one another, especially those written to narrate the early centuries of Zen's legendary history. These narratives follow a unified model and were edited over time to fit uniformly into the comprehensive documents that transmit the tradition as a whole—the *Transmission of the Lamp* literature.

One byproduct of this uniformity in the narrative accounts is a corresponding similarity in what is believed to be the lives and personas of the Zen masters they depict. Classical Zen masters are identifiable as Zen masters precisely because they say and do Zen-like things and lead lives that are recognizably “Zen” in identity. All of these stories begin, proceed, and end in much the same way. For example, accounts of the deaths of Zen masters bear remarkable similarity—Zen masters are presented in such a way that they die at a time and in a manner of their own choosing; the power of their Zen-disciplined will dominates from the moment of their awakening all the way through death. Some are imagined to die seated in the lotus posture while engaged in deep meditative concentration, having just composed a traditional death poem. Their Zen practice and Zen minds are understood to be flawless from beginning to end.

Tracing these narratives back to their probable compositions, historians have found over and over that these stories are much more the products of evolving traditions than they are of firsthand report. The lives of the most famous Zen masters are saturated with legend, and their historical foundations are often unrecoverable. Much of this literature was composed many decades or even centuries after the lives of the masters they depicted. The reason for pointing this out is that these traditional methods of historical representation will not be duplicated in the cases of contemporary Zen masters like Taizan Maezumi. Firsthand accounts by followers and detractors are now deposited in our archives, not as a well-edited, unified story about a contemporary master but as scattered representations from a variety of points of view. It is hard to imagine that these sources will ever disappear, contained as they are now in electronic form and available to anyone, anywhere. So although the importance of a Zen master will grow and evolve depending upon the later success of his or her legacy, as was true in earlier epochs, it is unlikely ever to be the case that the firsthand accounts of their lives will be drastically altered, deleted, or lost. This appears to be the case with Maezumi Rōshi. Unlike earlier Zen masters, what we have available to

document the life of Maezumi is a wide variety of historical materials composed both by Maezumi and by hundreds of individuals who knew him personally. Although some of these reports are permeated with admiration, they are quite unlike the legend-based accounts of classical Zen masters.

How does our image of Maezumi as a Zen master get constructed? If we are thorough and take the time to work through the evidence at our disposal, the sources are amazingly voluminous. We have recorded talks by Maezumi, essays and books written by him, books and essays written about Maezumi by those who knew him best, film footage of Maezumi both in formal dharma talks and informal circumstances. The list of resources goes further. We have films about Maezumi, photographs by the hundreds—probably thousands—as well as newspaper articles, journal articles, and magazine articles that have discussed Maezumi's life at one stage or another. And it is still possible to gather verbal accounts from the hundreds of people who knew him in one context or another, along with verbal accounts from his families in both Japan and the United States. The volume of evidence from which to construct a thorough account of the life of this Zen master is thus enormous. This chapter simply adds a further layer to this evolving tradition, based as it is on the archive of print, electronic, and verbal resources, and written by one who had limited but occasional contact with Maezumi during his life.

For classical Zen masters, we have one or sometimes several well-edited, tradition-sanctioned accounts. For Maezumi, we have a vast archive of firsthand images, most of which are “edited” only by the varying perspectives of those who have provided us with their story. In the former case, we get an image of the Zen master conceived as an ideal. In the latter, we get judgments of every conceivable kind. The accuracy, realism, and perspectival variation of the latter curtail the extent to which an ideal can be imposed on the historical narratives by a subsequent idealizing tradition. From this point on in the history of Zen, we have the opportunity to see not just what a Zen master is supposed to be like but also the extent to which particular masters actually lived up to that image.

The Teachings and Practices of Maezumi Roshi

Unlike most Zen masters from the classical period of Chinese Chan, Maezumi was an author from whom we now have a substantial written legacy. Five important books make his teachings accessible to the public. The earliest of these was published in 1976, just as the Zen Center of Los Angeles was beginning to attract international attention. *On Zen Practice* consists of dharma talks by Maezumi and commentaries on classical Zen texts, both meant to introduce readers to the basics of Zen practice—*zazen*, *sesshin*, precepts, *kōans*, and the

teachings of renowned masters such as Dōgen.³⁴ A sequel to this book was published the next year, 1977, called *The Hazy Moon of Enlightenment*.³⁵ This book builds on the basic practices described in the first volume by taking up the philosophical topics of enlightenment and delusion, the difference between sudden and gradual enlightenment, and the goal of embodying enlightenment in everyday actions.

Shortly thereafter, in 1978, a third volume was published, thereby solidifying the image of Maezumi and ZCLA as vibrant sources of Zen teaching. *The Way of Everyday Life* was a commentary by Maezumi on the famous segment of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* called *genjōkōan*.³⁶ This volume features the aesthetic dimension of Zen. The Dōgen text is done in calligraphy on dark parchment, and the remainder of the book displays the Zen-inspired photography of John Daido Looi, one of Maezumi's dharma heirs. Some years later, the textual dimension of Maezumi's legacy was extended through the posthumous publication of his dharma talks, in *Appreciate Your Life: The Essence of Zen Practice*.³⁷ Published in 2001, this volume makes available some of the many dharma talks that ZCLA had recorded over two decades of Maezumi's leadership, although dates are not provided for these talks. And finally, a collection of dharma talks given at various Zen Centers around the United States and Europe toward the end of Maezumi's career between 1987 and 1994 were published in 2001 under the title *Teachings of the Great Mountain: Zen Talks by Taizan Maezumi*.³⁸

Maezumi's teachings are grounded in the practice of *zazen*. Very often, in fact, his dharma talks either begin or revert back to this most basic Zen topic. He takes great pains to go over the specifics of posture, of breathing, and of ways to comport and conceive of the human body. Maezumi's Zen had a strong physical emphasis, a style that accentuates the fact that meditation has at least as much to do with your body as with your mind. Maezumi's first book was very appropriately entitled *On Zen Practice: Body, Breath, and Mind*. From his perspective, Zen practice can be encapsulated in these three domains of body, respiration, and mental orientation. A great deal of Maezumi's reflections on meditation take place in the context of his discussions of Dōgen's emphasis on *shikantaza*, "just sitting." He stressed the progression of the mind through its various acts of clinging to the self toward the capacity to "forget the self," letting the mind open wide enough for the world to pervade the self and overcome its boundaries.

Each of these themes provided Maezumi reason to give ritual a prominent place in his teachings. Indeed, a significant number of his *teishō* talks that have come into print are really about ritual procedures. He explains in great detail, for example, how to bow. Beginning with the physical postures necessary to perform Zen prostrations, Maezumi subtly moves to the state of mind that is being cultivated in this process. He explains how to configure the hands in

zazen and in *kinhin*—walking meditation—how to breathe when chanting, and what to do with the mind while all of these activities are underway.

Emphasizing ritual in Zen was a risky move. Many of the youthful Americans who had come to practice Zen would have regarded ritual as the least authentic dimension of any religion, especially Zen. Due to several factors, including the long-standing Protestant critique of Catholic ritual and the anti-nomian, antidisciplinary emphases of that time, they would have expected Zen to be more a revolt against ritual than training in it. Maezumi's second dharma heir, Dennis Genpo Merzel, tells how his earliest conflicts with Maezumi were over the role of ritualized behavior in Zen. In response to the Zen master's emphasis on tradition and ritual, on one occasion Merzel slammed his shovel into the ground, yelling adamantly, "This is not Zen!"³⁹ Zen, for Merzel and other spiritual romantics of that time, meant looking beyond the proprieties of custom and ceremony to the deeper resources of spiritual life. From the point of view of the first generation of American Zen practitioners, if Zen was anything at all, it was a spirituality of rebellion.

Part of the brilliance of Maezumi as a Zen master was that he understood and appreciated the spirit of this rebellion. Indeed, he hoped to harness its power. While sympathizing with the spirit of resistance, he understood that it lacked comprehensive vision and endurance, and that authentic Zen would require cultivating sensitivities that only the disciplines of mindful ritual could instill. So while teasing the young romantics through their rebellion, Maezumi continued to instruct in the ways of Zen ritual with great patience.

Patience was a primary virtue for Maezumi. From his many years of Zen practice, he understood that this is what it takes to make serious progress in the meditative arts. Part of this emphasis had to do with the fact that many of his students were young, impatient, and eager for immediate demonstrable effects. It was also true that most American practitioners in the 1960s and 1970s were steeped in the Rinzai "sudden enlightenment" literature of D. T. Suzuki, for whom "patience" was anything but "enlightened." Urgency was a more fitting metaphor for that orientation to Zen, and Maezumi stressed the extent to which such impatience would more likely lead to disappointment and despair. His teachings emphasized that to progress in Zen training, it would be necessary to practice calm, anxiety-free modes of mindfulness and to experiment patiently with these new modes of being without expectations about outcomes or rewards.

Two of Maezumi's frequently used slogans reiterated that point. Practitioners remember him saying over and over "just be patient," and on other occasions dipping into the Spanish language of ZCLA's neighborhood, *poco a poco*, "little by little."⁴⁰ He commonly used the single word "relax" in order to encourage the patient, open-minded mentality that "just sitting" required. Maezumi's

reputation also included the ability to personalize his teachings, sculpting them to the specific strengths and weaknesses of particular students.⁴¹ This required, of course, that he know his students very well, and it is indeed a significant part of his image that Maezumi spent a considerable amount of time with his students and knew a great deal about their lives and personas.

Although the Zen master did spend relaxed social time with students, his reputation includes the sense that he was *always* teaching. Students remark that it was very clear that Maezumi considered Zen a full-time, around-the-clock aspiration.⁴² In the midst of easy-going activities he might switch moods unexpectedly from playful to serious and concerned, or from friendly to severe. Students clearly expected that in the midst of everyday activities, Maezumi would leap suddenly into the depths of Zen discourse. Occasionally, as we have come to expect from classical Zen masters, Maezumi would speak in paradox or in a form of spiritual irony.

Students recall other times in which Maezumi would use the language of encouragement, offering useful “sayings” to help generate strong practice. Among his regular Zen slogans were “practice thoroughly,” “put your whole self into it,” “feel it in the depths of your *hara*” (midsection/abdomen), or “adjust your posture from the base.”⁴³ The seriousness and rigor of Maezumi’s teaching practice were never in question. For Maezumi, to practice Zen was at all times to practice vibrant and powerful forms of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is also the best way to characterize what was probably Maezumi’s most characteristic teaching—“appreciate your life.” By putting this phrase as the title of one of his books, Maezumi’s editors indicate its centrality to his Zen teachings. But the subtitle of that book—*The Essence of Zen Practice*—makes it even clearer how much power Maezumi attributed to this teaching. When elaborating on this saying, Maezumi’s dharma talks sometimes direct us toward appreciating the simplicity of life and at other times to its complexity and nuance.⁴⁴ Both the simplicity and the complexity of life were matters worthy of deep appreciation. No matter in which direction his readers and hearers were encouraged to look, what he meant to recommend is that practitioners clear their minds of distraction and learn to look directly at their lives—to appreciate things for what they are. Is there anything more basic to an enlightened way of being in the world than the simple but ever-so-rare capacity to truly appreciate the life you are living? Maezumi’s response is clear. This appreciation is “the essence of Zen practice.” The awakened quality of life that Maezumi taught entails the appreciation rather than the depreciation of the varied existence each of us lives—“just as it is.”

Maezumi’s teachings are also directed toward helping others locate whatever it is that prevents the appreciation of life. Students comment that he would

examine the words and movements of his students, always looking for what it was that stood in the way of more awakened forms of existence. Several of Maezumi's common sayings show this concern for the negative dimension of life. He would frequently inquire: "Where is the hindrance?" "What binds you?"⁴⁵ Inability to identify and understand these hindrances, to recognize what it is that stands in the way of greater capacity to live an imaginative and engaged life, means that human freedom is diminished and with it the range of vision available to human beings. Knowing that he would not always be able to see into the interior of other lives to find these blockages, his question—"what binds you?"—opens the realization that practitioners are themselves responsible for finding and eliminating hindrances. For Maezumi, *zazen*, *sesshin*, and *shikantaza* provide the grounds upon which these barriers can be located and overcome, and *kōan* study along with *dokusan* contact with a Zen master are the tools most effectively used in carrying that work through to completion.

Students report frequently that Maezumi wanted them to train themselves, that they should not expect to "be trained" as though all enlightened figures arise out of the same mold. One student reports, "He really tried to get a person to train themselves; he really wanted you to gain your own strength."⁴⁶ Although each of his students had the Zen master as a model and guide on the quest, Maezumi made it clear that each of them would need to do what he had done—set out a discipline of spiritual awareness that suited his or her own character and needs, and then gather the energy to follow it through to conclusion.

The Persona and Character of Maezumi's Enlightenment

We learn about the enlightened character of famous Zen masters from antiquity by reading texts that describe their "sayings and doings." These "discourse record" texts purport to be firsthand accounts of the many ways that the great masters of the past expressed their enlightenment in everyday situations. Stories giving expression to Maezumi Rōshi's character—the way his enlightenment was manifested in actual life situations—are voluminous. We find them scattered throughout the literature of disciples discussing the life of their teacher, many of these now enshrined in text and on film. As often occurred in classical Zen, however, these scattered stories eventually come together into larger, more comprehensive accounts that hope to express a full and complete image of the master's enlightenment. Surprisingly, this coalescence of stories has already begun to occur for Taizan Maezumi.

In 1986, award-winning novelist, disciple, and dharma heir Peter Matthiessen published his journals from the years 1969–1982 under the title *Nine-Headed Dragon River*.⁴⁷ These journal entries tell numerous stories that express the

character of Maezumi, incidents in their student-teacher relationship where we get an internal glimpse of the Zen master's mind and persona. Then in 1999, poet, writer, and filmmaker Philomene Long published a book entitled *American Zen Bones*.⁴⁸ Inspired by her long-time discipleship and friendship with Maezumi, Long gathered stories from the students of Maezumi and put them together into a text that is explicitly modeled on the classical Zen "discourse record" literature. Following this classical model, there is no chronology, no order of topics. As readers move from page to page, they get glimpses of Maezumi saying and doing unusual and interesting things. In this text, Maezumi's "discourse record" would fit seamlessly into the classic *Transmission of the Lamp* literature.

Then, several years later, Sean Murphy published a book taking something close to this same "discourse record" format. In *One Bird, One Stone: 108 American Zen Stories*,⁴⁹ we read a series of stories about Maezumi, but in this case juxtaposed and joined together with stories from the lives of other famous American Zen masters. This is extraordinary literature in that it adopts a genre from classical Zen history and weaves into it a very new segment of Zen history. For our purposes, these stories along with many others give a clear account of ways in which the character of Maezumi's Zen emerged in everyday life.

One feature of the persona of Maezumi that appears in many accounts of him is the way his physical presence made an impression on people. We have already seen how Maezumi's teachings highlighted the physicality of *zazen*, how he taught students to sense their "center" (*hara*) and to gather themselves into that central domain of poise. Followers of Maezumi describe him as maintaining that center at all times. As a result, Maezumi is frequently described as "charismatic in a calm way." Calm and charisma are often considered opposing traits, but Maezumi's "calm charisma" was something for which he was widely admired and which is often mentioned in the literature describing him. Student descriptions of Maezumi refer to his dharma name, Taizan, Great Mountain, as if that metaphor perfectly captured the solidity of his physical presence. He is described as a "small man with a huge presence," as projecting a "confident beauty."⁵⁰ Peter Matthiessen wrote that "he moved beautifully, leaving no trace, like a bird across the sky."⁵¹ He loved gardening and took great pleasure in the rigors of physical labor. One student described him as having "black fire in his eyes," saying that Maezumi lived a kind of freedom that made him unpredictable and uncategorizable.⁵²

Maezumi's quick wit and sense of humor are frequently mentioned by those who spent time with him, and are clearly demonstrated in many of the stories about him. His charisma included the capacity to see clearly into the situations directly in front of him and to respond with insight. Consider, for example, the following story:

Maezumi Roshi was sitting on the front porch of the Zen Center of Los Angeles one evening with one of his students when a disheveled, inebriated, and extremely depressed-looking man staggered up to them.

“Whaarsh it like,” the man slurred, “. . . to be enlightened?”

Maezumi looked at the man quietly.

“Very depressing,” he answered.⁵³

Related to the physicality and strength of his presence is the temper that Maezumi was well known to exhibit on occasion. All close disciples tell and write stories about it. When he got angry, Maezumi would rage with passion and energy until the matter was settled. He would not hold back, one disciple explained, because he was very “comfortable with his anger.”⁵⁴ “Being comfortable with anger” meant being able to trust that what was done in anger would not turn out later to be a source of deep regret. Although anger is often a state out of which monumental mistakes are made, wherever that is not the case anger is less to be feared because it is more an expression of honest vision than an immature, self-centered loss of perspective. In all of these accounts, the assumption is that Maezumi’s Zen anger operated under the framework of his Zen vision, and that in some sense it was intended as one form that his teaching practice would take. Peter Matthiessen wrote that his teacher would “push all of my buttons, keeping me off balance.”⁵⁵ By all accounts, when the occasion for anger had passed, so had the anger. It “left no residue,” one student claimed.⁵⁶ When it was over there was nothing left to infect the next encounter with the person who had just incited his anger. In that sense, Maezumi’s anger was something far more or far less than anger.

Juxtaposed to this side of Maezumi is another dimension of his character in which his Zen persona took a soft and sensitive form. One of his dharma heirs describes Maezumi as “grandmotherly” in relating to students.⁵⁷ Although some students needed vibrant energy or stern discipline, others needed sensitivity and care. One story in *American Zen Bones* is entitled “Just Cry”: “Luli Jiren Madero had a daughter who was born a dwarf. Her family was very loving and close, but still the condition caused a great deal of hardship and pain, for the child had to undergo multiple surgeries for her condition. One day, Jiren went to a private interview with Maezumi to find comfort. After telling Roshi her story, he reached into the sleeve of his robe and produced two clean handkerchiefs. He handed one to her, kept the other for himself, and they both cried.”⁵⁸

Maezumi was one of the first to ordain women, including women with children. His personal character included the innovative sense and courage to break new ground in Buddhism. There was something inherently experimental

about the cultural atmosphere in the United States when Maezumi taught Zen. The diversity of backgrounds and sense of freedom were extraordinary, and Maezumi reveled in this sense of the times. Pat O'Hara wrote that "Maezumi Roshi came to this country as a young man and just fell in love with the freedom and real thirst for the dharma here. He seemed very open to new traditions, and part of it was that he empowered a lot of women."⁵⁹

Another dimension to Maezumi's character and persona was his dedication to the task of teaching. Everyone who knew Maezumi and worked closely with him called him a "workaholic"; some teased him about this obsession with the dharma.⁶⁰ He made himself available for teaching purposes every day of the week and around the clock. As Daido Looi claimed, "His life belonged to his students."⁶¹ This dedication to others did not appear to prevent Maezumi from being a deeply introspective and self-aware Zen master. Although frequently in public view, he also maintained a strict meditation practice and valued opportunities for introspection and thoughtful reflection. As we know, however, different dimensions of our characters emerge in different sets of circumstance, and in Maezumi's case this is certainly true of his persona after the "scandals" that damaged his Zen Center in the mid-eighties. And it is to that transformation that we now turn.

Scandalous Images

As we have seen, in 1983 the vulnerability and humanity of Maezumi Roshi were brought to light in two interconnected instances of criticism. First, several sexual affairs with female students were disclosed, causing serious interpersonal turmoil at the Zen Center. As students began to see how these affairs represented mistakes in moral judgment, Maezumi's alcohol consumption quickly came to be seen as the source of the problem, now appearing in new light as alcoholism rather than as an innocent and unproblematic love of liquor. For some students, these revelations proved to be the end of their Zen careers. They were massively disillusioned, and when the illusions were gone there was nothing left to bolster their interest in Zen. For other students, these shortcomings could be gradually reconciled with the belief that Maezumi was an awakened Zen master. Although they too were disillusioned, these were illusions that they would gladly shed, illusions that had previously encouraged them to think that being a Zen master meant being invulnerable to all human frailty. Once the aura of magic was lifted from their understanding of Zen, what it meant to practice Zen and to seek awakening underwent a transformation.⁶²

Maezumi's love of drinking was long-standing and never hidden. When he was in San Francisco visiting Shunryu Suzuki, Maezumi would sometimes

take Suzuki's wife out drinking, since Suzuki himself took very little interest in these activities.⁶³ Maezumi often joined his students and colleagues on social occasions, both at ZCLA and out on the road. Students at ZCLA knew that one way to get Maezumi into a good conversation was to arrive with liquor as an offering. They often assumed, though, that these social practices constituted a "time-out" from their practice of Zen and from Maezumi's teaching. But there are no time-outs in life. Peter Matthiessen writes that when he attributed his own sluggishness in *zazen* one day to the *sake* that they had consumed the night before, Maezumi snapped back that "*sake* is one thing, and *zazen* is another. They have nothing to do with each other!"⁶⁴

As a skillful, therapeutic response to a student's petty excuse for weak practice, Maezumi's strongly worded barb was no doubt effective. But in retrospect, it may be possible to see in that response a significant lacuna developing in Maezumi's own rationalizations about alcohol consumption. After all, Buddhist philosophy argues against thinking of any two activities as starkly separated. It dwells insightfully on the deep interconnection between all things. Nothing stands on its own; nothing is really separate from anything else. Liquor consumption and the practice of *zazen* are not unrelated. In fact, they are intimately bound up with each other; they both have a significant bearing on one's state of mind. Failure to admit that alcohol affects mental discipline, mindfulness, and many other aspects of life prevents one from looking directly at this important relationship and recognizing that serious problems may be concealed there.

It may be that over time liquor came to play a particular role in 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.⁶⁵ It's not easy to be funny in a second language, and Maezumi may have been aided by the dampening of inhibition that alcohol provides. More to the point, though, 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. Improvised, unusual behavior is more easily initiated under the influence of alcohol, and accounts of Maezumi saying strongly worded and unusual things while drinking are clearly present in stories about him.

So one may wonder to what extent the expectations of spontaneous, Zen behaviors might have contributed to the desire for alcohol to help give rise to uninhibited, nonself-conscious behavior. Suzuki Roshi is an interesting contrast on this point. He reportedly did not drink much, and did not like the feelings of intoxication.⁶⁶ He was also not known for shocking, eccentric Zen-like

actions or words. Suzuki's power as a Zen master derived from a subdued wisdom, a quiet reserve that seemed to exude compassion and insight. Although in some moods Maezumi displayed a similar power of reserve, in other moods or on other occasions there was an eccentric energy to his persona, and it may have been that during the late seventies and early eighties this dimension of the Zen master was frequently initiated by the influence of alcohol.

Several weeks spent at Scripps Alcohol Rehabilitation Center were enough to educate Maezumi on the dangers of alcoholism. He admitted that he had never given it much thought before. This casual attitude toward alcohol is widespread in Japan, where a "disease" called "alcoholism" is simply not recognized, at least not in that era. Having received that upbringing, Maezumi now saw what he could not see before; he understood how his actions and relations to other people were affected by his desire for and consumption of liquor. Both he and his students began to see how one problem—drinking—may have set the stage for the other problematic action that marred Maezumi's Zen image.

The historical records seem to show that there were no sex scandals in medieval Zen monasteries. There were also no women. The Zen Center of Los Angeles was born at the height of a global revolution in sexuality that was made possible by advancements in birth control. Social changes, especially the women's movement, made the isolation of genders seem archaic and pointless. ZCLA, without being aware of this, would have been a laboratory of social experiment in gender relations. It was not clear that the opening up of sexual relations that came to be assumed at that time would exclude one participant—the Zen master—but that turned out to be precisely the requirement. As one practitioner claimed in the Zen Center film, "I had no idea that in 1984 in Los Angeles matters of sexual conduct between consenting adults would be so uproarious."⁶⁷ Essentially, nothing in this experiment was clear, or it was not until Maezumi's sexual relations struck many practitioners as deeply inappropriate and scandalous.

Once out of rehabilitation and educated on issues related to alcohol, Maezumi himself considered it "scandalous." "It's true," he said on film, "being alcoholic you become loose about morals. I agree that this negative part should be closely observed to become aware of it. Being an alcoholic, I didn't see the immoral things I did. It's really outrageous."⁶⁸ Students say that Maezumi never made excuses, that he took full responsibility for his own failures. Never defending himself, he was the most severe critic of his behavior. Indeed, it was Maezumi himself who argued that the chaotic situation that he had caused at ZCLA should be openly and honestly discussed in a documentary film about the center that had been scheduled to be shot, even though the film crew arrived at the height of the turmoil and exodus from the center.⁶⁹

Wendy Egyoku Nakao has said that Maezumi “spent the rest of his life trying to make up for his errors.”⁷⁰ As his attendant during the early nineties, she claims that Maezumi faced serious levels of depression upon recognizing what his unmindful behaviors had wrought. Due to the exodus from ZCLA after the scandals, the busyness that had consumed Maezumi before 1983 receded to some extent. Now, just when he might have least wanted it, he had free time for introspection and reflection. Those close to Maezumi after 1983 report that there was a significant change in the Roshi’s personality. An empty *zendō* on the occasion of a dharma talk was something Maezumi had not faced for years, and he understood very clearly what had caused the decline. Looking directly at that effect of his own actions was devastating, and Maezumi took it upon himself to shoulder the blame with unrelenting ferocity. His self-criticism did not abate, even when followers suggested to him in all candor that self-condemnation was no longer necessary.⁷¹

Other contemporary Zen masters have faced scandals in their careers. These other cases show us that the presence of some form of ethical failure may or may not come to invalidate or alter perceptions of the authenticity of a Zen master’s enlightenment. Sometimes it does, and in these cases others conclude that ethical errors of judgment show that a Zen master had not attained what before he had appeared to have attained. In Maezumi’s case, those who knew him throughout his life—both students and nonstudents—claim that the depth of Maezumi’s enlightenment is indisputable, given the evidence that his life presented. Overwhelmingly, those who had spent substantial time with him remained convinced that the depth of Maezumi’s “enlightenment” was authentic and beyond serious doubt. No one, they claim, could have demonstrated this level of personal presence and depth of character and not have ascended to remarkable levels of Zen insight; no one could have faked the level of clarity and compassion that Maezumi’s life so clearly demonstrated.

Depictions of Death

It is a tragedy of some significance that alcohol consumption figured into the death of Maezumi Roshi. It is tragic because Maezumi had overcome his desire and need for alcohol. He had lived for twelve years without drinking, and liquor played no discernable role in his life during that period of time, except as a constant reminder of the mistakes that had partly undermined his lifelong ambition to serve the dharma. So why did Maezumi die a death that was tied to alcohol? Piecing evidence together and imagining the most likely explanation, I have come to believe that Maezumi’s life was completely alcohol-free when in

the United States and elsewhere, but that on the few occasions when he traveled to Japan it was not.

It is highly unlikely that Maezumi ever talked to his Japanese family or anyone in Japan about his problems with drinking, or that this issue ever came up. Liquor consumption plays a somewhat different role in Japanese culture from elsewhere, and the expectation that brothers or work colleagues drink when they get together is virtually unassailable. Drinking is a firmly embedded expectation, a social custom that cannot be set aside without breaking the bonds of tradition and sociability. Moreover, addiction to and abuse of alcohol are not conceived of in the same way that they are in the United States. Few, if any, Japanese would think of alcoholism as a medical problem, especially at that time in the eighties, or as a disease requiring professional attention. Although Maezumi came to understand his addiction in this way through his education at the Rehabilitation Clinic and then later through organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, this was far different from the ways he had conceived of drinking before that time and the way that it was typically conceived in Japan.

Given these cultural differences and the awkwardness of not drinking in Japan, it seems relatively clear that Maezumi came to regard the control he had over his drinking to be solid enough that when he traveled to Japan he would simply suspend his abstinence for a short period of time in order to participate in family gatherings and other social events without the seemingly unnecessary restriction of having to break with social custom. Just living abroad is custom-breaking enough without having to add other restraints upon those that already exist. Or at least, so I now imagine Maezumi's thoughts on this matter when he traveled to Japan. Although the scandal of Maezumi's sexual relations could have only happened in the United States, given the unique sexual mores there, it seems relatively clear that an alcohol-related death would only happen to Maezumi in his native land where, from his point of view, drinking was unavoidable.

It also seems clear to me that Maezumi had achieved sufficient control over his drinking that he could drink while in Japan and then simply stop when he returned to the United States. He had accomplished that before with success, and no doubt assumed he would this time, as well. It would be hard to overestimate the strength and stamina of character that Maezumi have achieved in his later life. For the last twelve years of his life, the moral and spiritual struggle within him was intense. He battled with levels of guilt and a profundity of disappointment that few of us will ever face, and he did this while continuing on with his practice of teaching Zen. He knew how devastating his errors had been to ZCLA and to the dharma in America more broadly conceived. He had disappointed everyone, and let the momentum of the dharma slip out of his

hands. Although profoundly ashamed of his mistakes, he knew that he had to gather himself and his energies into a new effort of enormous proportions just at the moment in life when most of us begin to relax a little, to coast on the momentum of earlier achievements. This he did admirably, although always apologetically. No doubt the disciplinarian character of his lifelong Zen training served him well in this. It taught him how to let go of the past just enough to keep focused on the present moment of challenge. And although that present would always be shadowed by the weight of his past, Maezumi did manage to regroup his energies and purposes to the point that he would rebuild the Zen Center that he had mistakenly undermined.

At first glance, the circumstances of Maezumi's death would seem worlds apart from the idealized deaths of the great masters of the golden age of Zen. Images of their deaths are marked by perfect control of circumstances and timing. There are no tragedies in the narratives of classical Zen. These images, of course, come to us not from firsthand reports so much as through the editing powers of the evolving tradition. If you have a choice when writing the history of great founders of your group, how would you have them die, in ignominious circumstances or in mastery and triumph? In Maezumi's contemporary case, there appear to be few choices. The facts of the matter just are what they are, in spite of the initial efforts on the part of the Zen master's brothers to edit out the potentially demeaning details of drowning in a bathtub under the influence of alcohol.

Taking a second look at the timing and circumstances of Maezumi Roshi's death, however, something more comes into view. First, as to the issue of timing, although the classical masters of Zen appear to choose the time of their own death, Maezumi's death is obviously unchosen. Ironically, however, it would be hard to imagine better timing. Maezumi had just spent a dozen years working through the damage to his Zen Center that his own actions and choices had wrought, and all this with considerable success. There really was not much more to be done; the rest would be up to his successors, the one dozen dharma heirs who were already well on their way to distinguishing themselves for the quality and innovation of their Zen teachings.

Several students note that Maezumi had come to feel that rather than furthering the mission of Zen in America he was now "standing in its way."⁷² By this he meant that the new era of Zen in the West that Maezumi had helped to initiate would not really get underway until the older generation of immigrant Zen masters from Asia were replaced by Americans and Europeans and Latin Americans and so on throughout the world. Maezumi referred to himself as a "stepping stone."⁷³ He knew very clearly that the traditions from Japan that he had taught would be gradually altered and improved under indigenous

circumstances and that, as the Buddha had said, this impermanence was the true condition of the world. Although he certainly did not look forward to his retirement and death, he understood that these events would open up the dharma in the West to transformations that even he could not anticipate. Maezumi had lived sixty-four years, all in good health, and had maintained his strength, humility, and sense of humor throughout. Those who remember him at the end of his life recall a wizened, compassionate, and humble Zen master still fully within the power of his Zen mind. Leaving that image under those circumstances would be far from tragic.

Indeed, the unchosen but impeccable timing of Maezumi's death was even more interesting than that. He had just made his final trip to his homeland. He had gone there in part to participate in the memorial service for his mother, whom he loved and respected with great sincerity. Perhaps most important, he had gone to Japan to finalize his dharma transmission to Bernard Glassman, his foremost disciple. In Zen tradition this is the final and official act of turning a legacy over to a successor, and in classical Zen it often happened in the final days of a master's life. That the poem Maezumi inscribed on the official *inka* certificate would also be his Zen death poem is perhaps as beautifully choreographed a departure as anyone could imagine. Maezumi had paid his last respects to his mother, his brothers, and his homeland, had visited the leaders of the Sōtō sect with whom he had worked all of his life, and had undergone formal ceremonies of transmission to his successor. If that was not a magnificently timed death, it would only be considered such on behalf of the three children that he was leaving behind in America.

The other factor mentioned above—the circumstances of his death—provides another way to make sense of Maezumi's legacy. His death under the influence of alcohol was tragic in the same way that his earlier alcoholism and sexual misjudgments had been. In them we see a Zen master of obvious greatness brought down to humbling proportions. However much Maezumi Rōshi may have dreaded this outcome, it could very well be that among his greatest contributions to the global Zen movement now in formation is that the story of his life has helped to humanize our concept and image of Zen masters. We can now see a great Zen master as human in all the ways we are. 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 derive from the simple fact that he was also finite and human. While living a truly profound and visionary Zen life, Maezumi Rōshi was at the same time mortal and vulnerable to the tragedies of life.

By humanizing our understanding of what it means to be a Zen master, Maezumi shows us that mastery in Zen is not mastery of everything in life.

There are other dimensions to life that are not automatically cultivated or enlightened once a certain depth of Zen mind has been attained. These other dimensions—many of them, including the moral dimensions having to do with sexual relations and substance use—would have to be cultivated on their own even though Zen mindfulness may be the overarching skill that most effectively allows one to enlarge oneself in these other spheres. Reflecting on Maezumi's life and legacy helps us get beyond a "magical" understanding of Zen practice wherein everything in life is perfected at the moment when the results of Zen practice come to fruition. It helps bring contemporary Zen to a maturity that we typically evade when we look at classical images of Zen masters, a maturity that need not consider Zen masters as gods in order to hold them in admiration and deep respect. If this is part of Taizan Maezumi's legacy to the global Zen tradition, that could very well prove to be a monumental contribution.

NOTES

1. Work on this chapter began with a group of Occidental College students in a seminar on "Zen Masters." In appreciation for the great conversation, exchange of ideas, and research suggestions, I thank Nikhil Addleman, Joellen Anderson, James Case, Henning De May, Jeff Eamon, Theodora Forbes, Kate Hruby, Ian Lam, Christine Lew, Jackson Lewis, Brennen Lynch, Morgana Petrison, Rob Riccardi, Natalie Sandy, Jackie Steele, and Zoe Walsh.
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