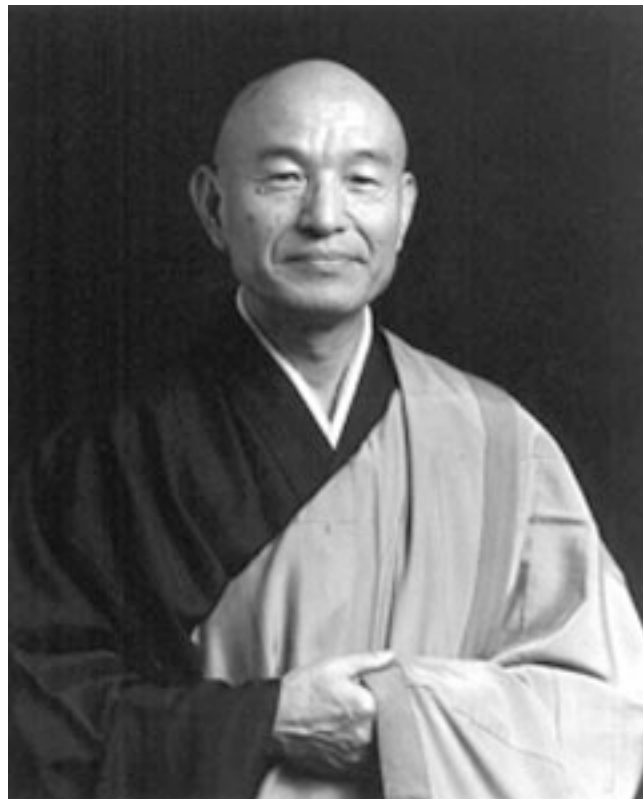


It Is Not Real - Maesumi Roshi  
From a Collection of Works by [Edward Muzika](#)



*Venerable Hakuyu Taizan Maesumi Roshi*

*Zen Center of Los Angeles*



Maesumi Roshi (1931-1995) of the Zen Center of Los Angeles was the gentlest, most self-effacing and emotionally open Zen Master with whom I studied (1971-1976). He was also the most intellectual, having received an academic degree in philosophy in Japan.

His Dharma talks (Teisho), were the deepest of all the Zen masters I knew with the exception of Joshu Sasaki, who was his equal.

I passed many Koans with him, but felt no victory. I began to doubt the efficacy of Koan work during this time.

At some point each month, during one of his Dharma talks, he would admit some fault of his, which he apologized for, feeling his actions had shamed Zen. To feel shame is typically Japanese; to openly admit shame was unusual.

One time, as part of his formal Dharma talk, he told of an incident, and apologized profusely, where he had pounded on the ceiling of his apartment with a broomstick, because the woman living over him made too much noise. He said he had been a little drunk at the time, but that there was no excuse for his behavior.

Gestalt and self-psychology were becoming popular at the time and many students were budding psychologists. Despite his own openness, he said he did not like the results of his students' dabbling in therapy.

There was also a small-bit of vanity. I was living at a Zen center six blocks away, the International Buddhist Meditation Center (IBMC), run by a very gentle Vietnamese teacher, Thich Tien-An. Both centers were expanding rapidly during the early to mid 70s. Every six months or so, Dr. Tien-An bought a new building for IBMC and the campus was crawling with his students.

After each time IBMC acquired a new building, when I went into Sanzen (Zen combat) with Maesumi, the first question he would ask, is, "How many buildings does IBMC have now?" Dr. Tien-An was always one or two buildings ahead of him. I guess it gave him something to shoot for.

During the late 1970's, I was teaching Zen and psychology at UCLA's Extension College; he and other Zen masters and psychiatrists would come to speak to my students.

At that time, the sexual scandals involving Zen masters, Tibetan teachers and later, Muktananda, were spreading doubt among all seekers about the worth of

Buddhism. I felt it was no big thing, that sex had nothing to do with realization – a viewpoint I still hold.

He publicly admitted all of his actual and self-perceived faults to my students as well as to his own. This won him great admiration from my class.

In our private conversations, he would ask, “Why me? Why am I getting such a hard time? Sasaki (Mt. Baldy Sasaki) is ten times worse than I am”

Of course, Sasaki never held himself to any high moral standard, everyone knew he was fooling around, so he was measured by a different (and much lower) moral yardstick, while Maesumi was immaculately proper in his behavior; therefore, his slightest fault was perceived to be a big deal, both by him and by others.

Maesumi had a gentle character and was much beloved by everyone. His successors are many and have gone on to become good, solid teachers in their own right.

However, as with most Zen masters, I questioned the depth of his real spiritual attainment. Attainment appeared, traditionally, to be measured by the number of koans passed, and perhaps he measured attainment by how well a student treated others.

Every Zen master I studied with, except Seung Sahn, pooh-poohed enlightenment, which they considered a Zen-illness. They regarded constant absorption, as per the Hindus, as the wrong way to go. Maesumi would repeatedly opine that interactions with people and the world was where real Zen was found. Sasaki said enlightenment was boring.

Overall, I found Maesumi to be a great teacher although the dryness and intellectuality of his Center cooled my enthusiasm towards Zen and led me eventually to Muktananda, whose practice was Bhakta (devotion)-oriented and where the chanting was ever so sweet.

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