

Why Some Buddhist Teachers Don't Ordain

In Western Zen, lay teachers can get overshadowed by priests and monastics due to the often hazy distinction between their roles.

By [Sean Murphy](#)

A case for Zen Buddhist robes. Photo by David Gabriel Fischer | <https://flic.kr/p/stX5vL>

A few years after receiving *inka*, the highest seal of approval in his lineage of Zen Buddhism, Bernie Glassman—one of the earliest and most prominent Americans to receive dharma transmission—did a peculiar thing: he gave up his priestly vows, disrobed, and lived as a layperson until [his death last year](#). Glassman was known for his unconventional ways, but his decision perplexed many in the Zen world. He continued to function as the senior teacher in his White Plum lineage and a sangha leader, and his monastic vows did not appear to have been a hindrance to his personal freedom. So why did he give up his robes?

Glassman was one of my early teachers, and this question has stuck with me throughout the years—even as, after many years of practice, I was named a lay dharma holder by Roshi Gerry Shishin Wick in 2016, and again this January as I attended my first conference of the [Lay Zen Teachers Association](#) (LZTA).

Those who gathered for the meeting at Joshua Tree Retreat Center in California chose to become lay Zen teachers for various reasons, but many shared a concern that, at times, students and sangha leaders regarded them as being of lesser stature than ordained teachers. Like many of my peers in the early days of my training, I had some initial confusion about the difference between ordained clergy—also called monks, nuns, priests, and at some centers, priestesses—and lay practitioners. To make the issue more confusing, some US centers—

particularly those with a live-in monastic community, as at Zen Mountain Monastery in upstate New York, where I trained for many years, make no particular distinction between monastics (also called monks or nuns in some centers) and priests. Their monastic community serves both functions.

In most of Asia, these roles are more clearly defined, as laypeople don't generally practice meditation; rather, they support the local temple or the practice of those in the monasteries, who, in turn, perform ceremonial functions for the lay community while generally keeping the traditional *vinaya* precepts. In Japan, laypeople are rarely involved in traditional meditation, and many Japanese temple priests do not continue to practice meditation after their initial training. Despite being home to thousands of temples, Japan has comparatively few live-in permanent monastic communities, and the priests commonly marry, have families, and may work jobs outside of temple functions—further obscuring the distinction between ordained life and lay life.

In America, on the other hand, Buddhism has appealed primarily to laypeople wishing to pursue the central practices of meditation and mindfulness. Later in my training, while traveling to different communities to gather stories for my book, *One Bird, One Stone: 108 Contemporary Zen Stories*, I discovered that defining the difference between ordained sangha members and laypeople was an ongoing issue in the West. This line becomes particularly blurry when many or most of the monastics or priests in some communities have outside jobs and families while some laypeople may live and work at their centers and train full-time. In some Western centers therefore, priestly ordination seems to have become primarily a mark of deepened commitment to the path and deeper responsibility to one's center and teacher.

I chose not to ordain, in part, because I have never felt drawn toward taking on the clerical responsibilities of performing ceremonies or rituals, which have not been pivotal in my development as a practitioner or teacher. Also, during my time at ZCLA and later at Zen Mountain Monastery, I felt the quality of training for lay and ordained teachers was essentially the same. And when I looked at the classical Buddhist literature, I did not always find such a hard line between monastics or priests and laypeople.

The Buddhist teachings (and the Zen tradition in particular) make a point of saying that lay practitioners can also attain enlightenment. According to one story from the [*Platform Sutra of the Sixth Ancestor*](#), Zen came to perhaps the most pivotal turning point in its development in 7th-century China when an illiterate layman, Hui Neng, heard a phrase from the *Diamond Sutra* chanted aloud and immediately attained enlightenment. Another influential text, [*the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra*](#), has as its central figure Vimalakirti, a lay disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha who, it is said, surpassed all other disciples (as well as various celestial beings) in his understanding of and eloquence in the dharma. Finally, there is the tale of Layman Pang, who was thoroughly enlightened and engaged in dharma dialogues with his also enlightened wife and perhaps even more enlightened young daughter. All of which goes to support the notion that deep realization is as possible for laypeople as it is for monastics.

Like many of my fellow practitioners in the early days of Zen in America, I accepted this without question. But despite the emphasis on equality between lay and monastic/priest practice in the communities where I trained, when push came to shove it was undeniable that most of the senior people—and for a long time all the teachers—were ordained.

This tension has existed in the West since Zen arrived here. At least one of our prominent early Western teachers, Robert Aitken, never took priestly ordination, but it took me a long time to realize that this brought with it certain limitations. For many years, for instance, Aitken was unable to give the precepts to his students, until he received dharma transmission in the 1980s and was empowered by his Japanese lineage to perform the rite, called *jukai*, as a layperson.

As for Bernie Glassman, his decision to leave the priesthood came because “Bernie felt that Zen in America needed a strong model for lay teaching,” his wife, Eve Marko, told me. Marko, a lay teacher and LZTA member herself, explained that the way Glassman saw it, the responsibility of a priest was to oversee the functioning of a temple, including performance of ceremony and ritual, while the responsibility of a teacher was to oversee meditative and other aspects of Zen training. As far as teaching goes, a lay teacher possesses the same rights and status. To address the issue of giving precepts, Glassman instituted a lay

preceptor training, and other members of the White Plum Asanga have adopted this approach as well.

Marko said that, after disrobing, “Despite his comprehensive knowledge of Zen ritual, Bernie never performed ceremonial temple functions again, leaving that to ordained priests.” She went on to say that the Soto Sect in Japan, with whom Glassman retained close ties through the early years of his training and empowerment, remained so resistant to his choice that they not only tried to talk him out of it, they never took his name off their rolls, even though he told them again and again that he was now a lay teacher.

Glassman himself explained his thinking in a 2012 interview that appeared on the now-defunct *Sweeping Zen* website:

By the time I disrobed . . . my main work was socially engaged Buddhism; I was not running a temple. My feeling had always been that you were a priest if you had a temple to run and take care of. Not a zendo. If what you were doing was concentrating on meditation and zendo aspects, you don’t have to be a priest . . . I have paths for priests and paths for teachers. I had some folks that I felt would be great priests but not teachers, and I did not make them teachers; they stopped at becoming full priests.

One positive thing about being a lay teacher, surrounded by other lay teachers at the LZTA conference, was that since we don’t consider it our primary responsibility to uphold traditional forms and rituals, no one at this gathering seemed too attached to the “the way it’s always been done.” I felt a sense of overall freedom to improvise and invent new ways of presenting the dharma for Western students in the 21st century, a need many teachers seem to agree on. It’s certainly a major concern for me: after guiding many hundreds of meditation students in the past 20 years in largely secular settings in mindfulness and writing seminars and classes at the University of New Mexico-Taos, I know of only one of my former students who has gone on to seriously pursue formal Zen training. Contemporary Western students often seem put off by the apparent formality and foreign flavor of the forms, as well as their hierarchical and sometimes authoritarian appearance.

So it was revitalizing at the LZTA conference to hear Ryodo Hawley of Zen Center of Los Angeles, who recently became one of the few lay Zen

teachers to carry the title of Roshi, presenting a new and innovative three-part way of introducing Zen practice to beginners, as well as Florida-based Zen teacher Al Rapaport putting forward new approaches to koans, and Buddhist-informed psychotherapist Megan Rundel offering trauma-sensitive approaches to Zen training, among a number of other innovations.

But perhaps Peter Levitt, poet, leader of the Salt Spring Zen Circle in British Columbia, and co-translator of *The Essential Dogen: Writings of the Great Zen Master* with Buddhist teacher and calligrapher [Kazuaki Tanahashi](#), put the issue most succinctly in one of several conversations I had with him at the LZTA meeting. While discussing whether or not priestly ordination was an important step for a Zen teacher, he said, “It seems to me that even to be named ‘teacher’ can be seen as extra. As has been said before, ‘There are no teachers of Zen.’”

Or as Bernie Glassman put it: “The bottom line for me is that the person has realized and is living the realization of the interconnectedness of life. That’s the awakening... that’s my standard for making somebody a

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