

STUDENT AND TEACHER
A Zen Perspective



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Foreword

Many years ago when I began a meditation practice, I thought I could realize the Way on my own. I chose the path of meditation because it emphasizes the experiential over practices that were academic or faith based. It was only many years later that I understood the need for a teacher. I had spent a great deal of time attached to or stuck on certain ideals and objectives that a teacher would have helped me move through much more quickly than I was able to do on my own. While no teacher can practice for us, a true teacher can be a spiritual friend and guide who can help prepare and supply the attitudes and environments for successful practice.

In working as a student with Nicolee Roshi for many years, I have come to respect the value of a good teacher more and more as time passes. We never outgrow the need for a teacher, and we never stop teaching others ourselves. For these, and many other reasons, I am very pleased that "Student and Teacher: A Zen Perspective," in which Nicolee Roshi shares valuable insights she gained both as a student and as a teacher of students, is now available to us in print. Not only does it help us understand the nature of the student-teacher relationship, but it elucidates our entire practice as Zen students. As students we are on a path which potentially leads to transformation and liberation. Nicolee Roshi gives us a clear and concise description of how these potentials can be realized and what the processes involved require of both the student and the teacher. As such, what is presented here is as valuable for the advanced Zen student as it is for those setting foot on the path for the first time.

I still know there is no substitute for sincere practice done solely by the student, but I also know there is no substitute for a true teacher. We need each other, and Nicolee Roshi provides excellent instructions on how to help these relationships flourish.

John "Jake" Gage Sensei

Obaku addressed the assembly and said, "You are all partakers of brewer's grain. If you go on studying Zen like that, you will never finish it. Do you know that in all the land of T'ang there is no Zen teacher?" Then a monk came forward and said, "But surely there are those who teach disciples and preside over the assemblies. What about that?" Obaku said, "I do not say that there is no Zen, but that there is no Zen teacher."



For American students of Asian spiritual traditions, this is a fascinating time, a time in which ancient methods of practice are being assimilated into our culture in an unprecedented way. Various methods of meditation are available to us as skillful means to further our spiritual practice. Teachers schooled in rich traditions offer their insights to help us in our quest. But as Americans we do not have a tradition of the “Venerable Teacher,” and we are only beginning to understand the subtleties and challenges involved in the student-teacher relationship within a spiritual setting. Yet this may become one of the most meaningful relationships of life, a deep learning experience, both for the student and the teacher.

Let us look at this dynamic by taking advantage of both spiritual and psychological methods, first by adapting from Western psychology the concepts of transference and counter-transference, which address how projection happens. An example of transference occurs when a student projects positive and/or negative beliefs, hopes, and expectations from the past onto the teacher, ongoingly. In counter-transference, a teacher projects onto the student his or her positive and/or negative hopes, beliefs, and expectations, ongoingly. Such projections happen naturally in all relationships, but we are talking about a length and intensity of response which can indicate that the student or teacher is hooked or stuck.

We will explore projections in more detail later, but first let us look in a general way at some of the hopes, beliefs and expectations a student can place on a teacher. They include:

- falling in love with the teacher
- wanting to be supported and understood all of the time
- wanting the teacher to be omniscient and/or omnipotent
- believing the teacher can drop everything else in order to be with the student

- wanting the teacher to be a good parent who can anticipate when the student needs their help
- wanting the teacher's words and actions to match perfectly, 100% of the time
- wanting the teacher to "fix" the student
- wanting to be special most of the time

Paradoxically, the beauty of the student-teacher relationship is that it does carry such projections. There is a very positive side to the transference and counter-transference, because it gives the teacher and student a place to work.

QUESTION: What is the difference between this and psychotherapy?

NICOLEE: In Zen practice we are looking into the very nature of mind, looking at the nature of the whole thing, the whole thing being empty of any solidity, any fixed nature, including the idea of mind itself. In Zen practice we are going to the depths, to the root, whereas in therapy we usually work at a different level. But it depends on where the person is. Some people in therapy might go right to the root, by beginning to look at the empty, fluid nature of self, of this life.

QUESTION: In psychology, doesn't the actual definition of transference and counter-transference refer to one's parents?

NICOLEE: I'm referring to transference and counter-transference in a more general way than traditional psychology. There are many Zen stories that cut through the ways we bind ourselves with our conditioning, including parental conditioning. One example would be the Zen koan, "What's your original face before your parents were born?"

QUESTION: What do you mean by getting "hooked"?

NICOLEE: A lot of the "getting hooked" in the student-teacher relationship, as I see it, reveals how we bind ourselves. One of the things we see clearly in the Buddhist teaching is that the source of suffering has to do with how we want something, someone else, or ourselves, to be. So when we get really tied into our desire that the teacher be a certain way, we are going to have quite a bit of suffering. And if we can begin to take responsibility, to step back and address the fact that we are getting stuck or hooked, a tremendous amount of space can open up for us, personally and in our relationship with our teacher. The key is to know that positive and

negative projection is a universal phenomenon, it goes on all the time, and that in a way it can be very creative.

QUESTION: Would you expand on the students' penetrating through their ideas of themselves and their world?

NICOLEE: Let me do so by going into the Three Seals of Buddhism: there is suffering in life, everything is impermanent, there is no fixed self. When we don't see the impermanent nature of things, ourselves, and others, we suffer, yet when we do realize impermanence we experience peace. We tend to prefer peace to suffering—but suffering is not “wrong.” It is simply part of what happens. When we see the unfixed nature of things, when we deeply realize there is no fixed self, we experience our inherent spaciousness. Our ideas about ourselves and our world are profoundly softened. Most students come to practice very sure that they are very solid and that reality is very solid and fixed. As we practice, we begin to see the fluidity and spaciousness of our life. So how do we learn to open to that, to penetrate through the barriers that prevent us from realizing what our life is? As trust builds, the student-teacher relationship can create a very effective skillful means to go through the places where the student says, “Oh no, not that.” The “not that” place is where the projections really tend to show up.

On a scale of 10, when you have an 8 to 10 kind of projection going on with the teacher, you can recognize it. But if you have ongoing 1's and 2's with the teacher, you might not recognize it. The key is “ongoing.” For example, if you frequently experience a stiffness in the body when the teacher walks into the room, you might want to take a look at that. Zen practice is going to unravel this small mind so that you experience the vastness of your life as the one body. The process of letting go of our fixed notions and projections is what a good deal of our practice is about.

QUESTION: Is the point not that you try to not be stiff, but that you just notice, “Oh, this is interesting, I get stiff when this person walks in”?

NICOLEE: Exactly. You bring attentiveness to what you are experiencing.

QUESTION: So it's not to try to get rid of the stiffness?

NICOLEE: Right. If you notice you are stiff around the teacher frequently, that's a subtle and very useful place to practice.

QUESTION: Is this the same process for the teacher on the counter-transference side?

NICOLEE: Yes, the student is also teaching the teacher. The student thinks it's one-sided—not at all. The teacher is also being trained by the student. Every student who comes forward is bringing a whole unique world with them. The teacher needs to be very attentive, not only to be able to use the training and skillful means to help the student realize what they are, who they are, what this life and death are, but also to what the student is teaching.

Let me address four stages that I have noticed in the student-teacher relationship: entering the Way, making a commitment, going through the muck, and clarifying the Way as one's life. I see this process as moving in a lifelong spiral motion.

Entering the Way

When new students of the dharma first enter the Way, they may experience astonishment, childlike openness, trust, innocence, and vulnerability. They may confuse falling in love with the dharma with falling in love with the teacher. Falling in love with the teacher is fraught with problems, the biggest of which is an imbalance in power. In most cases, the student has fallen in love with the dharma, because if the student really knew the teacher, knew the whole range of the teacher's warts and farts and smells and ups and downs and incapacity to see and other insufficiencies, s/he might not be at all romantically interested in the teacher! It is a very powerful experience when the teacher is carrying a deep knowing that you are the Buddha, yet you don't realize it.

When seasoned students who have practiced with other teachers in the same or other traditions begin practicing with a new teacher, they may not be as fresh as a beginning student. In terms of entering the way with a new teacher, such students may have difficulty letting go of their position, their knowledge, their experience. Instead of coming in with an open mind, their attitude may be, "I know something, and I want to be recognized as such." So entering into the student-teacher relationship from

a fresh place, letting go of ideas of entitlement, is an essential place to practice.

For a new student of the dharma, however, the teacher may be perceived as being all-knowing, perfect. The student's receptivity, openness, love, and honor in relationship to the teacher can engender a deep sense of intimacy. It's very important that the teacher be respectful. The student's naiveté is not negative. It is essential. For the teacher, it is like seeing a flower opening and knowing that if too much sunlight is given to an opening flower it can burn. But if not enough sunlight or water is given to the flower, then it cannot grow adequately. So this is a very delicate stage for the teacher as well as for the student. On the other hand, there are some students who are very self-protective. So the teacher then may use a variety of skillful means including the "cutting sword" to help open the student.

The teacher needs to look deeply, hear deeply, assess deeply. The teacher has to be careful, because when somebody comes in with a high level of openness and feels that the teacher is hot stuff, there is a way in which the teacher can buy that as being real, believing, "This is the truth about me," rather than recognizing, "This is the place the student is in." This is a very delicate place where teachers can be vulnerable. Loving the adoration, feeling elevated, feeling good, the teacher may fall in love with the student. Here is the student, catering to all the teacher's needs. If the teacher has moved an inch to sneeze, the student has a Kleenex ready. The teacher is being completely catered to. Who wouldn't love that?

QUESTION: What about when the student is afraid of or intimidated by the teacher?

NICOLEE: This is a negative aspect of projection. In negative projections we may be transferring onto the person notions that they are sitting in judgment of us, telling us if we're okay or not. Sometimes we project so much authority, power, on them that we can't move. The teacher has become all-powerful. A lot of fear can come up when we give another person so much authority. It may feel difficult to think or speak clearly. One may feel incapable of really expressing what is true, one may try to please the other person too much. These experiences are not wrong nor bad, they are a natural part of practicing with a teacher.

For a student-teacher relationship to be really effective there needs to be deep trust and faith in the teacher, and the teacher needs to have deep trust and faith in the student. A profound opening in the student-teacher relationship occurs when the student lets go of the barrier between self and other. There are many Zen stories in which the student has had a deep opening, goes to the teacher's room, and knocks on the door late at night. It is very important for that moment of contact to happen, for the teacher to be able to see the depth of realization of the student. But there are other instances of students deeply letting go, feeling deep appreciation for the teacher, and wanting to go to the teacher's room to express gratitude in the middle of the night, rather than letting the teacher rest by waiting until morning. Also, there are students who have knocked on the teacher's door in the middle of the night because they wanted physical union with the teacher.

QUESTION: In surrender, what is it that's being surrendered?

NICOLEE: We can look at surrender as the deep letting-go of fixed perspectives of self and other and a profound surrendering to one's own inherent experience that this life is not missing anything at any point, that it is altogether whole and complete, moment by moment. The student-teacher relationship is a very skillful means of opening, of helping that process of surrendering, of realizing who we are and what our life is.

There is a story of a Zen master and a student who is very full of his own understanding who comes to study with him. The teacher gives him a cup of tea and keeps pouring the water into the cup until the tea is overflowing. The teacher is demonstrating, "There's nothing I can do because there's no space." There is an emptying out that needs to happen, a surrendering of one's opinions, ideas, and so on. So the teacher has to wait patiently. But if the student is ripe and is willing to go through the process of letting go, in time it becomes apparent to the student where the student is. The teacher may use varying skillful means to facilitate the student's letting go. But then there is another kind of student who is so full of his or her opinions, ideas, etc., that there's no room whatsoever—the student wants to be right no matter what and is afraid to let go. In this case the student-teacher relationship will not happen in any depth. We have to be willing to be a beginner.

QUESTION: Is there a reverse side of that, with the teacher who believes that they are right and is really hung up on that?

NICOLEE: Yes, there can be a situation in which the teacher is frequently experiencing frustration, annoyance, falling asleep, wanting to leave and/or thinking too much about how irritating the student is. The teacher is hooked, and that's the delicate place where the teacher needs to step back and not try to justify doing whatever they want in relationship to the student because of their role or position. If the teacher recognizes when s/he is hooked, the teacher can learn a great deal. The teacher needs to be self-aware, to recognize his/her own response to what is happening, and to seek supervision from peers. The teacher may have to let go of being right. The student may never know the teacher is going through this. If the teacher is working with it in a completely personal way, there's a profound surrendering that's going on in which being stuck is recognized, and at that point the student may be a wonderful mirror, to help the teacher recognize self-deception. So doors can open. There is then a real possibility for the teacher. There is a story about a Zen Master, Zuigan, who called to himself every morning, "Be awake," and he answered, "Yes, yes!"

Making a Commitment

In the next phase of the student-teacher relationship, commitment, the student deepens his/her relationship with the teacher by not holding back, by being completely open, honest, keeping close communication with the teacher, and by taking responsibility for his/her aspiration and practice. The teacher also deepens his/her commitment to the student and may face issues of trustworthiness, clarity, ethics, and skillful means. It is important that the teacher and the student are a good match.

QUESTION: When the Dalai Lama was asked about choosing a teacher, he said you have to choose a teacher carefully, and you have to be critical and carefully evaluate the teacher's speech and behavior. That's your responsibility. And he said there have been teachers who have abused the relationship, and you have to be careful about that. How does one choose a teacher?

NICOLEE: Choosing a teacher is very important. You wouldn't marry somebody you didn't know, would you? There's a kind of marriage that happens in the student-teacher relationship. So it's really important to assess the teacher. Sampling different teachers, you may come to the point where you say, "Yes, I feel a real affinity with this person." This is just the beginning. Now you need to spend time learning about them. How does s/he function? How does s/he deal with power, time, money, peers, other students, family, ethics? You also need to spend time with the teacher by putting yourself in the interview line frequently. Again, it's like getting married to somebody whom you are trusting to deeply nurture you. Another way to think of it is that the teacher is being asked by the students to hold the gold until the students realize that they themselves are the gold.

The teacher also needs to take time to look at the student. Somebody may want to study with the teacher but they may not be a good match. It's valuable to both the student and the teacher to get a good sense of each other. I notice, in our culture, that students often leave by making the teacher wrong. I feel it is important to address how we can take leave, honoring the integrity and dignity of each other. If a student comes to practice for a while and there is not a good match, how does the student leave without making the teacher wrong and finding fault? How does the student tell the teacher, "You know, I've really tried it out, and I really thank you and express my gratitude and appreciation for what you've done and for what you're carrying. I don't feel we're a good match." Or the reverse could happen, a teacher, sensing that s/he is not a good match for the student, might direct the student to another teacher or Zen center. If there is a long-term student-teacher relationship which doesn't work out, leave-taking can involve integrity and dignity and respect for each other. This is where the maturity of practice on both sides can show up.

QUESTION: Is a formal ceremony involved in asking to be a student?

NICOLEE: Yes, there is a ceremony. Some teachers formally receive students very early in the student's training, others wait until later. It's important to talk over with the teacher how to formally become a student.

QUESTION: How does the teacher know about the student's commitment?

NICOLEE: After you've been teaching for awhile, you know that commitment has peaks and valleys. The commitment shows up not so

much by words as by actions and steadiness in practice. When times get tough, if there is commitment and steadiness in practice, the teacher and student can work together very deeply.

Going through the Muck

This stage of practice can be very difficult as the student's deepest attachments, fears, anger, doubts and blind spots reveal themselves. The mantle of self-protection that is creating the illusion of a fixed self is being penetrated. Some of the ways a student may experience going through the muck are by:

- being too controlling
- over-analyzing him/herself, the teacher, and the sangha
- dismissing and/or rejecting what the teacher has said
- doubting him/herself, the teacher, and the practice
- being compliant too much of the time
- being prideful
- feeling entitled, special
- feeling inadequate, incompetent
- withdrawing
- resisting, being indifferent
- feeling static, stuck, shutting down
- holding on to being right
- wanting to have a romantic relationship with the teacher
- becoming too dependent on the teacher
- holding on to his/her anger
- acting out in a rebellious, disruptive way.

In this stage, some of the negative projections a student can place on the teacher ongoingly are:

- seeing the teacher as a judge or critic
- seeing the teacher as a negative father or mother
- blaming the teacher

- seeing the teacher as being inadequate, incompetent*
- seeing the teacher as indifferent
- seeing the teacher as unjust

These states of mind fit very nicely into the Buddhist Five Hindrances: attachment/lust/desire; repulsion/ill will; sloth and torpor; restlessness and agitation; and doubt in oneself, in the teacher, in the practice.

QUESTION: How does a teacher project negatively onto a student?

NICOLEE: Sometimes a teacher can become ongoingly afraid of the student, or harsh, or angry, or overly appropriate, too polite, making the student the authority on whether or not the teacher looks good. The teacher may withdraw, shut down, be dismissive. If a teacher is frequently indifferent, dismissive, or inaccessible, the student's practice can be hurt.

Sometimes the teacher can experience deep feelings of inadequacy. In going through the muck, we can see the conditioned responses, the habits that create the illusion of self. We all have our own style of identifying with our own perspective. When these habitual ways are being cut into—through zazen, koan, the teacher, the student, the sangha, our life—resistance can surface. Going through the muck is a very deep part of practice, and if we can learn how to work with it, we can open doors, we can experience the spaciousness inherent in all situations. When we look into the nature of anything, we discover solidity isn't there. We make friends with whatever is at hand, we accept our humanity, our shadow and our light, and realize we are all of it. Oftentimes people come into spiritual practice, and especially the meditation traditions, hoping to transcend pain, judgment, etc., and instead they learn how to open to judgment, to see judging as judging. They learn how to open to fear, to pain, to self-righteousness.

QUESTION: Is there a valid place for discernment and preference?

NICOLEE: Discernment allows us to deeply appreciate differences, to experience the uniqueness of each moment. We have all kinds of preferences; when we get very attached to how we want ourselves, others, or situations to be, we start swimming in the muck. One of the elements

* It is very important for the student to recognize the difference between the assessment of a teacher's capacity versus projecting negative attributes onto the teacher out of fear, anger, ignorance.

of discernment is to be attentive while going through an experience rather than projecting it out. The tendency is to think or say, "I'm angry, you're wrong," instead of, "I'm angry, let me look into it." You see? The discernment involves stepping back, looking into it directly. Who is angry?

There are many different ways of working with anger. One, of course, is to sit into it, to be the anger. Experience it full-on. Then at the next point, how do we behave? Everything is cause and effect, so we always have an opportunity for learning and growing. If we can be open, curious, and have an intent to learn, we usually move through things more rapidly than if we get stuck in a defensive position. Taking action may not necessarily be the answer, either, because of the effect our behavior could have, depending on the circumstances.

Clarifying the Way as One's Life

The fourth phase that I see in the spiraling stages of the student-teacher relationship is clarifying the Way as one's life. For example, when we see that doubt isn't an absolutely solid thing, it's quite liberating, isn't it? When we look into fear, and I don't mean when we analyze fear, but look into the empty nature of fear and experience its ever-changing quality, we befriend ourselves. By inviting the experiences that we normally try to push away into the shadows, we deeply learn to trust ourselves. It's that process that engenders confidence in oneself. As long as we project our fear, doubt, etc. outward, we don't have to look into it because it is "over there." That's why if you are frequently upset or falling in love or angry with the student or teacher, you've got a place to practice. You have a place to clarify your life. So how do we do that? We take responsibility for ourselves and our practice. That's how we stand on our own two feet. So this process is constantly going on.

I remember a specific situation long ago that involved a student of Maezumi Roshi. Growing up, the student had suffered a great deal of abuse from her parents. As an adult she disowned her outrage. She loved to have an experience of light and well-being, she identified with being kind and generous, but something happened that disrupted her view of Roshi, and she turned into a wild banshee. The contrast between how she

presented herself to others and her feelings toward Roshi was stunning. Having befriended my own anger many times, when she came into interview with me and was exploding with anger towards Roshi, I listened and breathed. If we don't open to our own anger, our own irrationality, it's very hard to be present with somebody else's when it comes up. When the student went through her rage and began to settle, I asked her to imagine all the people in the world right at that moment who were experiencing rage, toward themselves, toward another, toward this planet. And at that point, "her" rage became "the" rage, and her heart just broke open into compassion. You know why? There was no gap. She realized that they were not apart from her. She didn't have to be afraid of herself nor hold onto her image of herself. Her whole body began to relax. She began to speak clearly. Opening to her projection on Roshi made possible a deep acceptance of herself. She was clarifying the vastness of her life.

The more deeply we practice, the more clearly we see that the Way is our life. We learn to deal with the world and other people as they are, rather than as we image them. As we clarify the Way as our life, we learn to open, let go, self-liberate, flow. The gift of no fear comes out of learning to open to our life as it is.

The key is to take responsibility. It is not easy. The force of getting rid of what we don't like and projecting it onto the teacher or the student is so powerful that it can take tremendous self-discipline to step back, to take responsibility when we are hooked. It isn't easy, because we are quick to justify and hold on to our opinions about others. Because if we are not right about them, we may feel sad and vulnerable, we may feel shame, we may feel deep awkwardness, deep embarrassment. We may even feel that this practice is too hard for us, that we can't let go. But if we learn how to open to these experiences, they will dissolve. There is something very soft that can happen as the experience dissolves, like a feather flying in the wind. That kind of softness. Or like the petal of a flower.

Questions along the Way

QUESTION: What are some of the means for working with these kinds of projections?

NICOLEE: There are many methods, some of which we referred to earlier, which can help us. The most basic and thorough means is meditation. Sit into your experience and experience the whole cacophony, judging, resentment, grasping, and so on. Neither reject nor hold on to whatever occurs. Be mindful. Pay attention. Who is judging? Who is in pain?

Another means is to ask ourselves some of the questions utilized in Western psychology when projection is continually occurring: "Who does this person remind me of? What does the situation remind me of?" For example, imagine you are a student, and because the teacher has been unavailable, you have shut down, withdrawn, even become indifferent. The indifference has seething resentment beneath it that has been going on for several months. Every time you see the teacher, you notice the above reactions. If you ask yourself the question, "Who does s/he remind me of?" s/he might remind you of somebody out of your past, such as an unavailable mother, father, sibling, or teacher. By stepping back and asking this question, the similarities and differences between the past and present can become apparent. This differentiating can help you let go of the emotional charge with the teacher. Oftentimes, a spaciousness occurs.

Another question to ask ourselves is, "What am I wanting?" As the Buddha stated in the Second Noble Truth, how we want things to be is usually the source of our dissatisfaction and suffering. When we are in pain, by asking the question, "What am I specifically wanting?" we can oftentimes gather very useful information to help us speak and behave more compassionately toward others and ourselves. It is also very helpful to talk with the teacher or a senior student about your experience. And there are times when a student would benefit the most by receiving counseling from a professional therapist.

QUESTION: I have a concern that the teaching, which is based on 2,000 years of culture and tradition, is being diluted by Western concerns about liability. There is a fear of legal action if the teacher is too harsh with the student.

NICOLEE: This is a very important point. It is one of the situations which are being clarified in our culture. For example, there is a tremendous power imbalance in the student-teacher relationship, so a sexual

involvement with a student is very inappropriate. We have seen the profound after-effects of that behavior since the '70s.

But sexual misconduct is just one form of dilution of the student-teacher relationship. Aren't you asking how do we open the wisdom mind, how do we work with the precepts, the rules and regulations for ethical behavior, as Westerners?

QUESTION: Yes. I personally wouldn't want a teacher who wouldn't yell at me. How effective can teaching be if students are coddled?

NICOLEE: Let me address this by looking at compassion in two ways. One is the grandmotherly softness that feels so loving and kind. The other is the cutting sword compassion that can be painful, cutting through the roots of our delusion. We need both kinds to train well. The teacher has to gauge the "right amount." Hopefully the four spiraling stages of the student-teacher relationship we are considering will be helpful.

QUESTION: At what point is the student willing to withstand the assault on his/her ego that's going on in the student-teacher relationship, and at which point is the student justified in deciding that s/he is being abused by the teacher?

NICOLEE: If you feel there's abuse, then speak up. But first examine what you mean by "abuse." Is there inappropriate use of power, position, money, sex, time, or other factors? Then examine if the teacher reminds you of someone in your past—differentiate past and present. Also, ask yourself what you want—be specific. Do you want the teacher to be kind and loving most of the time and not show anger? Do you want to be in control when the teacher is inaccessible to you? Be specific, then take responsibility. If your dissatisfaction is because of expectations that the teacher cannot fulfill, take responsibility and look into the nature of this dissatisfaction. If your dissatisfaction is realistic, talk to the teacher and/or seniors in the sangha, or to the center's grievance committee.

The student-teacher relationship is like a magnet. It can pull up everything, literally—all those places where you say, "No, not that, I've got it really well protected, I've got fifteen locks on that trunk, there's no way anybody will know about it." Don't become a student or sit retreats if you don't want to get into that trunk, if you don't want those locks to start unlocking.

QUESTION: What if a meaningful, mutual, romantic relationship develops between an unmarried teacher and student?

NICOLEE: If that were to happen, the teacher would need to end the student/teacher relationship immediately and follow guidelines so that the student, sangha, and teacher would be supported in a healthy and balanced way. Nowadays, Zen centers should have clear regulations to clarify this kind of situation. At Three Treasures Zen Community we have developed guidelines in the event this were to happen in the future. We also have a grievance procedure for anyone who feels there has been an inappropriate use of power, position, money, sex, time.

QUESTION: What about the role of women teachers in the student-teacher relationship?

NICOLEE: This is a dynamic and evolving area. Women are developing a lot of very interesting areas of practice now. One aspect that female teachers are addressing is how to take more into account the emotional life. This can be a very helpful Western contribution. In the Orient, emotions are not dealt with as directly as in the West. Also, how to integrate relationship, children, and family with Zen training is an important contribution, not only of women but also male teachers. The female style of practice tends to be gentler, and there can be great strength in gentleness—but for some students it may be too subtle. Women teachers tend to empower others to empower themselves—in a more horizontal rather than hierarchical fashion. The Native American Indian tradition has also made a difference, by contributing the council process, which is a very useful way for the community to express itself. It is being used by many dharma centers directed by male and female teachers in the United States and in Europe. I feel it is going to be a very powerful influence in this culture.

QUESTION: Would you say something about rules and roles in dharma centers?

NICOLEE: All systems have rules and all systems have roles. I don't care what system it is, whether it is a family, a Zen center, or a work system. A dharma center may have rules and regulations that are too restrictive. If there are too many rules, students can become dependent, less able to take responsibility for themselves. The roles can become overly defined: We know exactly how to be, how to behave, what to say, what not to say. Yet

we need rules and ethical guidelines for sangha harmony. If there's upset, there need to be grievance procedures to help a sangha sort things out. And there are times when rules are irrelevant, when the spontaneity of the moment is very powerful and useful. There needs to be leeway so the dharma doesn't get swallowed up in conformity. But there is a difference between spontaneity and impulsive behavior that may be harmful. I don't have any answers here, I'm just throwing possibilities out. Look at the larger effect of one's actions. There are some people, for example, who have a lot of crazy wisdom. But is their behavior hurting the sangha? And there are others who are heavy-duty alcoholics and causing tremendous pain. In such circumstances, if the teacher and sangha both take responsibility for what is happening and get outside help, it may create a healing, healthier environment.

QUESTION: What about conflict resolution?

NICOLEE: I very much appreciate the council process for conflict resolution. Also, Nonviolent Communication training, developed by Marshall Rosenberg, is wonderful for conflict resolution. I feel it's important for the sangha to have a format for these kinds of problems. Deep listening is a very important part of that. Kanzeon was awakened by listening to the sounds of the world—no gap. It really helps if you can listen to the other person so well that you can tell them accurately what you heard them say. There needs to be a willingness to learn, instead of trying to protect oneself at any cost.

There is a supplication at the end of a Zen ceremony that says, "I hope there is enough water in the Pacific to wash my words from your ears." Please take this information and work with it. Please do not accept it uncritically. Examine it for yourself, and see if it is relevant to your practice. Thank you.



Addendum

During a workshop on the Student-Teacher Relationship conducted by Nicolee at the Santa Monica Zen Center, the following exchange took place with Bill Yoshin Jordan Sensei, Nicolee's second successor and the teacher at SMZC. It is included as an addendum because it presents another view of the student-teacher relationship.

YOSHIN: Sensei, can I use our relationship as an example? Not only do I have a teaching position here at Santa Monica Zen Center, but I also have a student relationship with you. Talking about our relationship might shed a little light on the difference between submission, compliance and at least my own view of surrender. It is something that I have to manage ongoingly with myself. It's not as if there is some moment of great surrender, and "Here I am at your feet." We've never had that.

NICOLEE: Thankfully!

YOSHIN: Yes. And there's a profound sense of love and respect. My practice is to stay with integrity in the student-teacher relationship so that I can be taught. I was not born being "open to being taught." I was a Mr. Know-It-All: "There is zero you've got to give me, shut up, I'll tell you how much I know." I have to be very rigorously rough with myself around this issue. It started in my relationship with Maezumi Roshi, continued in my other relationships, but really shows up most actively with Sensei. How I can maintain my integrity as a human being and still fulfill my obligations as a student is by maintaining a coachable and trainable attitude. I've found that I have to let go of the entitlement to be right. It's worse than just being righteous. If you look at that, I can see that whole cultures of people have been murdered just out of that tiny, tiny thing alone.

So I'm constantly being pressed up against it with her, all of the time. She and I are as different as night and day, and it's a constant mind-

pushing, for me. I constantly have to manage myself around giving up my right to be right with her, giving up my opinions about her that protect me. And when I do, what emerges is affinity. Because she calls me forth as somebody bigger than my own personal identity. I still have my identity. I do. I'm still male. I'm not much different from how I was when I was fourteen or fifteen. The difficulty comes whether I overtly become resistant, or compliant, acting like a good student. It's very subtle. It's not just being righteous, I can handle that. But it's the subtle, unconscious right that I have to be right and to make her wrong. But on the other side, what's really wonderful is that she has the capacity to uphold her commitment to me, even to be upset with me sometimes but still to have her commitment to me be more important than the upset. And I found my commitment to her to be more important than the upset. And that seems to carry the day. Does that make sense?

But it does cost me. I feel one hundred per cent responsible for my relationship with her working out. Zero, her. Period. Now that's hard, that's very hard. And sometimes I really don't like it like that. But that's my choice. That was not anything handed down to me by Moses or Maezumi Roshi or anybody else. I made that decision. I'm one hundred per cent responsible. Does that mean that I don't argue with her sometimes? No. Does it mean she gets to crap on me? Absolutely not. But I'm one hundred per cent responsible for that relationship. And not only that, I'm responsible for making sure she knows that, so she can know that if she had to go to a hospital tomorrow and she died, that the ball would be picked up and run with and she wouldn't have to worry about it. I have to provide that for her. It's all over here, in me. I'm not suggesting you do that, I'm telling how it works for me. It isn't easy.

NICOLEE: Yoshin was a student of Maezumi Roshi's for many years, and when Maezumi Roshi died he asked to complete his studies with me. And I'm not easy. I'm tough. Especially at the end stages: clarifying and more deeply learning to care for other people's well-being. I very much appreciate what he said about surrendering and distinguishing between submission and surrendering. The surrendering he's doing is really to himself. Submission can imply bellying-up. Although submission can be part of surrendering to another, to oneself, it's not a place where you stay. My job is to train him as thoroughly as I can and to support him to

function independently. His job is to let go—even of transmission and being a Zen teacher. This is essential. In my own training with Maezumi Roshi I told him from the bottom of my heart, “Roshi, don't give me transmission, please, until you are satisfied.” I often ask myself, “What would happen if I didn't teach anymore?” As I answer this question and feel into it, I can see what I'm holding onto. Giving away position, ideas about Zen, creates space, freshness, not-knowing. Surrendering. Simplicity of the everyday moment.