



a teacher's responsibility

YVONNE RAND has studied the teachings of the Buddha since 1955 and taught them since the early 1970s. While her home path is Soto Zen, she has had teachers in the Theravadan and Vajrayana traditions as well. Today she mentors young teachers from each of the major traditions.

Some years ago I was studying with the late Tara Tulku Rinpoche. I asked him to teach me practices pertaining to death and dying. Clear that his training did not include this aspect of Buddhist training, he sent me to find a Nyingma lama who could guide me. So you can see that a teacher needs both the wisdom and the latitude to recognize that sometimes s/he may not be suitable for a particular student.

I find that seeing my relationship with a student in terms of a beginning, middle and end helps me clarify my roles as a teacher. In the beginning I ask the student to tell me what he or she is looking for. I can then decide if I am an appropriate teacher for that student. Often we will make a contract for a set number of months with an explicit set of mutually developed goals. At the end of the period we review our relationship and evaluate how things are going for each of us.

A teacher benefits significantly by having peer relationships. Peers can help a colleague consider how to handle a relationship with a student that gets out of balance or when a transference occurs that challenges the teacher. Transference problems and potential boundary violations are common areas of difficulty that

are inherent to teacher-student territory. Active and honest participation in a feedback loop is essential if a teacher sincerely wishes to keep teacher and student alike out of trouble.

Rudimentary training in Western psychotherapy is critical for Buddhist teachers; advanced work is preferable. Training in family systems theory, in boundaries, and in transference and counter-transference are especially important. If, as a teacher, I have not done the psychological work I need to do in order to understand my own behavioral patterning and my own mental and emotional tendencies, I may easily become confused about what a student needs and fail to differentiate what is primarily psychological work, on the one side, from authentically spiritual work, on the other, and I shall have little chance if any to understand the border zone where the two merge and blur.

Teachers need to be rigorously clear and consciously explicit about their reasons for teaching. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has listed three ways in which one might become a teacher: being authorized by one's own teacher; being asked to teach by students; and having a strong inner impulse to share one's own spiritual experience. Issues of qualification and authorization, whether formal or informal, vary from tradition to tradition. I encourage students to ask about a teacher's authorization and training. Both the tone and the content of the response can be informative.

The teacher must also be clear about where to teach, whom to teach, what one is ready to teach, and what additional training and experience one needs before beginning or continuing to teach. I have often worked with teachers who are fearful about one-to-one meetings with students or about giving formal Dharma talks. Working with a more experienced teacher can foster proficiency and confidence. Developing effective communication skills is crucial.

Teaching has a business side. Whether the venue be large or small, the teacher should understand the legal and financial dimensions of teaching. Failure to acquire such pragmatic knowledge can lead to confusion and chaos, not to mention wrongdoing.

When someone comes to me for advice about finding a teacher, I recommend observing a number of different teachers

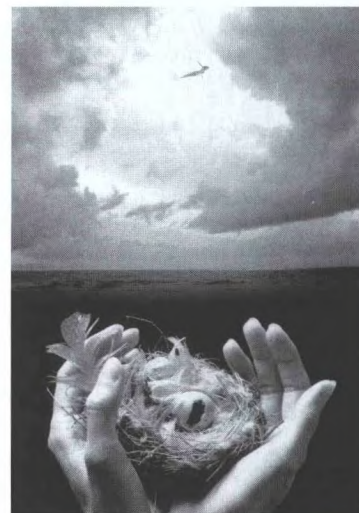


Photo: Jerry N. Uelsmann

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TEACHER

in different settings. I advise watching to see if the teacher is open to being questioned. Does the teacher demonstrate in his or her own conduct the qualities the teacher is teaching? I advise people to honor their intuitive responses to both the teacher and the teacher's settings. One can learn a lot about a teacher by observing the teachers' students.

Students frequently confuse enthusiasm for Buddhist practice and enthusiasm for a particular teacher. They can be dazzled by mere charisma. Impatience may lead them to not test what actually fits for them and for their spiritual life.

Shunryu Suzuki, the Zen teacher around whom the San Francisco Zen Center started, said years ago that, "sometimes I am the teacher and you are the student. And sometimes you are the teacher and I am the student." This pointing out has been invaluable to me over the years. Suzuki Roshi's lecture (in *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*) on how to control your sheep or your cow has also been invaluable. There he talked about giving the student a big pasture yet keeping present with the student all the while.

For students and teachers alike I recommend listing out all the teachings one has received in one's lifetime. The exercise can clarify what constitutes effective teaching, no matter which seat one is taking at any given time.

I have been fortunate to have had a number of extraordinary teachers in my years of study and practice on the Buddhist path. I have also studied with teachers who caused great harm

as teachers. From the latter I learned, painfully, about what does not work and what is not effective or wholesome in a teacher-student relationship.

The teacher-student relationship is based on trust. Above all a teacher must be trustworthy. As a teacher I want to build a relationship with the student that will withstand trouble over time. I must know how to hold the container within which the relationship occurs, one that protects both parties. Therefore I must not engage in so-called dual relationships with my students. I find not having a social relationship with students crucial to this end. The intimacy that is possible in the teacher-student relationship is precious and worth safe guarding. For both parties there is a need to be respectful, to pay attention to one's experience in particular and to not turn away from what arises as difficult within the relationship. ❁

Yvonne Rand, a close disciple of Suzuki Roshi and Dainin Katagiri, is a Zen priest and meditation teacher with more than 30 years of practice experience. She teaches out of her temple/home in Muir Beach, CA, and is currently at work on her book, *Zen and the Art of Choosing Your Words*. Copyright 2002.



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