

## Being a Student

When we first start out in a practice like this it's usually all about ourselves—what's in it for me. We either want to become calm, or clear, or get away from something in ourselves—like our anger, or fears, or sense of inadequacy. Eventually, after we've practiced for quite a while, we may begin to feel the need to give something back—that practice is not just about taking. This is not a moral dictate or a "should," rather it comes from an inner understanding. When this happens, the question, "How can I help?" may arise for us.

So, for example, we may decide to support the Center. We can volunteer for jobs, ranging from mowing the lawn to being a timekeeper to being on the Board. We can also give back just by our presence—simply showing up regularly, whether we feel like it or not, because we know it helps keep the practice at the Center strong. Please don't underestimate the fact that our practice can affect and help others. Just think of how you have been helped by observing the examples of others who practice. When we understand this, we also understand that simply attending regularly is a way to support the Center.

We can also give back in more subtle ways. For example, in listening to a Dharma talk, we may get caught in our reactions and opinions, and tend to believe them as truth. But if we could put our opinions on hold, and simply pay attention to what's being said, that's another way of supporting the center and the practice. In those moments, we could even ask ourselves, "How can I help?"—by perhaps asking a question or making a comment, to perhaps help clarify what's being said. So giving back is one aspect of being a student.

Another, perhaps more basic aspect, has to do with what it means to work with a teacher. The real issue in working with a teacher is if we're open to learning. If we think we already know a lot, we're not open. It's like having a full cup—there's no way we receive more. In a line from one of my favorite novels, a teacher says something like this to the main character: "Why don't you try to learn what I have to teach rather than spending so much time finding fault with it."

I don't encounter this full cup phenomenon here very often. But



**August Sesshin** applications are still being accepted. This is a five-day sesshin (8/6-8/11). If you can't attend the full five days you can apply for the first or last three days.

**Practice Period** will be from September 14 through October 12. Please leave this period open so you can attend all activities.

**Practice Leader training** (a one-year training) for Kate Watson-Forbess and Chuck Sweet will begin July 1. Although the training is not an absolute guarantee that they will become teachers, it is still a necessary step. Should Kate and Chuck become teachers at the end of the one year training, they will be co-teaching with Ezra and Elizabeth. The plan is to make for a smooth transition for when Ezra and Elizabeth begin phasing out; at present they have no set retirement date.

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I always think it's unfortunate when I see people stuck in believing their thoughts, or, stuck in being right, which always includes making others wrong. I even see this, on occasion, in myself! And it confirms my view about how easy it is to believe our opinions as truth, or to buy our own act.

When I met my first teacher, Robert De Ropp, I didn't like him at all. He seemed to be very authoritarian and gruff, and he really pushed my buttons. But I was very committed to the practice and so I stayed with him. And gradually I saw that my initial perceptions were not really accurate. So please keep in mind that how you feel about a teacher is not necessarily an accurate way to judge whether a teacher might be helpful. Sometimes our so-called "deepest" feelings, those we usually trust the most, are, in fact, quite suspect.

Remember, the way we experience a teacher is always the result of the many layers of our own subjective filters. Ten different people may experience ten different things from the same teacher. This is why, at this Center, we place so much emphasis on not believing our thoughts. So in this sense, part of being a student is to be open to the possibility that our subjective reactions need to be inspected.

Coming back to the point about how to work with a teacher: the set-up here at the Center is unique. First of all there are two of us, and neither of us are gurus; that is, we don't presume to be in an elevated position. But we try to keep in mind that the main job of a teacher is to help clarify the basic human problem: that we are disconnected from awareness of our true nature.

However, our approach to this basic human problem doesn't really fit the romantic Zen model of the master who can bring you to clarity with an incisive word or phrase. We're more in the Vipassana model of a "spiritual friend"—someone who has been on the path for a long time, and who has learned enough from life's disappointments to be able to help clarify what practice is in different situations.

More specifically, I see my job as a teacher as having three basic directions:

First, to help clarify what practice is, through talks and writing and interviews. Second, to help individual students uncover where they might be stuck, primarily through interviews. Of course, this requires that the student be open and willing. And third, a lot of my job is simply to encourage students to persevere—through all the ups and downs and dry spots.

Regardless of what a teacher does, most of the burden is on you—you have to do most of the work. You're the one who has to do the painful work of seeing through your beliefs, and your ideas about how things are supposed to be. You're the one who has to stay with your painful experiences, and learn what it means to surrender to them. Teachers can help a little, but unless you stay open to learning, little will change.

Coming back to the initial point of this talk: being a student. Along with the hard work of staying open, it eventually may require that you expand your role—to not just take, but also to give back. This is the process—first being open, and being able to receive, and then giving back.

*We can also give back just by our presence—simply showing up regularly.*

As you may already know, Elizabeth and I have asked Kate Watson-Forbess and Chuck Sweet to begin a one-year training in the position of Practice Leader. It doesn't mean that either of them have been hit with a lightning bolt and are now enlightened. But we believe that both Kate and Chuck have learned from their struggles, and are both able to give back through clearly articulating what they have learned. They will occasionally do interviews, and we encourage all of you to go in and see them, and to do so with an open mind.

When the one year Practice Leader training is over, assuming it goes well, Kate and Chuck may officially become teachers here. Meanwhile, Elizabeth and I are not quite ready to retire, but we think it's important to have a plan in place for when our bodies tell us that we need to phase out. So we are now beginning a new phase at the Zen Center, and we hope you can be open to it. Or at least be willing to be aware of your own opinions and reactions—and to know they are just that.

*Ezra Bayda*

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