



On Becoming a Formal Student

Entering the Lineage Tradition

with Zen West ~ Empty Field

When the question arises about entering the teacher-student relationship, please honor this call by being patient and sitting with your intention for some time. The most important thing in this process of clarification is to look into one's own heart for the answer and trust your intuition. By entering this gate, you are inviting the teacher to take a closer interest in your process, your day to day life and to lean in, in the service of awakening. Although there is a time honored tradition, the particulars of each engagement is unique.

To become a student, on some level, we need to be willing to learn – sometimes this begins with the knowledge that we cannot do this path alone and a sense that there is something to clarify. One needs just enough measure of trust and faith based on experience to enter this long held tradition. This is the powerful edge of Great Faith and Great Doubt necessary to travel the path of Zen. Students should take their time about this decision. Although there is the option of terminating this relationship, this is not common. The teacher-student relationship is not always easy and one should expect, like all relationships, that this includes both periods of constriction (frustration or confusion) as well as experiences of expansion (support and insight) natural to all growth processes.

Entering the lineage also means aligning with the tradition conveyed to through my late teacher, Kyogen Carlson, and Dharma Rain Zen Center. By becoming my student, you automatically become a member of the extended family and are announced and welcome at DRZC events to the extent you wish to participate.

Eligibility

Those considering requesting a formal relationship will have already received the precepts either with EF/ZW or at another center, and have been formal practicing members of our sangha for at least a year. Because we are a lay sangha, how the elements of training described below actually look for each student may be quite different, depending upon their needs and circumstances, and will naturally change over time. Below are important elements of Zen training that students become familiar with. Without these, the realization we long for remains remote. As you read through these, please feel free to discuss questions and concerns about these aspects of training as you envision becoming a student within this particular lineage.

Zen Training

Zen practice is open to everyone. Zen *training*, however, is another level of commitment that is guided by the teacher/student relationship. It is a thoroughgoing organic process – dynamic, adaptive and responsive to the causes and conditions of our life. There is no obstacle in any lay practitioner's life to realizing the path if they are sincere in their wish to do so. That being said, the Zen path does include time honored particulars that have pointed the way for centuries and has been adapted to our modern context.

How one engages these elements over time naturally ebbs and flows. It is a matter of discussion between teacher and student about what will be most helpful to the student's process at any particular time balancing life demands with formal participation. The lay student, as our ethical guidelines state, always maintains autonomy over their decisions and is ultimately responsible for taking care of their own practice. The teacher guides in the tradition. The following constitute the most important elements of training on the Zen path that, over time, become familiar parts of the fabric of our lives:

- ❖ **Serving the Sangha** – The sangha jewel is one of the three refuges which students are invited to serve as part of their training. There are endless ways to do this, including the most important, sharing your practice with the group and being willing to be seen, as you communicate insights and struggles. Other ways to support the sangha is to get involved in projects or take on any of the zendo roles listed below. This is not a matter of volume, but simply expressing your offering in *some* form. Serving also entails practicing kindness and compassion and doing one's best to abide by the precepts within one's sangha relationships.
- ❖ **Ango/ Study Groups** – Most new students will strongly consider the fall and spring study groups and consult with the teacher if this is something the student decides not to do for a season for particular reasons. Though taking breaks from these forms is completely acceptable, these venues are the primary arena in which we challenge our practice, risk being seen and deepen our understanding.
- ❖ **Sanzen** – Meeting face to face is an important aspect of being a Zen student. Students decide how often to check in with the teacher in sanzen. Occasionally, the teacher will request a student come to sanzen, but in general, it's assumed the student will initiate these meetings. It is not necessary to have a burning question, problem or new insight to come to sanzen.
- ❖ **Koho Meetings** – At this time, current formal students have expressed interest in meeting briefly once a month to check in, support one another, and engage in particular teaching questions. It is not required that everyone can make all of these, but should expect to make time for as many as you can. These meetings are a place to open up, be oneself, share insights and receive teachings and support.

- ❖ **Retreats** – Sesshin is the most powerful medicine we have in Zen, particularly for lay people whose busy lives amidst the exigencies of this modern world often overwhelm our deeper spiritual yearning and reflection. Sesshin is demanding, inconvenient and brilliant in its simplicity. Retreat rejuvenates, challenges, deepens, and clarifies, often in the short span of a few days. I encourage all of us to plan ahead and do sesshin as much as one's schedule and life circumstances will allow.
- ❖ **Zendo Roles** – Koho students are given the first opportunity to serve in zendo roles such as Tenzo, Doan-Kokyo, Shika, Jisha and Chiden. These roles are important traditional teaching tools of Zen. They show us how we move in the world, where we get stuck and where we might look for guidance. By studying these Zen ways of moving in the zendo, we serve the sangha and nourish our practice. Zendo roles may be something a student takes on for a year or is simply called on to do during a particular retreat.

Ethical Behavior in Relationship

- ❖ **Working with other teachers/sanghas/practices** – Students are supported in integrating practices and teachings from others. I have greatly benefited from doing so and sometimes recommend practices gleaned from other supportive directions. However, in this teacher's experience, it is better to imagine this as cross-training for the purpose of integration into one lineage root, one dharma, rather than engaging in practices "buffet style." Sometimes different elements don't touch or meld or inform one another. The way to avoid this is to consult with your teacher and to share what you are learning with the sangha as you proceed.
- ❖ **The teacher student relationship has risks.** There is much at stake. Many of us teachers in this "next generation" in America are aware of the shadow of abuses of authority in the early days of Zen that has caused great harm. Students should know I fully embrace and am bound by the ethics of the teacher-student relationship as defined by my home temple found in the accompanying DRZC document on this subject, alongside the ethics adopted by Zen West ~ Empty Field.

Important Elements from DRZC Relational Ethics Policy

(Please note that the "Master/Disciple" category in the DRZC document only pertains to monastic students and is not applicable in our sangha) Here is a link to the DRZC document on [Ethics and Precepts in Sangha Relationships](#). Please read it carefully. Here are some excerpts:

- ❖ **On All Formal Teaching Relationships:** Any undue advantage taken of formal students is a serious matter. Unconscious, heedless or careless actions that are detrimental to the welfare of formal students are a matter of reproof, and indicate a need for further training or education. Formal students should

remember, however, that they always have autonomy over their personal decisions (with regard to their health or finances, for example), within the guidelines of their commitment. For Lay Disciples [formal students], this means they always have the choice to back out of a training position if the requirements are more than they feel ready to meet.

- ❖ **On Lay Disciples:** We expect Lay Disciples to conduct their private lives in a way that would reflect well on the temple. We expect them to be honest and ethical in their personal and business dealings, to be faithful in personal relationships, and to be generally law-abiding good citizens in the community. These matters are generally considered training issues between the disciple and his or her teacher. ...Because of their increased visibility within the Sangha, [formal students] should be mindful of the perception of authority new members will have regarding them, and be careful about inadvertently taking undue advantage. Kindness and consideration for newer members becomes more important because of the perceived authority held by Lay Disciples.
- ❖ **On Teacher/student relationship:** The authority of the teacher is in guiding their Zen practice and meditation, and pointing out to what degree their [lay student's] actions and practice conform to the traditions of Soto Zen and the expectations of Lay Disciples [formal student] within the Sangha. [...] the responsibility of the teacher is to bring the student into a mature and autonomous relationship with the practice and the Dharma. (This is to say, the difference between Zen students who have taken the precepts and formal lay students is that the formal student gives consent to their teacher to address and examine any action that does not accord with the bodhisattva precepts and the lineage practice.)

The Process at Zen West ~ Empty Field

The tradition of becoming a student begins with a discernment period in which the prospective student must ask the teacher formally, over time, at three different occasions, if they would serve as their teacher. This discernment period involves an ongoing conversation about the readiness of the student and willingness of the teacher and whether the teacher and student are a “good fit.” It is a time to explore the meaning of the process and address any causes for concern.

After this period of discernment, if both parties agree to go forward, the student begins sewing their rakusu with the help of other students as needed. The student is given the choice of three dharma names from which to choose. Dharma names are carefully selected by the teacher to represent an aspiration or nascent awakened quality of the student. (It's the student's choice whether to use these dharma names in the community.) The teacher/student relationship is formalized during a public “Entering the Lineage Tradition” ceremony that includes a day-long retreat, where the student recommits to the precepts, and agrees to align with the enlightenment of the Buddha. The rest unfolds from our mutual commitment to the path.