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Zen Teachers and Sex

When the student of Zen first arrives in the presence of one who is to become the teacher, the work begins as an exploring of personal chemistry and electricity. These ineluctable interpersonal sensings will grow into the sinews, the trust, with which the teacher and student accomplish their work together. Except for the rare one who is spontaneously haunted by the Dharma, it is often only this trust that can give the student courage to weigh the anchor of one's own personal experience and launch into the unknown waters of Mind with desperate goal,

> Holding to nothing whatever
> But dwelling in *prajna* wisdom,
> ...freed of delusive hindrance,
> Rid of the fear bred by it...
> —from *Prajna Paramita Hridaya*

The student of Zen, relying in such innocent and selfless trust, willy nilly (will-I nill-I) and rightfully holds the teacher *personally responsible* for the truth of everything he says, the authenticity of everything he does. Such profound trust is possible only when one's relationship with the teacher is creative, dynamic, full of unrealized, unspeakable potential—whether the student knows any of this or not. The real teacher of Zen certainly does know all of it.—*Editor* (Dwain Wilder)

Zen Teachers and Sex: A Call for Enlightened Standards

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Let us remember: What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander.

—Elie Wiesel

The past decade has seen an alarming trend in American Buddhism as well as in other Asian spiritual traditions in this country: a series of revelations of sexual involvement between spiritual teachers and their students, often with the teacher showing a *pattern* of involvement, and with more than one student. In the wake of these scandals, which have shaken one meditation center after another, many women and men have been left pondering the implications for Buddhism—and questioning the value of Buddhist practice and training. Many have asked, "Isn't sex between Zen teachers and their students wrong, just as it is between therapists and their patients, and between academic teachers and their students, and in similar relationships of power disparity and trust?" A related question sometimes posed in one form or another is: "If you're enlightened, can you do just anything you want, regardless of the consequences for others?"

At last June's annual Conference of Second Generation Zen Teachers, I proposed, together with Sensei Sunyana Graef, another Zen teacher and a Dharma sister, that we publicly declare, as a group, that sexual relations between Zen teachers and their students is out of bounds. After long discussion this proposal for a public declaration was rejected by most of our eleven participants. They argued that since it was agreed in a previous such conference that the purpose of our meetings was to privately share our feelings and experiences on issues common to us as teachers, and not to take any stands on substantive matters, we should not make any such statement. "If we do it on this issue," one teacher warned, "then it will be something else next, like vegetarianism, for example. So where will it end?" Although it was generally agreed that sex should indeed remain outside the teacher-student relationship, the main sentiment was that any such ethical prohibition should be left for individual centers to declare on their own. And with that, a perfect opportunity was forfeited to use our authority as a group to shed light on this matter.

Our annual teachers' conference, functioning not as a legislative body but as a private "think tank" (and without any presumption of representing North American Zen), has filled a critical need. The information and experiences shared there have been illuminating and exceedingly helpful to me, and for this I owe a debt of gratitude to the other participants. In addition, those of us who have attended all or most of the first four meetings have seen a progressive knitting together of teachers. In fact, without the trust that developed among us through the informal give-and-take format of those meetings, this article may never have been written. Clearly, then, the original decision of our teachers' group to not take stands as a group has borne rich fruit. But the repercussions of sex between teachers and students have been so destructive, and the consequent confusion and doubt among students and would-be students so widespread, that the dangers of silence, I am convinced, outweigh the risks of speaking out. My appeal that follows does not arise from any illusion of my own moral infallibility, but rather springs from a deep concern for the Dharma. I sincerely hope that it will be received in this spirit by my colleagues as well as others.

For at least the past twenty years or so, at every introductory workshop at the Rochester Zen Center, Roshi Kapleau or I have passed on to the participants a warning from Asian spiritual traditions: beware of any teacher who gets sexually involved with his students, who is driven by acquisitiveness, or who craves "name and fame." (To these traditional Big Three compulsions—Sex, Money, and Power—which

have bedeviled religious leaders in the West as much as in Asia, I would add: substance abuse.) In addition, Roshi Kapleau and Robert Aitken-roshi have both published articles clearly stating that the teacher-student relationship is off-limits for sex. But given the unwillingness on the part of our teachers' group to publicly take a stand on this issue in spite of recurrent sexual transgressions by Zen teachers, I feel compelled to reiterate, in print, the position of this Center.

Much of what is wrong with sex in any professional helping relationship would also apply to Zen teachers having sex with their students. The dangers of sexual involvement in this arena are thoroughly explored in Peter Rutter's excellent book *Sex in the Forbidden Zone: When Men in Power—Therapists, Doctors, Clergy, Teachers, and Others—Betray Women's Trust*, which goes far beyond the scope of this article. (In his Prologue, Rutter explains that because 96 percent of sexual exploitation by professionals occurs between a man in power and a woman under his care, the forbidden zone defined in his book concerns men in power who exploit women. Similarly, since in Zen all such affairs that have come to light have involved male teachers having sex with female students, in this article I will generally use male pronouns to refer to teachers, and female pronouns to refer to their student victims.) In addition to the many important points Rutter makes, for Zen practitioners a more fundamental issue needs to be addressed: from an enlightened Zen perspective, can we even speak of "wrong" or "right"? The answer is: yes, we can, and, to correct claims to the contrary, we must.

In last year's teachers' conference, I was struck by how squeamish many of the participants were, even in our private discussions, about declaring the obvious: that sex between teachers and students is wrong (except, perhaps, when they are already in a committed intimate relationship—but then one has to wonder how objective a teacher can be in giving dokusan to someone with whom he is intimately involved). Why this wishy-washiness, I wondered after the conference, about so clear-cut an issue, and one on which the largest body of American psychologists, the whole academic community nationwide, and countless churches and other organizations have unequivocal codes of conduct?

I increasingly suspect that some in our group had fallen prey to one of the most insidious of Zen sicknesses: the attachment to the notion of emptiness, the undifferentiated aspect of reality. From this point of view there is indeed no wrong or right, nothing to be judged, and no one to judge—no distinctions at all. Everyone is whole and complete, everything is finished, Truth and Perfection are fully revealed equally in all beings and all phenomena. It is from this standpoint, or no-point, that a Zen master wrote:

Don't be overjoyed at the right.
Don't be distressed over the wrong.
For the ancient masters, things are like flowers and blossoms.
Peach blossoms are red, plum blossoms are white, and roses are pink.
Though I ask the spring breeze why they are so, it knows nothing.

This verse is an eloquent reminder that moral judgments have no reality except in terms of self-and-other, which is a construction of our discursive mind. But who on this earth lives beyond the shadow of self? The claim, explicit or otherwise, that "there is no right or wrong" can be made only by one who has transcended *fully* the illusory world of discrimination, which is not something even teachers can be expected to have done.

Contrary to popular notions, enlightenment varies in its depth, and these days an initial awakening is usually rather shallow, a mere glimpse into the non-duality of form and emptiness. That such an opening leaves much business undone has been emphasized by many masters over the centuries, including Chinese Zen master Kuei-shan, who left us these sobering words:

> *...even though the original mind has been awakened... there still remains the inertia of habit, formed since the beginning of time, which cannot be totally eliminated at a stroke.*

Thus not just years but decades of ongoing practice after a first awakening—even after completing one's formal training—are demanded of the person who would purify his or her personality and character of all greed, hatred, and delusion. Rather than idealizing teachers, students must learn once and for all that they are really fellow travelers on the Way, explorers who may be far ahead of their students, but not yet at the end of even that one path. Although it may be granted that *theoretically* even sex with students could be done out of compassion for her or him, for all intents and purposes we must

assume that no teacher other than a full Buddha could be pure enough to get involved sexually with his students out of selfless motives. Nor is there a student so detached as to remain unscathed by such an encounter.

To state that all of us, including the enlightened, must live in accordance with conduct widely defined as ethical by our society (if not all humanity) may sound utterly self-evident. Yet I hear and read remarks from even advanced Zen practitioners that suggest a disdain for ordinary standards of conduct. For example, in a conversation with a Zen teacher who had been sexually involved with at least one of his students, I insisted that we Zen teachers need to state unequivocally that sex has no place in the teacher-student relationship, and added that the American Psychological Association (APA) has adopted the same prohibitions in its ethical standards for therapists, as have virtually all universities and colleges in their codes of conduct for professors and instructors. To my dismay, this teacher merely smiled indulgently and said, "Well, I don't think we need to model ourselves after those people...." His implication, though perhaps unconscious (let us hope), was chilling: we who have seen the Truth are no longer bound by the rules of ordinary people. Or: Once you have realized the emptiness of morality and other conceptual systems, you may sport freely in this illusory world of relativity.

What makes all this so tricky is that this insinuation, self-serving though it may have been in this instance, is not without some truth. In Buddhism we are called upon to outgrow our reliance on morality *as a conceptual structure* by seeing into the emptiness that is the ground of all such structures. But this does not mean flouting basic standards of human conduct. As Roshi Kapleau has so often put it, "Zen is above morality, but morality is not below Zen." We can *see through* morality—i.e., see the relative, and thus limited, nature of it—without renouncing it. And having perceived the emptiness aspect of reality, where does one go if not back to the realm of form, and thereby give substance to the emptiness? Moreover, if we have truly awakened to the non-dual nature of reality and the indivisibility of all existences, we will be all the more sensitive and aware of the effects of our conduct on others.

Even as all phenomena are essentially empty, we live in a world of form and differentiation, of decisions and mistakes and needs and values.

A teacher wanting to escape the constraints of basic morality might point to the One-mind precepts of Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen, which formulate morality in the absolute terms of no-self. But these may not be invoked by a teacher to justify his actions until he has reached Bodhidharma's stature. Moreover, to shrink from moral statements when such silence serves to perpetuate abusive patterns of behavior is to forsake our responsibilities as teachers. None other than Bodhidharma himself expressed this in more vivid and traditional terms when he said:

> *One who thinks only that everything is void but is ignorant of the law of causation falls into everlasting, pitch-black hell.*

But let us now affix a cautionary label to the foregoing: BEWARE OF DOGMATISM. Attachment to one's own ideas of right and wrong is just as dangerous as an ethical relativism based on attachment to emptiness. Although the injunction against sex in a helping relationship of power disparity commands a huge consensus, few ethical issues are this clear-cut, and all of us must be constantly vigilant to avoid simplistic judgments. In most matters, the more vehement (not to mention self-righteous) we are in denouncing the actions of others, the more likely it is that we have not yet understood right and wrong in all its subtlety and complexity. At such times we also need to examine outselves to see whether psychological mechanisms such as projection may be at work.

So we must avoid the dark path of dogmatism as the way out of moral thickets. But denying the usefulness of ethical prohibitions is no answer either. In fact, one of the three essentials of Buddhist practice is morality ("Right Action" in the Noble Eightfold Path), for which a framework is given in the fundamental Sixteen Precepts. Among these are the Ten Cardinal Precepts, the third of which is "not to engage in improper sexuality but to lead a life of purity and self-restraint." Traditionally this precept was not interpreted in terms of the teacher-student relationship, but then traditionally teachers were all monks who had taken vows of celibacy. Today few teachers in either the United States or Japan are celibate monks, and it is time that for teachers we widened the interpretation of this precept to include no sex with students. It would be comforting to find that Zen teachers are capable of accepting the same level of responsibility and self-restraint as

are those in the helping professions and academic community generally.

With regard to any guidelines for conduct, the wording is not insignificant. At a large American Zen center, in the past at least, the precept on improper sexuality read as follows: "Do not be greedy." *"Do not be greedy"!* How tantalizingly elusive! Such wording, in its vagueness, offers no limits at all. No wonder this center was riven by a pattern of sexual abuse between teachers and students, nursed by wholesale confusion surrounding the precept on sexuality. Teachers need to get straight on all this and then explicate guidelines, if not within the traditional precepts then as a separate code of conduct for themselves.

Attachment to emptiness has a sibling vice, and that is attachment to enlightenment (actually, in both cases it is attachment to the *thought*). The "stink of elightenment," in which one imagines that through having awakened to our True-nature we have acquired something special, is a notorious pitfall on the spiritual path. Many Zen koans deal with this dangerous notion, which is, paradoxically, all too common in those who have had some insight into their Self-nature. If one has not sufficiently plumbed and integrated the points of such koans, or otherwise shed one's self-consciousness as an "enlightened person," what follows from this notion of "I am a special person," in just one more disastrous step, is "I have special privileges," or "I am not bound by the constraints of the unenlightened." Or: *"I don't think we need to model ourselves after those people."* Most likely anyone of Zen experience making such a statement would be savvy enough to deny that it carries the implication of moral immunity; presumably he would have learned, intellectually, that the distinction between enlightened and ignorant is dualistic and therefore ultimately unreal. But in Zen we listen to not just the words but the spirit behind the words, and it is here that even a subtle form of the unconscious arrogance of enlightenment reveals itself.

From a woman involved with a Sangha shaken by the sexual exploitations of its teacher comes this sorry story, revealing the worst form of teacher conceit. She had remonstrated with the wayward teacher, urging him to have his center draw up a code of sexual prohibitions, but only met the same patronizing reply each time: "Barbara [not her real name], I only wish I could make you understand..." In other words, "Alas, my child, no real understanding of these matters can be vouchsafed to you until you have attained to the exalted vision of us Enlightened Ones. Only then will you be able to question our actions." It would be hard to find a more contemptuous and dualistic response to a legitimate concern than this. Moreover, the so-called enlightened person, in the very act of self-consciously separating himself from the "unenlightened," is disowning his supposed enlightenment.

To insinuate in a disagreement between you and me that your viewpoint is disqualified because you have not had an awakening (or your understanding is less than mine) is a bald form of intimidation. Whatever greater insight I may have into the emptiness of phenomena may indeed give me a deeper understanding of an issue, but that does not mean that your viewpoint is necessarily flawed. Just as a student of lesser "spiritual" understanding may have a superior understanding of economics or art or sports, she may also have a keener grasp of psychology, for example, or group dynamics—or even ethics. Another consideration, again, is the *degree* of a person's realization; one may have passed many koans and yet have less practical wisdom than one who, with perhaps more life experience, has yet to "pass the first gate." Lastly, it is crucial to understand that even a solid Awakening is of value only to the degree that it has been integrated into one's daily life. Emptiness, or the experience of it in awakening, must be worked through the world of form before it can truly serve us and others. Hence the great emphasis in Zen, at least in ancient times, on maturing and testing one's awakening in the ordinary world, through the seasoning of time, before presuming to teach.

To assess the value of our meditation experience—i.e., how thoroughly or skillfully it has been integrated into our ordinary life of activity—we need only look at our conduct as it measures up to the standards that form the foundation of Buddhist practice: the precepts. At base, the Ten Cardinal Precepts are not mere culturally-bound moral commandments imposed on ignorant Buddhists to help them behave, a fence of do's and don'ts. Rather, they describe the conduct of a fully enlightened person, or one who has realized—made real—her or his deepest nature. Because no one since Shakyamuni Buddha himself, we are told, has completely actualized the boundless wisdom and compassion of this True-self, we all consis-

tently violate the precepts. But we must ceaselessly aspire to live up to them, that we may become what we truly already are. Unfortunately, too many Zen teachers today have failed to honor and uphold the precepts as they once were upheld. And nowhere is this more so, it seems, than in Japan. Esteemed Zen priests there lament that within their own ranks the discrepancy between what is said and what is done—between the prescriptive and the descriptive—has steadily widened in recent history. Undeniably, there are cultural differences at work here. In Japan everything has both a front (public side) and a back (private side) to it, and the two need not jibe; there is no Japanese word for "hypocrisy." The "packaging" of things and people and groups is all-important. But even more, the Japanese tend to avoid moral principles as much as Americans tend to promote them (each of these extremes has its problems). In a recent article in *The New York Times* on Japanese ambivalence about getting involved in the Gulf War, the author notes, "Even Japanese diplomats complain that there is no historical tradition of Japan standing up for a set of values." In light of this, is it just coincidence that all of the participants at last year's teachers' conference, which delivered such a resounding public "no comment" on the sex issue, come from Japanese lineages? Buddhist teachers in this country, whether American, Japanese, or Tibetan, have to open their eyes and see that they are living in a Judeo-Christian culture whose people are reared to think in moralistic terms. Most Americans will not put up with a cavalier attitude toward the precepts. Although the focus of this article is on teachers' misuse of sex, we must extend our ethical searchlight into other realms as well.

In fairness, it must be noted that Japanese and American Zen practitioners have nothing over some Vajrayana Buddhists in this country when it comes to indifference toward the precepts. For sheer wantonness, it would be hard to outdo the sexual exploitation of students by a certain Tibetan teacher, now dead (of alcohol-related causes). How distressing, then, to hear him held up as proof of the legitimacy of teacher-student sex! When I insisted to a Zen teacher who had been sexually involved with his students that the teacher-student relationship must be off-limits for sex, he retorted, "Well, look at _____ [the Tibetan teacher]. I consider him a great master, and he had sex with *many* of his students, men and women alike." What, we must ask, would make such a man "a great master"? His writing and speaking ability? The ingenuity and subtlety of his teaching methods? These might qualify him as a great *teacher*, but hardly a master in the true sense of the word. Zen master Dogen, in his book *Points to Watch in Buddhist Training*, written in 1235, referred to a master as one who is fully enlightened, who lives by what he knows to be the truth, and who has received the transmission from his own teacher. By these criteria, admittedly, there are few true masters anywhere today.

There are those who defend the Tibetan teacher's escapades on the grounds that since he neither made secret of nor repudiated them, he showed no incongruence between his teaching and his lifestyle. But this apology ignores teacher-student power dynamics. The teacher holds all the cards, and the weight of his office and of his often charismatic personality (the two are mutually reinforcing) can impose irrestible pressures on the student. Indeed, in the student's eyes the teacher may have the kind of magical power, even perfection, of a parent as seen by his young child. And like a child, the student is open and dependent—and thus vulnerable. How can any responsible teacher justify sex in such an unequal relationship? It is nothing less than incest in the family that is Sangha. Yet this Tibetan teacher is still celebrated, even revered, by surprising numbers of naive (and not so naive) Buddhists and others for his alleged "crazy wisdom" teaching. This is even after his Sangha was shattered by the news that his hand-picked American successor, who likewise had counted many sexual partners among his students and later died of AIDS, had slept with some of his students *after* being diagnosed as HIV-positive. To see hundreds of otherwise intact adults continue worshipping someone who used so many of his students sexually is to behold a modern-day version of "The Emperor's New Clothes." If this is a legitimate, rather than debased, demonstration of "tantric sex," then Tibet is a legitimate part of China. Yes, many men and women consider themselves to have been helped by this teacher. But as wise and skillful and even compassionate as such teachers may be in certain ways, it could be said of them, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, that "Everything has been figured out except how to live."

In the realm of psychotherapy, perhaps the most common, though lame, excuse offered by therapists for sex with their clients is that they were trying to help their patients (one therapist

drily commented, "You'll notice it's rarely the *unattractive* clients they feel compelled to help"). This supposed focus on the woman's welfare acquires its most toxic strain in Zen when mixed with the recognition of the transformative power of pain. Consider this comment made by a Zen teacher whose wife, "Kathy," left him after learning of his sexual involvement with one of his students. After indirectly resisting, through various arguments, my insistence that teacher-student sex was almost invariably harmful and thus wrong, he finally claimed that his extra-marital affair had precipitated dramatic spiritual growth in his wife. Without blinking, he marveled, "You can't imagine how much movement there has been in Kathy since this happened. After being stuck in her practice for years, she is finally going through great changes." In other words, "All's well that ends well. Since the pain I caused her led to her further growth, who's to say what I did was wrong?" If his claims of her growth were true, then that is indeed wonderful, and testimony to *her* strong faith and spiritual resources. But the subtle implication is, "Since everyone has the capacity to transform pain into growth, we (teachers?) may do what we want, and if the student doesn't benefit from it spiritually, that is her fault." Again, one can only hope that the self-justifying attitude revealed here was unconscious.

Sex between teachers and students will go on as long as there are teachers and students. In Zen such conduct *can* be judged as wrong, and *must* be declared so by its teachers. If we do not, then it is because we ignorantly cling to the doctrine of emptiness-only, or opportunistically cite it. Or because we arrogantly *and* ignorantly claim a moral immunity based on the "special status" of enlightenment or on the supposed need of teachers to be absolutely free to employ any and all "teaching devices." Or, as Peter Rutter suggests, male colleagues of transgressing teachers may want to remain silent in order to keep open for themselves the option of committing this transgression. In any case, it is a safe bet that, regardless of their credentials, teachers who justify sex with their students are deficient in their enlightenment. Even if the problem is seen as a weakness in character, or a lack of self-control, or a personality flaw, these shortcomings reveal an incomplete integration of the presumed enlightenment into the fabric of one's being and one's daily life.

Why is sex between teachers and students wrong? To this question it is tempting to reply, "If you don't see what's wrong, there's no point in trying to tell you." Those who need reasons can do no better than read *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*, but this much can be said here: it is wrong because it is almost sure to cause harm to the student and the teacher alike. Peter Rutter, drawing on many interviews, details the repercussions of sex in professional helping relationships, on both the victim and the perpetrator. For the victim, he emphasizes, it is fundamentally a betrayal of hope, the hope that she could be healed by this person in whom she had placed her trust. And because the teacher, like the therapist or doctor, is the keeper of that trust, Rutter wisely insists that sex under these circumstances is the teacher's responsibility, no matter what the level of provocation or apparent consent by the student. Yet the teacher, too, is damaged, for "in the very act of exploiting the student to feel more fully alive," Rutter points out, "he abandons the search for aliveness in himself"—and, in Buddhist terms, thus abandons his faith in his intrinsic wholeness.

Besides the foregoing consequences, likely in any case of sex in the forbidden zone, sex between teacher and student in Zen comes with a danger greater even than the spiritual and psychological damage to either individual: the corruption of the teaching. What teacher sexually involved with a student can claim that that intimacy in no way taints the purity of their interaction in the dokusan room? In Zen the verification of the student's progress and position rests largely on the teacher's authority, the integrity of which can all too easily be compromised by sex. In the end, this contamination of the purity of transmission is the most tragic loss. Also undermined, though, is the creative tension between teacher and student. When this polarized quality of give-and-take is discharged through sex, the potential for both teaching and learning diminishes.

A full discussion of teacher-student sex would call for an examination of not only the damaging effects of it, but the causes, so that we might *understand* the phenomenon rather than simply condemn it. Such an investigation would enable us to see teacher-student sex as an abuse of power that reflects inequalities in the family, society, and culture, and as a re-enactment of parent-child themes, on the part of both partners, through transference and counter-transference. These issues are elaborated in *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*, as are pertinent male and female cultural myths, the various kinds of

psychological woundedness that put both men and woman at risk, and a description of a typical step-by-step process through which sexual boundaries are violated.

Any Zen teacher who has yet to attain supreme perfect enlightenment is vulnerable to these influences from within and without. Yet he cannot excuse his sexual transgressions by pleading, "After all, I'm only human." Yes, Zen teachers *are* human—and so must respect and uphold appropriate guidelines for human interaction that have received consensus from the larger community of helping professions. For they may be tested, in the spiritually intimate and charged medium that is the teacher-student relationship at its best, by their students' deepest longings to merge—and by their own. No matter what temptations teachers might face, however—and these can be formidable—students have every right to expect more of them than of ordinary people. As publicly recognized spiritual guides and presumed exemplars of enlightened behavior, teachers are called upon to show uncommon insight, compassion, and will (or "won't"). Thus they have to work ceaselessly to become aware of their own psychological processes, through meditation, therapy, or other inner work, so that their own needs do not prevail over those of their students.

A teacher who does succumb to sex with his student must do everything possible to avoid repeating it; an isolated transgression, though inexcusable, is far less destructive than a pattern of them. An apology that grows out of genuine remorse is an essential first step toward healing both himself and the student, followed by an all-out effort on his part to uproot the underlying cause of the transgression. Then he must renew his commitment to the precepts, to practice, and to ultimate awakening, the three essentials of Buddhism. Zen teachers, like all men and women, are as buddhic as they are human, and therefore are bound to aspire to the highest fulfillment of their innate perfection. Meanwhile, we must dispel confusion about the standards expected of us, sexual or otherwise. Then we need to publicize these in a code of conduct ratified, ideally, by a majority of Zen centers. It is becoming painfully clear, too, that some institutional structure is needed to rein in those teachers who violate, at least chronically and brazenly, sexual limits or any of the other grave Buddhist precepts. And then we need to live up to these standards as the expression of our own deepest nature.