

## *Maurine Stuart*

*Dharma Talk given by Maylie Scott October 30, 1999; from the November '99 AZG newsletter*

Sojun Mel Weitsman is my root teacher. Maurine Stuart was my first woman ancestor-teacher. I met Maurine in 1981, nine years before she died in 1990, the same year I first came to the AZG. I have been thinking about her a lot as I settle into Arcata; she is always in my background, but in this transition, her presence is particularly strong. When people die, there is great loss and there can also be a releasing of positive energy; the hindrances in the relationship are gone. The energetic connection with Maurine endures and the nine years since her death make little difference. One of her repeated phrases that instantly brings her into focus is, "There is nothing that is not sacred, nothing that is not spiritual practice." I think this was the base of Maurine's sustaining, continuous practice.

In 1981, as Lenore Friedman was writing her book, *Meetings with Remarkable Women*, a group of Bay Area women invited Maurine to come out and lead an all-women sesshin. It was a life changing experience for a number of us. The forms were traditional, but freshly constellated. We improvised a zendo at the Vedanta Society retreat center, sitting half-hour periods, following one another's step in kinhin, eating in a formal but simplified style, listening to Maurine's deep-voiced teiso's, engaging in brief and pungent dokusans. Our confident, new arrangement was the basis of much of what we are doing here in Arcata. Then it seemed an exciting, even daring variation of the harder-edged forms of our more traditional, male taught practice centers. We were thirsty for this opening in practice and Maurine's sesshins continued twice a year until she died.

Maurine had been a concert pianist before she became a Zen teacher, so it was natural for music to become her teaching; both what she taught and the way she taught it. Talking about her music she said, "But I don't play. Something plays me. The more we come to the condition of emptied out, cleared up, warmed up mind, the more we can let go of the self-consciousness that makes us denigrate ourselves or worry about being conceited. We can be glad we can make something beautiful or play beautifully. We can be glad to share it with others and glad they like it. It is not conceited to say, 'Yes, I play the piano beautifully.' If I did not after all the training, all the work, all the effort, it would be sad. And so it is with you. Each of you is the artist of your own life. Play your life beautifully. Hold your head up and be glad you can offer whatever it is you have to offer freely. The little bell hanging in emptiness sings. Each one of us is hanging in the emptiness singing. Sometimes lover, sometimes wife, sometimes husband, sometimes artist, sometimes friend, always with open, compassionate, wisdom mind."

Like all good teachers, she had as many teaching methods as she did students. She could be sharp and severe with indulgence or self pity, sensitive and supportive with developing intuition. Several times, I begged her for teaching; "You must see things about me that need correction. Please say." She would smile and say nothing and I kept watching her and learning. I was often cook for our retreats and I had a kind of pressured style. I thought it was better for people to be in the zendo than to be in the kitchen, so I tried not to use helpers and to be quick and efficient. This involved increasing speed as meal time arrived and a good amount of last-minute tension. Maurine began to come into the kitchen a little before meal time. "Can I help?" she would ask. I would thank her (I certainly didn't need the Roshi, excellent cook as she was, to help me!) and say I was just fine. She would sit down and calmly watch me chasing around. Actually it was pretty annoying. "Why does she have to do that?" This rapacious independence was such an engrained part of my character, it took several kitchen visits and a long time to catch on.

Maurine offered me the very special gift of her friendship. As I had an extra bedroom, she began to stay at my house during her trips west. I would visit her in Cambridge summers when I went east to see my mother. "You are my friend," she said. "It doesn't mean that the teaching stops, but you are my friend." Understanding my reticence, she taught me about friendship - the confidences, the ways of appreciation, the heart-engaging trust. She opened her life to me, giving me a chance to see how a teacher lives, the stresses, the challenges, and the steadfast, generous balance.

Her liver cancer was diagnosed in the course of an annual check-up in late 1987. The last years were powerful as she rose fully to what she didn't like. "Whatever happens, don't make a move to avoid it." She had one operation, during which it was determined that the cancer had metastasized, and then refused further treatment, preferring to have quality of life in the time she had.

"Thanks to this practice, I feel I do have some true peace of mind. After all, life and death, health and illness are one. The true face of this universe includes all things in it - good, bad, life, death, health, illness - all of it. There are many so-called healers in the world, but healers cannot bring us wholeness. Healers do not heal us. The healing is already there in the wholeness. And the real goal of healing is to help the person in need of healing to be aware of this. At the deepest level, the so-called sick person has no sickness. At this level, I am not sick. With deep gratitude to this practice - because of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, because of all of you; because of all of this that we are engaged in together; because of this indefinable, mysterious, unspeakable, marvelous whatever-it-is - I really do feel this no-sickness."

So I want to express my great love for this wonderful teacher. Her mantra, which she received from Soen Nakagawa Roshi, was "Namu Dai Bosa" (in the name of the Great Bodhisattva); leaping into the Great Bodhisattva, the Great Bodhisattva leaps into me.

(Quotes from: *Subtle Sounds: The Zen Teachings of Maurine Stuart*, ed. Roko Sherry Chayat.)