

THREE STAGES OF THE STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

The three phases of practice – Me-stuff, Being-Awareness and Being-Kindness – are constantly interwoven throughout the practice life; they do not begin and end at some fixed point. This is particularly true in the student-teacher relationship; yet, the nature and quality of the student-teacher relationship is one of the most important factors in a student’s spiritual journey, and will no doubt greatly impact the student’s ability to move through the Me-phase and open into the phases of Being-Awareness and Being-Kindness.

During the course of our spiritual quest it is very common to come to the realization that we need the help of a teacher. Many people don’t have a problem with this, but some people never get beyond this barrier. For example, if you don’t know you’re asleep, it is unlikely that you will look for a teacher to help you wake up. Or, if you view authority with suspicion, believing that it’s unhealthy to passively submit to another, you may never be open to seeking input or guidance. Most of us underestimate how difficult it is for practice to penetrate into the fiber of our being, the fiber of our lives. Not having a teacher compounds this difficulty tenfold. Acknowledging the need for a teacher does not require that you become a true believer or give up your good sense; it does, however, require being open to the fact that you could use assistance. After all, even many teachers still have teachers.

Unfortunately, there’s no clear or simple formula for the student-teacher relationship. Each teacher is unique—in temperament, style, and also in interests. Some are strict and formal; some casual and relaxed. Also, each student is unique. So there’s no one way the relationship should be. Even within Buddhism there are three traditional models of the relationship, each quite different from the others; yet they exemplify the most common paths that the student-teacher relationship can take in other traditions as well. In the Tibetan model, devotion to the teacher, who is seen as a guru, is a very important aspect of the relationship. In the Vipassana tradition the teacher is seen as a guide or spiritual friend, quite different from an elevated guru. In Zen the role of the teacher is less defined, although often the teacher is seen as an enigmatic or romanticized agent of transformation, capable of catapulting students into enlightenment with a pointed question or the whack of a stick. Each of these three models has its own merits and its own limitations, but the point is, there is no one way the relationship has to be.

Regardless of the differences in style, the real function of a teacher is common to all: to clarify the basic human problem – that we are disconnected from awareness of our true nature. Individual teachers will approach this differently. One teacher may emphasize the need to leave the thought-based world and enter into the silence of reality-as-it-is. Another may place more importance on the psychological aspect of practice – particularly focusing on the Me-stuff as a way of clearing up clouded perception. And yet another teacher may focus more on specific techniques and meditations to help develop awareness.

Even the same teacher may be understood in different ways by different people. One of my former teachers told me I'm more a Gurdjieff teacher than a Zen teacher. Students sometimes tell me that I seem to teach more Vipassana practices than Zen practices. All the better! No one path can lay claim to the truth. The truth comes in many forms, through many traditions. But regardless of the emphasis taken by any particular teacher or tradition, the point is universal: the need to awaken to our true identity, our basic connectedness.

There are also common stages that a student-teacher relationship will inevitably go through, and in my years as both student and teacher, I've observed three specific stages, each of which can serve as a step toward freedom.

FINDING A TEACHER

Once we accept the need for a teacher, we have to find one with whom we feel compatible. This may take a period of trial and error, since not every teacher is suitable for every student. In fact, this is where the student's capacity for discernment is very important. Granted that it's difficult to effectively evaluate a teacher on first impression, there are nonetheless some obvious signs that a teacher may not be the best choice. For example, if the teacher speaks with an air of infallibility, or puts other teachers and practices down, or is defensive in response to honest but probing questions, then it might be best to keep looking.

There's one other quality in a teacher that might give us pause. Some teachers are very ready to describe their enlightenment experiences, or perhaps even declare themselves to be enlightened beings, or claim to have the One Truth. Lao Tzu's famous phrase is pertinent here: "Those who know do not say; those who say do not know." Once someone sees themselves as enlightened, any clarity they may have is likely to become delusion. This particular self-deception has been described as one of the most difficult to see through. We need to remember

this when looking for a teacher, because there is a part in all of us that would like to be spoon fed promises. While teacher's words and writings can point us toward Truth, The Truth can't be comprehended with the mind alone. Words and concepts can deepen our blindness if they lead us to believe that we, from our association with a self-proclaimed enlightened person, actually *know*. We don't know. We can't know, at least with the mind. The most painful thing about this is that it sets us up to become cynical or discouraged down the road.

However, also keep in mind that how you feel about a teacher on first impression is not necessarily an accurate way to judge whether a teacher is a good fit. Sometimes our "deepest" feelings, those we usually trust the most, are, in fact, quite suspect. When I met my first teacher, a teacher in the Gurdjieff tradition, I didn't like him at all. He seemed to be very authoritarian and gruff, and pushed all my buttons. But I was very committed to the practice and so I stayed with him. Gradually I saw that my initial perceptions were not exactly accurate; as well, I worked with my own reactivity toward him, and came to value his many good qualities.

When I met my second teacher, a Zen teacher, at first I felt I was mostly just passing through, in that I was not committed to either the teacher or the community. For two years I listened to his dharma talks, but rarely understood them – they were full of Zen enigmas, and were more lyrical than practical. But again, I was very committed to the practice, and after a while the talks started to sink in, and I stayed with him for many years.

In short, the search for a good teacher is not always so simple, and trial and error may be the best guideline. However, while trying different teachers in different traditions may be appropriate for a while, we also need to be aware of the possible tendency to shy away from commitment, or of our habitual patterns of dissatisfaction and doubt. Sooner or later, for practice to go deeper, a commitment must be made to one teaching – if not to one teacher. Without this commitment we can never develop the genuine heart connection which is possible in the student-teacher relationship, a connection that feeds our spiritual aspiration in ways that books or words can never do alone.

DIFFICULTIES WITH THE TEACHER

The second stage in the student-teacher relationship is to learn how to work with the inevitable difficulties that will arise in the relationship. Most often, these difficulties are the result of the student's filters, including all of the expectations and assumptions about what the

relationship is supposed to be like. Dealing with these issues in the Me-phase of practice clears the way for our natural Being-Kindness to come forth.

One of the most common filters students have is placing the teacher on the proverbial pedestal. The teacher is seen as saintly and wonderful, or more subtly, as the one who knows, unquestionably, what's best. If we come with the childish mind that wants to be saved, we might readily believe the positive projections we then place on the teacher. Of course, when we believe that our teacher walks on water we're usually the one that ends up drowning in our disillusionment. This phase in practice is not necessarily a problem; in fact, it can be very valuable when we are forced to face the inevitable disappointment of seeing through this illusion. This phase is only a problem if the student stays caught in it or doesn't know how to practice with the disillusionment of having one's idealized projections on the teacher fall in a heap.

There are other more subtle ways we can place filters on the student teacher-relationship. For example, you may begin practice with the assumption that the teacher should be perfect, or at least not have certain flaws. You may not be aware of having this obviously unrealistic expectation, but remember, whenever we have a strong reaction to something a teacher says or does, it's a clear indicator that we have the belief that the teacher *should* be different. Take a moment to ask yourself, what "flaws" in a teacher aren't okay with you? What is your reaction when the teacher does something you judge as "off"? (Please note that by using the word "flaw" I'm not talking about conventionally harmful actions.)

It's very likely that sooner or later the teacher will do something that will push the buttons on your own personal conditioning. There is guaranteed to be some "flaw" in the teacher that will not only upset you, but which will result in you believing your reaction-based judgments as if they were The Truth. Every student, no matter how mature, will bring his or her own ego-strategy to the relationship, whether through trust issues, the need to submit to or rebel against an authority, the need to be liked or understood, or something else.

Whatever your ego-strategy is, it will undoubtedly play itself out in the relationship with the teacher just like it plays out in other relationships. For example, if you have an emotional reaction to a difficult situation with the teacher, do you get righteously angry and think you need to speak your mind? Do you withdraw, or feel like giving up? Or do you go numb? It's important to know your own patterns. And it's imperative that you understand what practice entails when these situations occur. First and foremost, you must clearly and honestly see what you are up to.

Where might you be imposing your own subjective values? Where might you be reacting from your own blind spots or unseen demands? Where are you repeating patterns that have manifested in previous relationships – patterns that have not yet been addressed?

For example, if you're needy of approval and the teacher is firm in not catering to your ego strategy, you may react from hurt feelings that have little to do with what the teacher is actually saying to you. Ultimately, practice has to entail facing the fears underlying our protective patterns, whether manifested in daily life or in the practice relationship with our teacher. But in order to face these fears, we must first see them clearly. It might also be useful to talk to the teacher about how to best work with the issues that have been triggered. Hopefully, the teacher will be able to help you see what you're doing, even when the teacher and your relationship become part of the subject matter.

We have so many uninspected assumptions about teachers that they are bound to cause us difficulties at some point. Why? Because teachers aren't perfect; and they, like their students, are in an ongoing process. In fact, unless teachers continue to work at their own edge and with their own fears, they will become disconnected from others, and thus lose their effectiveness as teachers.

Teachers, perhaps more than anyone, have to be honest with themselves; they have to be willing to see their own limitations. For example, a naïve student may want to believe that the teacher is a mind reader, but a teacher can never know with certainty how a teaching will be taken by a given student. The Dalai Lama spoke about an elderly monk who came to ask him whether he thought it would be good for him to do hatha yoga. The Dalai Lama told him that maybe he was too old to begin such a physical endeavor. Later the Dalai Lama heard that the monk had committed suicide, in the hope that he could be reborn in a younger body capable of doing yoga! How could the Dalai Lama have known that his straightforward advice would lead to this sad result? In this sense there is no blame, yet, a teacher will still feel the weight of events such as these.

Of course, there are certain situations when the teacher may, in fact, act inappropriately. It may not be an obvious problem, like having sex with students, taking money inappropriately, or abusing alcohol or drugs, but it may still need to be addressed. Apart from these obviously inappropriate situations, the focus here is on the more "harmless" interactions that cause us to react. And the main point is that it's best to work with and see through our *own* emotional

reactions first, because most of our reactions are based on our own assumptions and conditioned views. For example, there is a common assumption among students that the relationship is supposed to be pleasant, or at least not difficult. If this assumption is on board, there will surely be a reaction when the teacher points to something in you that you hadn't noticed and perhaps don't want to see. Likewise, if we expect the relationship to be easy, how will you react when you're asked to practice with something that you're unwilling to practice with. But if you only do what makes you feel comfortable, or what is easy, you become less and less open to learning. This is unfortunate, because even the most skillful teacher can teach only in proportion to the student's willingness to learn.

When you realize what assumptions and agendas you bring to the relationship, it doesn't mean you should beat yourself up for your "faults", or struggle to be a better student. What it does mean is that you can become increasingly aware of your own beliefs and actions, using them and the difficulties they create in the student-teacher relationship to go deeper into your practice. The point of being a student, after all, is to learn. And it is the wish of every teacher to see students learn to stand on their own two feet, and to become free of their conditioned beliefs and behaviors. The less we act out of our agendas, particularly our dependence on an authority, the more we can be who we truly are. From that place, we can live from the Being-Kindness that is our natural essence.

STANDING ON YOUR OWN TWO FEET

As stated, one part of the teacher's job is to help the student clarify their individual difficulties, including each student's particular conditioning and set of hidden beliefs. On this level the teacher has to work very individually and specifically with each student, since some students, for example, may have a great deal of anger, while others have more fear or confusion.

Sometimes, especially in the early years of practice, the teacher may actively support the student, in a way, help carry the student, until the student develops the discipline necessary for practice to mature. Later, as the student's practice evolves, the teacher may say very little. At a certain point, by simply being heard, or asked pointed questions, the student will feel encouraged to stay on the path.

Given the teacher's job, it might be easy to mistake the teacher's function. The function of the teacher is certainly not to be the student's substitute parent. Nor is it to be the student's

therapist, even though the practice will often include working on the psychological level. This is a tricky point. The fact that we are psychological beings can't be ignored, which means we have to learn to work with our anger, fears, and strategies of protection. But the point of this work is not simply to understand ourselves better, or "improve" ourselves in order to live in a more stable and comfortable way. This may be the point of traditional psychology, but in spiritual practice we are learning to be with ourselves as we are, with life as it is, and to become free from the narrow, constricting, and artificial concepts of "me" as a separate self. It is the function of the teacher to point students in the direction of that freedom. All of the teacher's techniques are ultimately geared to allow the student to see through their illusory constructs, in order to awaken to our true nature.

As students, we have to recognize that there are many things we don't know. Much of the Me-phase of practice is about deepening our knowledge of ourselves, our "me." Even after moving out of the Me-phase, there will still be a great deal to learn. But when we enter the phase of Being-Awareness, a different type of learning takes place. We learn to expand beyond our customary perceptual filters – filters which seem to fall away naturally over many years of meditation. We can then begin to connect with a larger sense of what life is.

As we move outside the boundaries of the familiar – boundaries that ordinarily help us survive and make sense of things – we will most likely encounter fear, especially fear of the unknown. Here the teacher's role is crucial. At this point the teacher's task is to help the student stay present with his or her experience of seeming groundlessness – an experience which is likely to be difficult and sometimes even terrifying. A teacher who has been through the process can encourage the student to keep going, to not turn away from the spaciousness of Being-Awareness even when the experience is frightening. Through this process, students develop a deepened sense of trust in themselves and in the practice

The teacher's role in the phase of Being-Kindness is equally important. Here the teacher may encourage the student directly with words, but also indirectly, by example. For instance, when a teacher doesn't judge a student, regardless of what the student brings up, the student learns that it's possible to live without judging, either others or ourselves.

When the teacher can truly teach from Being-Kindness, students will be inspired to go deeper in their own practice. What they originally saw as good qualities in the teacher, such as clarity and kindness, they now see as a reminder of and reflection of what is also present inside

themselves. Both from the teacher's words and example, students can gradually develop a basic trust in themselves – in the Being-Kindness that is their own true nature.

In a way, everything a teacher does is ultimately directed toward helping students awaken to their true nature. This is what allows students to develop independence, to stand on their own two feet, no longer even needing the regular guidance of their teacher. It is unfortunate that some teachers require their students to remain dependent on them, because truly living from Being-Kindness should ultimately never be dependent on another, even one's teacher. Living from Being-Kindness is only dependent on awakening to who we really are.

Does this mean that at some point we no longer need a teacher? The answer is a qualified yes. It's qualified because we may make the choice to stand on our own before we are ready. I have even seen excellent teachers with deep clarity fail to recognize, at certain points, elements of their own Me-stuff. They were still good teachers, but because their learning process, particularly the ability to see their own blind spots, was impeded by being solely on their own, they never learned to truly *live* from Being-Kindness. As a consequence, they remained, at least partially, stuck in their own conditioning.

Suffice it to say that none of us are ever beyond the need for input on occasion, which is why the most effective teachers are those who remain receptive to learning and who exemplify humility in their unknowing. However, it is also possible to stand on our own two feet once we have become unrelentingly honest with ourselves, combined with the pivotal understanding that when we really pay attention, *everything* is our teacher.

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