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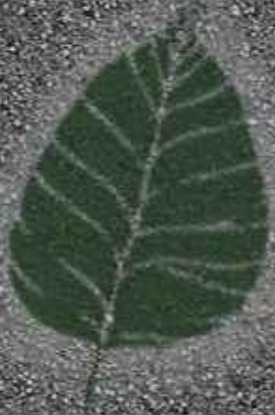
Transmitting the Dhamma

The Role of the Teacher

Susan Elbaum Jootla



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Key to abbreviations:

AN—Aṅguttara Nikāya (by nipāta and sutta);

GS—*Gradual Sayings* (PTS trans. of AN, by volume and page);

It— Itivuttaka (trans. by John Ireland, BPS, 1991);

KS—*Kindred Sayings* (PTS trans. of SN, by volume and page);

LDB—*Long Discourses of the Buddha* (trans. of Dīgha Nikāya by M. Walshe, Wisdom, 1987, by sutta and paragraph);

MLDB—*Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (trans. of Majjhima Nikāya by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom-BPS, 1995, by sutta and paragraph);

SN—Saṃyutta Nikāya;

Ud—Udāna (trans. by John Ireland, BPS, 1990);

Vism—*Visuddhimagga* (trans. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli BPS, 1975, by chapter and paragraph).

Transmitting the Dhamma

The Role of the Teacher

The Middle Way Teacher

The Buddha teaches the Middle Path to liberation, and his own way of teaching also follows a middle path. The theme of moderation runs throughout the Dhamma. Even in his first discourse at Isipatana he urged the five mendicants, his first disciples, to avoid the extremes of severe asceticism and sensual indulgence in their efforts to attain awakening.

Following the example of the Buddha, the role of the Buddhist teacher has always been an equable mean between extremes. The teacher is neither a guru who can liberate us if we blindly believe in him, nor a dispensable instructor giving out information about a narrow subject of limited value.

Buddhists recognise the supremacy of the Buddha as a perfected individual and as the teacher of the way

to transcend all suffering. He had trained himself over innumerable lifetimes to become the ideal guide. As he meditated under the Bodhi Tree, he discovered the way to eliminate his own suffering, and then, out of infinite compassion, he shared the method he had found with others. He searched until he discovered the sure route, then surveyed it carefully, designed and drew the map, and finally explained it to anyone who requested guidance along the way to true peace and happiness.

The Buddha never claimed he was able to annul the effects of his disciples' bad kamma and transport them to Nibbāna, as some Hindu gurus do. Nor is the Buddha a priest who can intercede with an almighty God to guarantee other people's salvation. Both those sorts of spiritual leaders belong to the first extreme—the devotee puts blind faith in the teacher who supposedly has the power to solve all his or her problems.

On the other hand, the Buddha is far more than a school teacher or college professor. The students of such instructors outgrow their courses as they grow up and need not revere them. These paid trainers are professionals. However dedicated they may be, they are doing a job; their body of knowledge is circumscribed. The Buddha's vision is unbounded and he teaches about life itself. The causes and conditions

of all phenomena are his field of knowledge. He knows all about the pleasure and pain of beings on every plane of existence. His 'subject' is the comprehensive way we can eliminate the causes of all misery. He devotes time and energy to anyone who seeks his guidance.

We will begin our study of Dhamma teachers by examining how the Buddha described his own role: as teacher, friend, guide, trainer, charioteer, and sympathetic leader. Then we extrapolate, based on the Pāli texts, to see who else is qualified to be a Dhamma teacher, and the responsibilities this role entails. Finally we will look at the modern Buddhist disciple's relationship with his meditation teacher.

The Buddha as Ultimate Teacher

The Buddha is the Teacher par excellence. Buddha Gotama is a 'Sammā Sambuddha,' a universal Self-Awakened One. Such exceedingly rare beings discover the truth that had been lost to the world for aeons, then proclaim it for the benefit of many. The three most basic qualities of all the Buddhas—past, present, and future— are:

1. They discover the long forgotten liberating truth, the Dhamma, by themselves, without a teacher.

2. They completely purify their own minds to attain the cessation of suffering.

3. They proclaim to the world this Dhamma they have discerned.

The first trait distinguishes Buddhas from arahants. Arahants attain full awakening after learning the way from a Buddha or one of his disciples. Universal Buddhas differ from non-teaching Buddhas by reason of the third trait. Non-teaching Buddhas (*paccekabuddha*) discover the truth for themselves during periods when the teachings of a Sammā Sambuddha are no longer available, but they cannot pass on their knowledge to others. All three kinds of fully liberated beings share the second trait: they experience the same awakening, the same Nibbāna.

'Trainer of men to be tamed' and 'teacher of devas and men' are two epithets of every Sammā Sambuddha. Gotama had spent countless existences as a bodhisatta preparing to find the way out of rebirth and all its attendant pain. He strove for aeons to perfect all the virtues needed to serve as a Universal Teacher. His background has profound repercussions for his followers too.

The Buddha's omniscience, his experience of the deathless Nibbāna, his offer to help others cross the raging torrents of saṃsāra, all contribute to make him

the greatest guide. He is the one who can show us how to find true security, if we also practise and live in accordance with his guidance. Those who follow the path with diligent energy will be able to gain supreme peace. The student's job begins with this faith in the Buddha.

The Good Friend

The Buddha refers to himself as the good friend (*kalyāṇamitta*) because he teaches beings the way out of dukkha, the suffering or unsatisfactoriness of cyclic existence. We would have no chance to escape from saṃsāra without this most valuable friendship. Only the extremely rare individual who has undergone the immeasurable training needed to attain Buddhahood can discern the central facts of existence independently of others: the Four Noble Truths, the three universal characteristics, and the cycle of dependent origination. The rest of us need a guide, friend, helper, in the form of a Buddha, to show us how we can gain true insight into our minds and bodies.

The Buddha is the best of friends in that overall fashion, but also in specific ways. Because of his special powers he can see just how to teach each disciple. He knows their previous lives, their past

meditation practices, and their potential here and now, so he can guide them accordingly. Many stories in the discourses illustrate how he helped a disciple overcome some hurdle because he discerned the roots of their difficulty in a past existence.

When the Buddha Teaches

In a discourse to the Venerable Puṇṇiya, the Buddha explains when it occurs to him to teach Dhamma to an individual (AN 8:82; GS IV 220). As the Buddha is free of every trace of egotism, he does not desire a large following or wish to attract unwilling, uninterested people. He will only teach those who are genuinely prepared to learn. The disciple must first have faith. Preliminary faith draws the learner into the Buddha's presence, to sit down, listen, and inquire about the meaning of what the Master says. The student should carefully attend to the Buddha's words because these words are always in accord with the truth. That may go against the grain of the learner's thought habits. He must then examine the discourse to determine whether it is true and act with conviction to walk the path to liberation. A student like this would have the honour of hearing Dhamma from the greatest of teachers.

The Buddha's Compassion

The Buddha's concern for others manifests in total devotion to teaching them Dhamma so they can free themselves of suffering. He is the epitome of the skilled communicator who uses various methods on various occasions to spur on his disciples. As the Teacher's role is just to point out the way and assist along the route, he exhorts his students to apply maximum effort to attain the goal. He is firm as he repeatedly tells monks, nuns and lay people who come to him to act on his advice and train their minds, now, to end the enormous and ceaseless suffering of the round of rebirth. He says that the way to liberation has been fully disclosed by him so there is no excuse for laziness on the part of those who hear him. The Teacher warns that if they do not heed him and practise to the utmost of their ability, they will surely suffer for many more lives:

> "What should be done for his disciples out of compassion by a teacher who seeks their welfare and has compassion for them, that I have done for you, Cunda. There are these roots of trees, these empty huts. Meditate, Cunda, do not delay or else you will regret it later. This is our instruction to you."
>
> MLDB 8.17

Free of all thought for himself, the Buddha's compassion never slackened. Even on his deathbed he continued to guide students. Although his attendant Ānanda tried to shield his ailing master from the queries of one last seeker, the Teacher had the man brought to his side and taught him the Dhamma in his dying hours.

How the Buddha Taught

The Buddha always taught the same truth, but he used different approaches to suit different audiences. If lay people asked a specific question, like how to be reborn as a deity, he gave a specific answer, only going further if he knew his audience had greater potential. Sometimes he spoke very briefly to bhikkhus who needed just a hint to develop insight. He also adapted his language to the individual. Discourses using precise technical terms were reserved for monks who had the training to appreciate them. He might convey the same ideas to lay people in more familiar turns of speech, using similes drawn from daily life.

Many suttas show a gradual method, a progressive training from basic common ground he shared with other spiritual traditions up to the highest insights unique to his own Dhamma. The following example (Ud 5:3) summarises this technique:

"Then the Lord saw Suppabuddha the leper sitting amongst that group of people, and on seeing him he thought: 'This one here is capable of understanding Dhamma.' For the sake of Suppabuddha the leper he then gave a progressive talk, that is, a talk on generosity, on virtue, on heaven; he made known the disappointment, degradation and corruption of sense-desires and the benefit in renouncing them."

Giving and moral virtue are the first steps one has to undertake before one can hope to meditate and understand the Dhamma. To prepare Suppabuddha's mind further the Buddha spoke of the deva realms ('heaven'), of the futility of sense-desire and of the peace that comes from letting them go. He grouped these three together because life in the deva realms is replete with sense pleasures, and the beggar covered in sores might well have longed for such a life. But the Buddha knew that devas too suffer, they too die, so he did not consider such an existence the final answer to the unsatisfactoriness of life. He wanted Suppabuddha to be ready to give up attachment to all the pleasures of the senses.

"When the Lord knew that the mind of Suppabuddha the leper was ready, malleable, free from hindrances, elated, and purified, he then made known that Dhamma teaching special to the Buddhas: suffering, origination, cessation, and the Path."

The culmination of the discourse was this teaching of the Four Noble Truths. Because the Buddha had taught him in progressive steps, Suppabuddha could transcend his miserable bodily condition, comprehend the truths, and "even as he was sitting there" he became a stream-enterer, the first grade of noble one, free of doubt, with full confidence in the Buddha's instruction. In consummate ways like these the Buddha was able to guide innumerable disciples towards the goal.

Buddhist Teachers after the Buddha

As many centuries have passed since the Buddha's Parinibbāna or final demise, we have to determine the best way to learn his teachings for ourselves. His teachings have been carefully transmitted down the centuries, orally from teacher to pupil, and also through the written word.

The Dhamma itself is always the fundamental teacher. Even while the Buddha was available in person, his followers were liberated by their understanding and practice of his message. And just before his Parinibbāna, the Buddha told the Venerable Ānanda, that the Dhamma and Vinaya—the Doctrine and Discipline— would be their teacher after he was gone.

> "Ānanda, it may be that you will think: 'The Teacher's instruction has ceased, now we have no teacher!' It should not be seen like this, Ānanda, for what I have taught and explained to you as Dhamma and discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher."
>
> LDB 16.6.1

While this would be sufficient for those like Ānanda who had already imbibed the Dhamma from the Buddha, this statement does not mean that today all we need do to liberate ourselves is read the texts. Study without recourse to an instructor implies excessive trust in our own intellect. People who wish to tread the path to awakening will be most likely to reach their goal if they receive guidance from a living teacher of pure Buddha-Dhamma.

A properly qualified guide—skilled, wise, compassionate, and dedicated to upholding the integrity of the Dhamma—is vital. Without such help it is extremely difficult to untie the bonds created by aeons of conditioning, by infinite layers of old kamma, by habits long rooted in greed, ill will, and ignorance. To purify the mind through meditation is a lengthy, demanding, painstaking job. One may encounter confusion, despair, and serious risks in the process. To proceed alone, or in dependence on an unqualified

teacher, could drag the aspirant more deeply into the mire of saṃsāric bondage rather than towards the path leading out.

The Best Teachers in the Aftertime

From whom can one be confident of learning the real teachings of the Buddha? According to Ācariya Buddhaghosa, after the Buddha's demise one should seek out an ariya (noble one) and request an appropriate meditation subject from him. Ariyas are those who have directly perceived the Four Noble Truths and thereby eliminated some, or all, of the mental defilements. They have tasted Nibbāna and are assured of attaining final awakening.

The greatest teacher after the Buddha is the highest kind of ariya—an arahant, a fully awakened being whose mind has no remaining trace of defilements. An arahant with supernormal powers would be a better instructor than one without them. If there are no arahants, which may be the case today, the lower kinds of ariyas—non-returner, once-returner, stream-enterer—are the best individuals to approach for guidance in the Dhamma.

It may be hard to locate an ariya, or indeed to ascertain that a particular teacher is an ariya, as the noble ones rarely, if ever, declare themselves as such.

A handful of teachers today are reputed to be noble ones. If, however, one observes a guide carefully over time, one may be able to deduce that he or she is an ariya.

The next best Dhamma guide, in the absence of a noble one, is an individual who knows all or some part of the Pāli texts by heart. Buddhaghosa says that this kind of Dhamma teacher is one who "guards the heritage, and protects the tradition." He follows the opinion of the wise rather than his own opinion (Vism III 61_64). Such teachers take precautions against allowing their personal opinions to warp the truth. Because they are aware of their own limitations, whenever they are uncertain they refer back to their own teachers. They also check with the Buddha's discourses and the traditional commentaries on them whenever they are in doubt. These teachers rely on these safeguards rather than their own views, which may be erroneous. Since non-ariyas are prone to hold opinions that do not reflect the actual truth, they are likely to have incorrect ideas which could distort the Buddha's message.

Sayagyi U Chit Tin, a teacher in the tradition of the late Sayagyi U Ba Khin, elaborates on the sentence from Buddhaghosa we quoted above. [1]

"'Guarding the heritage', of course, means

keeping the pure Buddha-Dhamma without trying to add to it or to take away from it and not distorting it in any way. This is particularly difficult for an ordinary person [non-ariya] who has not personally experienced for himself the most profound aspects of the Four Noble Truths. So we see that the teacher who is an ordinary person and who knows the texts will guard the heritage and protect the tradition. He will do so through following his own teacher's guidance rather than by relying on his own opinion.

"People who teach in the Theravāda tradition without having become noble ones must be especially cautious to 'guard the heritage and protect the tradition'. The Dhamma can free people from suffering because it is unalloyed truth; therefore altering it undermines its liberative power."

Although ordinary persons do not have the security of the ariya's direct insight into the Dhamma to serve as a lodestone to evaluate the Buddha's words, such individuals can teach Dhamma properly if they have authorization or approval from their own mentor, scrupulously follow his or her instructions, and return to them when in doubt.

People who teach meditation but do not take these precautions are liable to dilute, distort, misrepresent or override the pure Dhamma. This might be due to their own pride, views, or greed. They might misrepresent the teachings due to modern circumstances, pressure of time, the demands of their students, or even from misplaced compassion. For example, someone who is not trained to teach meditation could feel sorry for a friend with a fatal illness and try to teach him to develop insight without properly preparing him in morality and concentration. If this happens, the 'Dhamma' they teach does not have the power to eradicate suffering.

How the Dhamma Teacher Thinks

The Buddha once spoke about how a Dhamma teacher keeps the teaching pure:

> "Bhikkhus, any bhikkhu who teaches the Dhamma with thoughts like this: 'Oh that they may hear my Dhamma, and hearing it may be satisfied, and being satisfied may give expression to their satisfaction!' The Dhamma teaching of that bhikkhu is impure.
>
> "But that bhikkhu who teaches the Dhamma to others with thoughts like this: 'Oh that they may hear my Dhamma, for it is the Dhamma

which the Exalted One has so well declared, relating to the present, not a matter of time; the Dhamma which invites investigation and leads on, that is to be understood by the wise each one for himself, and hearing it, may acknowledge the doctrine, and acknowledging it, may practise that they may so attain!' He teaches the Dhamma to others because of the fair order of the Dhamma, he teaches the Dhamma to others out of pity, out of caring for them, because of his compassion for them. The Dhamma teaching of this kind of bhikkhu is very pure."

SN 16:3; KS II 134–35

It can be assumed that both bhikkhus are correctly repeating the words of the Buddha. But the first does not even refer to the Blessed One; he longs for his disciples to praise him. He emphasises 'my Dhamma'. That monk does not look to his audience's real benefit. His pride would distort the way out of suffering, harming himself and his students.

The second kind of teacher is compassionate and can truly help others. He explains the Dhamma according to the formula the Buddha gave for it. He considers that if the hearers accept the Dhamma and put forth effort, they may attain the Deathless. His

explanations are motivated by concern for the welfare of his students. For all these reasons, there is every possibility that they will benefit from his words.

A Dhamma teacher has to be sufficiently advanced on the Noble Eightfold Path to have the strength to lead others along it. The Buddha points out to the Venerable Cunda that a person mired in suffering cannot help someone else escape from it. To drag someone out of quicksand you must be anchored on dry ground.

> "Cunda, that one who is himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking in the mud is impossible; that one who is not himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking…..is possible. That one who is himself untamed, undisciplined, [with defilements] unextinguished, should tame another, discipline him, and help extinguish [his defilements] is impossible; that one who is himself tamed, disciplined, [with defilements] extinguished, should tame another, discipline him, and help extinguish [his defilements] is possible…."
>
> MLDB 8.16

These statements of the Buddha establish extremely

high criteria for Dhamma teachers who can truly help others become noble ones, assured of full liberation.

The Student's Relationship to the Teacher

The Buddha told the Venerable Ānanda about the ideal relationship between a teacher and a pupil. His description applied to his personal disciples and is equally relevant today. The teacher explains the Dhamma with boundless compassion; attentive disciples strive to follow his advice. This combination guides the learners towards Nibbāna, the end of suffering:

> "Here, Ānanda, compassionate and seeking their welfare, the Teacher teaches the Dhamma to the disciples out of compassion: 'This is for your welfare, this is for your happiness.' His disciples want to hear and give ear and exert their minds to understand; they do not err and turn aside from the Teacher's Dispensation…… Therefore, Ānanda, behave towards me with friendliness, not with hostility. That will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time."
>
> MLDB 122.25–27

Friendliness in this context is not casual companionship but rather a receptive attitude. We can deduce from other suttas that the disciple's 'welfare and happiness' is his or her progress on the Noble Eightfold Path.

Another Middle Way

Once the student believes he has found the proper Dhamma instructor, he has to treat the teacher with cordiality. The relationship evolves over time and its implications may occasionally have to be revaluated.

While a meditator should place full confidence in his Dhamma teacher, this confidence should not fall into the extreme of blind faith. The pupil must be careful to steer a middle course between unreflective trust and constant doubt. Put another way, the two poles are too much trust in the teacher and too much pride in oneself. Confidence grows as personal experience of the Dhamma convinces the meditator of the validity of the teacher's message. So the pendulum moves from time to time, but it should never swing drastically in either direction.

The Buddha pointed out in a dialogue with the Kālāmas that intellectual understanding of the teachings is required. [2] The Kālāmas were confused because they encountered many 'gurus' each

propounding his own views and reviling the others. They were unable to determine who was right and who was wrong, and they asked the Buddha to give them some standards. He began by telling them not to be "misled by report or tradition or hearsay…, by proficiency in the texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor after considering reasons, nor after reflection on and approval of some theory, nor … out of respect for a recluse (who holds it)."

Only when they knew for themselves: "These things are unprofitable, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the intelligent; these things, when performed and undertaken, conduce to loss and sorrow," should they reject them.

But the Buddha was not suggesting that perpetual doubt was the solution. He told the Kālāmas that when they knew for themselves that some actions were wholesome, blameless, and praised by the wise, and that such deeds lead to well-being and happiness, then they should put them into practice (AN 3:65; GS I 170–75).

The message of this sutta could be paraphrased thus: "Do not follow someone just out of apparent logic or theory or reason, nor based only on his reputation or the scriptures he quotes. But when you have proved to yourself that what he suggests is

valuable, and in accordance with what is approved by the wise, practise it wholeheartedly." One should only accept and apply a teaching if one has grounds for believing it will be beneficial for everyone, here and now, and if the wise would approve of it.

Logical coherence is also important, and the Buddha's teachings stand up to any reasoned examination. But as it is a matter of practice, of how lives are lives aimed at the loftiest of goals, things do not stop at the theoretical level. We should not be attached to our personal interpretation of the Dhamma, for our views emanate from the conditioning of our egocentric minds.

Many of the central Buddhist teachings, such as the doctrine of non-self or dependent origination, are neither immediately nor intuitively acceptable to the average intellect. This indicates why an intellectual approach, exclusively dependent on books, without a guide, cannot take one very far along the path of purification. Everyone is trapped in ceaseless cycles of suffering, disease, old age and death because—every moment, with every mental volition— one creates kamma that has to bear fruit. We can only find permanent escape with the direct help of someone who has preceded us along the Buddha's Way.

Devotion and Independence

Sometimes the Buddha recommended behaviour leaning towards devotion, sometimes towards independence. This range indicates both the flexibility of the Buddhist's attitudes over time and the differences between individuals.

Texts favouring the autonomy of the meditator include the famous line of the Dhammapada: "Work out your own salvation, Buddhas only point the way" (v 276). A second is the Buddha's advice to Ānanda: "Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge; with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge" (LDB 16.2.26). Still a third is the Buddha's rebuke to the dying monk Vakkali who was infatuated with the Master's physical beauty: "What is there in seeing this vile body of mine? He who sees the Dhamma sees me, he who sees me sees the Dhamma" (SN 22:87; KS III 101). The Teacher and his Teaching are inseparable. What was vital for Vakkali was to develop his own understanding of the Dhamma, not to cling desperately to the Teacher's physical presence.

The complementary attitude is the student's dedication to the teacher. This requires humility and trust. The Blessed One made this clear when he said

that one intent on fathoming the Dhamma should be firm in his conviction: "The Blessed One knows, I do not know" (MLDB 70.27). As a contemporary teacher may not have the perfect clarity of the Buddha or an arahant, the modern student may not have to go quite this far in accepting his teacher's authority. But so long as the living guide is conveying pure Dhamma, he or she is presenting the Truth. Those studying Buddhist meditation under a proper teacher would do well to cultivate respect and humility towards both the Dhamma and their teacher. This will enable them to learn more.

When the Student Should Approach the Teacher

In a personal talk with Ānanda the Buddha described the subtle balance that the long-time meditator should maintain in relation to his teacher. The attendant bhikkhu of course had heard many of the Buddha's discourses. He had a thorough intellectual grasp of the Dhamma and had attained the first stage of awakening. So the Buddha points out to him that only for certain purposes should a student like himself "seek the Teacher's company." This sort of disciple, presumably familiar with the proper etiquette and schedule, should not approach the Teacher every time

he is inclined to hear Dhamma. A desire for theoretical or anecdotal talk, or a longing for the melodious sound of the Teacher's voice or the beauty of his language, is not sufficient reason.

"Ānanda, a disciple should not seek the Teacher's company for the sake of discourses, stanzas, and expositions. Why is that? For a long time, Ānanda, you have learned the teachings, remembered them, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, and penetrated them well by view."

The Buddha goes on to say that, by contrast, a student who desires communication directly linked to his own efforts at release has the right to insist on it from his teacher.

> "But such talk as deals with effacement, as favours the mind's release, and which leads to complete disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, peace—on wanting little, on contentment, seclusion, aloofness from society, arousing energy, virtue, concentration, wisdom, deliverance, knowledge and vision of deliverance: for the sake of such talk a disciple should seek the Teacher's company even if he is told to go away."
>
> MLDB 122.19–20

The teacher of Buddha Dhamma cannot refuse a sincere student.

Dedicating Oneself to the Teacher

The Buddha suggests how advantageous it is for people to approach highly developed bhikkhus for guidance. We can extrapolate from this to include qualified modern Dhamma teachers. Referring to monks with excellent morality, concentration, and wisdom, he says, "Seeing those bhikkhus is very helpful, I say; listening to those bhikkhus, approaching them, attending upon them, remembering them" is also beneficial. Going into the presence of such people, serving them, recalling them and their message and following their lead, all help the avid meditator attain the goal. Such guides "can exhort, inspire and encourage, and … are competent teachers of the true Dhamma."

> "By following such bhikkhus, by associating with them and attending upon them, the [student's] aggregate of virtue as yet incomplete reaches completion of development; the aggregate of concentration, of wisdom, of release, and of knowledge and vision of release as yet incomplete reaches completion of development."

In other words, being in contact with such an instructor can help one develop in all aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path to the highest degrees.

Ācariya Buddhaghosa discusses the need for the student to dedicate himself or herself to the meditation teacher. He says that when the aspirant has approached the Buddha (or another teacher), he should be resolute and sincerely request guidance in meditation. Then he should dedicate himself to the Blessed One … in this way: "Blessed One, I relinquish this my person to you." For … when he has dedicated himself in this way, no fear arises in him if a frightening object makes its appearance; in fact only joy arises in him as he reflects: "Have you not wisely already dedicated yourself to the Enlightened One?"

When he dedicates himself to a teacher, he should say: "I relinquish this my person to you, venerable sir." For one who has not dedicated his person thus becomes unresponsive to correction, hard to speak to, and unamenable to advice… Consequently the teacher does not help him…

If the pupil does not accept his teacher's advice and admonitions, the teacher will, at some point, cease trying to help him. Why should the teacher waste time

and energy on an unresponsive individual who does not utilise his help when there are others working diligently under his guidance? Surrender to the Dhamma teacher does not entail giving up one's ability to think. Rather, it instils humility and receptivity, enabling one to absorb guidance and protection. As Ācariya Buddhaghosa says:

> "But if he has dedicated his person, he is not unresponsive to correction, does not go about as he likes, is easy to speak to, and lives only in dependence on the teacher. He gets the twofold help from the teacher and attains growth, increase and fulfilment in the Dispensation [the Buddha's teachings]."
>
> Vism III 124, 126

Accepting Admonition

The Buddha said he will repeatedly correct a student and never give up on anyone who is trying to improve. Similarly, good Dhamma teachers today reprove meditators out of compassion, even if at times this requires strong words. A pupil who has previously dedicated himself or herself to the teacher will take the warning to heart and try to change.

Venerable Mahā Moggallāna says that earnest students are ready to change themselves when their

errors are pointed out by their teachers. They do not harbour evil desires or consider themselves superior to others. A student who controls his anger and does not become stubborn, revengeful or vituperative, will accept admonition gracefully. If he is reproved, he does not resist, denigrate or talk back to the teacher. Such a student also faces up to the situation while succinctly explaining his behaviour. Mahā Moggallāna points out that freedom from contempt, envy, deceit and arrogance also enable a disciple to learn from a teacher's warning. In sum, a humble student will be able let go of his or her opinions when the teacher points out that they are incorrect (MLDB 15.5).

Students who maintain such attitudes can learn a great deal when their errors in conduct, speech or meditation are pointed out by their teachers. The mind can be insidious because of its deep-rooted clinging to the sense of 'I'. Since we have no perspective on ourselves, we often cannot see our own mistakes. A good teacher will point out a student's errors.

Finding a Dhamma Teacher

Today we have to place faith in the Dhamma that the Buddha taught and in the person transmitting those pure teachings. Ultimately the teachings themselves are the refuge, for putting them into practice is what

will bring awakening. There are however, three refuges in Buddhism—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The Buddha is the pathfinder, the shower of the way; the Dhamma, the truth and the way. The Sangha as refuge traditionally means the Ariya Sangha, the community of beings who are partly or fully awakened. It would perhaps be appropriate to include teachers of pure Buddha-Dhamma in the Sangha. [3] Teachers are one's refuge because they guide one along the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha also praised the qualities of his teacher-monks and said they could be very helpful to students. He said that bhikkhus highly developed in morality, concentration, wisdom, and liberation—all the aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path—can "exhort, inspire, and encourage" students. He called them "competent teachers of the true Dhamma" who can bring the light of the truth to others (It 104).

One should look for the same traits in meditation teachers. One cannot know all about a teacher in advance, but careful scrutiny will make clear which candidates are so far from these ideals that one should not study under them. The basic requirements in a guide are a reputation for unblemished morality and meditative skills sufficient to enable them to train their students in the proper Dhamma. One has only their reputation, conduct and the observable traits of their

students to rely on in making an initial choice. But one can try out the teacher's meditation method for a time, sincerely and wholeheartedly apply it, and then decide whether he or she meets the criteria of a Dhamma teacher. One's choice is bound to be partly subjective. Staying with any valid Buddhist method is probably more beneficial than to combine several, or to frequently change teachers whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist.

Some standards to use in evaluating Dhamma guides are as follows:

What they teach should tally with the Buddha's teachings preserved in the Pāli texts, as translated by reputed scholars.

Their personal morality should appear impeccable. They scrupulously keep the rules of the Vinaya if they are bhikkhus, or the Five Precepts if they are lay people.

Their meditation centre should follow a middle path in all major respects.

Their students should look and sound reasonable like the kind of people one might want to emulate.

We will now draw out some practical implications of these criteria. To clarify (1), let us see how the Buddha said to properly evaluate the words of

someone who claims to represent his teaching. He said that no matter whom one hears the Dhamma from, one should examine their words thoroughly, without rushing either to embrace them or scorn them. If what is heard fits in with the carefully preserved texts of the Buddha's discourses and the Vinaya without distortion, the reported teaching should be taken as Dhamma. If after careful study and comparison, it does not correspond with them or contradicts them, then one may conclude it is actually not the words of the Buddha and may not be true (AN 4:180; GS II 174_77). In that case one would be wise to avoid the person teaching in such a way and learn pure Dhamma from someone else.

For (2), let us spell out some specific personal ethical criteria for the modern Dhamma teacher, based on the Five Precepts. As prescribed by the first precept, a Buddhist teacher should have nothing to do with violence. Threats or intimidation run counter to the Dhamma. If an instructor has a reputation for violent or coercive behaviour, this would be reason enough not to study under him or her.

The teacher should personally apply the injunction against taking what is not given (stealing), found in the second precept. He should not manipulate the Dhamma, or his students, to acquire wealth or power. People sincerely wish to give gifts to their teachers,

out of gratitude and to earn good kamma. But if a teacher plays on the students' generosity and encourages them to give him valuable gifts, the teacher's conduct is impure. One should stay away from such a teacher to avoid being used.

The teacher should either be celibate or, if married, should strictly observe the third precept, abstaining from sexual misconduct: that is, they should have no sexual activity outside the marriage. There are fine married Dhamma teachers who raise families. But any teacher who is unmarried should be committed to abstinence so that sexual motives do not mar their relationship with their students, even in subtle ways. The Buddha taught many lay people and he never told them to be celibate all their lives. He recognised that most people's sexual urge is too strong for this. But between teacher and student, and wherever Dhamma teaching is undertaken, sexual ties are dangerous and unhealthy. As a Dhamma teacher is the highest superior one can have, the relationship is vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

The teacher should always be honest as required by the fourth precept. Look for truthfulness and candour in a Dhamma teacher. If one suspects that a teacher is lying, hinting around, conniving, or being evasive, one should examine the situation carefully and perhaps read this as a warning to stay away. Teachers who

cannot express themselves clearly, or who seem to obfuscate rather than elucidate the Buddha's teachings, are not going to help their students.

The teacher should abstain from all intoxicants—the fifth precept. This includes alcohol and all mind-altering drugs. It is the very nature of such substances to becloud or distort the mind, and the process starts with the first sip or dose. Some contemporary teachers maintain that the precept against intoxicants requires only abstaining from their excessive use, and they even use these substances themselves. This is not the traditional Theravāda position. Just where and how would one draw the line between moderate and excessive drinking? Anything that distorts one's mind would taint the mental purity needed to meditate and especially to teach the Dhamma. Those who wish to transmit the teachings of the Buddha, the purest of beings, should entirely give up intoxicants to do their job with the required clarity and sincerity. A teacher who rationalises substance abuse will not convey the true Dhamma.

The meditation or retreat centre where the teacher instructs is a good place to study the third and fourth criteria. One should look for a 'middle way' in the rules of the centre. We have already noted that the Buddha said both asceticism and sensual indulgence are extremes to be avoided, so Dhamma centres

should not encourage them. Austere practices, like very little sleep, or long, unsupervised, solitary retreats, or inadequate diet, pose grave risks to inexperienced students. On the other hand, a minimum of the Five Precepts—including total celibacy while at the centre—should be required of all residents.

Meditators should not be permanently isolated from the outside world. A balance of faith and understanding should be encouraged. Only if the meditation centre is well run in a moderate, compassionate way will students benefit from the teaching there.

Finally, one should try to meet and talk with a range of the teacher's students. Are they sensible? Can they explain what they have gained from his teaching? Would you like to resemble them? Are they 'spaced out' or alert? Do they give the impression that they function competently in the outside world, in their families, at work? These individuals are in part the result of that teacher's methods, so one should consider seriously if one would like to resemble them.

Conclusion

The Buddha as teacher is of paramount significance. Without his pioneering discoveries of the truths about

existence, and the compassion that made him unstintingly share the way he found, we would have no escape from the suffering that permeates all life. We owe the possibility of freedom to his Dhamma. His teachings allow us to work correctly to attain perfect purity of mind, Nibbāna, and end the round of rebirth.

One has to train oneself. Buddhas only point the way, but the way would be utterly unknown without him and those who have transmitted his message down to the present. Without a proper teacher, one would have no opportunity to end suffering.

The world is full of risky spiritual methods—full of cults, mystical ideas, and confused 'gurus' feeding on human distress. The aspiring meditator has to be wary of them until he or she locates a teacher of the proper Dhamma.

The task of finding such a person is demanding and difficult but not insurmountable. Such people do exist, and can be traced. Some background reading will develop preliminary faith in the Buddha's awakening. Familiarity with some of his discourses will help one determine the quality of a Buddhist teacher. If one is careful not to rely overly on emotional reactions, the good kamma one has generated in previous lives, along with the guidelines enumerated above, should bring one into contact with the right kind of person.

Some time spent conscientiously training under them will either confirm that the choice was wise, or convince one to depart and continue to search elsewhere.

May we all study under teachers of perfect Buddha Dhamma!

May they guide us on the Noble Eightfold Path to the cessation of suffering!

Notes

1. U Chit Tin, "The Good Friend", in *Buddhism as a Way of Life and Other Essays*, Dhamma Texts Series 4, assisted by William Pruitt, The Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust, U.K., 1993, p.244. **[Back]**
2. This sutta has become a favourite in the West where it is too often used to misrepresent the Buddha as favouring complete scepticism. **[Back]**
3. The other traditional reference for Sangha is the community of Buddhist monks and nuns. The modern trend of using the word very broadly to include all practitioners strays too far from its origins **[Back]**

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