



Working with a Teacher



DEKELING

Lama Lekshe

Working with a Dharma Teacher in Tibetan Buddhism - a Guide for Beginning Students

Understanding the Role of a Dharma Teacher

Rooted in centuries-old traditions, the role of the teacher transcends simple instruction; they are meant to embody the dharma as well as to teach it. Of course, there are teachers of all kinds and at all levels—great sages and more ordinary, everyday guides. Both have an important role.

Most students will encounter everyday guides most of the time. Still, to have a guide who has undergone years of training, and who has encountered the experiences and obstacles that you are likely to meet is a great aid to practice. Finding a teacher with whom you resonate and who is devoting their life to the awakening of others is good fortune.

The Teacher as Guide, Mentor, and Spiritual Friend

A dharma teacher is not merely a teacher of knowledge but a trusted companion on a journey of self-discovery. They offer guidance through the complexities of life, serving as a guide in all kinds of times and all stages of practice. With their help, students find inspiration, and the courage to tread the path with determination, as they work through layers of confusion and impacts of past experience, and open to a life more free of confusion, fixed beliefs, harmful views and habits.

The Qualities of a Genuine Dharma Teacher

Authentic teachers should possess a deep understanding of the dharma, coupled with compassion and strong ethical conduct. Their wisdom should arise from lived experience—not just from knowledge in books. Eloquent speech and charisma are not sufficient.

Finding a Dharma Teacher – How to Proceed

Finding one's main teacher is an important step in a spiritual journey. A fruitful process is usually marked by introspection, discernment, and the sincere aspiration to walk the path of awakening under the guidance of a wise and compassionate spiritual friend.

It's also an everyday decision: Can you find someone who offers the amount of accessibility you need? Can you find a person who communicates in such a way that you understand and are encouraged to continue? Can you find a person who will be working as a spiritual guide long enough for you to acquire confidence in the method itself?

Preparing Oneself: Intentions, Aspirations, and Self-Assessment

Before embarking on the search for a dharma teacher, cultivate clarity of intention and a sense of aspiration. Reflect on your reasons for seeking guidance—are you motivated by a genuine thirst for wisdom and liberation, or by fleeting desires for worldly gain? Are you looking to replace a lost parent or friend? Is your search a pattern of needing to be obedient to something other than your own spiritual compass? Honest self-assessment is the first step towards aligning oneself with both dharma and a person who teaches it.

Criteria for Choosing a Teacher: Compatibility, Lineage, and Authenticity

Factors for discernment and wise decision-making might include things like: Compatibility with the teacher's teaching style, lineage, and spiritual outlook. Resonance with a teacher whose words awaken your heart, and whose presence inspires confidence in the transformative power of the dharma. Choosing a teacher who sees you and can help you apply dharma in a way that works for you. Choosing a teacher fearless enough to help you meet the edges of your practice and spiritual journey.

Practical Steps: Attending Teachings, Getting to Know the Community, and Observing the Teacher

Before looking for a teacher, engage actively in the dharma community your potential teacher serves. Attend teachings, retreats, and meditation sessions offered by different teachers and lineages. Immerse yourself in the teachings, observing not only the words spoken but also the embodiment of wisdom and compassion in various teachers' actions and demeanor. Take time to cultivate relationships within the sangha community—fellow practitioners can offer valuable insights and support on your quest for a dharma teacher.

In the journey of finding a dharma teacher, patience, discernment, and an open heart are your most trusted companions. Remember that the teacher-student relationship is a important bond—ideally it will last a lifetime and longer.

The Student-Teacher Relationship

In Tibetan Buddhism the connection between student and teacher is a relationship whose purpose is to support the learning and integration of methods of awakening into daily life.

Because practice—especially at the beginning— can be a vulnerable space for growth for the student, eventual mutual trust and respect between student and teacher is essential. In a best-case scenario, your primary guide’s role in your practice will be an on-going life resource, so investing in the relationship with intention and care is sensible.

Most teachers understand this from their own experience. They will encourage you to proceed with care. Why hurry? They will likely recommend that you take classes and attend events and see them or any potential primary teacher in every kind of circumstance before deciding.

Members of a dharma community should have open access to teachers in public events regardless of whether they are a student or not. The student-teacher relationship comes more into play when the student is committing considerable time to practice, retreat and the engagement in the community. Then a more thoughtful dialogue and a more intimate discussion can take place before making any decision about implementing a close teacher-student relationship.

Commitments and Responsibilities of the Student

Once one decides to take a guide as their main, or one of their main teachers, things shift slightly. At this point there must be clarity that the person who guides you in awakening is not going to be your personal friend. The power imbalance is too great. While the relationship may be friendly, it cannot be friendship.

At this time, it will be helpful to cultivate a sincere intention to learn and grow, dedicating yourself wholeheartedly to the practices and teachings imparted by your teacher. Openness to the teacher’s instruction will greatly impact learning.

Ethical Considerations and Boundaries

Also integral to the student-teacher relationship are ethical considerations and clear boundaries. Both the student and teacher should uphold the principles of right speech, right action, and right livelihood, and treat each other and fellow practitioners with kindness, respect, and compassion.

To protect the student's practice, the teacher will likely emphasize maintaining appropriate boundaries, refraining from undue familiarity, and definitely refraining from any inappropriate behavior that might compromise the integrity of the spiritual connection.

Nurturing Trust and Openness

Trust forms the bedrock of the student-teacher relationship, serving as a foundation upon which the seeds of awakening will flourish. This requires that the student cultivate trust in their teacher's guidance and teachings, allowing some measure of vulnerability and openness to being receptive to the transformative power of the dharma.

“Walking the spiritual path properly is a very subtle process; it is not something to jump into naively. There are numerous sidetracks which lead to a distorted, ego-centered version of spirituality; we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spiritually when instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques. This fundamental distortion may be referred to as spiritual materialism.”

— Chögyam Trungpa, **Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism**

Engaging with Teachings and Practices

Part of the student-teacher relationship is that the student is actually practicing. Otherwise, there is little basis for the relationship. Through study, contemplation, and practice, practitioners embark on a transformative journey, uncovering the timeless truths that lie at the heart of the dharma. This is not an effortless endeavor. Like anything else, it takes investment.

Approaching Teachings with an Open and Discerning Mind

As you engage with the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, cultivate an open and discerning mind, free from preconceptions and fixed views. Be ready to question, inquire, and investigate with curiosity and sincerity, and also understand that conceptual understanding will be secondary to direct experience. Meditation and other practices will be the most important tools.

The Importance of Practice and Integration into Daily Life

The power of Tibetan Buddhist teachings lies not merely in intellectual understanding but in the transformative power of practice. Dedicate yourself wholeheartedly to the cultivation of mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom in your daily life. You'll need to embrace meditation, contemplation, and ritual as powerful tools for self-transformation, weaving the threads of the dharma into the fabric of your everyday existence.

Dealing with Doubts and Challenges

On the path of the dharma—as in the rest of life—doubts and challenges are inevitable companions. Embracing obstacles as opportunities for growth and insight, knowing that each challenge encountered can be a stepping stone towards greater understanding and realization is helpful. It will be helpful to seek guidance from your teacher and fellow practitioners, drawing strength from the wisdom of the sangha as you navigate the sometimes turbulent waters of doubt and uncertainty.

Navigating Transitions and Challenges

The fact of impermanence means that transitions and challenges are inevitable in life. It also means that change is possible, no matter how entrenched one is at the start.

Understanding the Impermanent Nature of Existence

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent. Recognizing and internalizing this truth is crucial and is a part of many practices. Embracing the changing nature of existence as a fundamental aspect of reality will not be a source of discomfort or a source of fear, but will in time be seen as a gateway to freedom.

The Role of the Dharma Teacher During Times of Change

In times of transition, the support and insight of a dharma teacher become invaluable support. A teacher can provide not only spiritual guidance but also emotional support, helping us to view our experiences through the lens of the dharma.

Cultivating Patience and Compassion

Patience and compassion are virtues of immense value, especially during challenging times. Patience allows us to endure hardships with grace, understanding that even the most difficult moments are transient. Compassion, directed both towards ourselves and others, softens the heart and opens the door to healing and connection. It is through the cultivation of these qualities that we find strength and clarity and the determination to continue.

The Practice of Letting Go and Trusting the Path

One of the most profound lessons we learn on the spiritual path is the practice of letting go—releasing attachment to outcomes, clinging to identities, and our aversion to discomfort.

While the primary effort is one's own trust in the dharma, your teacher, and the sangha to be your companions through transitions.

Cultivating Inner Guidance and Wisdom

Eventually the journey of awakening extends beyond the relationship with an external teacher to reliance on wisdom itself as a guide. As practitioners progress along the path, they come to realize that the ultimate teacher resides within—and is the luminous wisdom of their own buddha nature.

The Practice of Meditation and Contemplation

Meditation and contemplation serve as powerful tools for connecting with the inner guru. Through the practice of mindfulness and introspection, practitioners learn to ease the turbulent waves of the mind and attune themselves to awareness itself. In the spacious expanse of awareness, the voice of the inner teacher becomes clear, offering guidance and insight into the nature of itself and of reality.

Integration and Embodiment of Wisdom

Ultimately, the journey of cultivating inner guidance and wisdom is not merely about acquiring knowledge but about embodying the truths revealed by the inner guru in every aspect of our lives. Buddhism is not the only spiritual path to acknowledge this.

“Feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear, instead of being bad news, are actually very clear moments that teach us where it is that we’re holding back. They teach us to perk up and lean in when we feel we’d rather collapse and back away. They’re like messengers that show us, with terrifying clarity, exactly where we’re stuck. This very moment is the perfect teacher, and, lucky for us, it’s with us wherever we are.”

—Pema Chodron

Expressing Discontent with Respect

While the relationship between a student and a dharma teacher is typically characterized by respect and trust, there will certainly be occasions when a student experiences discontent with their teacher. It would be hard to break out of one's deepest patterns and confusions without a bit of upset.

Much like it is in sports or arts, practicing on the edge, at some point in one's life, will be needed to progress.

The student and teacher will need to proceed with integrity and honesty to proceed. Students may find it helpful to meet in person with a teacher during these times. Before meeting, you may find these things helpful:

1. Mindful Reflection

Before expressing discontent with your teacher, take time to reflect mindfully on the nature of your dissatisfaction. Why is this experience here? Where did it come from? Is it an expression of a habit-pattern? Examine whether your concerns stem from miscommunication, differing perspectives, or something else. Clarify your intentions and motivations for addressing the matter, ensuring that your concern is clear to you. This will help you clarify it with your teacher.

2. Choose the Right Time and Place

Select an appropriate time and setting to discuss your concerns with your teacher, ensuring privacy and conducive conditions for open dialogue.

3. Express with Clarity , Taking Responsibility

When expressing discontent with your teacher, communicate with clarity, honesty, and respect—just as you would expect the teacher to do for you. Articulate your concerns calmly and directly. Focus on specific behaviors or actions that have caused discomfort or disagreement, providing examples to illustrate your points. Express your feelings and perspectives sincerely, while remaining open to your teacher's response and perspective.

4. Listen with Openness and Receptivity

After sharing your concerns, listen attentively to your teacher's response with openness and receptivity. Allow them the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings, offer explanations, or address your concerns with your spiritual awakening in mind.

Practical Matters in Working with a Teacher

Navigating the relationship with a dharma teacher in Tibetan Buddhism involves not only spiritual engagement but also practical considerations.

Appointments for Guidance

Establishing appointments for guidance with your dharma teacher is supportive to receiving personalized support and instruction on your spiritual path. Respect your teacher's time and availability by scheduling appointments in advance and honoring the agreed-upon times. Prepare questions or topics for discussion beforehand to make the most of your time together, ensuring that each meeting is fruitful. These meetings are not social events any more than your visit to your doctor is.

Each teacher does meetings differently. Some give 5 minutes. Others do meetings only on retreat. Some teachers are more available for nurturing a more frequent dialogue in service of awakening.

Take the Time that You Need, not More

The teacher sees many people in appointments for guidance, clarification of instruction and pastoral care. When your needs are met, offer to end the meeting.

Supporting the Teacher

Recognize that your dharma teacher's ability to offer guidance and teachings relies on the support of their students and the wider community. Offer financial support through donations or offerings, when possible, to sustain the teacher's livelihood and enable them to continue their dharma activities. That said, never let a lack of funds be an impediment to sincere practice. At Dekeling, the teachers have agreed that the most important offering is your determination to use the practices you receive to benefit yourself and others.

Still, it takes time, energy and money to keep offering the dharma. You can express gratitude by volunteering your time and skills to assist with administrative tasks, event organization, or other practical matters, lightening the teacher's workload and allowing them to focus on their primary role of sharing the dharma. For the same reason you can offer any other skill such as housework, gardening, repair work and so on.

Understanding the Teacher's Demanding Schedule

Acknowledge that your dharma teacher's life is often filled with a demanding schedule of teaching, mentoring students, and engaging in various other activities related to their role. Be understanding and patient if scheduling appointments or receiving responses to

inquiries takes time. Trust that your teacher is dedicated to supporting your spiritual journey, even amidst their busy schedules.

Examples of Pastoral Care

In addition to teaching and mentoring, dharma teachers most often engage in pastoral care, offering compassionate support to both community members and members of the wider community who might be facing challenges or difficulties in their lives. This may involve providing emotional guidance, counseling, or practical assistance in times of need. For example, a teacher may offer solace and wisdom to a student navigating grief or provide advice and resources to someone about to be a parent.

Hospitals, schools, professional associations, and other institutions rely on pastors and lamas for representation to and assistance for the wider community.

Some teachers offer ritual support such as weddings, baby blessings, funerals, house blessings and so on as part of their service offering.

In addition, communities often invite teachers to be guest speakers and retreat leaders. Teachers may also write books, do podcasts and other work to help spread the dharma.

How to Prepare for a Mentoring Meeting with a Teacher

Preparing questions for a spiritual interview or mentoring meeting in Buddhism involves introspection, clarity, and a focus on your spiritual journey. Such questions should reflect your earnest desire to progress on the path, confront challenges, and deepen your understanding. Though questions will also arise spontaneously, here are suggestions for preparing meaningful questions in advance

Reflect on Your Practice

1. **Assess Your Current State:** Spend some time in meditation or quiet reflection to assess where you currently stand in your spiritual practice. What emotions, thoughts, or challenges are most present for you right now?
2. **Review Changes in Understanding:** Consider the progress you've made since your last meeting. What changes have you noticed in your understanding, your daily life, and your meditation practice?
3. **Identify Challenges:** What obstacles or difficulties have you encountered? Are there specific emotions, thoughts, or situations that seem to hinder your progress?

Formulate Your Questions

1. **Be Specific:** Instead of asking broad, general questions, try to hone in on specific aspects of your practice or understanding. For example, instead of asking how to meditate, ask about overcoming specific distractions you encounter during meditation.
2. **Seek Suggestions for Personal Application:** Focus on how the teachings can be applied in your daily life or how you can embody compassion and wisdom in your own life's challenges and opportunities.

Final Preparation

- **Prioritize Your Questions:** Depending on the time available, you might not get through all your questions. Prioritize them based on what feels most pressing or significant at this point in your journey. This way, if your time runs out, you got the questions most important to you answered.
- **Openness and Flexibility:** Approach the meeting with an open heart and mind. Be prepared that the answers may not be what you expect, and the conversation could take unexpected turns, offering insights you hadn't anticipated.
- **Record and Reflect:** Consider jotting down the answers or insights provided during your meeting, and reflect on them in the following days. Sometimes, the full depth of the answer unfolds with time and contemplation.

Preparing with intentionality and mindfulness not only shows respect for your teacher's time but also deepens the fruitfulness of your spiritual mentoring meetings.

Cultivating Ease and Joy in the Spiritual Mentor Relationship

The relationship between a spiritual mentor and a Dharma student is not solely about rigorous study and solemn introspection; it's also about fostering a sense of shared humanity, and sometimes, ease and joy. Cultivating these qualities within the mentor-student dynamic can enhance the journey, making it more enriching, fulfilling, and sustainable.

1. Authentic Connection

Open Communication

- Establishing open channels of communication built on trust and mutual respect allows for the authentic exchange of ideas, concerns, and experiences. When both mentor and student feel comfortable expressing themselves freely, a deeper connection can be forged.

Shared Humor

- Infusing the mentor-student relationship with lightheartedness and humor can alleviate tension and foster a sense of camaraderie. Sharing laughter and joy creates bonds that transcend the formal roles of teacher and student, fostering a warm and supportive environment. Let's face it, waking up has hilarious moments.

2. Embracing Imperfection

Growth Mindset

- Embrace imperfection as a natural part of the learning process. Both mentor and student are bound to make mistakes and encounter challenges along the way. Viewing these experiences as opportunities for growth rather than failures cultivates resilience and a growth mindset.

Humility and Vulnerability

Embrace humility and vulnerability as essential qualities on the spiritual path. Both mentor and student can learn from each other's vulnerabilities and imperfections, fostering a sense of shared humanity and compassion.

3. Finding Joy in Practice

• Celebrating Practice

Celebrate milestones and moments of progress in the student's spiritual journey. Whether it's a breakthrough in meditation practice or a newfound understanding of a challenging concept, or the completion of a practice commitment, acknowledging and celebrating these achievements cultivates a sense of accomplishment and joy.

- **Joyful Engagement**

Encourage the student to approach their spiritual practice with joy and enthusiasm rather than obligation or seriousness. Infuse activities such as meditation, study, and service with a sense of curiosity, wonder, and joy, making the journey itself a source of fulfillment and happiness.

4. Nurturing Gratitude

- **Expressing Appreciation**

Cultivate a culture of gratitude within the mentor-student relationship. If both are exerting on behalf of awakening, it's something to appreciate. Appreciation need not be frequent or effusive, but it can happen.

- **Gratitude Practice**

The student can cultivate a daily practice of gratitude, reflecting on the blessings, teachings, and opportunities afforded by the mentor-student relationship and the path of the Dharma. Cultivating gratitude opens the heart and fosters a sense of abundance and contentment. The teacher no doubt has this with their own mentors.

5. Creating Space for Playfulness

- **Exploring Creativity**

Encourage the exploration of creative and playful expressions of the Dharma, such as art, music, storytelling, or movement. Engaging in these activities fosters creativity, spontaneity, and joy, while also deepening the student's understanding and embodiment of the teachings.

- **Playful Inquiry**

Approach the study and contemplation of the Dharma with a spirit of playful inquiry and curiosity. Encourage the student to explore complex concepts and teachings with a sense of wonder and fascination, rather than rigid adherence to intellectual analysis.

In cultivating ease and joy within the mentor-student relationship and the journey of the Dharma student, both parties contribute to creating a nurturing and supportive environment conducive to growth, wisdom, and happiness. Through shared laughter, celebration, humility, and gratitude, the path of awakening becomes not only a journey of profound transformation but also a joyful and fulfilling adventure. The inherent challenges are workable, then, and meaningful as necessary experiences.