



The Role of the Teacher in Spiritual Practice I

Laura Good

1/30/2019

“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear” has been attributed to many spiritual traditions but it most likely was never said by the Buddha (according to fakebuddhaquotes.com) And while the gist of it may be true, it can also be very frustrating if you don’t live near a teacher in the tradition you desire or if you keep “striking out” on your journey to find the perfect teacher. Which sounds a little like dating, waiting to find that certain someone with whom you just “Click”.

Finding a good teacher, or rather the right teacher for your practice is important. A good teacher will guide you and give you skills, but they are not your best friend or your therapist and probably will tell you at times exactly what you don’t want to hear. The ego may want a “yes man” or we may just want someone to take away our suffering. “If only someone would just tell me what to do to end my suffering, I’ll do it!” But no one can do it for you.

But deeper than the ego is our Buddha nature that wants to hear the truth, however hard. Shattering delusion lets our inner goodness shine. It’s not always fun but a good teacher will help you do that and more.

Tonight, I’ll talk about different kinds of meditation teachers and what my experience with them has been.

When I moved to California 20 years ago, I was eager to find a spiritual home. Within the first week, three separate people mentioned there was a meditation sit around the corner from me led by one of the Spirit Rock teachers. Though I was a regular meditator, I hadn’t tried Vipassana and felt like this was some sort of destiny or karma. And it was, I was so ready for this practice. And though looking back it probably wouldn’t have matter who the teacher was. Howie Cohn was a marvelous teacher and we clicked. I quickly became a regular sangha member and couldn’t wait to take my first retreat.

After three days of getting up early, staying silent and meditating from dawn to past dusk, I was going “deep”. I was pretty raw and having hourly moments of heartache mixed with insight. At the end of every guided mediation Howie read a poem or story. That evening, he read a piece by a modern female humorist that he loved. The story was...fine. I was a writer myself, so here came the judging mind. But I kept listening and then he closed with the authors name, we’ll call her “Sue”.

My face felt hot and burning. I went to high school with Sue. Sue was not exactly my high school nemesis, but who she represented was: petite, popular, a cheerleader, from a very wealthy

family, she lived in a mansion. I was none of those things in high school. The only thing we had in common was we were both in honors creative writing class. Girls like her made me burn with jealousy all those years ago. I never felt good enough. She had so many advantages, I felt like the world was already fixed and I had no chance and here I was crying-again, all those years later!

My teacher, of course meant no harm, there was no way he could have known his choice of reading caused one of the 100 or so retreatants to have a minor emotional episode. I was so distraught at my reaction I signed up for an interview with him. I told him what had happened. He said the one thing I DIDN'T want to hear, "Oh, well, she's your teacher." Ugh-no way, this was NOT how I wanted to learn my lessons, not from her!

My strange "karma" with "Sue" continued. When I had a baby, her best-selling children's book was given to me as a gift (ouch). A few years later, I ran into her at a Buddhist festival in Chicago. I don't think she even recognized me. Finally, after one of our high school reunions, a classmate wondered why Sue never came to them. Another responded that she hated high school, never felt comfortable and said she had no interest in ever coming to one. Hmm. Maybe she hadn't had it so easy after all; none of us do.

Recently, as she was dying of cancer, she wrote a hugely popular column in the NY Times about her illness and marriage. It is now being made into a movie. At this year's high school reunion we all raised a glass to her. Some of her close friends were crying, I privately thanked her for her strange role in my journey which she never knew about. Our connection was never personal, but the teaching was.

I remember years later at another retreat, I spent days formulating in my mind what my one, brilliant question would be to the teacher. He kind of shrugged and said, "The teachers really don't care about what you're going through—in a detailed way. Of course, we care about your welfare, but the story doesn't really matter-everything is workable". I can't even recall what I thought was so dire at the time.

Why do we need to seek out a relationship with a Buddhist teacher?

We long for many things, an inner peace, understanding or awakening. And when we try to do anything, whether it's learning how to play an instrument or a sport, having a teacher to guide us, keeps us safe, gives us knowledge to improve and flourish and eventually gives us the tools to enjoy and succeed.

BASICS

Before we go through the different types of teachers there are some basics that may seem obvious but are worth noting:

- are they knowledgeable and have a strong appreciation and interest in the dharma?
- are they kind and trustworthy?
- are they open without being overly attached or rigid in their views?
- do they teach what is beneficial to the student?
- are they ethical in word and deed?
- do they claim any special powers or devotion from their students?
- do they have inappropriate relationships with students?
- do they "practice what they preach"

Many kinds of teachers

(from Scott Tusa)

“The first is a relationship with a teacher who is like a professor. This is someone at a college-level course or another kind of course where we’re merely connecting with them in order to study Buddhism and the dharma more deeply.

The second is a dharma instructor who is not necessarily a professor, but someone who is knowledgeable, who knows the dharma well, and who can be an instructor for us in Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist meditation.

The third is a meditation instructor. This is a person who we know has meditation experience and we can deliberately go to for help in navigating some of the pitfalls of our meditation practice.

In Tibetan Buddhism there are also ritual practices that they combine with meditation. Another type of teacher can be a ritual trainer, someone who trains us in those aspects of practice. We also have spiritual mentors who may be Buddhist teachers, instructors, or meditation teachers who we develop a closer relationship to over time, and we study the Buddhist path more deeply with them.

From here, we may then meet what’s called the root teacher. A root teacher is a teacher who inspires us the most, to whom we have a strong—we usually say karmic—connection. We may have a strong interest in studying with them. We feel very inspired when we encounter them and hear their teachings. In the Nyingma tradition, we describe the root teacher as the person who pointed out the nature of our mind out of kindness, making it possible for us to recognize it.

Shopping Around

It might be tempting to keep shopping around for a teacher until you find just the right one. Informing yourselves on the different traditions may help, but someone who knows the facts and history of Buddhism is a great place to start. Maybe you like ritual and want a more devotional, religious practice like Tibetan, or you want something that combines yoga or Hindu cultural practice. Maybe you respond better to philosophical interpretations of the dharma. Or maybe you happen to meet a mediation teacher who helps refine your meditation skills and that’s all you need and that can be helpful to any other religious practice you may have. Or maybe you like to a mix of them all which some will frown on but others will celebrate. At the core, life is your teacher, this is YOUR journey, no one else’s.

When it's time to move on

In the west, as people move frequently for jobs etc. it’s very hard to stay with one root teacher. For many years after I moved from California, I still flew back to Spirit Rock for retreats. I was very attached to that place and the teachers, but it became impractical when I lived abroad. When I came back to the States, I did what I always do, looked for a mediation group. There was not a specific Vipassana group where I lived so I started go a Laos temple. It was very ritualistic

and I soon felt out of place with the Laotians who had many festivals and offerings and big gold Buddha's. So a few of us decided to sponsor a monk to come live and teach at a separate center. We arranged to give robes to our new resident monk, an American who had recently been ordained in Thailand. He was very intent on not diverging in any way from the tradition he was taught. Meaning, alms rounds, not eating after noon etc. We had to coordinate his meals, his money, driving etc.

After having a baby, I had chronic pain in my hips and back. Finally getting back to my sangha's weekly meditation was a victory in of itself in spite of the difficulty of finding childcare and the pain. But I was committed, reluctantly realizing I would have to use a chair in the back of the hall to mediate.

After our meditation we sat in silence waiting for the monk to start his dharma talk. Five minutes had turned into over ten minutes of awkward silence. Everyone looked around, "is there a problem?" we thought. Finally, a member asked, "Bhante, is there something you need before you begin?"

Staring straight ahead with barely an expression, he spoke. "I'm waiting for everyone to sit on the floor. Lay people cannot be higher than the monk".

He was sitting on a slightly raised cushion about six inches off the floor.

"What?" I thought. I knew about the no feet pointed at the alter thing but really? I couldn't sit on a chair for the dharma talk? I reluctantly slunk down against the wall trying not to aggravate my pinched nerve. The mental cascade begun. 'Who does he think he is?' "I helped give this guy a permanent home. I even got up early once a week and put my infant in the car and drove thorough pouring rain to leave hot, organic oatmeal at his doorstep. "(Women can't be alone with a monk according to his tradition, even to prepare or offer food).

I had meditated and studied long enough to recognize what was happening in my mind: the five aggregates, the selfing, the second dart. even the gender aspect of eons of Buddhist monastic history, the indignation etc. the whole shebang. But still...something felt wrong.

I tried to work with it for weeks. Finally, when our small sangha couldn't coordinate all the food offerings to the monk every morning and when I realized there was some sort of power dynamic going on that I couldn't fully understand, I stopped going.

I quickly found another sangha, turns out, one block away from my house. It was led by a female teacher who had trained with many of my former teachers on the west coast. It was a very democratic group, and open to many traditions and challenges Buddhism in the west was experiencing.

Months later, a woman who had also attended the former sangha started to come to my new one. We chatted one night about our practice and why she had left too. Her experienced had echoed mine and we pondered about why in this day and age trying to support an American turned eastern monk didn't work for us.

She was an older, salty, southern lady who recently had battled cancer. She laughed. "I've served men my whole life, let him make his own damn oatmeal!"

Though this happened over a decade ago, different reflections come at different times. I have metta for myself, I have metta for the monk. Buddhism in the west demands flexibility. We are all a part of how it's changing. I am more amazed at the dharma every day. Traditions arise, sometimes they may have to fall away, but the dharma stays true. A clear mind and heart that serves everyone, no matter how high or low off the floor, is how I experience it today and a good teacher will guide you in developing the skills that let your unique nature shine.