

Scott Tusa

*How to Cultivate a Healthy Relationship with a Buddhist Teacher*

Week One: “Embarking on the Path”

December 3, 2018

Hi, I’m Scott Tusa, a Buddhist teacher based in New York City. I teach Buddhist philosophy and meditation throughout North and South America in a variety of communities, and I support Tsoknyi Rinpoche's Pundarika Sangha as a practice advisor. For the last 20 years, I’ve studied and practiced in both the Gelugpa and Nyingma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and I spent nine years as a Buddhist monk.

I’d like to welcome you to this series on how to cultivate a healthy relationship with a Buddhist teacher. This is a very important topic and one that’s very dear to my heart, one I’ve both struggled with and found strength in. In this week’s talk we are going to cover why we might seek out a relationship with a Buddhist teacher. To start, I’d like to talk about the purpose of the Buddhist path and why we practice.

The Buddhist path is a path of awakening. It’s a path of uncovering our own innate buddhanature—our awakened nature. Buddhanature is a quality, an essence that all sentient beings have. An important part of the beginning of the Buddhist path is an understanding of the obstacles preventing us from experiencing that awakened nature. The Buddha pointed this out very skillfully in the first two truths of his teaching on the Four Noble Truths.

In the first truth on suffering, we come to an understanding and a deeper experience of what binds us to dissatisfaction, suffering, and the wheel of samsara, as we call it in Buddhism. Then we explore its causes, namely afflictive emotions and our habitual patterns of karma that reproduce these suffering states again and again.

Through this, we come to a deeper understanding of what we’re seeking on the Buddhist path, why we might want to practice meditation, and also a confidence in our own inner potential that we can actually bring about the qualities of awakening.

In this context of discussing how we might cultivate a relationship with a Buddhist teacher, we start with just a basic reflection on our own inner potential, our own nature. We start with a basic reflection on both this first noble truth of *dukkha* [suffering] and the second noble truth of its

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cause. Then the third noble truth states that there can be a cessation to that suffering, and the path to that cessation is presented in the fourth noble truth.

As we start to explore a possible relationship to a Buddhist teacher, we recognize that this teacher can act as a human bridge between where we are now in our current experience and the awakening we wish to uncover. It’s wonderful to start with books and apps; for most of us, they’re the most accessible route to the dharma—they’re right there at the touch of a button. But they do have their limitations. If we become serious about the Buddhist path and we really want to explore it deeply in practice, study, and reflection, then at some point we’re going to have to seek out a relationship with a human teacher.

Why do we need to seek out a relationship with a Buddhist teacher? It’s because we long for awakening. As we’re starting our path of seeking a relationship with a Buddhist teacher there are some qualities that we may begin to develop and connect with that will help that relationship to be healthier from our side.

The first quality we want to develop is openness without attachment to our views. This means avoiding the extreme of skepticism on one side and the extreme of wanting to become a believer too quickly on the other. We simultaneously develop the quality of openness and the quality of discernment.

Having connected with some books, Buddhist writings, or YouTube videos or apps, we start to learn enough to distinguish between teachings that are going to be beneficial and teachings that are faulty or aren’t going to be so beneficial. That’s the second quality we want to develop.

The third quality is a strong appreciation and interest in the dharma, which I’m sure we have already if we’re interested in seeking out a teacher. The fourth quality is an attentive and clear mind, the fifth is emotional maturity, and the sixth is a kind heart.

We’re trying to cultivate an attitude of examining our motivations and seeing why we are seeking out the Buddhist path. Why are we seeking out a relationship with a teacher? If we gain clarity on our side, it’s going to help the relationship to be smoother once we enter it.

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There are many different varieties of relationships with a teacher that we can develop in the Buddhist tradition. Here I’m going to name a few, and later on I’ll go more into a description of what these are.

The first is a relationship with a teacher that’s 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’s knowledgeable, who knows the dharma well, and 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 we also have ritual practices that we combine with our 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.

These are the variety of teachers we can connect with. In the beginning we might just connect with a meditation teacher or a dharma instructor. Starting there, we can explore that relationship carefully over time. As we explore that relationship, that particular teacher may turn into a more

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important teacher for us, or we may explore a relationship with other teachers. It’s about gaining discernment in what is suitable for us and when.

This week we’ve covered the purpose of practicing the Buddhist path, the benefits of working with a Buddhist teacher, and why we might seek out that kind of student-teacher relationship. We’ve looked at the qualities we want to develop as a spiritual seeker or someone seeking out a teacher on the Buddhist path, and the variety of teacher-student relationships we can develop.

Next week, we’ll look at examining a teacher and what to look for in a teacher. We’ll also look at possible cultural misunderstandings that can come up, and how to cultivate an open, yet discerning mind when it comes to working with a Buddhist teacher.