

Scott Tusa

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

Week Two: "Examining Our Teacher's Qualities"

December 10, 2018

Hi, I'm Scott Tusa, and welcome back to the second week of this series on how to cultivate a healthy relationship with a Buddhist teacher. In this talk, we're going to explore why it's important to examine a teacher, and how to do that. Just like we would examine a potential business partner or a relationship partner, we should examine a spiritual teacher; it's even more important to do so. Why is it more important? Because this is the person we're asking to lead us on the path to awakening.

When talking about a spiritual teacher, we usually use the terms lama or guru. Guru can be a scary word for a lot of people. It is often misinterpreted. It's even maligned and made fun of. But the Sanskrit word "guru", which is the term the Tibetan word "lama" derives from, really just means someone who is heavy or weighty with spiritual qualities. On the Buddhist path, this is someone who's developed a strong ethical base, meditative awareness, and qualities of Buddhist wisdom or its ultimate view of emptiness.

If we want to be more specific, there are a few qualities we can look for within a Buddhist teacher. These qualities might depend on what kind of relationship we're developing with the teacher. For instance, the qualities we're looking for in a Buddhist professor are going to be different than the qualities we're looking for in a root teacher. But this is a general list that we can use to examine a wide range of potential Buddhist teachers.

The first quality is having a strong base in ethical conduct. The teacher should be very conscientious of their ethical conduct, resolve not to harm others, and keep their conduct in line with the Buddhist path.

Second, they should be knowledgeable of the dharma. The third quality is compassion. Here the compassion applies to taking a real interest in our liberation, in taking a real interest in wanting to see us free from suffering. The fourth quality, which is especially important in the case of a root teacher, is that they have some realization of the ultimate view of emptiness.

We could ask the question, "Are we looking for perfection in this kind of person?" The answer is no. We're essentially looking for a compassionate, yet imperfect human being. What we need to understand when entering this relationship with a teacher is that it's hard to find someone who is impeccable, but we do our best to find someone who upholds these qualities as best possible. This will be different for a Buddhist professor versus a dharma instructor, a meditation teacher, or a root teacher.

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It's also important to develop a relationship with a *network* of teachers. As I already pointed out, we can have different relationships with different teachers—from just studying information from someone more knowledgeable than us on the Buddhist path, to someone who might guide us in meditation, deepening that relationship, all the way up to someone we're receiving empowerments and pith instructions from. The latter would be someone we'd want to spend a good amount of time examining, possibly years.

Overall, having a network of teachers is extremely beneficial in the beginning. That's because we might have someone we can connect with to guide us in study, reflection, and meditation as well as someone we can connect with who has done a lot of practice in retreat or has lots of realization and is qualified as a proper lama or a guru. All of these different roles can be in the same person, they don't have to be many teachers. But I've personally found it helpful to have relationships with and ask questions to different kinds of teachers.

When we're connecting with Asian Buddhist teachers, there can also be cultural misunderstandings that we have to work through. There are many potential misunderstandings and I'm not going to be able to describe them all in an exhaustive way, but there's a few I'd like to mention.

The first is that we may have a different wish or motivation in what we're seeking from a Buddhist teacher or spiritual teacher. That is why I said in the first talk that it's important to investigate and examine our motivations. A spiritual teacher, whether they're a Buddhist professor all the way up to a root teacher, is not our therapist. They're not there to coddle us or heal our emotional wounds. They are there to teach us the path of awakening. Of course, there's healing that can take place along that path, but this can be a common cultural misunderstanding. We may need to seek out a therapist and have that as a separate relationship with a person that's not our Buddhist teacher.

Another cultural misunderstanding is that our Buddhist teacher is our worldly friend; they are not. This doesn't mean that we can't enjoy meals with them or have a laugh sometimes, it just means we're not relying on them for that type of role in our life.

Further cultural misunderstandings can be related to the emphasis on individualism in modern Western societies, in contrast to the emphasis on hierarchy within certain Asian Buddhist traditions. It's just something to check our mind for and see where we might be placing a limiting belief on what we believe has the most efficacy within a system or path.

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As we explore these possible cultural misunderstandings, we're cultivating a quality of openness in relation to our view, based on self-compassion, and we're also cultivating discernment, a necessary component in walking the spiritual path. These two qualities will serve us throughout our path. We can see that we're already cultivating qualities of mindfulness, discernment, and openness as we begin to seek out a spiritual teacher and we examine that person in a relationship.

As we cultivate openness and discernment, we want to apply these to avoid two extremes. One is being too quick to enter into a relationship with a Buddhist teacher, and the other is being overly skeptical and not entering into that relationship at all. It's a balance of cultivating openness and discernment. If we come into contact with a qualified Buddhist teacher, they are actually going to give us the tools to check them, because the tools are within the teachings themselves. They will give us the very tools we need to examine whether they're qualified or not.

This week we've looked at how to examine a teacher and what qualities to look for when we're exploring a relationship with a Buddhist teacher. We've also examined some possible cultural misunderstandings, and we've looked at cultivating an open yet discerning mind.

Next week we'll explore how to build trust once we've examined a teacher and entered into a committed teacher-student relationship with them, as well as how to work through problems as they arise.