

Scott Tusa

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

Week Three: “Building Trust and Overcoming Issues”

December 17, 2018

Welcome back to the third week in our series on how to cultivate a healthy relationship with a Buddhist teacher. I’m Scott Tusa, and this week we’re going to look at how to build mutual trust in our relationship with our teachers and what to do when problems arise.

We begin to build trust in this relationship by doing a proper examination as I described in the previous talk. It’s important to take our time in developing our relationship with our teacher to really examine this person carefully to see if they have the qualities it takes to lead us on the Buddhist path. Trust in our relationship with our Buddhist teachers is really built on appreciation and discernment. This is where we take our time to check the person and really see if they have the qualities it takes to lead us on the path of Buddhist awakening.

When we begin to develop an appreciation for the dharma we study the dharma more intensely, which leads to an even deeper appreciation for the dharma. As we also begin to deepen our meditation practice we start to have direct experience, which further inspires us and deepens our appreciation of the dharma. The place we should start in relation to the teacher is also with discernment and in appreciation of the dharma itself. Trust is really built upon appreciation and discernment.

When it comes to our relationship with our teachers, discernment starts in the process of examination, where we’re checking this person to see if they have the ability to lead us on the Buddhist path of awakening. Before this, we might have gained some appreciation for the dharma. This is really the main focus, whether we’re working with a teacher or just working with books.

Again, trust is really based on appreciation and discernment. Discernment takes time; we need to get to know a Buddhist teacher in order to see if they have the qualifications to lead us on the path of Buddhist awakening. While we’re doing this, we’re also gaining a richer and deeper appreciation for the dharma itself. As we meditate, we’re gaining a richer appreciation of the experience of what the dharma can produce, bring about, or uncover. We merge these two in our relationship with the teacher as well. The teacher is one of the supports in our learning,

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reflection, and meditation. But it’s the dharma itself that we are trying to bring about as a quality of realization and experience within our mind.

There’s a famous quote by the Buddha that we can use as an example here. The Buddha said, “Do not rely on the individual, but on the dharma. Do not rely on the words, but on the meaning. Do not rely on the provisional meaning, but on the definitive meaning. And do not rely on the ordinary mind, but rely on wisdom.” The first part of this quote really applies to this aspect of building trust, where we’re learning to rely on our teachers for knowledge, inspiration, and for being an example of what we can develop if we practice the Buddhist path. But ultimately, it’s the dharma that we’re relying on and the teacher is just helping us gain access to a deeper experience with that.

Appreciation starts for the dharma and then we begin to develop an appreciation for our teachers, because we see that it was because of the teachers’ kindness that we were able to access the dharma in a deeper way.

A relationship to our Buddhist teachers is not going to be linear, like all relationships. Our expectations should match the kind of student-teacher relationship that we are entering into. There are certain expectations we might have for a relationship with a Buddhist professor, and different ones for a meditation instructor, or for a ritual trainer. Then there are other expectations we might have when relating to a root teacher. These expectations are mainly from our side in terms of what we’re looking to get out of that relationship with that particular teacher. A mentor or a Buddhist teacher is not there to hold our hand every step of the way. They’re really there to point out the path of understanding, knowledge, and practice so that we can develop our own relationship to the dharma, and deepen that through meditation and practice.

Unfortunately, like other relationships in our lives, problems can arise in the teacher-student relationship. We could even say that it’s *likely* that some kind of problem will arise because the buddhadharma often challenges us to look at our limited views, our biases, and the ways we view ourselves and the world. If that gets caught up in the relationship to our teacher or something they’re saying, that could obviously turn into a disagreement.

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This is why it’s so important to cultivate those qualities of openness and discernment. Here, our discernment also serves as a way to understand our projections, our relationship to the dharma, what is arising for us, and when, and how we work with this skillfully.

Of course, if you’ve examined your teacher well and know they are compassionate, you can go to them if there’s been a disagreement or misunderstanding and talk to them about it at any point. Though if a teacher decides to repeatedly use their authority out of self-interest when they really are in the wrong, we’re also free to end this relationship in an amicable way. We can quietly leave without deriding that teacher or expressing hatred or anger.

If there’s egregious abuse involved, we should follow the Dalai Lama’s advice and seek out the help of proper authority figures and speak out. From there, we can then seek proper healing for ourselves and the community.

Overall, we shouldn’t go into any relationship with a spiritual teacher being overly skeptical or overly optimistic. We should remain open, unbiased, yet discerning. This is a safe and beneficial way to get the most out of our relationship with our teacher.

In this week’s talk, we covered how to build trust in our relationship with our Buddhist teacher and what to do when problems arise. We talked about trust being built upon appreciation and discernment, what to expect in our relationship to our teacher, and also what to do when problems arise.

Next week we’ll be covering the transformative power of devotion. I hope you can join us.