

The Student-Teacher Relationship: Opening the Heart of Compassion

By Sonia Osorio

“I used to ask my teacher Jamgon Kongtrul every day to help me with my mediation practice. He was willing to talk to me but was usually quite brief, and he kept on saying the same thing, which was, ‘Keep going, everything’s OK.’ Finally I got really frustrated and developed fantastic doubt and resentment. I thought maybe I’d been cheated, and maybe they had just set me up as a tulku [reincarnate lama] when I actually wasn’t, and maybe the whole thing around me was hoo-ha. I thought maybe I should just be an ordinary person, ask his help, and he might tell me more of the truth. I felt there were a lot of barriers because of my title, my honor, and I should ask him again about that. I was so worked up.... And I said to Jamgon Kongtrul, ‘Maybe I am not the great person you expected me to be, I’m so ordinary and I have those thoughts, and it doesn’t seem to make much sense, me practicing.’

“Jamgon Kongtrul seemed to be quite startled at that.... And he said, ‘Do you have devotion to me – do you love me?’ And the whole thing turned my concepts completely upside-down. I realized that I was regarding his teaching as merchandise and had never realized his teaching was the gift of love. I burst into tears, ran out of the room, and cried in the woods.” - From *Collected Vajra Assemblies*, Vol. 1. Halifax: Vajradhatu Publications © Diana J. Mukpo.

I, too, found tears coming to my eyes when I read this story about Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the founder of the Shambhala Buddhist tradition, and his teacher. It echoed my own doubts in terms of myself as a student, of the teachings that I had been receiving, and of my own capacity to become a teacher. I knew that in its deepest expression, teaching is never a commodity, but rather an exchange of energy, wisdom and skill. Up until that point, however, it had never struck me that teaching is also an expression of love - love for the teachings, love between a student and teacher, love for oneself in the expression of the teachings. It was then that the student-teacher relationship took on a deeper meaning for me and I understood with my heart what was being offered to me, and that the work of a teacher is simply to touch the student’s heart, allowing it to open so that others may know what is already within them.

According to Buddhist tradition to find a solid foundation for relationships (in this case, between a student and teacher), we need to consider what we most value in our connection with someone we care about. What are the moments in a relationship that we most cherish? It may be the understanding, or the feeling of being heard or seen, but ultimately, it is the sense that we are seen and understood - and yes, loved – for who we are and for where we are in our experience and on our path. In such moments, we become more connected to ourselves and to another human being, ultimately understanding the interconnectedness of all things.

This connection is about something we trust (the practice, teachings), through someone

we trust (the teacher) – and it is absolutely integral to the student-teacher relationship. For this to happen, however, the aspects of caring, compassion and love must become conscious and must be used responsibly. It is this that will sustain us and offer us insight in periods of doubt, questioning or conflict.

Two phrases remain embedded in my mind, offered to me by one of my own teachers, during that period when I was questioning my practice and my path: “Does the practice still touch your heart? Would you teach it to someone you love?” So long as I am able to sincerely answer yes to both of these questions, I know that my work as both a teacher and student is not yet done. There is still more in me to be drawn out, more in the teaching to draw from, and something still touches me deeply in others.

“The word ‘educate’ comes from the Latin *educare*, which means ‘to draw out’,” states Constance Buck, PhD, Academic Dean at Southwestern College, in Santa Fe, an institute dedicated to experiential teaching, counseling, psychology and bodywork. “When we educate, we draw out from within the student what’s already there. That’s the basis of any good relationship.”

The word relationship is key here. To be in relationship requires both respect and humility. There’s a humbleness required of the student, where they must enter the relationship as an empty vessel, to use a Buddhist term, empty of preconceptions and ideas of what they believe they know or should be learning, and allowing themselves to be filled with the knowledge and wisdom being presented to them. That’s easier said than done, to be sure. It presumes integrity and clarity on the part of the teacher and total trust on the part of the student. In this sense, the student-teacher relationship is initially based in a perceived power or knowledge differential between a student and a teacher, which must always be recognized and respected, where one person goes to another to learn or to be informed of something that they don’t yet understand or are not experts in. This, however, does not mean that one has power over another.

“To assume that I know and that you don’t is really only part of the picture,” states Buck. “I may know a skill that you don’t and I may be able to teach you how to use your hands on a person’s body, but that doesn’t mean that the relationship needs to be based on notions of domination and submission because that will eventually lead to problems between the two parties.”

The more students and teachers are open to one another, the greater the potential is to encounter obstacles that stand in the way of openness. These obstacles can be about perceived differences in power or roles, or arise from our habituated patterns that we’ve developed to deal with painful circumstances in our past. True learning can only happen when we become conscious of the ways we shut ourselves off from truly relating to one another – and to life. To avoid closing off, we have to dismantle our stories about the roles of teacher and student, and then lift the veil off what we think we’re learning. Though this may be transformational, it is far from magical – it is, in fact, often quite raw and yet simultaneously quite liberating.

“I have no interest in keeping people in a submissive attitude or in letting them see bodywork or therapy as something magical just because it opens our capacity for deep feeling states,” says Buck. “A teacher has to help the student learn how to be very skillful in these feelings states and in their application of connecting to another human being. I can teach [technique], but as a teacher what I’m much more interested in doing is pulling out an art and a truth: that human beings inherently know how [to relate to each other]. So, if I’m teaching massage, what I know to be true and what I want to teach is that touch is a fundamental experience. Human beings wouldn’t have survived as a species if we hadn’t been touched. It’s our connection to one another, to this life, and when we truly feel this, we’re truly alive.”

Waking Up to Ourselves

The teacher knows something which the student does not yet know, but the orientation and skill of a teacher is of one who stands in a place of knowing - not just the subject matter at-hand, but also that they are awakening a person to their own potential. A teacher’s fundamental role is to simply allow another person to experience themselves as mastering something, actualizing themselves – and we need to be very honest and continually vigilant about that.

“Instruction should always be moving the student in the direction of an internal reference points,” says yoga teacher Donna Farhi in her book *Understanding the Teacher-Student Relationship* (Rodmell Press, 2006). “I am not interested in the student’s ability to be obedient to instruction, but rather in his ability to inquire into the meaning and relevance of an instruction for him.”

Buddhist teacher and author Ken McLeod (*Wake Up to Your Life*; Harper Collins, 2001) outlines four criteria in spiritual work, which could be used relative to any student-teacher relationship. These are: power (the ability to do something versus having power-over), ecstasy (the ability to open), insight (the ability to see into), and compassion (the ability to let go). He further states that the teacher has three responsibilities: to show the student what being awake means, which they do through their own actions and various other means; to teach and train the student in the techniques that they’ll need; and to point out what’s getting in the way of their awakening. Ultimately, the role of both the teacher and student converge in one task: to remain present and awake for the work at-hand, and to bring their own unique talents to bear in that process.

Teaching should create an awakening inside us, an awakening to our own capacity: to know, to surrender, to give and receive – to know the difference between reacting and acting in a way that the situation requires. Most importantly, teaching should serve to awaken something inside of us, to (re)connect us to ourselves, to our bodies and to this world.

“How awake are we to the fact that this other person, whom we call a student, just needs a field to come into and experience their inherent capacity and skill for themselves?” asks Buck. “The goal of teaching is to wake that up – and then there’s a skill that’s an overlay to that. If the skill is massage, then what I teach you is a manual skill, and at that level, I

do perhaps know something that you don't know. But all the rest is inside us."

Buck sees teaching this aspect of connection, or interconnection, as a refinement that enables a person to open to something they haven't learned yet: to be attuned to the inner state of another and to their own inner state simultaneously. "That's what opens the doors of perception," she states. "It requires that the student awakens to their humanity and their capacity for compassion, and their desire to become a teacher, a therapist, or a counselor. What we're teaching is about refining our capacity to be sensitive to another's state by being continually vigilant of our own."

Teaching as Transformation

What teachers and students ultimately engage in is in developing compassion for one another - and by extension to all living beings. To teach is to look for the highest expression within a student. Just as when we work with someone who's injured, tense or ill, we look for the healthiest and most vital expression of who they are or can be.

"We attempt through whatever understanding we have gained from our own experience, to act as ushers for the student's fiery process of transmutation," states Farhi. "It is our task [as teachers] to ensure a safe and effective context for this process to occur, using skillful means to ignite and sustain the fires of transformation, and providing ongoing support and recognition of the student's intrinsic wholeness, regardless of where they are in the journey. Perhaps this last is most important of all, because when we feel truly seen and recognized we experience profound healing."

"The attitude that all of who I am is already there, and that I can cultivate an environment where this can emerge is what teaching and learning are all about," says Buck. "The experience of being with a teacher who hands that capacity back to you is exciting and transformational."

It is this sincere commitment, first to our own and then to another's process of transformation that is the hallmark of a nourishing student-teacher relationship. It is also the paradox: we come to a point where we can no longer do this alone and we seek a teacher; then we come to a point where we absolutely must do this alone. These are not fixed points, however. They are always shifting, sometimes bringing us more to working in concert, sometimes taking us to where we must work on our own. It is in this continual flux that the student-teacher relationship expresses itself best, where we are at times the teacher, at times seeking one, and forever a student - ever-open to exploration and humble in the face of what we do not yet know.

At that point, teaching and learning become part of a much more skillful and compassionate transformation, in the real meaning of compassion, which is to be with someone fully and completely, regardless of what is arising. It means that we are no longer identified with the role of a teacher as someone who has power-over someone, but more as someone who can help us connect to our own power for change and guide us through a territory where they, too, have been. In this way, the roles of teacher and student become secondary to that experience of deep human connection.

For this process to occur, states Farhi, healthy boundaries need to be established and sustained by both student and teacher. “The teacher acts to uphold a safe and sacred container in which the process can occur,” she states. “In the same way that discipline limits in order to liberate, containment helps us to narrow our focus so we can gather and concentrate our energy toward asingular purpose.” While Farhi says that it is ultimately the teacher’s responsibility to maintain clear boundaries, she also believes that transgression of these boundaries would occur much less frequently if students were more aware of and clear within themselves about what constitutes healthy boundaries. So once again, we return full-circle to the joint responsibility that’s inherent in the student-teacher relationship.

Beyond Money-Making

We may think that we enter a teacher-training to become a teacher - whether working one-on-one with individuals or teaching to groups – but that’s often the least of it. There are a lot more subtle things going on, many of which have do with healing of our own wounds – and we generally move towards a profession that will heal us or wake up the parts of us that have been numb for far too long – that is what the teacher has to know and understand. Teachers are facilitators, individuals who have had an experience that a student may not have yet had, but one which the student is totally able to experience themselves. We teach how to break down the barriers to that experience, how to work with what comes up when stories about who we think we are crumble, and ultimately how to hold and guide another – student or client - through their own experience.

“Making money is certainly why people may enter some schools or trainings and there’s a reality to that,” states Buck. “But as educators we also have to understand that people need access to new roles, other than how society tells us we should be. The other person must be facilitated, must be embraced, in the same way that the person who’s teaching was embraced and facilitated by another. It’s a lineage. It’s also a respect for wisdom and elders that we’ve lost in our culture. I’ve been facilitated by people who not only had great wisdom, but who also knew and understood that their responsibility was to impart their knowledge so that it could continue when they were no longer here. That is indigenous in the true meaning of the word: ‘to be born from within’. As teachers, we’re making it possible for whatever it is that we’re teaching to be born within another in their own unique way.”

This whole subtle dynamic is not always stated as people enter a formal training because it’s not always understood, even by those who teach. People go into a training wanting to learn a skill that’s marketable, and sometimes neither those learning nor those teaching understand what it is that they might be putting out on the market.

“My commitment is to finding the teacher in the student – and I don’t own that role,” emphasizes Buck. “We’re into ownership and possession in our society. I own something and you’re paying me to get it. This is particularly true of people who develop their own methods that are touted as teacher because this is a consumer culture, and massage and healing professions are not immune

to that.”

The Threat of Change

Every time we open a new book, or take or offer a new training, or move deeper into ourselves, or into the student-teacher relationship (or any relationship, for that matter), we’re confronting a place of “not-knowing”. For some, this can be intimidating or humbling, exciting or terrifying. But, the often unspoken aspect of this place of not-knowing is that it is threatening, to who we are and all that we thought we knew. At a very primal level, this is perceived as a very dangerous place because we are, in fact, approaching the notion of dying, even as we are primed to birth or open to something new.

“Not-knowing can threaten our survival,” says Buck. “Here, I don’t separate the student teacher; it’s just about being human. It’s annihilation anxiety. At a psychological level, we actually evoke that part of our nervous system that perceives the person in front of us as dangerous, even if they’re not. The reflex is real, but the story about it comes from our wounding and it’s a distortion of perception. In teaching, we’re asking people to go into the unknown and to face all that this implies. As teachers, we have to understand that this is happening in both parties - and we have to especially be conscious of that in ourselves.”

Any teaching is always an experiential education, where the person is taken into a world where anything can happen, where you put people in motion, in relationship to their bodies, to themselves and to others. Usually what emerges is that, even though on the surface we’re learning a particular skill, there’s a place where we don’t know what’s going to happen next. We sometimes forget that. The teacher, because of the familiarity that they have with world that they’re trying to impart - above and beyond the technique - has an easier time in that place of not knowing.

“It’s an actual part of the nervous system, called mirror neurons,” explains Buck. “It’s a bridge between that place where your subjectivity and my subjectivity connect. We’re picking up subtle queues - facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice – all the time, and what we don’t like to admit, or know how to admit, is that we’re on the look-out for potential danger: Are you a threat? Will you kill me – or the idea that I have of me? These subtle cues are hardwired into us, but we can also awaken to the fact that these mirror neurons give us a powerful amount of information and potential to connect to one another in ways that are healthy, nurturing and life-supporting as well.”

In many ways, the work of teaching is to make this survival-action reflex conscious and work with it in a life-affirming way, where our capacity for attunement to another person - whether in counseling, teaching, or any profession or relationship - becomes valuable: that the other is just as important as I, instead of threatening to me. All that a teacher in this situation is doing is allowing a person to experience who they already are by allowing them to drop the idea of who they think they need to be. As we do this, we become less fearful of what is happening and more open to change.

“Students and teachers have these two forces at work: an embryonic sense of caring, commitment, and love that wants to blossom, and the imprisoning weight of our past fears, anxieties, and hurts,” states Robert P. Craig in his essay on the student-teacher relationship from a Buddhist perspective (Clearing House, 1996). “If either side of a student's or teacher's nature is emphasized to the exclusion of the other, that person cannot move forward in relationship in any meaningful way... The relationship between a student and teacher can help free both from hidden entanglements by allowing each person to see exactly how and where he or she is stuck... The difficulties we have with intimacy, caring, and compassion become not so much obstacles as an integral part of love's path.”

“We can think this intellectually and believe it's what we're doing, but on a more unconscious level, we're often threatened by this deeper shift in the relationship,” states Buck. “That's because we live in a culture that's all about resources and access to those resources and domination over them. If that's the unconscious concern, then I will put you, as a student, in a position that's slightly inferior, less informed, or even more ignorant than or submissive to me. And that can be very subtle without any intention to harm, but it can compromise the full expression of both the student and the teacher. So, I have to continually examine what my role is as a teacher, and what I believe about myself and others in that role.”

Moving Into Mentoring

When that world of who a student really is, begins to open up, it's both extremely exciting but also hugely threatening – and this is true not only in the learning but also in the teaching. If the teacher can become aware of this dynamic, then we move towards inclusion and mentoring.

“When I teach, I'm bringing the student into the role of teacher,” says Buck. “I'm showing them what a teacher is by letting them experience it for themselves, versus having to get it or take it from me; so it's less about imposing and more about offering and opening. I am, in effect, allowing them to take my job. At that point, it's a mentoring relationship. I know that this person knows just as much as I do, but they just don't know it yet. My attempt in teaching at this stage is to work my way out of a job. Do I, as a teacher, facilitate you into a role of peership with me? Is that my bottom-line value? If I'm teaching you the skills in such a deep way that when it's my time to move over, there's someone there who truly knows and understand how to do this, then I've moved into a mentoring role. That has to be a value that comes from heart.”

As we learn how to be in relationship with one another in a way that supports all life, we perceive less threats and see through dichotomies. At this stage, we move into a relationship of equality, or “peership” as Buck says, where we value the “other”, not as someone separate or threatening, but as ourselves. I teach you as I learn from you and learn from you as I teach you. To have such boundaries blur, however, requires a deep initial respect for boundaries and limits, then a dropping of them to open to something limitless.

A teacher is a student first and foremost and we must never forget that. The whole relationship between student and teacher has to do with leveling the disparity between a person who knows and one who doesn't. To get there, the student has to drop what they think they know and open to what they can – and do – truly know. The teacher, meanwhile, has to remain open to the ever present possibility of learning something new about themselves, about another, or from the teachings themselves. Then, both parties can enter a space where they can become more fully who they are. Here, we become mentors to one another. This is true relationship - with one's teacher, with one's students, and with one another. Then, the true teachings begin to touch us - and others - through our work, with our words, and from our hearts.

Teaching Principles

While these principles were originally presented to yoga teachers, the spirit of them can easily be applied to any teaching practice.

- To be a good teacher you must be an eager, humble, inquisitive student.
- Teaching is rendering service. It is much like parenting.
- Prepare students so that they have good listening and learning skills. They must learn to lay aside their presuppositions and ways of doing things. Genuine yoga [teaching] begins when students have respect, desire and are completely present. The transmission is one of relationship. Of course the teacher has had this attitude in relation to their teachers. Students must have this attitude even if other students are teaching. Otherwise, without humility and respect, yoga [teaching] becomes a farce.
- Just attitude and eager respect can suspend citta vritti [“fluctuations of the mind” – i.e. distractions and stories]. It is not hard. It is not easy. If someone you love is there, you don't even need technique.
- Be truly helpful. Do not try to impress. Do not show off.
- Don't be self-righteous. Don't lay a “trip” on the student.
- Do not be seductive and flirtatious with students. And do not respond to seductive and flirtatious students.
- Beware using flattery or ego-empowering techniques. They might be useful as skillful-means with certain students on rare occasions, yet they easily backfire. Puffing up the egos of neophyte students and teachers is the business of cults and extends the power of the teacher irresistibly.
- It can take many years of study before one is burning with intensity to know the truth.
- Allow the student to discover the internal and full action of a pose [or technique].
- Be kind and patient. That person is you.
- Look at the whole pose. Breathe the pose.
- Know the vinyasa [flow] of the pose. Not only what poses might proceed or follow, but what sequences of movement occur within the pose as it matures.
- Get feedback. Find out if the message got through for real. Students are always reluctant to disappoint an insecure teacher.
- Watch the student's feet, hands, face, breath, eyes, lips and overall action.

- Look before you leap. Don't be cavalier and arrogant by fixing what is not broken.
- Know when anger is arising in the student or in yourself. Be aware of your own and the other's mind-state.
- Respect the space and internal process of yoga students. Invading someone's sacred space can be offensive and violent.
- Teaching is constant mindfulness practice in thought, word and posture.
- Always practice refined alignment in your own body as you adjust another.
- Teach directly out of your own experience, in the moment. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Know when to refer problems to someone with more experience.
- Beware of flattery. Do not praise yourself. Be satisfied being the servant of a servant.
- Practice asana as mudra. [Practice teaching as sacred space where creative energy can flow].
- Practice and teach Bhava, or ecstatic feeling, rather than technique.
- Teach what you know. Do not teach what you don't know.

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