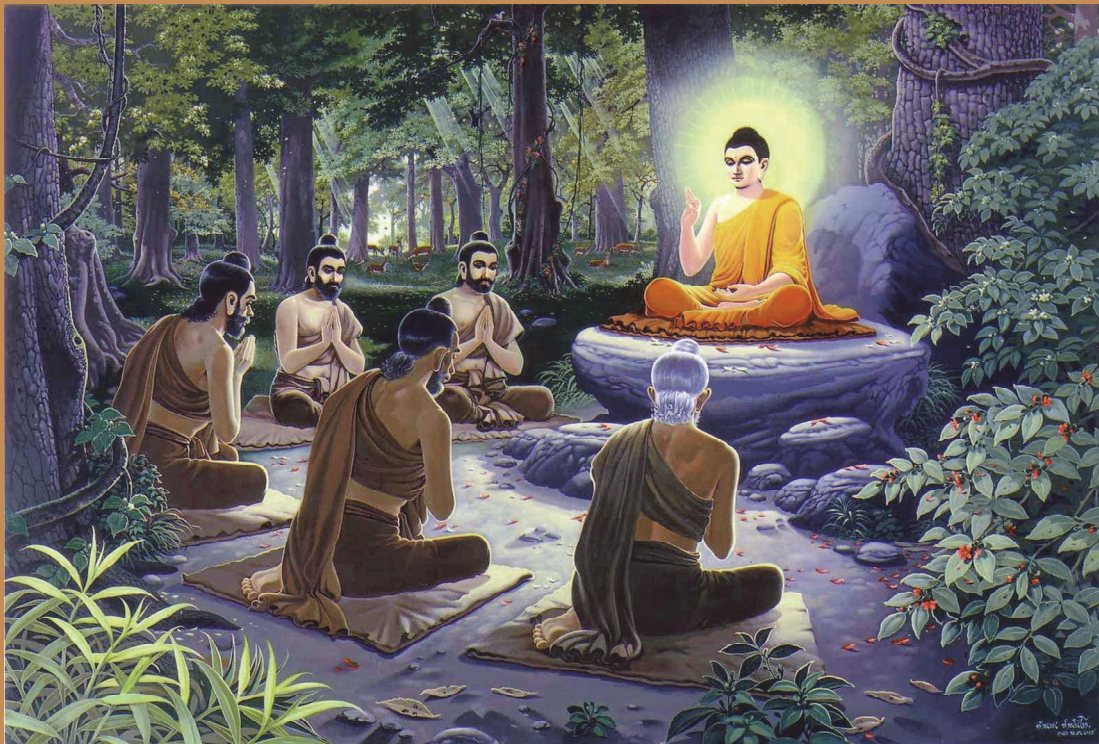


CHARLESTON BUDDHIST FELLOWSHIP

TRANSMITTING THE DHAMMA



Original Author

Susan Elbaum Jootla

Revised and edited by

Allan R. Bomhard

Basic / Introductory Series

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The doctrinal positions expressed in this book are those of Theravādin Buddhism.

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Transmitting the Dhamma¹

THE ROLE OF A TEACHER

The Middle Way Teacher

The Buddha teaches the Middle Path to liberation, and his own way of teaching also follows a middle path. The theme of moderation runs throughout the Dhamma.

Even in his first discourse at Isipatana, he urged the five mendicants, his first disciples, to avoid the extremes of severe asceticism, on the one hand, and sensual indulgence, on the other hand, in their efforts to attain awakening.

Following the example of the Buddha, the role of the Buddhist teacher has always been an equable mean between extremes. A teacher is neither a guru who can liberate us if we blindly believe in him, nor a dispensable instructor giving out information about a narrow subject of limited value.

Buddhists recognize the supremacy of the Buddha as a perfected individual and as the teacher of the way to transcend all suffering (*dukkha*). He had trained himself over innumerable lifetimes to become the ideal guide. As he meditated under the Bodhi Tree, he discovered the way to eliminate his own suffering, and then, out of infinite compassion, he shared the method he had found with others. He searched until he discovered the sure route, then surveyed it carefully, designed and drew the map, and, finally, explained it to anyone who requested guidance along the way to true peace and happiness.

The Buddha never claimed that he was able to annul the effects of his disciples' bad *kamma* and transport them to *nibbāna*, as some Hindu gurus do. Nor is the Buddha a priest who can intercede with an almighty God to guarantee other people's salvation. Both those sorts of spiritual leaders belong to the first extreme — their devotees put blind faith in a teacher who supposedly has the power to solve all his or her problems.

On the other hand, the Buddha is far more than a school teacher or college professor. The students of such instructors outgrow their courses as they gain knowledge and need not revere them. Such teachers are paid professionals. However dedicated they may be, they are doing a job; their body of knowledge is limited. The Buddha's vision is unbounded, and he teaches about life itself. The causes and conditions of all phenomena are his field of knowledge. He knows about the pleasure and pain of beings on every plane of existence. His "subject" is the comprehensive way we can eliminate the causes of suffering. He devotes time and energy to anyone who seeks his guidance.

We will begin our study of Dhamma teachers by examining how the Buddha described his own role: as teacher, friend, guide, trainer, charioteer, and sympathetic leader. Then, we extrapolate, based on the Pāli texts, to see who else is qualified to be a Dhamma teacher, and the responsibilities this role entails. Finally, we will look at the modern Buddhist student's relationship with his teacher.

¹ The original version of this exposition was prepared by Susan Elbaum Jootla and published as Bodhi Leaf 145 (Buddhist Publication Society, 1998). The current version has been revised and edited by Allan R. Bomhard.

The Buddha as the Ultimate Teacher

The Buddha is The Teacher par excellence. Buddha Gotama is a “Sammā Sambuddha”, a universal Self-Awakened One. Such exceedingly rare beings discover the truth that had been lost to the world for eons, then teach it for the benefit of all. The three most basic qualities of all the Buddhas — past, present, and future — are:

1. They realize the liberating truth, the Dhamma, by themselves, without a teacher.
2. They completely purify their own minds to attain the cessation of suffering.
3. They teach this Dhamma that they have realized to others.

The first trait distinguishes Buddhas from Arahants. Arahants attain full awakening after learning the way from a Buddha or one of his disciples. Universal Buddhas differ from non-teaching Buddhas by reason of the third trait. Non-teaching Buddhas (*paccekabuddha*) discover the truth for themselves during periods when the teachings of a Sammā Sambuddha are no longer available, but they do not pass on their knowledge to others. All three kinds of fully liberated beings share the second trait: they experience the same awakening, the same *nibbāna*.

“Trainer of men to be tamed” and “teacher of devas and men” are two epithets of every Sammā Sambuddha. The Buddha Gotama spent countless existences as a Bodhisatta preparing to find the way out of rebirth and all its attendant pain. He strove for eons to perfect all the virtues needed to serve as a Universal Teacher. His background has profound repercussions for his followers too.

The Buddha’s superior knowledge, his personal experience of the deathless *nibbāna*, his offer to help others cross the raging torrents of *samsāra*, all contribute to make him the greatest guide. He is the one who can show us how to find true security, if we also practice and live in accordance with his guidance. Those who follow the path with diligent energy will be able to gain supreme peace. A student’s job begins with this faith (trust, conviction, dedication, confidence) in the Buddha.

A Good Friend

The Buddha refers to himself as a good friend (*kalyāṇamitta*), because he teaches beings the way out of *dukkha*, the suffering or unsatisfactoriness of cyclic existence (*samsāra*). We would have no chance to escape from *samsāra* without this most valuable friendship. Only the extremely rare individual who has undergone the immeasurable training needed to attain Buddhahood can discern the central facts of existence independently of others: the Four Noble Truths, the three universal characteristics, and the cycle of dependent origination. The rest of us need a guide, friend, helper, in the form of a Buddha, to show us how we can gain true insight into our minds and bodies.

The Buddha is the best of friends in that overall fashion, but also in specific ways. Because of his special powers, he can see just how to teach each disciple. He knows their previous lives, their past meditation practices, and their potential here and now, so he can guide them accordingly. Many stories in the discourses illustrate how he helped disciples overcome hurdles, because he discerned the roots of their difficulty.

When the Buddha Teaches

In a discourse to the Venerable Punniya, the Buddha explains when it occurs to him to teach Dhamma to an individual (AN 8:82; GS IV 220). As the Buddha is free of every trace of egotism, he does not desire a large following or wish to attract unwilling, uninterested people. He will only teach those who are genuinely prepared to learn.

A student must first have faith. Such preliminary faith draws the learner into the Buddha's presence, to sit down, listen, and inquire about the meaning of what the Master says. A student should carefully attend to the Buddha's words, because these words are always in accord with the truth. That may go against the grain of the learner's pre-existing thought habits. Consequently, he must objectively examine the discourses to determine whether what they say is true and then act with conviction to tread the path to liberation. A student like this would have the honor of hearing Dhamma from the greatest of teachers.

The Buddha's Compassion

The Buddha's concern for others manifests in total devotion to teaching them Dhamma so they can free themselves from suffering. He is the epitome of the skilled communicator, who uses various methods on various occasions to spur on his disciples. As a Teacher's role is just to point out the way and assist along the route, he exhorts his disciples to apply maximum effort to attain the goal. He is firm as he repeatedly tells Monks, Nuns, and lay people who come to him to act on his advice and train their minds, now, to end the enormous and ceaseless suffering of the round of rebirth. He says that the way to liberation has been fully disclosed by him, so there is no excuse for laziness on the part of those who hear him. The Buddha warns that, if they do not heed him and practice to the utmost of their ability, they will surely suffer for many more lives:

“What should be done for his disciples out of compassion by a teacher who seeks their welfare and has compassion for them, that I have done for you, Cunda. There are these roots of trees, these empty huts. Meditate, Cunda, do not delay, or else you will regret it later. This is my instruction to you.” MLDB 8.17.

Free of all thought for himself, the Buddha's compassion never slackened. Even on his deathbed, he continued to guide students. Although his attendant Ānanda tried to shield his ailing master from the queries of one last seeker, the Buddha had the man brought to his side and taught him the Dhamma in his dying hours.

How the Buddha Taught

The Buddha always taught the same truth, but he used different approaches to suit different audiences. If lay people asked a specific question, he gave a specific answer, only going further if he knew his audience had greater potential. Sometimes, he spoke very briefly to Bhikkhus who needed just a hint to develop insight. He also adapted his language to the individual. Discourses using precise technical terms were reserved for Monks who had the training to appreciate them. He might convey the same ideas to lay people in more familiar turns of speech, using similes drawn from daily life.

Many *suttas* show a gradual method, a progressive training from basic common ground up to the highest insights. The following example (Ud 5:3) summarizes this technique:

“Then, the Lord saw Suppabuddha the leper sitting amongst that group of people, and on seeing him, he thought: ‘This one here is capable of understanding Dhamma.’ For the sake of Suppabuddha the leper, he then gave a progressive talk, that is, a talk on generosity, on virtue, on celestial realms; he made known the disappointment, degradation, and corruption of sense-desires and the benefit in renouncing them.”

Generosity and moral virtue are the first steps one has to undertake before one can hope to meditate and understand the Dhamma. To prepare Suppabuddha’s mind further, the Buddha spoke of the celestial realms, of the futility of sense-desire, and of the peace that comes from letting them go. He grouped these three together because life in the celestial realms is replete with sense pleasures, and the beggar covered in sores might well have longed for such a life. But the Buddha knew that celestial beings suffer too, they die too, so he did not consider such an existence the final answer to the unsatisfactoriness of life. He wanted Suppabuddha to be ready to give up attachment to all the pleasures of the senses.

“When the Lord knew that the mind of Suppabuddha the leper was ready, malleable, free from hindrances, elated, and purified, he then made known that Dhamma teaching special to the Buddhas: suffering, origination, cessation, and the Path.”

The culmination of the discourse was this teaching of the Four Noble Truths. Because the Buddha had taught him in progressive steps, Suppabuddha could transcend his miserable bodily condition, comprehend the truths, and, “even as he was sitting there”, he became a Stream-Enterer, the first stage of Noble Ones, free of doubt, with full confidence in the Buddha’s instruction. In consummate ways like these, the Buddha was able to guide innumerable disciples towards the goal.

Buddhist Teachers after the Buddha

As many centuries have passed since the Buddha’s Parinibbāna, or final demise, we have to determine the best way to learn his teachings for ourselves. His teachings have been carefully transmitted down the centuries, orally from teacher to pupil, and also through the written word.

The Dhamma itself is always the fundamental teacher. Even while the Buddha was alive, his followers were liberated by their understanding and practice of his teachings. And just before his Parinibbāna, the Buddha told the Venerable Ānanda, that the Dhamma and Vinaya — the Doctrine and Discipline — would be their teacher after he was gone.

“Ānanda, it may be that you will think: ‘The Teacher’s instruction has ceased; now we have no teacher!’ It should not be seen like this, Ānanda, for what I have taught and explained to you as Dhamma and discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher.” LDB 16.6.1.

While this would be sufficient for those like Ānanda who had already imbibed the Dhamma from the Buddha, this statement does not mean that today all we need do to liberate ourselves is read the texts. Study without recourse to an instructor implies excessive trust in our

own intellect. People who wish to tread the path to awakening will be most likely to reach their goal if they receive guidance from a living teacher of pure Buddha-Dhamma.

A properly qualified guide — skilled, wise, compassionate, and dedicated to upholding the integrity of the Dhamma — is vital. Without such help, it is extremely difficult to untie the bonds created by eons of conditioning, by infinite layers of old *kamma*, by habits long rooted in greed, ill will, and ignorance. To purify the mind through meditation is a lengthy, demanding, painstaking job. One may encounter confusion, despair, and serious risks in the process. To proceed alone, or in dependence on an unqualified teacher, could drag the aspirant more deeply into the mire of saṃsāric bondage rather than towards the path leading out.

The Best Teachers at the Present Time

From whom can one be confident of learning the real teachings of the Buddha? According to Ācariya Buddhaghosa, after the Buddha’s demise, one should seek out an Ariya (Noble One) and request an appropriate meditation subject from him. Ariyas are those who have directly perceived the Four Noble Truths and thereby eliminated some, or all, of the mental defilements. They have tasted *nibbāna* and are assured of attaining final awakening.

The greatest teacher after the Buddha is the highest kind of Ariya — an Arahant, a fully awakened being whose mind has no remaining trace of defilements. An Arahant with supernormal powers would be a better instructor than one without them. If there are no Arahants, which may be the case today, the lower kinds of Ariyas — Non-Returner, Once-Returner, Stream-Enterer — are the best individuals to approach for guidance in the Dhamma.

It may be hard to locate an Ariya, or indeed to ascertain that a particular teacher is an Ariya, as the Noble Ones rarely, if ever, declare themselves as such. A handful of teachers today are reputed to be Noble Ones. If, however, one observes a guide carefully over time, one may be able to deduce that he or she is an Ariya.

The next best Dhamma guide, in the absence of a Noble One, is an individual who knows all or some part of the Pāḷi texts by heart. Buddhaghosa says that this kind of Dhamma teacher is one who “guards the heritage, and protects the tradition.” He follows the opinion of the wise rather than his own opinion (Vism III 61–64). Such teachers take precautions against allowing their personal opinions to warp the truth. Because they are aware of their own limitations, whenever they are uncertain, they refer back to their own teachers. They also check with the Buddha’s discourses and the traditional commentaries on them whenever they are in doubt. These teachers rely on these safeguards rather than their own views, which may be erroneous. Since Non-Ariyas are prone to hold opinions that do not reflect the actual truth, they are likely to have incorrect ideas which could distort the Buddha’s message.

Sayagyi U Chit Tin, a teacher in the tradition of the late Sayagyi U Ba Khin, elaborates on the sentence from Buddhaghosa we quoted above.²

“Guarding the heritage’, of course, means keeping the pure Buddha-Dhamma without trying to add to it or to take away from it and not distorting it in any way. This is particularly difficult for an ordinary person [Non-Ariya] who has not personally experienced for himself the most profound aspects of the Dhamma. So we see that a teacher who is an ordinary person and who knows the texts will guard the heritage and protect the tradition. He

² U Chit Tin, “The Good Friend”, in *Buddhism as a Way of Life and Other Essays*, Dhamma Texts Series 4, assisted by William Pruitt, The Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust, U.K., 1993, p. 244.

will do so through following his own teacher's guidance rather than by relying on his own opinion.

“People who teach in the Theravāda tradition without having become Noble Ones must be especially cautious to ‘guard the heritage and protect the tradition’. The Dhamma can free people from suffering because it is unalloyed truth; therefore, altering it undermines its liberative power.”

Although ordinary persons do not have the security of the Ariya's direct insight into the Dhamma to serve as an authority on the Buddha's teachings, such individuals can teach Dhamma properly if they have authorization or approval from their own mentor, scrupulously follow his or her instructions, and return to them when in doubt.

People who teach meditation but do not take these precautions are liable to dilute, distort, misrepresent, or override the pure Dhamma. This might be due to their own pride, views, or greed. They might misrepresent the teachings due to modern circumstances, pressure of time, the demands of their students, or even from misplaced compassion. For example, someone who is not trained to teach meditation could feel sorry for a friend with a fatal illness and try to teach him to develop insight without properly preparing him in morality and concentration. If this happens, the “Dhamma” they teach will not have the power to eradicate suffering.

How a Dhamma Teacher Thinks

The Buddha once spoke about how a Dhamma teacher keeps the teaching pure:

“Bhikkhus, any Bhikkhu who teaches the Dhamma with thoughts like this: ‘Oh that they may hear my Dhamma, and hearing it may be satisfied, and being satisfied may give expression to their satisfaction!’ The Dhamma teaching of that Bhikkhu is impure.

“But that Bhikkhu who teaches the Dhamma to others with thoughts like this: ‘Oh that they may hear the Dhamma, for it is the Dhamma which the Exalted One has so well declared, relating to the present, not a matter of time; the Dhamma which invites investigation and leads on, that is to be understood by the wise each one for himself, and hearing it, may acknowledge the doctrine, and acknowledging it, may practice that they may so attain!’ He teaches the Dhamma to others because of the fair order of the Dhamma, he teaches the Dhamma to others out of pity, out of caring for them, because of his compassion for them. The Dhamma teaching of this kind of Bhikkhu is very pure.” SN 16:3; KS II 134–135.

It can be assumed that both Bhikkhus are correctly repeating the words of the Buddha. But the first does not even refer to the Blessed One; he longs for his students to praise him. He emphasizes “my Dhamma”. That Monk does not look to the real benefit of his students. His pride would distort the way out of suffering, harming himself and his students.

The second kind of teacher is compassionate and can truly help others. He explains the Dhamma according to the formula the Buddha gave for it. He considers that if the hearers accept the Dhamma and put forth effort, they may attain the Deathless. His explanations are motivated by concern for the welfare of his students. For all these reasons, there is every possibility that they will benefit from his words.

A Dhamma teacher has to be sufficiently advanced on the Noble Eightfold Path to have the strength to lead others along it. The Buddha points out to the Venerable Cunda that a person mired in suffering cannot help someone else escape from it. To drag someone out of quicksand, one must be anchored on dry ground.

“Cunda, that one who is himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking in the mud is impossible; that one who is not himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking.....is possible. That one who is himself untamed, undisciplined, [with defilements] unextinguished, should tame another, discipline him, and help extinguish [his defilements] is impossible; but that one who is himself tamed, disciplined, [with defilements] extinguished, should tame another, discipline him, and help extinguish [his defilements] is possible....” MLDB 8.16

These statements of the Buddha establish extremely high criteria for Dhamma teachers who can truly help others become Noble Ones, assured of full liberation. ■

THE ROLE OF A STUDENT

A Student's Relationship to a Teacher

The Buddha told the Venerable Ānanda about the ideal relationship between a teacher and a pupil. His description applied to his personal disciples and is equally relevant today. A teacher explains the Dhamma with boundless compassion; attentive disciples strive to follow his advice. This combination guides learners towards *nibbāna*, the end of suffering:

“Here, Ānanda, compassionate and seeking their welfare, a Teacher teaches the Dhamma to his disciples out of compassion: ‘This is for your welfare, this is for your happiness.’ His disciples want to hear and give ear and exert their minds to understand; they do not err and turn aside from their Teacher’s instructions. Therefore, Ānanda, behave towards me with friendliness, not with hostility. That will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time.”
MLDB 122.25–27

Friendliness in this context is not casual companionship but rather a receptive attitude. We can deduce from other *suttas* that a disciple’s “welfare and happiness” is his or her progress on the Noble Eightfold Path.

Another Middle Way

Once a student believes he has found the proper Dhamma instructor, he has to treat the teacher with respect. The relationship evolves over time and its implications may occasionally have to be reevaluated.

While a meditator should place full confidence in his Dhamma teacher, this confidence should not fall into the extreme of blind faith. The pupil must be careful to steer a middle course between unreflective trust and constant doubt. Put another way, the two poles are too much trust in the teacher and too much pride in oneself. Confidence grows as personal experience of the Dhamma convinces a student of the validity of the teacher’s message. So the pendulum moves from time to time, but it should never swing drastically in either direction.

The Buddha pointed out in a dialogue with the Kālāmas that intellectual understanding of the teachings is required.³ The Kālāmas were confused because they encountered many “gurus” each propounding his own views and reviling the views of others. They were unable to determine who was right and who was wrong, and they asked the Buddha to give them some guidelines. He began by telling them not to be “misled by report or tradition or hearsay. . . , by proficiency in the texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor after considering reasons, nor after reflection on and approval of some theory, nor . . . out of respect for a recluse (who holds it).”

Only when they knew for themselves: “These things are unprofitable, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the intelligent; these things, when performed and undertaken, conduce to loss and sorrow”, should they reject them.

³ This *sutta* has become a favorite in the West, where it is too often used to misrepresent the Buddha as favoring complete skepticism.

But the Buddha was not suggesting that perpetual doubt was the solution. He told the Kālāmas that, when they knew for themselves that some actions were wholesome, blameless, and praised by the wise, and that such deeds lead to well-being and happiness, then they should put them into practice (AN 3:65; GS I 170–175).

The message of this *sutta* could be paraphrased thus: “Do not follow someone just out of apparent logic or theory or reason, nor based only on his reputation or the scriptures he quotes. But when you have satisfied yourself that what he suggests is valuable and in accordance with what is approved by the wise, practice it wholeheartedly.” One should only accept and apply a teaching if one has grounds for believing it will be beneficial for everyone, here and now, and if the wise would approve of it.

Logical coherence is also important, and the Buddha’s teachings stand up to any reasoned examination. But as it is a matter of practice, of how lives are those aimed at the loftiest of goals, things do not stop at the theoretical level. We should not be attached to our personal interpretation of the Dhamma, for our views emanate from the conditioning of our egocentric minds.

Many of the central Buddhist teachings, such as the doctrine of non-self or dependent origination, are neither immediately nor intuitively comprehensible to the average intellect. This indicates why an intellectual approach, exclusively dependent on books, without a guide, cannot take one very far along the path of purification. Everyone is trapped in ceaseless cycles of suffering, disease, old age, and death because — every moment, with every mental volition — one creates *kamma*, wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral. We can only find permanent escape with the direct help of someone who has preceded us along the Buddha’s Way.

Devotion and Independence

Sometimes, the Buddha recommended behavior leaning towards devotion, sometimes towards independence. This range indicates both the flexibility of the Buddhist’s attitudes over time and the differences between individuals.

Texts favoring the autonomy of a student include the famous line of the Dhammapada: “Work out your own salvation, Buddhas only point the way” (v 276). A second is the Buddha’s advice to Ānanda: “Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge; with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge” (LDB 16.2.26). Still a third is the Buddha’s rebuke to the dying Monk Vakkali who was infatuated with the Master’s physical beauty: “What is there in seeing this vile body of mine? He who sees the Dhamma sees me, he who sees me sees the Dhamma” (SN 22:87; KS III 101). The Teacher and his Teaching are inseparable. What was vital for Vakkali was to develop his own understanding of the Dhamma, not to cling desperately to the Teacher’s physical presence.

The complementary attitude is a student’s dedication to the teacher. This requires humility and trust. The Blessed One made this clear when he said that one intent on fathoming the Dhamma should be firm in his conviction: “The Blessed One knows, I do not know” (MLDB 70.27). As a contemporary teacher may not have the perfect clarity of the Buddha or an Arahant, the modern student may not have to go quite this far in accepting his teacher’s authority. But so long as the living guide is conveying pure Dhamma, he or she is presenting the Truth. Those studying Buddhist meditation under a proper teacher would do well to cultivate respect and humility towards both the Dhamma and their teacher. This will enable them to learn more.

When a Student Should Approach a Teacher

In a personal talk with Ānanda, the Buddha described the subtle balance that the long-time meditator should maintain in relation to his teacher. Of course, the attendant Bhikkhu had heard many of the Buddha's discourses. He had a thorough intellectual grasp of the Dhamma and had attained the first stage of awakening. So the Buddha points out to him that only for certain purposes should a student like himself "seek the Teacher's company." This sort of student, presumably familiar with the proper etiquette and schedule, should not approach a Teacher every time he is inclined to hear Dhamma. A desire for theoretical or anecdotal talk, or a longing for the melodious sound of a Teacher's voice or the beauty of his language, is not sufficient reason.

"Ānanda, a disciple should not seek the Teacher's company for the sake of discourses, stanzas, and expositions. Why is that? For a long time, Ānanda, you have learned the teachings, remembered them, recited them verbally, examined them with the mind, and penetrated them well intellectually."

The Buddha goes on to say that, by contrast, a student who desires communication directly linked to his own efforts at liberation has the right to approach his teacher.

"But such talk as deals with effacement, as favors the mind's liberation, and which leads to complete disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, peace — on wanting little, on contentment, seclusion, aloofness from society, arousing energy, virtue, concentration, wisdom, deliverance, knowledge and vision of deliverance: for the sake of such talk, a disciple should seek the Teacher's company even if he is told to go away." MLDB 122.19–20.

A teacher of Buddha-Dhamma should not refuse a sincere student.

Dedicating Oneself to a Teacher

The Buddha suggests how advantageous it is for people to approach highly developed Bhikkhus for guidance. We can extrapolate from this to include qualified modern Dhamma teachers. Referring to Monks with excellent morality, concentration, and wisdom, the Buddha says: "Seeing those Bhikkhus is very helpful, I say; listening to those Bhikkhus, approaching them, attending upon them, remembering them" is also beneficial. Going into the presence of such people, serving them, recalling them and their message, and following their lead, all help the sincere meditator attain the goal. Such guides "can exhort, inspire, and encourage, and ... are competent teachers of the true Dhamma."

"By following such Bhikkhus, by associating with them and attending upon them, the [student's] aggregate of virtue, as yet incomplete, reaches completion of development; the aggregate of concentration, of wisdom, of release, and of knowledge and vision of release, as yet incomplete, reaches completion of development." It 104.

In other words, being in contact with such an instructor can help one develop in all aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path to the highest degrees.

Ācariya Buddhaghosa discusses the need for a student to dedicate himself or herself to the meditation teacher. He says that when the aspirant has approached the Buddha (or another teacher), he should be resolute and sincerely request guidance in meditation. Then, he should dedicate himself to the Blessed One ... in this way: “Blessed One, I relinquish this, my person, to you.” For ... when he has dedicated himself in this way, no fear arises in him if a frightening object makes its appearance; in fact, only joy arises in him as he reflects: “Have you not wisely already dedicated yourself to the Enlightened One?”

When he dedicates himself to a teacher, he should say: “I relinquish this, my person, to you, Venerable Sir.” For one who has not dedicated his person thus becomes unresponsive to correction, hard to speak to, and unamenable to advice. Consequently, the teacher is not able to help him.

If a student does not accept his teacher’s advice and admonition, the teacher will, at some point, cease trying to help him. Why should a teacher waste time and energy on an unresponsive individual who does not utilize his help when there are others working diligently under his guidance? Dedicating oneself to a Dhamma teacher does not entail giving up one’s ability to think. Rather, it instills humility and receptivity, enabling one to absorb guidance and protection. As Ācariya Buddhaghosa says:

“But if he has dedicated his person, he is not unresponsive to correction, does not go about as he likes, is easy to speak to, and lives only in dependence on the teacher. He gets the twofold help from the teacher and attains growth, increase, and fulfilment in the Buddha’s teachings.”
Vism III 124, 126.

Accepting Admonition

The Buddha said he will repeatedly correct a student and never give up on anyone who is sincerely trying to improve. Similarly, good Dhamma teachers today reprove students out of compassion, even if at times this requires strong words. A student who has previously dedicated himself or herself to a teacher will take the admonition to heart and will try to change.

Venerable Mahā Moggallāna says that earnest students are ready to change themselves when their errors are pointed out by their teachers. They do not harbor evil desires nor do they consider themselves superior to others. A student who controls his anger and does not become stubborn, revengeful, or vituperative, will accept admonition gracefully. If he is reprovved, he does not resist, denigrate, or talk back to the teacher. Such a student also faces up to the situation in a calm, mature, and responsible manner. Mahā Moggallāna points out that freedom from contempt, envy, deceit, and arrogance also enable a student to learn from a teacher’s admonition. In sum, a humble student will be able to let go of his or her opinions when a teacher points out that they are incorrect (MLDB 15.5).

Students who maintain such attitudes can learn a great deal when their errors in conduct, speech, or meditation are pointed out by their teachers. The mind can be insidious because of its deep-rooted clinging to the sense of “I”. Due to the lack of an objective perspective on ourselves, we often cannot see our own mistakes. A good teacher will point out a student’s errors.

Finding a Dhamma Teacher

Today, we have to place faith (trust, conviction, dedication, confidence) in the Dhamma that the Buddha taught and in the person transmitting those pure teachings. Ultimately, the teachings themselves are the refuge, for putting them into practice is what will bring awakening. There are however, three refuges in Buddhism — the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The Buddha is the ultimate teacher, the one who shows the way. The Dhamma is the truth and the way. The Sangha as refuge traditionally means the Ariya Sangha, the community of beings who are partly or fully awakened. It would perhaps be appropriate to include teachers of pure Buddha-Dhamma in the Sangha.⁴ Teachers are one's refuge because they guide one along the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha also praised the qualities of his Teacher-Monks and said they could be very helpful to students. He said that Bhikkhus highly developed in morality, concentration, wisdom, and liberation — all the aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path — can “exhort, inspire, and encourage” students. He called them “competent teachers of the true Dhamma”, who can bring the light of the truth to others (It 104).

One should look for the same traits in Dhamma teachers. One cannot know all about a teacher in advance, but careful scrutiny will make it clear which candidates have strayed so far from these ideals that one should not study under them. The basic requirements in a teacher are a reputation for unblemished morality and meditative skills sufficient to enable them to train their students in the pure Dhamma. One has only their reputation, conduct, and the observable traits of their students to rely on in making an initial choice. But one can try out a teacher's meditation method for a time, sincerely and wholeheartedly apply it, and then decide whether he or she meets the criteria of a Dhamma teacher. One's choice is bound to be partly subjective. Staying with any valid Buddhist method is probably more beneficial than to combine several, or to frequently change teachers whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist.

Some standards to use in evaluating Dhamma teachers are as follows:

1. What they teach should accord fully with the Buddha's teachings as preserved in the Pāli scriptures and as translated by reputable scholars.
2. Their personal morality should be impeccable. They must scrupulously keep the rules of the Vinaya if they are Bhikkhus or the Five Precepts if they are lay people.
3. Their meditation center should follow a middle path in all major respects.
4. Their students should look and sound reasonable, like the kind of people one might want to emulate.

We will now draw out some practical implications of these criteria. To clarify (1), let us see what the Buddha said about how to evaluate the statements of someone who claims to represent the Buddha's teachings. He said that, no matter from whom one hears the Dhamma, one should examine their words thoroughly, without either accepting them or rejecting them. If what is heard accords with the Buddha's teachings as preserved in the Pāli scriptures, without distortion, the teachings should be taken as Dhamma. If after careful study and comparison, they do not accord with them or contradict them, then one may conclude that it is actually not the

⁴ The other traditional reference for Sangha is the community of Buddhist Monks and Nuns. The modern trend of using the word very broadly to include all practitioners strays too far from its original meaning.

words of the Buddha and may not be true (AN 4:180; GS II 174–177). In that case, one would be wise to avoid the person teaching in such a way and learn pure Dhamma from someone else.

For (2), let us spell out some specific personal ethical criteria for the modern Dhamma teacher, based on the Five Precepts. As prescribed by the first precept, a Buddhist teacher should have nothing to do with violence. Threats or intimidation run counter to the Dhamma. If an instructor has a reputation for violent or coercive behavior, this would be reason enough not to study under him or her.

A teacher should personally apply the injunction against taking what is not given (stealing), found in the second precept. He should not manipulate the Dhamma, or his students, to acquire wealth or power. People sincerely wish to give gifts to their teachers, out of gratitude and to earn good *kamma*. But if a teacher plays on a students' generosity and encourages them to give him valuable gifts, a teacher's conduct is impure. One should stay away from such a teacher to avoid being used.

A teacher should either be celibate or, if married or in a committed relationship, should strictly observe the third precept, abstaining from sexual misconduct — that is, they should have no sexual activity outside the relationship. There are fine married Dhamma teachers. But any teacher who is not married should be committed to abstinence so that sexual motives do not mar their relationship with their students, even in subtle ways. The Buddha taught many lay people, and he never told them to be celibate all their lives. He recognized that most people's sexual urge is too strong for this. But between teacher and student, and wherever Dhamma teaching is undertaken, sexual ties are dangerous and unhealthy. As a Dhamma teacher is the highest superior one can have, the relationship between teacher and student can be vulnerable to sexual exploitation if the third precept is not strictly adhered to.

A teacher should always be honest as required by the fourth precept. Look for truthfulness and candor in a Dhamma teacher. If one suspects that a teacher is lying, hinting around, conniving, or being evasive, one should examine the situation carefully and perhaps read this as a warning to stay away. Teachers who cannot express themselves clearly, or who seem to obfuscate rather than elucidate the Buddha's teachings, are not going to help their students.

A teacher should abstain from all intoxicants — the fifth precept. This includes alcohol and all mind-altering drugs. It is the very nature of such substances to becloud or distort the mind, and the process starts with the first sip or dose. Some contemporary teachers maintain that the precept against intoxicants requires only abstaining from their excessive use, and they may even use these substances themselves. This is not the traditional Theravāda position. Just where and how would one draw the line between moderate and excessive drinking? Anything that distorts one's mind would taint the mental purity needed to meditate and especially to teach the Dhamma. Those who wish to transmit the teachings of the Buddha, the purest of beings, should entirely give up intoxicants to do their job with the required clarity and sincerity. A teacher who rationalizes substance abuse is not adhering to the true Dhamma.

The meditation or retreat center where a teacher instructs is a good place to study the third and fourth precepts. One should look for a "middle way" in the rules of the center. We have already noted that the Buddha said both asceticism and sensual indulgence are extremes to be avoided, so Dhamma centers should not encourage them. Austere practices, like very little sleep, or long, unsupervised, solitary retreats, or inadequate diet, pose grave risks to inexperienced students. On the other hand, a minimum of the Five Precepts — including total celibacy while at the center — should be required of all residents.

Meditators should not be permanently isolated from the outside world. A balance of faith and understanding should be encouraged. Only if the meditation center is well run in a moderate, compassionate way will students benefit from the teaching there.

Finally, one should try to meet and talk with a range of the teacher's students. Are they sensible? Can they explain what they have gained from his teaching? Would you like to resemble them? Are they "spaced out", or are they alert? Do they give the impression that they function competently in the outside world, in their families, and at work? These individuals are in part the result of that teacher's methods, so one should consider seriously if one would like to resemble them. ■

CONCLUSION

The Buddha, as the ultimate teacher, is of paramount significance. Without his pioneering discoveries of the truths about existence, and the compassion that made him unstintingly share the way he found, we would have no escape from the suffering that permeates all life. We owe the possibility of freedom to his Dhamma. The Buddha's teachings allow us to work correctly to attain perfect purity of mind, *nibbāna*, and end the round of rebirth.

One has to train oneself — Buddhas only point the way. But the way would be utterly unknown without him and those who have transmitted his message down to the present. Without a proper teacher, one would have no opportunity to end suffering.

The world is full of risky spiritual methods — full of cults, mystical ideas, and unethical “gurus” feeding on human gullibility. The aspiring meditator has to be wary of them until he or she locates a competent teacher of the pure Dhamma.

The task of finding such a person is demanding and difficult but not insurmountable. Such people do exist, and can be found. Some background reading will develop preliminary faith in the Buddha's awakening. Familiarity with some of his discourses will help one determine the quality of a Buddhist teacher. If one is careful not to rely overly on emotional reactions, the good *kamma* one has generated in previous lives, along with the guidelines enumerated above, should bring one into contact with the right kind of person. Some time spent conscientiously training under them will either confirm that the choice was wise or convince one to depart and continue to search elsewhere. ■

May we all study under teachers of perfect Buddha-Dhamma!
May they guide us on the Noble Eightfold Path to the cessation of suffering!

ABBREVIATIONS

AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i> (by nipāta and <i>sutta</i>);
GS	<i>Gradual Sayings</i> (PTS translation of AN, by volume and page);
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i> (translation by John Ireland, BPS, 1991);
KS	<i>Kindred Sayings</i> (PTS translation of SN, by volume and page);
LDB	<i>Long Discourses of the Buddha</i> (translation of <i>Dīgha Nikāya</i> by Maurice O’C. Walshe, Wisdom Publications, 1987, by <i>sutta</i> and paragraph);
MLDB	<i>Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha</i> (translation of <i>Majjhima Nikāya</i> by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, 1995, by <i>sutta</i> and paragraph);
SN	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i> ;
Ud	<i>Udāna</i> (translation by John Ireland, BPS, 1990);
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i> (translation by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli BPS, 1975, by chapter and paragraph).
PTS	Pāḷi Text Society
BPS	Buddhist Publication Society

CHARLESTON BUDDHIST FELLOWSHIP MISSION STATEMENT

1. Theravādin Buddhism:

Theravādin Buddhism is the school that comes closest to the original form of Buddhism. The Theravādin scriptures, composed in the Pāli language, come directly from the mouth of the Buddha or, in some cases, his chief disciples.

“Theravāda” means “Doctrine of the Elders.” According to tradition, the name is derived from the fact that the doctrine was fixed by 500 Elders of the Holy Order soon after the death of the Buddha.

The teachings of the Theravādin School consist essentially of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the doctrine of Conditioned Arising, and the doctrine of No Self or No Soul.

The emphasis in the Theravādin tradition is on the liberation of the individual, which takes place through one’s own efforts (in meditation) and through observation of the rules of moral discipline.

Theravādin Buddhism is the dominant form of Buddhism in the countries of Southeast Asia — Śri Lanka (Ceylon), Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Laos, and Cambodia.

2. Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings (the *Dhamma*) of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the *Dhamma*.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the *Dhamma* into practice.

3. Goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- To provide systematic instruction in the *Dhamma*, based primarily on Pāli sources.
- To promote the practice of the *Dhamma* in daily life.
- To provide guidance on matters relating to the *Dhamma*, its study, and its practice.
- To prepare and distribute free educational material.

4. Activities/Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following activities/programs:

- Informal seminars on Buddhism.
- *Dhamma* study groups.
- Instructions in meditation (mindfulness of breathing [see below]).
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend.

Study groups and meditation instructions, however, are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment.

5. Membership:

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship encourages sincere practitioners to become members and to become active in promoting and supporting the activities of the organization.

Members receive mailings and the right to participate in programs sponsored by the organization. Members also receive free copies of all educational material produced by the organization.

There are absolutely no membership dues or other fees required to participate in any of the activities or programs offered by the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship.

6. Commitment:

Buddhism is not concerned about converting or convincing anyone, and no one will be expected to change his/her religious beliefs in order to attend study groups dealing with the life and basic teachings of the Buddha.

Advanced instructions, however, are only available to those who have committed to live a Buddhist way of life. That is to say that they must consider the Theravādin Buddhist path as their primary spiritual practice.

7. What is expected of an instructor/teacher:

- An instructor/teacher must be disciplined in morality/ethics (lay teachers must observe either the five or the eight precepts [when participating in or conducting retreats]).
- An instructor/teacher must be calm and patient.
- An instructor/teacher must be enthusiastic about the *Dhamma*.
- An instructor/teacher must have a solid understanding of the *Dhamma* from study.
- An instructor/teacher must have concern for the spiritual development of his/her students. This means putting their spiritual welfare first, putting their spiritual growth first, which can sometimes be very different from allowing them to do what they want. One of the responsibilities of an instructor/teacher is to inform students when they have gone astray and to redirect their efforts back to the path.
- An instructor/teacher must have skill in instructing students.
- An instructor/teacher must never become tired of giving an explanation over and over again.

8. What is expected of students:

- Students must be impartial, that is, must listen to the teachings with an open mind and not

with preconceived ideas or biases.

- Students must strive to improve their understanding of the *Dhamma* and to put the *Dhamma* into practice. That is to say, students must take full responsibility for their own spiritual development.
- Students must give full attention to the teachings when they are being given by an instructor/teacher or when studying on their own.
- Students must show respect for the *Dhamma*, for the instructor/teacher, and for fellow students (that is to say, they must not be antagonistic towards any of these three, nor must they bring an agenda).
- Students must follow instructions meticulously, without improvisation or deviation of any kind, especially the instructions concerning meditation.

9. Disagreements/disputes:

Should disagreements/disputes arise concerning instructions in particular spiritual techniques or disciplines, interpretations of aspects of the teachings of the Buddha, and/or one's own individual practice, the actual words of the Buddha, as recorded in the Pāli scriptures, along with the Commentaries that accompany and elaborate upon those scriptures and non-canonical works such as the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Milindapañha*, will be the final and binding authority. Personal opinions, personal preferences, interpretations unsupported by scriptural evidence, doctrinal positions of other Buddhist schools or other spiritual traditions, and the like will carry no weight.

10. *Dhamma* study groups:

The purpose of the study groups is to explore particular aspects of the *Dhamma*, in accordance with the doctrinal positions of the Theravādin School of Buddhism, in a relaxed, open, and uninhibited environment that promotes the free exchange of ideas and information. Questions and comments are encouraged.

Study groups must not be confused with instructions: instructions must be followed exactly as expounded in the scriptures, without deviation of any kind, while study groups are unstructured forums.

11. Meditation instructions:

The mind is essentially a process, a flow of thoughts. The faster and more turbulent the flow is, the harder it is to go below the surface level of awareness into the unconscious realms where our desires and fears, problems and aspirations arise. In *samatha* meditation, we train the mind to concentrate on a single object such as the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. In this way, we can gradually slow down the furious rush of thought, giving increasing self-mastery and, in so doing, provide a sound basis for further development.

Meditation is simple, but it is far from easy — it is a very demanding discipline. We have to be very patient with ourselves and not demand miracles overnight. Whether the results are perceived by us or not, every bit of effort helps. It takes a lot of hard work to purify one's mind, but through patience, determination, and continuous practice, the day will come when negative responses will no longer arise in our mind.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides basic group instructions in mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) and conducts group sittings using this technique. Students are expected to follow the instructions meticulously — right motivation, right posture, right method, and right dedication, both in and out of class:

- Right motivation: The stronger our motivation is, the more likely we are to succeed. When we start a meditation session, it is important to understand why we are doing it and to generate a positive motivation toward the meditation process. We should choose to practice meditation of our own accord — we should not practice it under pressure from others.
- Right posture: This means sitting, standing, or walking to and fro (if engaged in walking meditation), keeping the back perfectly straight at all times. Lying down may also be used as a meditation position, but only if one is disabled or if one is sick. Unless one is hospitalized or bed-ridden for some reason, one should not meditate in one's bed or any other place where one normally rests or goes to sleep.
- Right method: The instructions given by the Buddha must be followed without modification of any kind. This means no changes should be made based upon personal preferences or based upon what is taught by other Buddhist schools or other spiritual traditions.
- Right dedication: We always complete our meditation session by dedicating the positive energy that has been generated to all sentient beings, that they may be happy, that they may be well, that no harm may come to them, that they may cause harm to no one, that they may achieve enlightenment.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship takes no responsibility for those who choose to ignore the instructions or who choose to explore other types of meditation or other meditation topics on their own. Moreover, the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship reserves the right to refuse to give instructions to those who violate the above policies/rules.

Instructions and/or guidance on other meditation topics and more advanced meditation techniques will be provided on an individual basis to those who have successfully completed at least one ten-day retreat at IMC-USA (see above for details). ■