

## **When the Student is Ready the Teacher Appears.**

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(This article was adapted from a talk given at a meeting of the Ojai Meditation Group.)

Once there was a Bodhisattva by the name of Dipankara, who was a very deep meditator and a very advanced teacher, much loved by people. He lived in India and he traveled around in the Tibetan area with a man to help him carry his bag and cook his food, and this man was a very unpleasant person. He had a really bad temper, he was quite rude, and on top of that he was a terrible cook. Of course people begin to notice this person's bad manners, and they feel sorry for Dipankara. They go to him and say, "Venerable Sir, why don't you just fire your servant and we'll be very happy to cook for you and help you in whatever way you need." Then Dipankara looks at them and says, "Venerable Sirs, you don't understand: this man is not with me as my servant, he is with me as my teacher. He teaches me tolerance and patience."

Here is a really fine example of how you use and work with human relationships in training. If two people train together or practice together, it's not very important to say which one is the teacher and which one is the student. Obviously in certain situations one of them will have more experience than the other, and it just depends on what you're learning, how important that is.

When Dipankara says, "This person is teaching me tolerance and patience", it's not said as: "Well, this person is really horrible so I'm going to be tolerant." If training is done properly, there's humility in there, and so to be with somebody who will really bring out your patience becomes a gift. For myself, when I find myself in a situation where my stinginess or my patience is being stretched a little bit I have learned to be grateful because that is what I want. I want my patience to grow. If a situation requires me to exercise my patience, it's a good situation because it's good for me. The other person, in turn, may learn something from seeing me change.

When training with others everyone is learning, and that means that you can train wherever you are. It's the old complaint of laypeople that at the temple everybody is practicing and life is harmonious, but in their own workplace nobody is practicing and it's very difficult. But, actually, if you look at this little story, that argument falls down because if people in your work situation are forcing or teaching you to be more patient, more generous, a little wiser, a little bit less easily knocked off balance, they're actually helping you—they're doing you a service. And you are the one who can choose—that's the nice thing about it—it's completely up to you. Are you going to complain about the situation or let it drive you totally to distraction or are you going to use the situation as an opportunity to practice your meditation? The choice is yours. It's not necessarily easy, but I can tell you a secret—it's not all that easy at the temple either. It just *looks* easy. It looks easy just like a complicated ballet looks easy. You know that it really isn't; it requires a lot of practice.

Wherever you are you can take whatever happens as an occasion to train, and that means you have to look to yourself to make the change. You don't look to the circumstances, you don't look to other people: "I could practice with a whole lot more equanimity if everybody else would cooperate a little." It's always me who has to make

the change. If there is disharmony, it's always me who has to let go of some expectation or demand. If there is a general sense of worry or impatience or it's all too much, it's me who has to ground myself in meditation. To live in this way and look to yourself for change is what Buddhism calls liberation.

This is fascinating and can be scary, too. In the formal training situation in the monastery people come together to do a day of concentrated practice; you work shoulder-to-shoulder with a monk in a situation where working on yourself is *the* most important thing, there are few distractions, and that can be really intense. It's very focused and it can be quite scary. It is important to remember that you are there as a volunteer. I don't *make* anybody practice. If you're within the temple grounds, then it is assumed that you want to practice. The world is very big—the temple is only 45 acres. If you don't want to practice, you don't have to be here. The gate is always open for people to come or go.

Secondly, as Dogen says, the truth appears naturally. We go about our practice, we follow the temple schedule, we do the work as it appears in front of us, we have interactions with people—and people say things and do things and things happen, and all of a sudden you realize, “Oh my goodness, I didn't know I had that much anger in me.” The nature of practice is such that all of a sudden it can make something very clear about yourself that you've never noticed before. Part of it is what I call the 'different background'. We all are used to a picture of ourselves in a certain background: 'This is how I am'. Now if you take that self-image out of its usual surroundings and you put it in the temple, all of a sudden you see details that you did not notice before. Just like when you put a picture from a blue background onto a red background, it brings out different things in the picture.

This changing of the background is actually very helpful if you're serious about learning to really know yourself. Meditation is about learning to really know oneself. This means at times that your self-image crumbles a little, or you discover a big wart on yourself, and then the other aspect of training with others becomes important: we go for Refuge to the Sangha. The Sangha can be very comforting because it is, in essence, accepting. You can only really learn from somebody else if you first accept them. You can learn patience and you can learn tolerance and you can learn something about yourself only if you stop kicking at the situation or maligning the person or complaining about how hard it is. As long as you do those things, you're not really learning, you're fighting. Only when you stop fighting can you begin to accept. You say, “OK, so here's this person, and he's difficult to live with. Well, I'm going to live with him.” If you read our little story with attention, you will find a deep acceptance and love in Dipankara's attitude, no despising or blame. If you despise somebody you will not learn anything from them.

Just don't fight and don't despise and don't think there is nothing in the situation for you. There always is something good, no matter how painful or how rough or how boring it is. There is always a teacher for anyone who wants to learn.

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