

# The Teacher-Student Relationship: Choosing a Teacher

By Kathy Wesley. Last Revised 2.17.09

“While abiding in the world, it is difficult to hear the Victorious One’s teaching, which is the source of benefit and happiness. When entering into the teaching for the purpose of making your leisure and opportunity worthwhile, in the beginning, seek and then follow the wisdom teacher.”

With these words, the 19th Century Karma Kagyu master Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye begins the chapter on the teacher-student relationship in his masterful encyclopedia of Buddhism called “The Treasury of Knowledge.”

In these short sentences, Jamgon Kongtrul distills the essence of centuries of Buddhist wisdom and presents them for the modern-day audience, explaining why teachers are so necessary in this difficult and often confusing world.

A few years ago, at the suggestion of our spiritual guide Bardor Tulku Rinpoche, the Columbus Karma Thegsum Choling studied this wonderfully detailed work. In it, we discovered why teachers are necessary, and learned how to find a good teacher and how to follow a teacher once you have found one.

In our modern era of “comparison-shopping” Buddhism, we in the West are continuously bombarded with advertising, books and other media touting the names and traditions of many Buddhist teachers.

But how do we select a teacher? How, from the vast array of choices, do we find the best teacher for ourselves? And, with all the books on Buddhism available today, why is a human teacher even necessary?

In the early verses of his commentary on the book, Jamgon Kongtrul quotes the Buddha himself as showing the need for teachers:

“So, the bodhisattva, the great being, who wishes to manifestly and fully awaken to supreme, right, and full awakening, first of all should approach the wisdom teachers, follow them, and honor them.” (Shaky-

amuni Buddha, “The Noble Eight Thousand Verse Perfection of Wisdom Sutra.”)

And the Buddha himself is given as the source for the best advice on how to choose a teacher. From the Tibetan Dhammapada (Sayings of the Buddha), Jamgon Kongtrul quotes:

“By following inferior [wisdom teachers] you will degenerate; by following those on the same level you will stay the same. By following someone higher you will obtain holiness. Therefore, you should follow someone higher than yourself.”

Kongtrul says there are four types of teachers we can encounter. Our ability to encounter them and relate to them depends on our karma and our ability to follow the dharma:

1. The Ordinary Person;
2. The partially-awakened bodhisattva;
3. The fully awakened Buddha who manifests as a human being (such as Shakyamuni);
4. The fully awakened Buddha who manifests in an enriched form (called the “enjoyment body of the Buddha,” such high-level bodhisattvas like Chenrezig and Tara, or in the form of Vajradhara, the primordial Buddha).

“While one is a beginner, one lacks the ability to follow the Buddhas and high-level bodhisattvas, therefore one follows spiritual friends who are ordinary people.” Kongtrul says. “When one has mostly exhausted the obscurations of karma, then one is able to follow spiritual friends who are high-level bodhisattvas. When one dwells on the greater path of accumulation, one is able to follow spiritual friends who are emanation bodies of the Buddha. When one dwells upon the highest [bodhisattva] level, then one is able to follow spiritual friends who are complete enjoyment bodies of the Buddha.”

Lastly, Kongtrul says, “While we who are beginners sit

in the dungeon of karma and passions, we do not even have a glimpse of their [higher beings'] faces, let alone being able to follow spiritual friends who are higher ones. Because of our meeting with spiritual friends who are ordinary people, the lamp of their speech illuminates the path from which we shall meet the spiritual friends who are superior. Therefore, the kindest of all is the ordinary person who is a spiritual friend."

Among the qualities teachers should have, Kongtrul says the most important are good morality, learning, patience, and compassion. If teachers do not have these qualities, Kongtrul says, students should not follow them. However, he adds, "It is rare for all the qualities to be complete. Therefore, one should take a lama with more good qualities [than bad ones.]"

Students also get a warning from Kongtrul, in the form of a quote from Shakyamuni's Kalachakra Tantra:

"Disciples who are overcome by arrogance and anger, are separated from samaya, long for material things and are also uneducated, these disciples are eager to be deceived, their minds deteriorate from the state of supreme happiness, and they do not get empowered. The lamas who cling to enjoyments, are careless, use harsh words, and are endowed with desiring the objects of the sense faculties, those should be rejected by intelligent disciples, as if rejecting hell as a cause for complete awakening."

When the good student and good teacher come together, Kongtrul summarizes, they are "like precious jewels."

When questioned about the process of finding a teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche said that a person's teacher will have three qualities:

1. They will be someone we have confidence in – meaning that we are confident they know what they are talking about, and that they know the dharma thoroughly.
2. They will be someone we trust – meaning that we know them well enough to entrust ourselves to their care.

3. They will be someone available to us – meaning that we will have access to them to ask questions about our practice, etc.

On another occasion, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche described "branch" teachers and "root teachers." Branch teachers give us preliminary instructions, while the root teacher gives us the teachings that, as Rinpoche says, "make the most difference in our mind." Some people, he said, will have several branch teachers and more than one root teacher. It depends on the individual and the circumstances.

Given the foregoing statements, it may seem difficult, if not impossible, to encounter wisdom teachers in this world, but we can take heart; it is said that the best way to prepare ourselves to meet our teacher is to do our spiritual practice.

Bardor Tulku Rinpoche once said that students who are new to the dharma should not feel too much pressure to select a teacher right away, but should relax, take their time -- and do their practice.

When a student practices, whether it's quiet sitting, compassion meditation, or mantra meditation, she or he accumulates merit, and this, in turn, leads them to meet many teachers. As they come in contact with those teachers, and ask questions about their practices, students will find one or two teachers whose advice helps them progress in their practice. Eventually, from among all the teachers they've met, Bardor Rinpoche says, they will find a qualified teacher whose advice helps them the most. Such a person can become one's root, or main, teacher.

Once a person has a main teacher, they need not search for teachers and teachings elsewhere. They can rely on their main teacher for advice about what to study, what practices to focus on, and what empowerments to take, etc. Having a teacher helps focus our practice and cuts away extraneous and distracting threads in our practice so we can progress more rapidly.

May beings everywhere be endowed with faith, and with compassionate and wise spiritual friends!

