

## **Mentoring on the Spiritual Path**

*Dharma Roadside Dialogue*

*#4 April 30, 2022*

*#1Exposé*

Today we're going to talk a little bit about spiritual assistance on the Dharma roadside. About the importance and necessity of having good support and inspiration from a spiritual friend on the path. But before I go into this explanation, I'd like to reframe what I am going to say in a larger picture, and as we are talking about mentoring or spiritual guidance on the path, I think it's important to understand what the path is. What are we talking about?

The path we are talking about is the path that was opened and taught by the Buddha, the path leading to awakening...and what is awakening? Awakening is the reconnection with our Buddha nature; the given factor that we have to always keep in mind is that we're all endowed with Buddha nature. We all partake from Buddha nature. We are not depleted and we're not empty and we don't need to build anything or acquire anything, but we have to get rid of what creates a veil and obstacle that prevents our mind from knowing itself. The entire path is going to be liberating the mind from the four types of veils; the veils of knowledge and the veils of afflictions, which can be subdivided into the veil of knowledge, the veil of habits, the veil of karma, and the veil of mental afflictions, so that the Buddha nature can come to the surface and shine through. In order to do that we have to cut through and liberate all the veils that actually, at this point, are the very ground of what we sense as being "myself." It's very difficult because we are biased, and it's also very difficult because we are trying to cut the branch we are sitting on, so there is a sense of fear when we're doing that. We're not always objective because of habitual veils and tendencies and ignorance and so on, and because we are afraid of losing the only thing we know. That's why we need a third party, somebody outside who's going to help us to cut through all this habit and deceit; that's where the spiritual friend is very important.

There are different types of mentoring, but if we just remain in the context of the Buddhist path, the path towards enlightenment, there is a mentoring that is preparing us and there is a mentoring that is going to help us to refine our understanding and the qualities. The first part is taught in the early teachings of the Buddha and pretty much can be found in what we refer to as the Theravada, or more precisely the path of the listeners, the Sravakayana, where we try to cultivate a very healthy ground. A very healthy foundation, a very healthy basis through the three-fold training. The three-fold training, which is the training in ethics, the training in samadhi (meditation), and the training in prajna (discernment) wisdom. With this three-fold training we create a good ground that will, in the perspective of the Theravada, help us to come to realize the selflessness of the individual. And that's an important point because all of the misery that we can create and suffer from comes from the fundamental ignorance that mind has about itself.

Mind doesn't recognize that it has several qualities and misrepresents these qualities...mostly through what we call the "basic split." There is a split that happens in every instance of

consciousness between that which knows...the perceiving mind, and that which is known...the object, the phenomena. We tend to attribute, because we are in the world of imputation or projection of confused mental representation, we tend to attribute the nature of an entity to what is merely a process. So the self, which is a process, and when we study the skandhas and when we study how the consciousnesses work and so on it becomes very clear...what we call self is merely a process. But we superimpose on that, out of ignorance and habit, the idea or the mental representation of "someone" being this process. So the process becomes an entity.

The same happens with what is not me, that is phenomena. We also tend to see them as an entity and of having their own substantial independent autonomous nature, and that's what we are negotiating all the time, this outer world, whether it is animate or inanimate. This basic split creates dualistic clinging. This dualistic clinging, which is an old habit, creates the basic split...and then in this space between me and what is not me all sorts of mental afflictions based on preferences and dislikes will arise, they will motivate actions, actions will have consequences, and this is how the wheel of conditioned existence spins. That's where we are. And everything that we do will be developed based on this misrepresentation of reality...the fact that mind doesn't know itself and doesn't know what's going on. We need to see this and we need to eradicate this misrepresentation and create some space for a clear vision of the true nature of reality. And again, as we are prisoners of this dualistic clinging and dualistic perception it is very difficult for us to see clearly...because our glasses are dirty! Whatever we look at has the color of the dirt on our glasses. We need an optician, we need somebody who is going to help us clean up our glasses and get a clearer vision of reality. That's the reason why we need this mentoring support of the spiritual friend.

In his text *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Gampopa explained that the cause for enlightenment is the fact that we are endowed with Buddha nature. The basis on which the revelation of this reality will take place is our very life, our existence, this lifetime; this precious human life. Thirdly, what is going to be a catalyzing cause or condition is the encounter with one or more spiritual friends. So we have the cause, we have the basis on which it is going to happen, and we have the conditions in which it's going to happen; that's the package deal, according to the Buddha's teaching on the Buddhist path.

First we are like children who don't know anything. We have a little interest; we feel that something is sort of wrong, like there must be more to life than this, along with a vague feeling that we really want to change something. So we read and attend lectures and we look at ourselves...I mean we try everything. But somehow when we get in touch with the Dharma through books or a talk or whatever, it rings a bell. Basically it rings the bell of your Buddha nature, reminding you of its presence even in the midst of this thick fog of ignorance. And you might say, "Oh yeah, I always knew that." How many times have we heard that? People say, "Oh yeah, I always knew that, it's so familiar!" Because it's not something you have to acquire, it's something you are born with, it's innate...but we are not yet fully in touch with it. Sometimes little glimpses, sometimes when the light shines through the cracks we have a glimpse of it, but most of the time not.

So at first we're like children and we need to acquire basic information so we can think about it. We need to be given a very precise frame for our practice, our work, our reflection, our study and our behavior, and then we need a spiritual friend who will help us do that. In the Theravada tradition, traditionally we regard the elder not just by age but by the experience that comes from all these many years of practice as spiritual friends. "Spiritual friend" is a word in English that translates the Sanskrit word *kalyana mitra* and in Tibetan *gewa shen nyen*, or if you contract it, *geshe*. A geshe in some traditions such as the Gelugpa or Kadampa is a teacher; somebody who is knowledgeable, and who will help you to understand and master the Dharma. So the idea of gewa shen nyen is somebody who helps you get in touch with the innate sanity of your mind. A role model of being true, genuine, authentic, knowledgeable and having a certain level of experience; it doesn't have to be a full Buddha, but absolutely without self-centered interest, who only has the intention and desire to help someone, a trainee, who is eager to learn. So that's the definition of a spiritual friend.

In the early stages of our development it is pretty much like parenting tools; we need to be potty-trained, we need to be given the words and concepts and all of that, and we need a certain structure. This is what we need at that point. But as we grow, the structure we needed in the early years might be more constraining and not too helpful, so things must adjust and evolve and change a bit. In the early days it's very helpful to have this elder perspective on everything we do, and like in the early classes we ask, "Teacher, can I do this, should I do that." Or Mom and Dad. We like to have this.

For example, in the Theravada when you commence on the path and choose to become ordained as a full monk or nun, you have a group of four monks or four nuns who will give you the ordination; they will transmit the ordination to you. One will be your preceptor, which means that he or she will help you to really understand the vinaya, to really understand how to behave, and who will train you properly in how to use your body and speech very, very properly. One will be an instructor that will help you on a daily basis. These four, who I call the pool of ordination, will always be available, so that whenever you have a difficulty, like with keeping your vows or some details that are not clear, you will always come back to them, they will keep an eye on you, they will make sure that you have what you need...robes, knowing how to beg for alms...they make sure that your life is okay and that the environment in which you're going to grow spiritually is fine. That's their job, to take care of the trainee. They also keep an eye on you if you're not very careful or a bit sloppy...they might call you. Like if you miss a step and make a little booboo, you can always come back to them and ask them how to fix it, and they will help you to get back on track. Or if you make a big booboo and you don't see it or you don't want to see it, they will call you on it and let you know that something went wrong, and encourage you to change as needed. There is a sense of family, a sense of support, and it's always based on respect and love. Nobody is putting you down because you are "just" a trainee and don't know anything, no, they really help you to grow. It's very good to have this help at this point on our path.

Now what is the relationship between the trainee and the spiritual friend in the Mahayana perspective? It's based on the training that we have received through the Theravada perspective. We need to cultivate the three trainings; we need to have a solid sense of ethics, we need to have some growing experience in meditation, and we need to cultivate our discernment through study, reflection, and meditation. On this basis we can generate something broader, which is bodhicitta, the enlightened mind attitude. We can generate the very deep aspiration to help everybody (that is you and me, me and you) to progress on the way to enlightenment and reach this moment of freedom from the ignorance which is the cause of all our misery and suffering. And we implement this aspiration with the practice of the six paramitas...so that was the brief for the Mahayana aspiration and application.

We seriously need some help to do that because, the Theravada approach, particularly when you take the vows of individual liberation, is pretty much dealing with your behavior of body and speech. This is visible; if you go astray on one of your precepts, everybody can see it, really. Like if you kill somebody it's kind of obvious. But if you have the intention to get rid of somebody, it's just in your head, and maybe nobody notices. So you think it's easier to keep the bodhisattva vows than to keep the precepts, just because nobody sees the bodhisattva vows but everybody can see your behavior. It's actually just the opposite; it is way easier to keep the precepts of individual liberation because it's mostly about body and speech, and it's very, very subtle and difficult to keep the precepts of the bodhisattva because it is about intention...and it's about application. Just a change of intention and then something could be soiled in your bodhicitta, something is tainted, so this needs to be addressed because it might fester and definitely the qualities will not grow, so you need someone to keep an eye on you. In this context, in the Mahayana context, the spiritual friend is often referred to as "the crocodile," because once he has bitten you, he will not let you go...will always be around. Whether you like it or not.

I have in mind a story of somebody who made a very grandiose declaration to Kalu Rinpoche that he wanted to be his disciple forever, and so on...and Kalu Rinpoche just looked at him and said, "Yeah, I'll be your teacher...even when you will not want me to be your teacher." That's the idea of the crocodile. Compassion will get a hold on you and not let you go. So sometimes you will beg, sometimes you will try to bribe, and sometimes you will try to kick, and sometimes you will try to escape. But you can't escape the crocodile. And this is very important because the vows of individual liberation may be taken only for this lifetime. They are based on the skandha of form and contingent on this lifetime. They may be taken in the perspective of the bodhisattva vows until enlightenment, but mostly it is taken for this lifetime..."Until the end of this life I will follow and work with this precept."

The bodhisattva vows are very different; they are from this moment until the heart of enlightenment, it's a very different project in terms of length and in terms of dedication. You are binding yourself with this vow. The word in Tibetan for vow, *dompa*, is actually the same verbal root as the word for "to bind." You bind yourself to this aspiration and application of bodhicitta. In a

way you are your own crocodile...but when sometimes you get to a point where you lose more than you win, you might have second thoughts. It feels like too much, like you didn't sign up for all this, can we negotiate the terms? Then you need the otherside of the "crocodile" that says, "No way!" You need the encouragement to not let go of this commitment. Like if you're climbing a mountain and want to quit, you wouldn't cut the safety rope between you and the guide...no way. We are committed, we're together in that.

So that's the general ideal of the *geva shen nyen*, the *kalyana mitra*, the spiritual friend. He or she is going to help us to get the best out of our potential and will be creating an environment in which this work is feasible and possible, demanding...but never impossible. There will always be a way to adjust so that the work can happen. This kind of work is going to collide with some of our habits, and that's where the difficulty will be. At times you will think, when colliding with some old habits, that maybe the spiritual friend created that for us, as if they are asking impossible things of us. No, they didn't ask the impossible, you're just impossible. You're impossible...and then the slightest thing you have to do is impossible. As usual you blame somebody else for that. Like a mirror points out the reality of your face; do we like mirrors? Not everyday! Same with a spiritual friend. There are days when you try to avoid seeing them!

I remember once I went through this situation where I really didn't want to see Gendun Rinpoche; just the sight of him would make me uncomfortable. It was painful, physically painful...because he was so demanding, I could feel the crocodile bite on my neck all the time. It was so painful. His room was very central in the monastery and his window was...there was no way, it was like a crossroad, you had to go one way or another and he would see you, he would sit in front of his window reciting his mantras and looking at everybody and what was going on. So I had to go way around to avoid being seen, and for a couple of weeks I really managed to avoid him. Then one day he asked one of my colleagues, "Is Tsony here? I haven't seen him in a while, can you tell him I need to see him?" So I had to go. So I go and knock, and Rinpoche is there and sitting and then he said to me, "What do you want?" And I said, "I don't know, you asked for me to come, what did you want?" And he said, "No, I never did that. Oh, but as you're here, sit down." And he dressed me down, because he needed to tell me things. Like, "Who do you think you are, do you think you can fool me, you can avoid me?" No, no...that's the crocodile...and you always have to work with it. Once you agree on that, that there's no privacy in the training, that you are naked and you are exposed, then you stop wasting time and wiggling like a worm on a hook. You just have to be there...sometimes it's going to burn and sometimes it's going to be pleasant...but we have to do it. We have to work.

But how do we come to this point of confidence and surrender? That's the main question. We cannot build up this kind of confidence based on a sense of I must obey or I must be a good boy or a good girl. Or I want to please Daddy or Mommy. I want to be accepted as a good student. All of this is totally irreverent and all of this crap will have to be removed from the stream of your mind. So the earlier you do it the better it is. Get rid of it, and just get naked and come as you are. Don't

be afraid. Like if you come into your bathroom and you know you need to look at your face and comb your hair before you go to work, but when you come into the bathroom you turn your back to the mirror. Why even come in? Just go in and face reality.

What I really learned with Gendun Rinpoche throughout all those years is that first you are loved, first and foremost. Because the spiritual friend has no personal agenda. He or she is not trying to gain something from this relationship. If a spiritual friend tried to gain something from a relationship, the one thing I could see for myself being in this position from time to time is I'd be so happy if you reached the point where you don't need me anymore. That's the only thing I'd want from you, that you don't need me anymore; that you've gained a plateau of independence, that you know your way, you know how to work with the scriptures, you know how to look at yourself in yourself, and I am redundant in your world...wonderful! So that's the only personal interest I have in this relationship. First and foremost, you are loved. I love your dedication, I love your honesty, I love your clumsiness, I love your personality, I love everything in you because you're true. Okay?

Trungpa Rinpoche once addressed his students, saying that when he came into the meditation hall and he saw the shoes outside in the hall well aligned and organized he really liked it, because there is such a difference between the shoes and you guys meditating. The shoes were really properly and simply sitting, and that was really great. So the only thing a spiritual friend expects from you is that you keep your word, keep working at it, be honest, be true, and be courageous. Be loving and kind, and most importantly...it's an illusion, don't take it so seriously. Don't turn it into a heavy drama. You know? We are Dharma practitioners, not drama practitioners. So just a little bit of lightness makes it easier.

First you're loved, then you are seen as you are, and the teacher is not trying to pretend this doesn't exist, or promote this, because there will be some sort of reward for him or her. No. Basically a Dharma teacher couldn't care less about any negotiations or little gratifications that can come from you. Frankly, when you are trying to help people it's a burden. It's heavy. It's not just easy; you are not in it for the lightness of it. You're in it because you want to say thank you to your teachers, you want to say thank you to the Buddha for giving this wonderful thing, and you see a kindred spirit, someone who has the same aspiration and wants to progress on the path. And you want to honor this, you want to honor the forefathers and mothers and their dedication and true aspiration of the training. That's all. Let's work it together. As Ram Dass used to say, "We are walking each other home." We are walking each other home. That's the basis of this relationship. Anything outside of that is irrelevant.

I've kept aside the tantra because I think it's irrelevant to who we are now. Tantra is something that should have always remained secret. Not public, never public. Because tantra is a relationship between one person and another. A man and a woman, or two women, or two men...a teacher and a trainee. And this relationship is so personal, so unique, it escapes any convention; it doesn't fit with the necessities of polite society. You can't have a true tantric relationship, let's say in a

monastery or in the world as we know it, because this is just outside. Once Shamar Rinpoche told me, “If you really want to practice tantra you have to go into the jungle.” That means leaving society. Society has rules...we could say it needs to be politically correct, but no. It has to be civilized.

The rules of engagement between a trainee and a teacher in the Mahayana or the Theravada are very clear and are acceptable for the society as we know it, more or less. Tantra is not. Tantra is outrageous. Tantra doesn't care about any convention and doesn't buy any form of reality that we take for granted. So when you really want to practice tantra you have to make sure you have a guru, and you have to make sure you are up to the job, up to the mark. When you think of tantra you think of Tilopa, Naropa in our tradition, you think Milarepa and Marpa, okay? Out of my league. Wonderful, admirable, I wish one day I can do that, and have this particular connection. If you look at tantra throughout the time it was in India, it was secret; it was not established. People didn't know who was a tantric practitioner.

In our tradition there was one master whose name was Kukkuripa...that means “the dog,” because he was always living with dogs. And Naropa said as a joke, “Yeah, he's so ugly, that's the only companion he can have.” How do you fit an ugly freak with dogs into American or European political correctness? It doesn't fit...it freaks people out. So that's why they stay away, even in the monasteries you had tantric practitioners like Maitripa who eventually got expelled from the monastery for misbehavior which was correct from the point of view of tantra, but not from the point of view of the Vinaya. Shantideva. They were all behaving as monks, they were “closet” tantric practitioners, living a double life; and only after they died they would find in their belongings maybe a bell and a vajra, and then realize they had been a tantric practitioner. I don't know how and why but it happened that in Tibet tantra became more mainstream in the monasteries, so for example you had monks who had the vows, like of chastity or celibacy, spending years visualizing themselves in sexual union with a consort, a female or male deity. Of course there's some little clash that might happen, and if you are not very clear at maintaining the difference between the different approaches (of the Theravada, the Mahayana, and the Tantra) then everything bleeds into one another and there are some mishaps, some things that happen. And in the Tibetan world over the last decades we have had several unfortunate episodes where some indelicate teacher traded secret tantra for money or sexual favors. Or established some sort of system of behavior that was outrageous but justified because this is “tantra.” No. This is not acceptable. That's why things should be really clear. What is tantra is tantra, and what is Mahayana is another thing.

If the teacher asks you something that is really hard for you to do, you can always discuss and negotiate, “Why should I do this?” And the teacher should be always able to justify the reason why this particular job has to be done. Why do you have to face this specific aspect of your character? It should always be something that is in agreement with the sutras. It should always be possible for you to come to a point where you understand, man it's hard, but it makes sense. And you grow because you accept this challenge and you're going to work with it and the spiritual friend is going to help

you to go through this, to pass this hurdle, to discover something and then move on. That's the function of the spiritual friend in the Mahayana.

Oftentimes there is a question also of the relationship with the teacher, is it like monogamy...like you're married to one person, and you can't see other people. No. No. I like to talk in this Mahayana perspective about a pool of teachers that you are in connection with...and they are different; they can be a man, a woman, different age, different perspective. They have a different way of understanding and interpreting the Dharma that can be very, very enlightening for you, in the sense of bringing more freshness and vision and differences to your understanding of the Dharma. Helping you to understand that there is not one single expression, but rather that it has many, many facets. So this is very important; we shouldn't be limiting the number of sources of information about Dharma. But as you practice and you exchange and grow with the input of these different teachers, quite naturally there are two or three who become more regular, and maybe one becomes the central teacher who comes from this pool of teachers. And this central teacher, it's very simple. It's not a conscious decision, like who is my best friend, no, no. It happens as you study and navigate through the Dharma, and your studies and reflections with these different teachers, it happens to become more and more obvious that this person creates a tremendous space in which things get very clear for you. Because that's him or her, and because it's me; there's no real rhyme or reason, it's just because there is some affinity...this becomes clear.

Atisha had lots and lots of teachers and then three main teachers...he learned from Maitripa, he learned from Dharmarakshita, but he said that the one that was his central teacher was Serlingpa, the master from Indonesia, because in his presence things became obvious. Things about the nature of mind and about bodhicitta became clear. Because everything is interdependent, right? It's not that the Dharma exists and is in the hand of a teacher and then the teacher gives it to you and then you have it. This is not how it works. It is the catharsis of when these two minds merge, the Dharma emerges, and it happens because of karmic connections, previous relations we had, wishes we've made to study together, and so this contact becomes bigger than a conscious choice. It sort of imposes itself. It's how it is; with this person I get the most out of the Dharma. And so we regard this person very highly because it's a very precious situation that is created with this person. And it doesn't mean you exclude any others, like, "I found the one." Put a ring on it and think, "That's mine! My precious, my Rinpoche."

No, that's not what we should do, we should still receive information from other teachers to get other perspectives; we always need to study, we always need to deepen our understanding, we always need to think, we always need to be confronted with different views, and sometimes from teachers who have a very opposite or different views from ours. It's very precious. Say you're very serious, okay? Sometimes you need somebody who just takes you out for a beer. Loosens you up a bit. And then sometimes you're like, "Yeah, dude, it's Mahamudra, relax, nothing exists," and so on. Then you need somebody that tells you, "Yeah, but you should keep the precepts, you should work on this, you should work on that." You wouldn't go towards this one because that's not your natural



inclination, but the contrast is interesting. So loosen up, tighten up, and these teachers will help you to do that. But then you've got this central source where in any case there is something really special that happens, and that's your contact with your Buddha nature, that's how you get in touch with your Buddha nature.

So I think this idea of exclusivity comes from a misunderstanding that comes from the tantra. In the tantra, as I described earlier, in a relationship like Tilopa and Naropa's, because you go sort of off the charts your only reference is the teacher. Nothing else really makes sense, everything is just an illusion and that's the lifeline. You can't say just like, "Yeah, no. I'm out of it," because then you get lost in the space. So in the tantra yes, there is a need for an absolute connection with a teacher. But once I asked Gendun Rinpoche, "How do we know in the tantra that this crazy looking teacher is a mahasiddha and not a psychopath?" He basically said, "There is no way to know. Only at the end. If in this process you are enlightened, this was a mahasiddha, if you're as crazy as a loon, that was just a psychopath." Okay? So are you ready for that trip? Maybe choose something a bit more civilized; that's why after all these early guru's tantric nature you then had Gampopa, who came and organized retreat centers and monasteries...and you've got the Karmapas and so on, who on the inside are tantrica, but their outer appearance is as a civilized Mahayana teacher. So if you are in this place where you can benefit from a tantric teacher, then there will be a tantric teacher, but you will know what it is; you're informed, you are enlightened, and it will be beneficial. And if you are not at this point, then you will have a very civilized Mahayana teacher that will be of great benefit for you on the path of the paramitas.

So the idea of exclusivity came from this, something like, "Yeah, you have to follow my lineage. Only my lineage. And you have to follow only me as a main guru, and you have to obey everything I say." Yes, in tantra. No in Mahayana. Really. I mean, it's fine to obey or follow the instructions when you understand them. But if you're forced into something that doesn't make sense, head or tails, what kind of benefit are you going to gain from that? The process is to be open and willing to learn, and to be very honest.

We should avoid the three flaws of a cup. The three flaws of a cup are the ways to describe what may prevent the work with a spiritual friend from happening. If you have a cup that is upside down you can pour as much tea as you want into it but it will never stay in. If you have a cup that is cracked then as much tea as you pour into it will always leak out. If you have a cup that is dirty and you fill it with a beautiful and precious nectar, it will be stained, polluted, and become poisoned. So the attitude of both the trainee and the spiritual friend should avoid these three flaws of the cup. If the teacher or the student are careless nothing will happen, like pouring tea on an upside down cup. If the teacher or the student are not committed to the work it's like a cracked cup, now and then you pour in some tea, but it always ends up leaking out. And then if you have a hidden agenda, like if you want to be the student of a very famous teacher so you can say, "I am a student of the Dalai Lama, I met him once on YouTube." Like you want to show that you are the precious student of a

precious teacher...you are stained by arrogance, by looking for something, you are under the sway of what Trungpa Rinpoche called spiritual materialism.

Spiritual materialism is something that Trungpa Rinpoche coined, he used the example of the Three Barbarian Lords. In Tibetan we say *lalo*; barbarians. Barbarians are basically people who live outside of the central area where civilization is; they are on the outskirts, they're out in the fringes so they behave in a strange way, kind of barbaric. Trungpa Rinpoche describes spiritual materialism as the Three Lords or the Three Barbarians. The first one is physical materialism, the second one is psychological materialism, and the third is spiritual materialism.

So the first one, physical materialism, is the belief that possessions can bring relief from suffering. Trungpa Rinpoche agrees with the fact that they might bring temporary happiness, but then more suffering in the endless pursuit of creating one's environment to be "just right." So physical materialism is that, "The cushion is not good enough, the meditation hall is not good enough, the text is not well printed, the teacher doesn't speak my language" We're always trying to get things to the point of "it's good." And as a view it's a dream, it's a fantasy, it's never...and so in the end you're frustrated all the time. And when you apply this to Dharma, it's, "As soon as I have time I will practice. I'll work hard, then I will retire and have enough money to feel secure and then I will practice." We always have this idea that there are some sort of external conditions that will make us safe and happy, and it's always based on this same idea that there is a "self," this self is an entity, and it deserves security and satisfaction. So we drag the Dharma practice into this madness. The Dharma practice which is supposed to get rid of this fixation on the self as an entity and give birth to an awareness that the self is just a process interacting with other processes that are phenomena, and coming to know what is the essence of all this manifestation as being empty and cognizant; we forget this. That's the first aspect of materialism.

Another level that can cause some misunderstanding is like, "I am rich because I have this or that, or I am a teacher because I have such and such a diploma...like, I did a three year retreat, I am a Lama." Really? You know, when we (the Bodhi Path teachers) first met with Shamar Rinpoche in 2007 for the first sort of master class (he's the master, not us, right?) he put us through the ringer. The first thing he said was, "Okay, you all did retreat, one, two, or three, I don't know how many retreats, but you all did retreat, so technically you are Lamas, yes. But, when Gampopa in the *Jewel Ornament* describes the Lama, what it says does not describe you. At all. The basic Lama is Lama Gendun, your teacher. Who is like him? Hmm?" Of course everyone was silent. He said, "You are Dharma teachers. You have knowledge and experience and you share it." Ahhh, we don't have to be Gods, such a relief. As my dear friend Khaydroup said, "Call me whatever you want, but don't call me late for dinner." Names and titles, who cares? But sometimes we think we're a Lama because we have been sleeping for three years in a retreat center. You know?

Over the last 25 or more years that we've had retreats going on at Le Bost, we always had the same plumber...he would come regularly to fix things during the retreats in the retreat centers. Once he

said to me, “Hey, over the last 30 years I’ve spent an average of three years in the retreat center, so technically I’m a Lama too.” So the plumber was a Lama. Okay? Well, why not. Just like me, you know? So don’t hide behind titles and possessions that define you, like you’re good because you’re rich. I don’t know if you’ve seen the series *House of Cards*. There’s a moment when Claire Underwood comes outside and she sees a person sitting on the pavement, and she gives him \$20, then gets into her limo and drives away. The next day she comes out and sees the same guy and he comes to her and gives her back her \$20 folded into an Origami bird, like, “I don’t need your money.” So, who’s rich? Who is powerful? It’s a fixation.

The second fixation is psychological. If we know something, if we have a set of beliefs, a system of philosophy, we think that this will help bring relief from suffering. You think that what you know is liberation; what you know is just confused projections of your concepts and mental representations. It’s not because you can see the idea of what enlightenment is that it has anything to do with enlightenment, but reaching enlightenment seems to be such a long, long project, let’s think about it...that seems to be an easier reach. So we get fixed on that and for this the conventional use of spiritual materialism arises, by identifying oneself as a Buddhist or some other label...by collecting empowerments, looking for spiritual accomplishment, and all of that is just another attempt to further construct a solidified view of ego, in which case we are not trying to see that this is just a process, we are trying to define it as something reassuring. That’s how you turn a god into a demon; something that is supposed to liberate, which is Dharma, you turn it into something that just reinforces the narrative of confused mind that believes in the self as an entity. You make the Dharma serve your neurosis. Bravo! What a great job! So you need a spiritual friend who’s going to call your BS, okay? Because you can’t do it by yourself; you’re trapped in it. So you need someone who will tease you about this.

When we were in retreat, everyday after our meal Gendun Rinpoche would come and sit with us and we could ask questions. And we realized after a while that any questions we asked he would give an answer that was so uncomfortable that we stopped asking questions. So he came, and we just sat and tried not to even think, because he might peek in on your thoughts. “No, don’t think.” And then everyone was waiting for the one who would crack first and say, “Rinpoche, could you ...?” And then we were jubilant, because someone was going to be crucified and we would be entertained. And then at one point, when everyone was maintaining the stability and thought-less-ness for self protection...that’s the only reason, because we didn’t want to be slapped in the face, we didn’t want to be insulted how ridiculous and complex our mind was. And at this point Rinpoche said, “Ohhhh, [tibetan...] great yogi beyond conceptual thinking.” And everyone was like, “Ooof.” Of course, then he was shooting at everybody. You need this kind of teacher who is fearless, calls you on your bs, and shows you how you are self-deceiving, how you fool yourself all the time. If you don’t have this external help, qualified, loving and fearless...you don’t learn anything.

And spiritual materialism, the third aspect, is the belief that a certain temporary state of mind is a refuge from suffering, like, “I’m going to meditate so I can forget everything.” You know? You

practice meditation like you take an Advil...just to, like, get rid of the pain. You could just take opium! That would do the job. You wouldn't have to sit for hours, it would be instantaneous. And then you get attached, I mean you get addicted...like you get addicted to opiates, you can get addicted to meditation. Meditation again is serving the only master it has always known; it is "me," the entity that doesn't want to be challenged and disturbed. Like the punk band the Ramones sang, "I wanna be sedated." Sedated so we don't have to face reality...and you need a spiritual friend who is going to wake you up from your enjoyable artificial heavenly paradise. And if you don't have this you can't do it.

These were very brief, but there was a request for it so..the Three Lords, the Three Barbarians of spiritual materialism. You can see how much you can fool yourself, pretending you are practicing for enlightenment when actually you are just cultivating a good nest for the entity of satisfaction and promotion. Nowadays you can have a weekend certification program to become a meditation instructor, and then you can tell other people how to meditate. You know, personally the more I do this the more I feel like, "Who am I to say anything?" Sometimes I really have to kick myself in the butt and say, like, "I have to go out there now and tell them something." Really? Why do you even ask me, why do you even listen to me? What I think sometimes is that I am just as confused as you, really! So if somebody comes to you and says, "Let me tell you the truth" and points a finger at what you should do, I advise caution. This is really in a nutshell what I wanted to share about the relationship between a trainee and a teacher...and also, on the side, about spiritual materialism. Gendun Rinpoche used to call it spiritual arrogance. It's the same idea. Promoting yourself, thinking you are secure; a Lama.

Everyone has to become more independent, as we are walking each other home. And home is interdependence, home is freedom...knowing one's own mind. We take turns. Sometimes I teach you things, sometimes you teach me things...and together we learn. We learn what the Buddha taught and we cultivate a tremendous respect for the path he opened. Having tremendous gratitude for all the men and women who throughout the twenty-five centuries since he passed away have kept this message alive. And relevant. And didn't turn it into some sort of Las Vegas version of the Dharma, you know, bling bling; but rather true, honest, genuine and alive...relevant. That's what happens when the relationship between a teacher and trainee works well.