

Mentoring on the Spiritual Path

Dharma Roadside Dialogue

#4 April 30, 2022

#2 Dialogue

Q: My question is about the cup you mentioned that is faulty while receiving good advice or teachings and so on, and the one that is upside down obviously wouldn't hold anything, and one is cracked, what was the third one you mentioned?

A: Stained, and so it pollutes the purity of the transmission. Let's say you have beautiful tea poured into a cup that has poison in it; if you drink the tea it will kill you. This is why I connected it to spiritual materialism, because these are the three types of stains; physical, psychological, and spiritual forms of stains. We need a teacher who helps us to "clean our cup" first. And because it's us, it's really hard because it almost seems like we have to get rid of ourselves, but really we just have to do a thorough cleansing. That's the third example. And I was saying that this works both for the teacher and the student; usually we think this is only for the student, that the student must be free from the three flaws of the cups. But I really believe the teacher should also be free from this. Actually, if you are not free from that you are not qualified to be a teacher. Do something else; get a job.

The problem is, and this connects to spiritual materialism in a sense, or psychological materialism, that sometimes we think we know and that's good enough. This knowledge has not led to or become a complete transformation of our being. A radical transformation of our being which is experiential. Through the practice of Dharma we should really become a different person, not a different "self," but a person who is not under the influence of mental afflictions. We say in the literature that the sign of literacy is that he or she speaks with measure, using proper language; there is peace in the communication.

And the sign of an accomplished meditator is the absolute absence of mental afflictions; or the control, the subjugation of mental afflictions such as anger, greed, jealousy and arrogance and so forth. This is a sign of accomplishment, and sometimes unfortunately we convince ourselves that we know Dharma. We know it, only. We haven't felt it. And then we pass on the words, which is hearsay. That's the stain of cognition, in the sense that we don't know reality. We think that knowing is sufficient. Knowing is not sufficient; knowing is important, it's essential, but it's not sufficient. Realization is absolutely necessary.

That's a form of pollution in our communication as a teacher, so that's why I believe that the example of the three cups apply to the teacher as well as to the trainee. This being said, Gendun Rinpoche said, because of another example comparing the teacher to a tsatsa, you know, a tsatsa is molded out of clay. So the student should refine the clay, with no grains of sand or pebbles, the clay should be really clarified and processed several times so that any rocks and grit have been removed; that should be the characteristic of the student. And the teacher should be like the mold, or the

form, and the design of the Buddha inside should be perfectly engraved and with no flaws and imperfections. When the two meet, that creates a perfect image of the Buddha. But in this example, Gendun Rinpoche said, “It is more important that the clay of the student be of good quality than the form of the teacher be flawless.” Because if the student is of superior quality, he or she will receive whatever the teacher can give and will complete what is missing by his or her own qualities and research. So it’s even more important that the clay is of good quality, even if the mold is imperfect. Ideally both should be perfect, but do we live in an ideal world?

Q: So when you talk about the student needing to get to a certain point, by getting rid of the “rocks and pebbles” and becoming a fine clay, this suggests that there is a fair amount of work that needs to be done before someone is ready to be in that kind of relationship. Can you say more about what that preparation is, and when you know you are ready?

A: Basically what it means is that whenever you are attending a class, a teacher, a talk, or reading, just simply be there. Be present. Because when you are distracted then you have a subterranean flow of thoughts, you’re somewhere else; you’re reading a book, you flip the page, and then you’re like, “Oh, what was that page even about?” It seemed that you read it, but you didn’t really read it because you were thinking something else. So the idea of the “three cups” is to be present, i.e to turn your cup up and try to really pay attention so that you retain some of what was said, and also make sure that you are not attending this class or listening to this talk or reading this book because you want to nourish one of the “three barbarians” of spiritual materialism. To make it seem like, “Oh, I know, I read the book...so I can tell you what I know.” Have a pure intention. That’s why traditionally we take refuge when we begin a teaching. We take refuge and generate the enlightenment attitude so that our mind is clear...clear in the sense of not stained by any hidden agendas. It’s not so much that you have years of preparation before you can even begin, it’s while you are doing it. It’s a reminder to be here, be attentive, and try to have proper motivation.

The same goes for the teacher. When you’re a teacher and go on a tour, believe me I’ve done that for like 20 some years, there are days when you are inspired and other days you wish you were somewhere else, and have to remind yourself what you are doing here; it’s not about you, about how you feel, it’s about the people, about the Dharma you share. You have to be true, you have to be honest, and you have to give your best...and some days you really have to kick yourself in the butt to make it happen. Because you are tired, or it’s too late, or you’re sick, or on the road and jet-lagged, whatever. You have to be there as the teacher. And if you have nobody “home” when you’re teaching, and they are like ghosts, like empty shells...this happened to me a couple of times...it’s really, really hard.

I remember once I gave a public talk in the museum in Innsbruck, Austria, and there were a fairly good number of people, but I couldn’t connect with these people. I was trying to provoke them, I was saying outrageous things, I was making jokes that I thought were funny, but not them, obviously. It looked like I had a bunch of zombies in front of me, and I was sweating, I was sweating, and there was nothing, there was no feedback...just a bunch of upside down cups. For

whatever reason. So yeah, both must be present. Present, attentive, and fresh; ready for the adventure. When you are on stage you feed from the reaction, you feed yourself from the reaction of the people; it's a catharsis, not just me doing my schtick. It's us meeting and something wonderful happens that doesn't have much to do either with one of us individually...it's the catharsis. And that's Dharma; what comes out is Dharma, not my schtick. My schtick is a concept to maybe create this magic. Maybe. But we have to be two to dance, so that's the idea behind the three cups. It's so rare, maybe we take it for granted, but access to Dharma is rare. You know, this morning I was talking with the French audience online. In France we still have some very precious old masters, old Dharma teachers, and one of them has for 40 plus years doing so much in France, with thousands of students in Europe and everything, but now he is very old and sick and very fragile, so he cannot meet the people since it would be too dangerous for his health or maybe even his life. When people realized that oh, the Lama is not accessible anymore, I was trying to be polite and said, "Yeah, but he goes into the temple to meditate, you could go and meditate with him, or if you cannot go in person, the center has organized online in the temple so you can follow the rituals and be with them in the temple online; he's not dead, he's still here!"

But sometimes I think that the reality is like, "How many years did you know him? What have you been doing during these forty years that you regret now that he is not available? It's not now you should cry, you have missed so many opportunities." Learn from that; don't miss any opportunities, they are not going to come back. Whatever you miss is not going to come back. So when you have the chance to have the time to practice Dharma, just be there. Be present, Be attentive.

Of course, nowadays, what I do is recorded, so you can watch the reruns;~} But reruns are not live. Reruns are not being together. It's maybe better than nothing, that's why we do it, but this is a special time; you carve out time, you make choices..."Oh, it's a Saturday." Luckily today, at least here in Virginia, it's cold and gray, so you don't have as many choices. But if it's nice weather, and it's the weekend and you want to go out and you want to enjoy, maybe you figure you can watch the rerun later...this kind of attitude. But really, get it while you can. Be really present to it. You learn as you do it, you don't need twenty years of preparation, that's what I mean, just jump on it when it happens.

Q: My question is related to your mention of mentoring, which in my work means that people who are veterans at their job can help to guide newcomers. But when it comes to sharing about Buddhism, which I have studied and practiced over time, I am wondering what is the correct way to share with newer students or friends who may ask me. What is appropriate?

A: When we came out of retreat, Gendun Rinpoche gave us some very simple advice regarding teaching. He said, "Always teach from your heart, always teach what you have experienced to be valid that worked for you. Don't elaborate too much, don't teach from books." He meant don't share your concepts; share your living experience. You know, when you have a great scholar, it's very entertaining, because he or she can tell you a lot of stories and show a marvelous display of knowledge and whatnot. But when you stay five minutes with somebody who has realization, you

feel refreshed and enlightened because the authentic being is oozing wisdom and compassion, and you can absorb this. This is way more important than the entertainment.

I often define myself as practicing the fine art of entertained lightening. Partially enlightening and partially entertainment. As a friend of mine said, “You’re so good, you’re the only one I know practicing sit-down comedy.” You know, instead of stand-up comedy, sit-down comedy. This is true, I know that I use a lot of words. Sometimes too much. Too many concepts. The authentic beings, like someone like Gendun Rinpoche or the great masters I have had the privilege to meet, I’m not sure I have it, so I feel a bit like you, I feel like I’m not competent; I feel like I am not qualified...and therefore the temptation is to use concepts to fill the gap, to fill what seems to be missing in terms of realization. And I don’t actually think it’s a good strategy. I don’t think we need to talk so much. To be a living example we need to be the sermon, not the preacher. We need to be an embodiment of what we otherwise might say with words, so people see the quality of Dharma through you...through your body, through the way you communicate, through your kindness, through your attentiveness, and they don’t feel your trying to sell them a new “bible.”

It’s very important. And for you it’s very important because you feel that you are good enough to do that. As you said, we’ve known each other for many, many years, you’ve practiced, you’ve studied, you are very, very dedicated to your practice and your study and you have some experiences and some things that have profoundly affected your life; it’s not just knowledge, these things that are deeply in your mind and that can be perceived in your behavior and the way you act and the way you speak. And that’s what other people, your friends, will see. If you try to sell them a bible they will know it’s just an old medicine show, like you’re just trying to sell them something. But if you are just a human being talking to a human being, again, we are just walking each other home.

And if you have this interest from someone, in answering their question you can share that ‘this is what I have understood on that point, this is really something that helped me in difficult times, or deepened my understanding,’ and so that’s what you can share. And then if they want more, then you can say, “If you want to study more, or read more, Google Buddhadharma.” Dharma is everywhere, at a Dharma center, for instance, and if there were books that have been helpful to you, you can certainly share these books.

For me now, I’m just “selling” three books, or four; these are all books by Shamar Rinpoche. I say, “My “bible” is *Path to Awakening*, and *Boundless Wisdom*, and if it’s too much to read, then *Boundless Awakening*; if you want to really practice you can have this, and that’s good. And then if you want to know more you can read *Buddha Nature*, and you can also read the view and meditation of Mahamudra if you really want to read more. But frankly, *Path to Awakening* and *Boundless Wisdom*, or *Boundless Awakening* if you can’t really read all of that, that’s just good. You’ve got enough to practice, you’ve got the basics. I think the most important thing for all of us is not to doubt ourselves, like, “I don’t have the degree.”

I think I mentioned earlier, I left school very early; like I spent less time in school than Greta Thunberg. So sometimes I feel that I'm underqualified. I'm very impressed when I go to Washington and Lee or some other university to teach; and I think someone might call security and have me evicted for being an imposter, "What are you doing here?" So I have to overcome this; I'm a human being and that's good enough. You are a human being and that's good enough. We have experience that we can share and that's very good, let's share that. You know, we don't fall into the psychology called materialism of trying to pretend we are someone by the amount of books we have read or the number of PhDs we have. We might have all the letters of the alphabet in front of our name, it doesn't make us a different person...we sit on the same toilet in the morning as everybody else, right? It's who we are that makes the difference, and this is what you share.

That's why we were always impressed and flocked around Gendun Rinpoche, because that's what we could all perceive; this is someone very rare and precious and I have to stay and absorb as much as I can. We can all do that, and it's a very good training, because in a way it obliges us to be the best we can. To really tap into our real experience and not just pretending we know, or afraid we don't know; all of these ego related unnecessary concerns. We don't do this to gain anything, so if people like it, that's great, if they don't like it, that's just fine. You know, if you like what I say that's fine, if you don't like what I say, that's fine. Maybe I'll learn from your criticism, maybe I was not good enough or precise enough in my explanations, so thank you so much, I will learn to be more concise, and more precise, so I learn...maybe you didn't learn much, but I learned a lot, thank you. But don't hesitate, this is a beautiful treasure, we need to share it...with whoever shows the slightest interest. Even if it's just for one second, because you plant a seed in the stream of their consciousness. And this curiosity will grow, and one day they will reach enlightenment.

Q: Do you recommend reading or hearing teachers from other branches of Buddhism in order to explore a different outlook, or is it better to stay closer to Bodhi Path teachers and the path that we know?

A: Yeah, of course. Of course. I don't know if I shared here or in the previous session in French, but I shared that the great teacher Kalu Rinpoche, the previous one, wrote a long life prayer for the 16th Karmapa, and at the end, at the conclusion, he just wanted to share his position, and he said, "All the traditions are respectable, all the traditions that lead to some sort of awakening are respectable; mine is the Kagyupa. My teacher is Karmapa. Old is my body, happy is my mind." And he concluded by, "Ha Ha Ha." Laughter. So he first says all the different traditions that share the teachings of the Buddha are a valid path to enlightenment, and so there's no need for segregation or exclusion...but 'if you ask me, my tradition is the Kagyupa, my teacher is Karmapa. And as far as I am concerned, my body is old, but my mind is happy.'

So I've learned a lot from all the other traditions, and one thing I've learned is that they use different languages, they use different wording. For example, if you read Dogen, from the Soto Zen tradition, it's different language. For example, for bodhicitta they say bodhicitta, but we translate this as 'mind of awakening,' and they translate it 'seeking mind.' Seeking mind, mind is looking for something.

This is just an example to show you that when you can understand that the same core teaching of the Buddha can be approached from different angles, by different cultures, by different teachers, with different languages, you don't have to be fixed and attached to the words; you have to understand the meaning. You don't fix on the finger, you look at the moon that the finger is pointing out. So that's one very important thing because there are so many debates and discussions that 'this is like this, this is like that;' hairsplitting. Philosophy, debates... 'are you madhyamika svatantrika or prasangika...do you think it is empty of everything or do you think it's a qualified emptiness?' Pffff. Give me a break.

If it's your life's path that you're going to be a scholar and so forth, that's great, go and debate. But, you know, how does it help me in everyday life to free myself from affliction and come to know the true nature of my mind? So then you read that many cultures and many teachers and many traditions in many, many countries since 2500 hundred years are trying to make available in their time and their culture and to the people speaking their language, to make the Dharma available. That's all that matters. So I learned this when I studied other traditions; like when I read some texts from Sakya or Kagyu or Nyingma (when I want to stay in the Tibetan world.)

Shamar Rinpoche once told me, "Oh yeah, all these writers like Longchenpa and others, they're basically rebranding everything. Like they just tell the same old stories, they just give them new names." With all the respect in the world. And he said, "All these philosophers of India, hairsplitting endlessly...is this Nagarjuna?" You know, you can't say anything against Nagarjuna. So you have this sort of distance; respecting, absolutely respecting, but at the same time saying, hey, the core is the same; don't fall into the psychological materialism where you cling onto the view, cling onto the definitions and words. That's what I learn when I read or listen to other teachings. I've learned that you can say it with many different words. And that helps me, then, to look at painters and poets and dancers and see that some of them are talking using different words or no words.

Once I was taking part in a class of political philosophy at Washington and Lee University with my friend Eduardo who was a professor there. And Shamar Rinpoche asked me, "Can I come?" and I said, "Sure!" I asked Eduardo if it would be okay and he said that of course Shamar Rinpoche could come, and so Rinpoche came to the class. Washington and Lee is small, one class has ten or twelve students maximum. And so they were talking about the phenomenology of perception, with each student explaining how they understand perception; how the mind that perceives comes to know the object that is perceived, and they had to make a final report of their understanding of what they had been studying. Rinpoche was there and was listening, and at some point he said to me, "This is *prajnana*." This is what it is called in Tibetan, this phenomenology of perception, studying perception; how mind works. And I said, "Yes, it's the same. They use different words."

There was one young woman who was the "A" student type, and she made a very brilliant report. She was really aiming for the A+...it was pretty obvious. Everything was very well labeled and so on, but also a kind of 'copy and paste' of what she had heard and what she read, you know? They had

freedom of expression about how they would present their report, and there was another young woman who was a theater major and also into graphic arts, and was taking political philosophy on the side...and she had made a collage. It was on the wall, it was a huge collage, and so she explained the phenomenology of perception through the collage; Rinpoche was very impressed. He said, "That's great! She really hit the nail on the head, not like the curly blonde..that was too much thinking!" And then he went up to this girl and invited her...oh yeah, because she was studying literature, she was studying mostly Shakespeare, which was Rinpoche's second favorite author, after Machiavelli. Rinpoche had these two favorites. And then he invited all the students to come and have breakfast at his house at 8 am the next day, and he'd show them his library. So the next day all these kids came to Rinpoche's house, and he received them and we offered them breakfast, and then he was talking with this girl about Shakespeare and her understanding and his understanding, and so on. And she said, "Hey, you know, tonight we have a rehearsal of the play that I wrote, why don't you come? And Rinpoche said, "Sure!"

And then at 5 pm Rinpoche was gone to the theater at Washington and Lee to be in the audience when she was rehearsing the play; he totally got her. He got that she knew what she was talking about from the inside, and that she wasn't aiming for an A+ grade from Professor Eduardo Valezques, she was just expressing her understanding...and he totally got it. It was not using the language of Buddhist philosophy or madhyamika or whatever, the "lingo;" she used her own lingo. And so that's what is important, that we are able to understand from inside and so that any words or form of expression that is not verbal can be used to share an experience and kindle the experience in the mind of the person you are talking to. That's how it works. Transmission of Dharma is kindling, it's not like putting water in an empty bucket. So that's what we really need to do, and I think that comes back to Christine's question; we can share that, we can share our experience. Because we'll find somebody to connect with...there will be a catharsis, boom, Dharma will arise. There will be a true experience of the Dharma of realization, not just scriptural Dharma, not just the words and the concepts. Because words are often very, very dividing and excluding. I don't trust words. I play with them a lot, I use them, I abuse them, but I don't trust them.

Q: Since my main teacher, Shamar Rinpoche, passed away some years ago now, am I supposed to be looking for another teacher or spiritual friend? Are some of the other people Rinpoche invited here considered spiritual friends? I am just wondering if I am missing something, as I followed this conversation today?

A: You are one of the happy few that met Shamar Rinpoche at home, in his home. And I think that when Shamar Rinpoche will be the historical Buddha, we will be around him in Bodhgaya, and there we will be his close family of brothers and sisters; of course, somewhat like all families, dysfunctional from time to time. But mostly loving and full of respect, even if sometimes it rubs a little bit. But you are part of the few, the happy few. I told that to the people who gathered here after Rinpoche passed away, asking the same question...like, do I need to find a spare? A spare Rinpoche, a spare guru;~} Like looking in the trunk of the car, for a spare Rinpoche..ha! No, you don't, you don't have to.

You still attend teachings to deepen your understanding of Dharma and so on, that's just fine. Shamar Rinpoche, with this group, and I'm really talking about the original first group of students in Natural Bridge, had created a very personal connection...and I really invited everybody to do just a little bit of memory work, get past the grief of Rinpoche being gone, and maybe even feeling lost and like an orphan for some; to go back into your memories. There was maybe a moment where something happened, an empowerment with Rinpoche; maybe it was just a smile, maybe a word, maybe something, maybe you shared a glass of Bordeaux with him...and then something happened. Then just go back as often as you can to these moments, and in your mind recreate this moment; actually relive this moment, so you can do it again and again and again. You know, we call it guru yoga, but that means go back in time to this moment when there was this contact, something special that maybe your conscious mind that is so busy with many things doesn't keep a trace of it, but if you sit still for a while you just go back to this moment...but something happened here. And that's going to be the beginning of your recollection, and that's going to be your practice. That's practice from the heart. There's maybe not much to say, or no words if you try to describe it, like everybody says, "Really, he said hi when you met him?" Haha, it doesn't mean anything to anybody else, but for you this was a transformative moment, and you can always come back to that and then mind this space. Because maybe it was really quick and you barely noticed this; just go back there. Go back there.

The first time I met Shamar Rinpoche was in 1979, and he came to Dhagpo Kagyu Ling where I was (I was already a monk) and I was supposed to lead him to his residence with incense, and he came out of the car and looked at me and began to talk to me in Tibetan! He called me Geshe. "Geshe, I'm so happy to see you! Where's your house, what are you doing here?" All in Tibetan, and I was just floored. I don't know, I couldn't do anything. So I reconnected with him. We have met so many times before. It's just like, remember? As if we had met last week. For him, there was no interruption. For me it was like, "Yeah, I was born in Paris, why do you talk to me in Tibetan?" I reconnected. I reconnected; we knew each other. From this point on, it was just like reconnecting, going on in our exchange and conversation, mind training and all of that. And so I value this moment, even if I was floored and I was speechless, which for me is something, this was an absolutely mind-blowing moment. And I never tried to rationalize it, saying like, "Why did he call me this, and what was the reason?" I don't care. What was important beyond the words was to reconnect. We knew each other; unfinished business. Chop chop, let's get to work. So you have something like this; all of the people in Natural Bridge or students who are on this call from DC, or other places who had contact with Rinpoche got a particular connection with this Buddha. Just keep it alive, go back to it, this is your safe place; not to sleep but to grow; this is your greenhouse. That's where your Buddha tree grows.

And now when you listen to other teachers and you receive Dharma instructions, what's the harm? But the main one was this, and this is a gift. Because of former karma, good karma and precious human life, meeting with a Buddha and cups were up and clean with no cracks. That's what happened, so cherish this. Cherish this.

And those that didn't meet him, don't feel sorry. You know, there was a young woman, a girl; she was a teenager and was the niece of one of the lama women who lived at the monastery. She was maybe fifteen, I don't know, and she said, "You were so lucky, because when you were around my age or maybe a bit older, you met Gendun Rinpoche, you met Karmapa, and I haven't met anybody. I have no personal connection with anybody." And I said, "Make wishes, make good wishes, it will happen." And one summer she came to spend the holidays at the monastery with her auntie, and that was the summer when Karmapa was there, the summer when Khenchen Trinley Paljor Rinpoche, who was Karmapa's tutor, came to transmit all the Six Yogas of Naropa and everything to Karmapa, and her auntie was actually helping; preparing the meals and so on for Khenchen Rinpoche. And so she helped her auntie, and of course, she totally connected with Khenchen Rinpoche, who was such a great scholar and realized person but very down to earth; you know, some people would see him as their grandfather, their Dharma grandfather. They totally hit it off, they had this contact. And later that summer I was going down south near her parents house, so I drove her back home so she wouldn't have to take the train. During the trip she kept telling me, "Khenchen Rinpoche told me this, and he said maybe I should practice that," and she was so happy, and I said, "Nalli, what was it you said last year when you told me your life was a total mess because you hadn't met a teacher? I told you make wishes and it will happen, and now it's happening," and she was just so happy. And then, long story short, she is a very successful woman, she lives and works in Shanghai in luxury products...she does promotions, etc. And for many years I had not seen her because she's living and working in Shanghai, but I met her in Kathmandu when we were there for the funeral of Sharmapa, and I asked her what she was doing? She was about 25 or 30 at the time I guess. And I was so happy to see that at heart she was the same very simple and pure-hearted mountain girl. Even though she was living in the most 'big money, big party city,' and she said, "I learn a lot in my job, and now I'm building up my contact list, and once I build up a good list, I will start my own business and I will become a millionaire...and then I will sponsor all Karmapa's projects." So that's her project for life. She wants to work, become a millionaire, and she wants to sponsor all Karmapa's projects. And she's a girl who was born and raised in the mountains, in a very remote area. She has an amazing future, she has a heart connection with Khenchen Rinpoche (the heart connection is still there even though he has departed this life) and she had also a very strong connection with Shamar Rinpoche and later on with Karmapa (and so she's part of the Karmapa mandala activity.) So...it happens. Make good wishes and dedication. It's really amazing that I can say I know a millionaire with a very clear mind;~} Not greedy, very well-intentioned. Wow, we need more of this! It's a beautiful story, and when you meet her, at heart she still has this very simple pure mind, even while being a skilled highly successful and experienced professional. Her parents were practitioners, her aunt a lama at the monastery, and she bathed in this from a very young age. The bodhicitta is in her heart; she's a very, very nice person. That's so good.