



Reflections on Teaching

I was asked to write a few reflections on my 30 + years of Dharma teaching, which includes 25 years of sharing the Buddha's message in Seattle. First and foremost it is and has been a joy to help guide the spiritual lives of others and a sacred honor to have accompanied many people through their struggles. The students' trust and raw honesty fed me over the years, and I have felt welcomed into an intimacy that few people share.

I have always felt that both the student and I needed to be equally exposed if we were to genuinely meet each other. I believe that the process can only be authentic when both parties were willing to meet without pretension. Often, usually after many minutes of serious discussion, the students and I would meet in a stillness beyond separation where our roles were abandoned. This is sacred ground, where the practice dissolves, and we meet as one.

I must also confess that teaching has taken its toll over the years, but perhaps not in the way you might imagine. The impact was not from the endless pain that a teacher encounters through countless interactions, and it was not from burnout or compassion fatigue. A teacher usually learns early on to hold the suffering of others without disrupting his/her own life. No, the price of teaching for me came from the way most students frame their connection with teachers. That relationship is usually based upon need or want. From the student's perspective the teacher is usually seen as someone who knows something they do not. The teacher is rarely viewed as the ordinary person that as he/she is, but rather as someone who has something to offer. This wanting something from the teacher keeps the relationship uneven.

This is not wrong or inappropriate, and in fact is the basis for almost all teaching, but it can mold the teacher into a skewed self-image. When the student projects specialness onto the teacher, most teachers actually enjoy that projection. For the most part, almost all of us who teach like being seen as the embodiment of the nobility of the Dharma. Again that is perhaps to be expected, but if we look behind the veil of that uplift, we will likely see that it masks the unconscious pain of the teacher. Wherever there is unexplored pain there will be distortion, and Dharma teaching is no exception.

Herein lies the rub. If the teacher really wants to be free but is unable to separate who he/she really is from that projection, then he/she has to step away from these unbalanced interactions so that the pain can be explored and the truth be seen. Exposing our shadow is never easy. We would much prefer the projected image than the darkness of our self-assumptions, but any distorted image keeps part of our minds from being exposed and examined. At some point in the journey hiding from our shadow becomes intolerable.

One teaching point that fits in with this topic is the fact that the Dharma is not special, holy, or ethereal. If you believe this then you could easily be lured into a cult. If Dharma teachers feign an otherworldly demeanor then he/she has strayed far from the truth because the truth is that the Dharma is ordinary. The Dharma is simply the way things are without pretension or excess, and a true teacher should understand and embody that fact by becoming ordinary, natural, and authentic. Please remember this as the litmus test for your involvement with any Dharma group or teacher.

When I retire, I am retiring from that endearing and heartfelt affection that has been both enriching and self-limiting. It is difficult to do, but for me the pull of my unfinished work is stronger than the desire to be seen beyond what I know myself to be. I am retiring *into* the shadow of my life. What is left I do not fear; I fear what I leave undone. In the number of years remaining, I want to meet everyone as a human being without pretense or confusion. I want to meet all beings without the uplift of their expectations or projections. I want to clear away the veil of difference and allow life to genuinely meet itself, and that does not mean you have to lose your projections, it means I can no longer want them. This is my work, not yours.

This does not preclude the many areas of growth and joy I have experienced over the years from learning while teaching. Let me share a few key lessons:

I have learned the tenderness of personal pain, and to walk with someone into his or her life is hallowed ground. I have learned that most of us believe deeply in our personal story, and our story is usually bound within painful self-images. I have found it humbling to explore those assumptions with a student, but I have also discovered that though I understand the students are not the person of their narrative, the students usually do not understand this. For many years I unskillfully tried to rush the students to that conclusion, but it inevitably backfired in different forms of reaction. I have learned that a student's need for identity is not my problem to solve. It takes time and commitment from the students to unwind themselves from the trappings of their narrative, and that takes patience from the teacher as well as the students.

I have learned to allow people to guide their own process and to move forward only as far as they wish. Though I may know a freedom beyond where they may arrest their process, my role is to accompany them through their process without trying to have them live my expectations or intentions.

This has allowed me to understand the nature of growth itself. To understand growth, first we have to take the imaginary individual out of it, and see growth as life attempting to complete itself. When left alone, awareness seeks its own completion and the unconscious becomes conscious. Our spiritual practice is to see the truth behind the obvious, to see what is being falsely promoted or denied. If we have the intention to do that and only that, our freedom is assured. Patience guides the process. It is only our minds that attempt to hurry our growth. The timing of our spiritual journey is natural to each one of us; it is not the speed of our partner or friend. When we are in competition, we are competing with our ignorance.

The most an outside facilitator can do to offer the maximum environment for that growth to occur is to listen without judgment, to allow the story and accompanying insights to arise on their own within the safety of one's attention. To react to the narrative usually sends the message that something is wrong with the speaker and infuses negative energy into the exploration, which ultimately forces the trauma deeper into the speaker's unconscious.

Growth only comes when we are willing to examine our beliefs. Sometimes the desire to sustain those beliefs and hold on to the accompanying narrative is stronger than the desire to be free of the pain. This means that we have not sufficiently seen the suffering contained within those beliefs, and more time is needed. When those limitations are understood and realized, we will give them up on our own, in our own timing.

My hope for the Theravadin lineage going forward is that it does not solely focus on the social and personal pressures of the time. Certainly those problems need to be included within the overall growth in the consciousness of our humanity, but Buddhism is unique in that it does not stop with the personal. It points beyond the reference of I, me, and mine toward the common denominator of the formless that

holds all things. It is so easy to get lost in the specific disruptions and denial patterns of our current situation that we lose this perspective. But as taught to me by my many teachers, it is only by keeping our eye on the universal freedom espoused by the Buddha that these specific problems will have a final resolution.

Yes, awakening takes time even as it is based in the timeless reality of now. I have learned that life is moving in accordance to its own natural unfolding, and we are along to fully experience the ride. It has been a delight to play a small role within that process, and seeing you grow as students and friends is what has sustained my teaching in the face of self-doubt and controversy. The job has been fulfilling not because I have been a significant player but because you have allowed me to be in attendance.

Bowing in humility,

Rodney