

Teacher and Inner Teacher

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The master sees things as they are,
without trying to control them
She lets them go their own way
and resides at the center of the circle.
—*Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Mitchell

I have been a teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen since 2009, and I practiced Zen for about 26 years before becoming a teacher. I was also a schoolteacher, so being a Zen teacher is not entirely new. A teacher's position is a very powerful one. I knew that even as a little girl, as my mother was also a schoolteacher, and many children often came to our house to get additional help from her. I always knew I would be a teacher; however, something about being a Zen teacher is also completely different from being a schoolteacher. Nonetheless, they have two things in common: power and trust.

When I became a schoolteacher, I was still very young, and some of my students in high school were only a few years younger than me. It was difficult both to be friendly and also to do my teaching job, in order to prepare students for exams and later to give them knowledge useful in their adult life. I understood the importance of keeping healthy boundaries, so they could feel more grounded and safe and for them to trust the teaching process.

I perceived the job of a Zen teacher when I started practicing in my early 20s; somehow, this fascinated me. I once told Zen Master Seung Sahn that I wanted to be a teacher, and he said very loudly, "Wonderful!" At that time, I wasn't aware why this job appeared to be so awesome. At that time, I wasn't as conscious as I am now of how much power a Zen teacher may have. According to Rob Preece in *The Wisdom of Imperfection: The Challenge of Individuation in Buddhist Life* (Snow Lion, 2006), "This can lead to a greater depth of insight into the power of the relationship as well as the potential dangers contained within it."

Carl Jung said that human beings have a tendency to project onto others some of their internal dreams. Not perceiving the power within themselves, they project it onto people who hold powerful positions. One of the most powerful positions is that of spiritual teacher. Other powerful professions are often connected with fame or notoriety, such as directors or celebrities. Humans love to attract attention and be recognized by others, and those who do this are also given power by the ones who look at them.

Nowadays we are in a time of challenging powerful people who have abused their power. This is a time of coming out with the truth, following years of pain after being abused. This is a time of the #MeToo movement, when many women and some men have finally decided to confront and overcome the pain in their life that had come from their own power being taken away through an act of abuse. Power becomes very attractive and desirable, perhaps because it has

the ability to make a human feel most alive and to make life greatly meaningful.

The position of spiritual teacher carries a reflection of the human dream of being superhuman, free from human limitations. In Jung's language, it is an archetype of guru, a deep part of our psyche. Preece points out, "When we encounter an individual who draws out our projection of the archetype of the guru the effect can be dramatic." I remember my first visit to Warsaw in 1981 and the reaction of people who told me that Zen Master Seung Sahn could go to different planets and was fighting with demons while doing night practice.

It was shocking and dramatic to see this under the Communist regime in Poland, but it was probably what people needed—the great guru and teacher, the superhuman. According to Preece, "As we transfer the inner archetype onto the outer person we may see him or her as truly awesome. We may fall in love with the wonder and inspirational quality we are seeing.

"As we do so, that person begins to have a powerful effect on our psyche."

The person may have great gifts and qualities, but if it were not an archetypal projection, the effect wouldn't be so dramatic.

This phenomenon is what we face as teachers. It is critical, and maybe more so in these times, that teachers see their power and use it wisely to help students toward a more authentic and mature relationship. It may, however, happen that a teacher is unaware or even in denial of the subtle motivating forces that lead to using this power for their own ends, thereby abusing students as well. We are perhaps most aware of sexual relationships between the teacher and student, but this is certainly not the only form. It can lead to abuse of power and trust not only with the student but also with the whole community.

Sometimes the teacher-student relationship may have a resemblance to the parent-child relationship. It can be very healing, if the trust a student has with the teacher is not exploited. Very often our wounds around parental difficulties leave us with longing for a perfect parent. If this is unconscious, it may well be projected onto the teacher as a longed-for ideal parent.

Sometimes this projection may be so intense that it becomes unbearable for a teacher. It is important in that case that teachers see their limitations and perhaps talk with the student and encourage them to seek help outside this relationship. This honesty about the teacher's limitation can be quite important and may help the student to find their own way of healing and regaining the power lost some time in childhood.

It may also happen that a teacher makes a mistake, and the student keeps silence. For the student, it is important to speak out. This helps the student, and their healing and self-

protection should be their primary concern. It also helps the teacher and the sangha, for speaking out can prevent further harm. Even without direct harm, in many situations, interactions between student and teacher provoke the student's disillusionment and the confusion that goes along with it. It helps to return to reality and get back our own power. While this may be painful, we may end up being more connected with our own inner authority and our own inner teacher, and thus learn to trust ourselves. If there is less illusion in the first place within the teacher-student relationship then the process of becoming independent is faster and less painful.

It seems that modern life is disillusionment's friend. Espe-

cially in Western culture, we are encouraged to be self-sufficient. In a way, this creates a healthy suspicion of others and their motives. In another way, it inhibits healthy connections with others. This self-sufficiency can also inhibit cult-like behaviors in different religious organizations, making it less likely that the student will spoil the teachers with too much respect.

What is the perfect model of a teacher, then? In the words of Rob Preece: "authentic in his openness about himself, his joys, and his struggles." I would add: always developing, empathetic, challenging students, a great listener who helps students to be fully human. ♦

Karma Does Not Define Our Situation. What's Important Is What Kind of Choices We Make.

Zen Master Bon Shim (Aleksandra Porter)

From a dharma talk given during winter Kyol Che at Wu Bong Sa Temple

The most common explanation about karma is cause and effect. What that means is that whatever happens in our life, whatever we are facing, what we are dealing with, whatever obstacles and hindrances and pain and suffering—whatever we have comes from some primary cause. But if you practice for some time then you see the meaning of karma in a broader way. That means that karma does not define our situation. What's important is what kind of choices we make.

This is an important point. You cannot make excuses like "that is my karma" because it's an open situation. What's important is what you do with your karma, what kind of choices you make. And if you make right choices, then your karma might become your dharma. And then you can get free of your karma. Or at least you can control your karma. It always works in this way. Either karma controls you, or you control your karma. Having a human body means we have some karma. You cannot get rid of it, but you can use it.

You can practice, and then for the first time you can see your karma. This always comes first. You have to see your karma, and sitting a retreat, even a one-day or one-week retreat, is enough time to see your karma. Some of it. Not the whole picture—you cannot get the whole picture in one week, but you can see some of your tendencies. If you are very careful and really pay attention, you'll see your tendencies. You see your craving and you see what you are trying to get away from. You see your mind, which is maybe judging. You see yourself as not having enough confidence or believing in yourself. All of this is karma. So first see it and face it.

And then if you see it and you face it, and you have enough courage to really face it, then you can work with your karma, deal with your karma, which is to control your

karma, and eventually use your karma.

Of course it is a long process, because as we all know very well, our patterns are deeply rooted. It's true. Practice is like going against the stream, so it's hard work. And it requires a lot of effort, a lot of determination and perseverance. And of course, paying attention, because you can see your tendencies, but you can transform that if you pay attention.

This is like a first gate. You cannot do anything if you do not pay attention. It's the small things; it's not like a big transformation happening like this. [*Snaps her fingers.*] It doesn't happen this way.

Sometimes we look at our path like it is one line, and we hope that going on this path just means getting better, being more happy, having more joy, having a more successful life.

But that has never been my experience. It doesn't go like this; it's not a linear movement. It always goes around. We have life and death, and we have samsara. You are going up, then you are coming down. You have success; you have a good sitting. We can see this during one week. Every day, every block of sitting: one moment you are happy and you feel good. "My meditation is great, so clear, so strong." And the next moment, even the next round of sitting, sometimes the next five minutes, "What happened?" Some fear or maybe anger just came out of the blue. But if you sit long enough then you don't pay so much attention to that. It's changing, changing, your thinking, your feeling, your emotions are changing. Don't worry about all this karma coming and going; what is most important is to return back to before thinking, our original mind, over and over. We practice letting go, and we practice starting over again and again. What a privilege! ♦