



Four Ways to Authenticate a Genuine Buddhist Teacher

Many students in the Bodhi Path Buddhist Centers have asked me to explain how to find a good meditation teacher. As this is an important question and something that many people are curious about, here is a brief explanation.

Good meditation teachers are usually people who live very simply. 'Living simply' means someone who has renounced everything and lives free of the many things that may burden most people's lives. He or she will likely stay in a quiet, isolated place such as a cave or small hut in the mountains. For the most part, great meditators are not people who are known widely as highly ranked spiritual teachers. Instead, they have spent many years of their lives in retreat, and when not in retreat are completely stable in their daily meditation practice. Even figuring out where to look for such a great meditator is not easy. You can begin to search for them by enquiring from Buddhist people who know meditators, and then you should analyse how they live. If someone is not really accomplished in meditation, they will not be able to live for long in such conditions.

Teachers who travel regularly may not be the best meditation teachers. While one cannot generalise, the mind of someone who travels regularly is likely preoccupied by many things. This happens because of what one sees and experiences in one's daily life, even ordinary things like big supermarkets and malls. Add to that the more exceptional experiences like having devotees invite one to many events, and it is not difficult to understand that such a mind may already be distracted. While this is not true 100% of the time, in most cases it is. And a person with a distracted mind will not be a good meditation teacher. Therefore finding someone who lives in an isolated setting and is dedicated to meditation is already putting you on the right path to find an appropriate meditation teacher. The following guidelines will make this more clear.

When you set out to examine a teacher, you will see that there are four kinds. These four kinds of teachers can be categorised according to two things: their scholarly understanding of dharma, and their mastery of essential instructions. Essential instructions are the key to unlock the heart of the teachings. Each practice has a key that is not openly explained, and it is held by those few serious practitioners who were taught it by a long line of the most experienced meditators. Some teachers are scholars who have no essential instructions. Then there are teachers who have key instructions but no scholarly training or ability. There are also teachers who are both key holders and scholars. The fourth type of teacher is one who has no key or scholarly training. Among the four, only the last needs to be completely avoided.

Of course, each type of teacher can benefit you in a specific way. If you only follow the dharma that is explained in a scholarly way, that is good. To only

follow key instructions without scholarly training is very good. If you follow both the scholarly training and the key instructions, that is supremely good. It perhaps goes without saying that having neither scholarly access to the dharma nor key instructions does zero good! But in any case, to reach the goal you need the key.

For a general audience in need of the most basic introduction, the type of teacher who is only trained as a scholar is very good. For very advanced practitioners engaging in intense practice, the teacher who only holds key instructions is excellent. Finally, the combined scholar/keyholder is perfectly suited for any type or level of student. The fourth type of teacher, the one with neither scholarly training nor key instructions, is perfect for nobody. Ironically, it is also the type of teacher that many may be tempted to follow.

You might wonder how it is possible to judge if someone is truly learned, or if they are a great meditator who holds the essential instructions. To start to determine if someone is learned, you can begin by looking into this person's background - check their scholarly training and qualifications. Do some research in the community where that person was trained or teaches to make sure they have the training and qualifications they claim. A thorough investigation of their background is the best way to know if they are qualified or not.

Unfortunately it is impossible to determine if someone is a great meditator, so looking for a meditation teacher is a different thing altogether. You can find information out about the person to see if he or she spent many years in retreat or not, if he or she lives in a way that embodies renunciation. One thing is for sure - if someone is claiming to be a great meditation teacher, or claiming to be enlightened, that person is not at all reliable. Anyone who consistently claims greatness, who tries to control his or her students strongly by claiming that is the nature of samaya, who tries to tell you that if you don't obey their commands you will go to hell, who is clearly trying to collect money, should not be trusted. To learn dharma perfectly from the right teacher you must drop your ordinary concepts and learn to look with new eyes. You cannot search for a meditation teacher the same way you look for something like a good brand of toothpaste. Following the best advertising campaign will not lead to the right teacher. If you judge according to such things as status, wealth, or number of followers you will not find the right meditation teacher.

Just like a good meditation teacher, someone who wants to be a good meditator must also renounce attachment to worldly life. A meditator should live simply, without too many responsibilities, and without ambition. In order to focus, you must be willing to renounce.

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