

Lineage Tradition Teaching Guidelines

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This message is to clarify to all of my students the need to protect the teachings. The heart of a pointing out style of teaching is the teacher-student relationship. In this relational style of teaching, the obligation of the teacher is to explain the nature of the mind, to give careful wording of meditation instructions according to the level of the student(s), to explain the expected meditation outcomes in a way that is aligned with the authoritative texts and commentaries in the lineage, and to identify problems and offer ways to correct them. The special pointing out instructions for awakening the mind traditionally have been protected, and to receive them comes with the duty to respect and protect them. The teacher-student relationship is central in helping the student overcome where he or she is stuck, identifying misunderstandings and ways the practice has gone off track, and ensuring that the student has a chance to refine the practice to awaken the mind. In a lineage tradition based on direct transmission, the issue of holding authority for the teachings is not to be taken lightly, and although for purposes of minimizing the disease of idealization that is destructive in this culture I have served as your ‘tour guide,’ that has not been meant to minimize the obvious authority or authorship of my approach to teaching.

The question of authorization to teach and teacher training has come to our attention. Here are five guidelines we are now recommending for the development of teachers:

1. Motivation. In a lineage tradition the motivation to teach is extremely important. Traditionally, teachers are asked to teach or nominated to teach by a senior teacher. Lack of self-importance and a genuine desire to help others are considered necessary ingredients. Therefore, the situation is complex when a student asks to teach or says, “I want to teach this,” because the motivation at least in part arises from self-grasping. Just as the ‘self’ cannot realize the awakened nature of the mind, the ‘self’ cannot teach the dharma. So far, I have authorized only three people to teach this Pointing Out Style, Susan Mickel, George Protos, and Gretchen Nelson all of whom I asked to teach. While other students have asked me to teach, I have sometimes used these individuals in more limited capacity, until the issue of motivation and competence to teach could be resolved. Currently, I am also training John Churchill to teach.

2. Realization. Those given authority to teach in the Pointing Out Style must have genuine realization of the real nature of the mind, and that realization must be relatively continuous in daily life in a way that has transformed that life. The issue of realization is complex because of the dangers of false conceptualization of realization that may be confused for genuine realization (a kind of self and other deception in the service of self grasping), genuine realization that is ‘off’, and genuine realization that is situation-specific and therefore unstable.

3. Comprehensive Knowledge of the Path. Those qualified to teach generally have a thorough knowledge of the authoritative textual tradition; a working knowledge of the technical terms for each stage of the path; a careful knowledge of how to word meditation instructions for each stage of the path; and a thorough knowledge of the desired states and problems that occur at each stage. For example, I have spent 40 years learning the textual tradition and the technical language, and the last 20 years refining the wording for each of the meditation instructions. The assumption that some students have made, namely that it is OK to transcribe tapes and teach from them by mimicking the words, with limited knowledge of the textual tradition or the technical language is remarkable.

4. Talent as a Teacher. Even genuine realization in meditation doesn't automatically translate into talent as a teacher. There are a number of great Indo-Tibetan meditation masters, who are extremely accomplished as meditators, but who simply aren't very good at teaching. In my case, I went to graduate school as a Danforth Fellow, a fellowship given to a small number of young talented teachers in the country. As part of the Danforth, I was actually trained to teach (of course in another area, not the dharma).

5. Character. Perhaps the most important ingredient in teaching the dharma is good character. That is why the issue of teaching out of self-importance or teaching out of a need to teach rarely works out. Good character is lived. That is why a teacher often spends many years with a student observing the student before teaching the student anything of value. In the Tibetan tradition before a student is taught, the student must first prove his or her worthiness to teach by demonstrating good character over time.

Tsonkhapa, in the Great Treatise, addresses the "Four Dark Practices" that erode the development of Bodhicitta. These are, deceiving one's teacher, deceiving others in the name of the dharma, harmful speech, and intentionally causing regret or doubt in others who are sincerely practicing. Deception covers half the list of dark practices. In the West, the entire foundation of a healing relationship like a psychotherapy relationship or a doctor-patient relationship is based on trust. Without basic trust the healing relationship is fundamentally flawed. Likewise, the spiritual teacher-student relationship is fundamentally flawed where there is deception.

Teacher Training

Given the nature of these requirements, I see the issue of training others to teach the Pointing Out Style of meditation as something that requires a lot of time and careful consideration. I have worked with George Protos for over a decade and he has assisted in over a dozen retreats. Susan Mickel was already a mindfulness meditation teacher before training with me, and she has assisted in around a dozen courses. I have given both of them the specific teacher instructions for each stage of the path. Both have my authority to teach retreats. Whenever they teach they run it by me ahead of time, and when questions arise regarding teaching they readily communicate with me during the retreat. More recently, I have been working with Gretchen Nelson. Gretchen has already assisted in 20 retreats. Gretchen is leading a weekly local sangha in San Francisco with my consent. She is also fully authorized to teach. In Newton MA I am working on a regular basis with John Churchill and he is assisting in an on-going weekly meditation group.

I publicly outlined the 5 areas of teacher training at the January 2008 Advanced Retreat. I made it absolutely clear that no student had the authority to use my teaching materials and go off on their own and teach, except for George Protos, Susan Mickel and Gretchen Nelson.

Guidelines for Students

1. Authorization: No one has the authority to teach full retreats in the Pointing Out Style or to use the teaching material in anyway unless I authorize that. If I invite a student to assist in some limited capacity in a retreat that is not to be misconstrued as authority to independently teach. No one has the right to contact you using the address lists from my retreats unless I authorize that.

2. Teaching Materials: All the teaching materials for the regular and advanced retreats are covered by copyright protection. I have spent years synthesizing this material, evolving the style of teaching, and the specific wording of all the meditation instructions. As I have now begun making students sign a form that they understand they are not to use the material for other purposes, I have been amazed at the number of students who have come forth and have disclosed the 'creative' ways they are using this course material in different contexts. I didn't expect these precious teachings to invite a feeding frenzy. No student is authorized to use this material in any way, other than to guide personal meditation practice, without written consent from me. Any unauthorized use of this material will result in an action to protect my intellectual properties, and will also result in an irreparable breach of the teacher-student relationship.

3. Limited Personal Use Only: Out of generosity I have allowed students to use my handouts, take notes, and tape-record the meditation sessions for the benefit of their own on-going personal meditation practice. Giving students permission to use course materials for personal meditation practice is not to be misconstrued as permission to use the material for any other purpose. Apparently, my comment that "the teachings are given freely," made in the context of a pointing out style of teacher-student relationship, has been misinterpreted by some to mean that they can do whatever they want with the course materials including using it to teach with. These tapes are not to be transcribed without my knowledge and written consent. Any use or distribution of these teaching materials for purposes other than personal, individual meditation practice will be construed as a copyright violation in the Western sense, and a violation of the teacher-student relationship, in the Eastern sense. Please keep in mind that in a Pointing Out Style of instruction, the teacher-student relationship is necessary to identify and correct problems in meditation. That is why distribution of teaching materials apart from that relationship runs the risks of meditation practice going off track, realization being merely conceptual, and/or a deterioration of the value of the teaching. Given the fact that everybody was recording the sessions and doing what they want with them, the recordings were restricted. We are making a studio quality copy of all meditation sessions that will be available at some point in 2010, with the written agreement that you will use these only for your personal meditation practice.

4. Confidentiality and Distribution Restrictions: Because of the issue of "safe space" students have been allowed to tape material in an individual retreat and to distribute those tapes only among students in the same retreat. The reason for this rule is that students are required in the retreat to talk about personal meditation experiences, and I don't want to create an unsafe environment wherein students know that what they discuss might be heard by other students outside of the retreat. This confidentiality rule is absolute. Recently, it came to my attention that some students were distributing audio tapes either to students who had never taken the retreat with me, or to students who had taken a different retreat, so that confidential material about descriptions of personal meditation experiences was being distributed. Any student who breaks this confidentiality rule will be dismissed as a student.

5. Local Sangha: A number of local sanghas have developed to follow the Pointing Out Style of teaching. I certainly wish to encourage local practitioners to get together to deepen their meditation practice. Organizing a local sangha does not convey authority to teach. Some sanghas have an authorized local teacher, for example, I have authorized George Protos to hold a local sangha in Marin County, CA, and Gretchen Nelson to hold a local sangha in San Francisco. Other sanghas meet without an authorized teacher, for example, Fella Cederbaum has organized a local sangha in the Boston area, but no one in the group holds themselves out as a teacher. That group is a model for what can be done legitimately. Other than what I have named, if additional local sanghas exist using the Pointing Out Style wherein someone is holding themselves out as the teacher, it is not authorized.

6. Duty to Protect the Precious Teachings: We live in a difficult time. The music industry has virtually folded in the last few years because of the pervasive attitude in this culture that it is perfectly OK to download any copyrighted music and distribute it in any way people see fit. I have given all of you extremely precious teachings, and I have done that with complete openness and generosity. I did not intend my generosity and clarity of teaching to be construed as an invitation to take these precious teachings and do whatever some may want to do with them. Therefore, I am asking each one of my students to take very seriously this point: each of you has the duty to carefully protect the preciousness of these teachings and the way they are taught. If there are violations you know of, I expect you will communicate that directly to me.