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Unconditionally Steadfast

PEMA CHÖDRÖN, dharma teacher and author of *When Things Fall Apart*, speaks about roles and responsibilities within the teacher/student relationship.

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You've described the teacher-student relationship as one based on unconditional commitments: The teacher will never give up on the student and the student will never leave the teacher, no matter what. How did you come to that understanding?

I'd like to back up a bit. There are different levels of the teacher-student relationship and not everyone's ready for—or wants—an unconditional commitment. Most people read a book or hear the teachings of a specific teacher and it helps them. In fact, it can dramatically change how they work with the difficulties of their lives. They may then ask if they can become that teacher's student, by which they mean asking for guidance now and then. This kind of relationship can be valuable and the student feels, quite rightly, that's all that's needed. It's rare that a student wants to enter into an unconditional commitment with a teacher because what this means is being willing to work at a very profound level on where you are holding back. So really, how many people are willing to unmask completely? That's the basic question.

Was that your experience? That unconditional commitment came with “unmasking”?

When I asked Trungpa Rinpoche if I could be his student in 1974, I was not ready to enter into an unconditional relationship. But for the first time in my life I had met a person who was not caught up—a person whose mind was never swept away—and I realized that was also possible for me. And I was incredibly drawn to him because I saw that I couldn't manipulate him.

You felt seen by him?

It wasn't as personal as that. It was more like: This is a man who knows how to cut through people's trips. And I experienced that cutting as encouraging; threatening, but refreshingly threatening.

But you still didn't feel ready for an unconditional relationship with him?

That took time. Working intimately with a teacher is the same thing as learning to stop shielding ourselves from the completely uncertain nature of reality. In other words, when we work closely with a teacher, all the ways that we hold back and shut down, all the ways that we cling and grasp, all our habitual ways of limiting and solidifying our world become very clear to us, and it's unnerving. At that painful point, we usually want to make the teacher wrong or make ourselves wrong or do anything that is habitual and comforting to get ground back under our feet. But when we make an unconditional commitment to hang in there, we do not run away from the pain of seeing ourselves - and this is a revolutionary thing to do and it transforms us. But how many of us are ready for this? One has to gradually develop the trust that it is ultimately liberating to let go of strongly held assumptions about reality.

Are you talking about gradually developing the trust to surrender into the unknown?

Yes. But what I'm really pointing to here is developing steadfastness with yourself, steadfastness with your fears. This comes from developing clear seeing of all that arises in your heart and your mind without pushing away what you don't like or getting cozy with what you find attractive, and without disassociating or acting out. So the teacher encourages you to be relaxed more and more with your own uneasy, insecure energy and to stay with yourself through highs and lows.

That implies a steadfastness with the teacher as well?

Yes, that's it. Steadfastness with one particular person translates into steadfastness with any situation that you could possibly encounter. This starts with steadfastness with yourself and in particular, steadfastness with your own emotional distress - being able to open to it, to rest in it without seeking the comfort zone of habits. Without developing this basic trust in oneself, regarding your teacher as perfect and doing whatever they request can be harmful and even dangerous to the naive student.

Do you have a different relationship with your students than your teacher had with his students?

I consider myself a spiritual friend to my students. I'm not a guru. In general, I don't give empowerments or perform other Vajrayana rituals and in particular, I am nowhere near as wise or daring as Trungpa Rinpoche. I can only share the spiritual understanding that I have, and it's a long way from the spiritual understanding of Trungpa Rinpoche. But some things are the same. It is important, for instance, that students are open with me and don't hide their neurosis and also that they don't idealize me. It's important that students get to know me well so that I come off the pedestal and they see me as an ordinary person. I was always taught to see the teacher and the student as sharing a mutual journey - not as a master-servant relationship.

But you do enter into formal teacher-student relationships?

The first time someone asked me to be their teacher, I didn't know what it meant. I kept saying no, then after two years I said, "Okay, but if we're going to do this, you have to do what I ask you to do." That was a big mistake and I would never say that to anyone now. Because now I realize that you just enter into the relationship, as I did with my teacher, and it evolves to that place of trust and love - or it doesn't. It's not something that you can demand.

Why did you ask that student for total obedience?

Because I know that when you're willing and able to trust the teacher, that's your first experience of steadfastness; it was my first experience with not getting swept away by judgments and opinions. See, the idea here is that entering into an unconditional relationship with one person is a training for staying open to the paradoxical nature of reality. How do you get to the point where you can open to this world as it is, with all of its violence and beauty and meanness and moments of courage? When you enter into an unconditional relationship, you experience both like and dislike, approval and disapproval; you experience profound horror and heartbreaking love. And then you get to discover if your heart and mind are big enough to contain the complete picture - and not just the part that you approve of. If you can develop the capability to remain steadfast in one unconditional relationship, you can remain steadfast with the suffering and joyfulness of life.

And the key is the experience of trusting another person?

It's more than that. The teacher serves as a mirror but also encourages your ability to trust in yourself. You begin to trust in your basic goodness instead of identifying with your neurosis. There's a shift of allegiance. Then the obstacles begin to seem temporary, and what's permanent is the wisdom. To the degree that you become intimate with your neurosis - not acting-out and not repressing - to that degree you discover your wisdom. In Vajrayana Buddhism they actually say, "The more neurosis, the more wisdom."

They talk about transforming confusion into wisdom. That doesn't mean getting rid of confusion: It's alchemy - the gold is in there. The relationship with the teacher helps you stay in the middle of the fire.

How is the role of the teacher and the role of devotion to the guru different in Vajrayana than in other forms of Buddhism?

In Vajrayana you're moving in the direction of realizing that the whole world is your teacher. You're encouraged to have a passionate involvement with life - with love, illness, death, disappointment. There is no emotion or activity that is off limits as a source of wisdom. For this reason, this path demands a lot of discipline, and it also requires guidance. In the absence of a narrow and restrictive set of rules, you need someone to show you where you're behaving in a way that is indulgent or repressive or too reactive. And you need someone that you will listen to. In Vajrayana, the guru shakes things up a lot, which prepares you for the fact that so does life. So in real life - what do you do when things fall apart?

Do you function like that for your students?

I don't deliberately set about to create those moments when the student feels the rug being pulled out. In the lineage stories, the gurus purposely did that. For instance, Marpa tested Milarepa by making him build towers and then, with no "rational" reason, told him to pull them down again. So you're asking about students working with me? Might they suffer because they don't have that?

Or, are you somehow providing that?

In a limited number of relationships, when we work closely and the student is brave enough, that kind of cutting through of old habits and limited ways of seeing does happen. But, curiously, it seems to have to do more with their own courage than anything that I do.

In guru yoga the instructions are to see the guru as a Buddha, not as an ordinary person. But you say that you want students to realize that you are ordinary.

Well, not only the teacher, but everyone is Buddha. Buddha means awake. It's important to know that we are all capable of being awake. What I was left with from Trungpa Rinpoche was this: that between the teacher and the student there can be a meeting of minds, a mutual communication. The job of the teacher is to help the student experience that their mind and the mind of the teacher are the same. The teacher realizes that the student doesn't understand that, doesn't believe it, and doesn't trust it. The relationship needs to be intimate enough so that the teacher can work with exactly where the student is limiting themselves. Sometimes someone needs love and sometimes harshness. But whatever the teacher does is always about helping you to see layer after layer of defense mechanisms and self-deceptions that block your innate wisdom. You have tremendous devotion because without your teacher you would never have discovered this confidence in your own wisdom. But you don't think of the teacher as being up there while you're down here. That's an important point.

But in some of the texts about guru devotion, the word used is "worship" - the student is instructed to worship the teacher.

I've never been encouraged by my teachers to worship anyone. There's too much hope and fear in that kind of setup. In my opinion, it would definitely not be helpful to advise students that they should worship a guru or that they should feel wrong if they question or find fault with a guru. If I'd been given that advice, I wouldn't have lasted very long. One has to be encouraged to use one's critical intelligence and to express one's concerns without fear. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to say, "Question authority." Just like those bumper stickers. But you're still left with an important question: What is it that encourages a person to hang in there so that the minute the teacher does something that you don't like you don't say, "I'm outta here"? We Westerners have a strong habitual tendency to idealize our authority figures. We romanticize them. For Western students what needs to be communicated is that the mind of the teacher and student meet, not by the student making the teacher all pure or all evil, but in the ambiguity between those two, in the capacity to sustain uncertainty. Otherwise, in the name of true devotion you'll get a kind of worship that inevitably flips into vast disillusionment because sooner or later the teacher does something that the student can't handle. We've seen many cases where that happens. What has to be emphasized is that students don't accept anything without questioning. This is a standard Buddhist teaching: Don't accept anything before you test it and test it and test it. And one should be encouraged to move as close as one can get to the teacher so that if there is any hypocrisy or deception one will see it.

And what if you do see hypocrisy?

You can stay or you can leave. But the most important point is how you handle your mind. There have been cases when teachers, both Western and Asian, have caused harm. But for the most part, what we're talking about are students who bolt the first time a teacher doesn't meet their preconception of what a teacher should be. You don't like their political views, or the fact that they eat meat or drink wine . . . you're out of there because you don't like a change in the dharma center's policy or you feel unappreciated or neglected. What I've seen is that often a student hangs in there for four or five years in a kind of honeymoon period where they endow the relationship with all their longings to be loved and to be in the ideal, non-messy relationship. Then, inevitably, because of the closeness to the teacher, they get provoked - something provokes them - and all their core, unresolved emotional issues come up. They feel betrayed, disillusioned and a lot of other habitual feelings, and then they leave the scene. I'm talking here about

situations where the ordinary messiness of daily life becomes unavoidable and not of situations where there is severe abuse of power.

And in cases of severe abuse of power?

The challenge is to be able to say that something is wrong and still not demonize that teacher. To me, the main point is still how you are handling your mind. Once you start demonizing, your heart and mind get very small. Fixation in any form causes suffering. That fixation could take the form of “The guru is perfect and can never do anything wrong,” or it can take the form of “The guru is a charlatan and can do no good.” Both are expressions of freezing the mind. You know, we all love to talk about big mind, vast mind, spaciousness. But can we abide in the spaciousness that is presented to us when things fall apart? Or when the bottom falls out? Every time you hit your thumb with a hammer, the mind stops - and then the mind jumps in to build its case. Sometimes you have to leave a teacher, and that is very painful. But if you can stay with the pain instead of justifying or condemning, then that teacher has taught you well. It may sound corny, but I think that love is where it’s at. Not romantic or possessive love, but this unconditionally steadfast relationship with ourselves and with other people - that’s what I’m talking about. If a teacher never gives up on a student, that’s what I mean by love. And if a student also never gives up on the teacher, then in that situation of complete openness there can be a meeting of minds. But if either the teacher or the student have fixed ideas of what they are going to achieve, or how to deal with each other, or who they think the other one is, then communication gets blocked.

Would you say, then, that the practice is learning to love the guru in this open-ended way?

Yes, and we’re not used to this kind of love. To love and be loved unconditionally is what we all want to receive, and what we all have difficulty giving. And then add into the equation that the teacher-student relationship is not exclusive. That’s really not what we’re generally looking for. So, as students we usually enter into the relationship with our habitual, neurotic relationship patterns. If we have jealousy issues, if we have abandonment issues, those will come up with a teacher. On the other hand, if we persevere and experience our emotional difficulties as path, then the relationship evolves. In my case, when I saw Rinpoche not giving up on other people I began to trust that he would not give up on me. So the experience of seeing that the teacher can love so many people and wish to dissolve the suffering of so many people can help the student develop more love and trust for both themselves and the teacher.

Something happened along those lines once that had a profound effect on me. One time when Trungpa Rinpoche was in retreat, one of his longtime students was there with him. The student was having emotional difficulties and causing a lot of problems for everyone. So the other students began wishing that this man, let’s call him Joe, would go away, and they told Rinpoche about all the problems with this man’s aggressive behavior. But Rinpoche just seemed to ignore their complaints. At one point, though, Rinpoche walked into the room just as Joe had lashed out viciously at a woman and slapped her. Then Rinpoche did something that was very atypical. He said to Joe, “Out! I want you out now!” Joe was completely devastated and could not believe it. He said, “But Rinpoche . . .” And Rinpoche just said, “Out, I don’t want to see your face again,” and he left the room. After Joe left, Rinpoche came into the living room and all the other students gathered around him and said, “We’re so glad you got rid of Joe. He did this yesterday and that the day before and this morning . . . Thank you for sending him away.” Then Rinpoche drew himself up and said very firmly: “I think you do not understand that Joe and I are the best of

friends.” So that’s the kind of love I’m talking about. I felt like Trungpa Rinpoche would step in front of a train if it would get through to you.

But how did Joe feel?

At that moment the rug got pulled out and I’m sure it hurt a lot. But later, Joe said that Rinpoche’s throwing him out saved his life.

I wonder if this classic teacher/student relationship that you’re describing is being diluted as Western teachers incorporate their cultural beliefs into the dharma.

This kind of question comes up whenever the dharma goes to a new land. The teachers from the new country naturally draw from their own culture. So it’s always an experimental time in that way. And there are Asian teachers now who naturally fear that the dharma could be corrupted. I think that creates a good balance. The more they fear corruption, the more that causes Western teachers to make sure that they aren’t corrupting. If someone you respect says, “I think that you’re going astray,” you have three choices: You can become defensive; you can buy it hook, line and sinker; or - the middle way - you can just let it process you. That middle way is the one I would suggest. Just let it process you. There’s no problem with being questioned and challenged. Yet there is no other way but to experiment. Buddhism is going to look different in the West. If the essence were lost, that would be a tragedy. But keeping the essence doesn’t mean not changing anything.

What kind of challenge do you find in being a teacher of Buddhism as it comes to a new culture? Being a teacher is a constant training. Training to be sane. To be genuine. To be honest. And to not hide behind some title. I feel that I am at the kindergarten level with this. But it is joyful to pass the dharma on. Generations of teachers have dedicated their lives to realizing these teachings and to passing them on, and that lineage of wisdom could be lost, so it’s wondrous that the teachings can take root in a new land and be digested by Western people. That’s what Trungpa Rinpoche said again and again: “You people are the ones. I’m going to die. If you don’t understand what I’m saying and pass it on, then nothing will grow and the dharma in the West will not survive.”