

Relating to a Spiritual Teacher: Building a Healthy Relationship

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Part II: The Dynamics of a Healthy Student-Teacher Relationship

11 Seeing a Mentor as a Buddha

The Relation between a Mentor's Functioning as a Buddha and Being a Buddha

Beyond the suggestion to focus with firm conviction and appreciation on the good qualities and kindness that their mentors actually have, the sutras and tantras instruct disciples to regard these qualities and kindness as those of a Buddha. As disciples advance in their practice, they gain progressively deeper understanding of the relation between their mentors and Buddhas. Eventually, as practitioners of highest tantra, they need to see that their tantric masters are Buddhas.

The later Gelug graded-path texts added seeing that one's mentor is a Buddha to their presentations of guru-meditation. The meditation focuses on understanding why a mentor must be a Buddha. The first reason is scriptural authority: Buddha stated in several sutras and tantras that in later times he shall appear in the form of spiritual mentors and that disciples then need to respect their mentors as they would respect him.

The next four reasons are inferences from logic. (1) Because the enlightening influence of the Buddha operates without any break in continuity, it must still be operating at present. (2) For that influence to reach disciples, it needs to pass through a medium, namely the medium of properly qualified mentors, as with the analogy of the need for a magnifying glass to focus the rays of the sun on kindling. (3) The way in which the confused minds of disciples makes things appear is unreliable. Therefore, although mentors may appear to have inherent flaws, this appearance of their mode of existence does not correspond to how they actually exist. (4) Because disciples' minds are limited, they would only be able to see and relate to a manifestation of Buddha that appeared with conventional limitations. Therefore, to help disciples, mentors necessarily appear to have conventional shortcomings.

Most Westerners find this presentation lacking. Either it fails to convince them that their mentors are Buddhas or it leads them to accept the proposition with inadequate understanding. Thus, they misunderstand the instruction to see their mentors as Buddhas.

In *A Commentary on [Dignaga's "Compendium of] Validly Cognizing Minds*," Dharmakirti stated that the defining characteristic of a phenomenon that arises from causes and conditions is its ability

to perform a function for a specific audience. Because of this ability, the phenomenon is what it is. Thus, for instance, a watch that performs the function of a toy for a baby is not simply a watch *functioning as* a toy: it *is* a toy, for the baby.

The Madhyamaka explanation clarifies this point: the object is only *contingently* a toy, not *ultimately* a toy. It is not the case that the watch contains a concrete, findable defining characteristic, like a genetic code, that by its own power makes it ultimately a watch. Nor is it the case that the item here is an object that has two such characteristics in it, which by their own powers make it ultimately both a watch and a toy, either simultaneously or alternatively. Nor is it the case that the object itself is ultimately something undefined, which is neither of the two. It is a watch or a toy contingent on its ability to function validly as a watch for an adult or a toy for a baby, without ultimately being a watch, a toy, both, or neither.

The confusion here is that the four logical inferences cited in the graded-path texts demonstrate that spiritual mentors *function as* Buddhas for their disciples, while the scriptural quotations state that they *are* Buddhas. By the above explanation, the two statements are equivalent, but only in the sense that mentors are contingently Buddhas, not ultimately Buddhas. Westerners who are unaware of the Madhyamaka distinction between contingent and ultimate existence find the entire presentation totally baffling. Their confusion becomes even more perplexing because a magnifying glass does not need to be the sun in order to act as a medium for the sun. Therefore, when the texts recommend seeing that a mentor is a Buddha, we need to understand this to mean seeing the person only contingently as a Buddha, inasmuch as he or she validly functions as a Buddha for disciples.

Mentally Labeling a Mentor as a Physician or as a Buddha

In *A Sutra Spread Out Like a Tree-Trunk*, Buddha recommended that disciples discern their spiritual mentors as physicians, themselves as patients, the Dharma as a medicine, and its diligent practice as the way to be cured. A spiritual mentor, after all, teaches methods to heal disciples of shortcomings and difficulties. Let us supplement the above explanation of contingent and ultimate identities with the Prasangika-Madhyamaka analysis of mental labeling to understand the validity of this vision.

Spiritual mentors are only contingently doctors inasmuch as they can validly function as doctors for disciples. More precisely, they are only *conventionally* doctors inasmuch as they can be validly labeled as doctors by disciples. Valid mental labeling requires a valid basis for the labeling. Here, the basis is the ability of mentors to function validly as doctors for healing their disciples of shortcomings and difficulties. This does not imply, however, that spiritual mentors are doctors in all senses of the word, either ultimately or even conventionally. No one would expect his or her mentor to be able to perform brain surgery. Labeling mentors as doctors is merely a convention, drawn in order to affect disciples' attitudes so that they may derive the most benefit from their relationships with their teachers. After all, as mentioned previously, the term *tenpa*, rendered as "building a healthy relationship," refers equally to the relationships of patients to doctors and of disciples to spiritual mentors.

Further, the great Indian monastic university of Nalanda, which specialized exclusively in sutra studies, followed a custom that all Tibetan monastic centers of learning subsequently have adopted. During classes, the monk students are to regard their teachers as Buddhas, themselves as bodhisattvas, their classrooms as pure Buddha-fields, the subject matter as the purest Dharma, and the occasion as timeless. These five features characterize the situation of a Buddha teaching in a *sambhogakaya* form. *Sambhogakaya* is a network of subtle forms, made of transparent light, which can teach the full scope of the Mahayana teachings to the most advanced disciples.

Discerning a mentor's activity of teaching the Dharma and using it as a basis for ascribing him or her a name allows a valid labeling of the person as a sambhogakaya Buddha. As in the case of labeling a mentor a doctor, labeling a mentor a Buddha does not mean that he or she is ultimately, or even conventionally, a Buddha in the full sense of the word. Disciples would hardly expect that their mentors could multiply into billions of forms or walk through walls. Following this convention of labeling merely affects disciples' attitudes so that they have greater respect for the seriousness of their studies. Moreover, as Sakya Pandita wrote in *The Profound Path of Guru-Yoga*, depending on whether disciples view their mentors as ordinary beings, bodhisattvas, or Buddhas, they gain the inspiration of one or the other.

Therefore, when regarding our mentors conventionally as Buddhas, we discern only certain features about them and on that basis we label them Buddhas. We do not label our mentors as Buddhas based on everything about them, but rather based only on their good qualities. The strength of these qualities does not affect the validity of the labeling. Whether eyes are strong or weak, we validly label them eyes if they enable us to see. Similarly, whether our mentors' skills in communicating the Dharma are great or small, we validly label the skills a Buddha-quality if they enable us to learn Buddha's teachings.

Moreover, the mental labeling of our mentors as Buddhas is valid by Chandrakirti's three criteria. (1) Nalanda had the established convention of labeling a spiritual mentor a Buddha and our mentors follow the Nalanda tradition of teaching the Dharma. (2) A mind that can validly apprehend what is conventionally true does not contradict the labeling. Our mentors perform the functions of a Buddha in leading us to enlightenment through explaining Buddha's teachings. We experience the beneficial effects of their teachings the more we put them into practice. (3) A mind that can validly apprehend the deepest truth about how things exist also does not contradict the labeling. Labeling our mentors as Buddhas does not imply that their actions of teaching the Dharma, by their own powers, independently of anything else, make our mentors ultimately, or even conventionally, omniscient Buddhas. Our mentors exist and function as Buddhas for us only inasmuch as we can validly label them as Buddhas and Buddhas are what our mental labels refer to.

The Nonliteral Use of the Label *Buddha*

Regarding a spiritual mentor as a Buddha has a shared meaning common to sutra and tantra. The sutras and their commentaries instruct disciples to see their mentors as Buddhas when they receive teachings or when they take refuge or bodhisattva vows. The highest tantras instruct disciples to do the same at all times. Chandrakirti taught that highest tantra teachings with a general meaning shared with sutra are to be taken literally only if they accord with common experience. Because regarding one's teacher as a Buddha does not accord with common experience, it is not to be taken literally. Sakya Pandita explicitly made this point in *The Divisions of the Three Sets of Vows*. There he wrote, "The Prajnaparamita texts state that disciples need to regard their mentors as if the teachers were Buddhas. They do not claim that the mentors actually are Buddhas."

A shared teaching that is not to be taken literally has different levels of meaning depending on the context. Each level needs interpretation to clarify the intended meaning. Moreover, the levels of interpretation common to sutra and the early stages of tantra practice are all intended to lead us deeper. They lead to the definitive, ultimate level of meaning concerning the clear light mind and the realization of voidness with it.

Progressive Levels of Interpretation

In *A Last Testament Letter Cast to the Wind*, the Gelug master Gyelrong Tsaltrim-nyima explained three progressive levels on which disciples need to see their spiritual mentors as amalgams of the

Buddha-figures Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and Vajrapani. On the first level, their mentors are like them in their good qualities; on the second, they have their qualities; and on the third, their mentors are the three figures.

In an oral commentary, Serkong Rinpoche correlated Gyelrong's three levels with the three progressive ways in which disciples need to view their mentors as Buddhas found in the *shravaka* (listener) sutra, bodhisattva sutra, and highest tantra explanations. The shravaka sutras, often called the *Hinayana* (modest vehicle) sutras, include the Pali canon of the Theravada tradition and the Sanskrit canons of seventeen other early Indian Buddhist schools. From a shravaka point of view, their mentors are similar to Buddhas in having developed a Buddha's good qualities. From a bodhisattva standpoint, their mentors are emanations of Buddhas and thus contain these qualities; while from the viewpoint of highest tantra, they are Buddhas. These three interpretations derive from a difference in the description of Shakyamuni Buddha found in the shravaka sutras, the bodhisattva sutras, and the highest tantras.

The shravaka sutras explain that Shakyamuni was born as an ordinary being, Prince Siddhartha, and that he developed his good qualities during his lifetime to become a Buddha. Thus, on a shravaka level, we focus on our mentors as similar to Shakyamuni in that they started life as ordinary people and developed good qualities through strenuous effort. Focusing on this aspect of our mentors helps us to realize that we also have started the spiritual path as ordinary beings. With appropriate hard work, we too may correct our deficiencies and gain the qualities of a Buddha. This realization helps us to develop the shravaka motivation, the determination to be free of our shortcomings.

According to the bodhisattva sutras, Shakyamuni Buddha reached enlightenment eons ago. Out of compassion, he consciously took birth as Prince Siddhartha in the form of a supreme emanation (nirmanakaya, tulku) to demonstrate to others the manner of becoming a Buddha. Understanding Shakyamuni in this way helps us to realize that enlightenment does not end with death. Buddhas continue to help others until everyone has become enlightened. Thus, seeing our mentors as further emanations of Buddha supports our understanding that Shakyamuni is continuing to manifest for everyone's sake. This helps us to gain the courage to keep our bodhisattva motivation, bodhichitta, to strive to become Buddhas as our mentors have done and to help others for as long as is needed.

The Tibetan tulku system encourages the bodhisattva sutra view of spiritual mentors. Although objectively one does not need to be a Buddha to start a line of tulkus, Tibetan disciples regard their mentors as enlightened tulkus, whether or not spiritual authorities recognize them as Rinpoches. Because Shakyamuni manifests in an extensive network of tulkus, disciples see their mentors as Shakyamuni tulkus, if not also as tulkus of other traditionally recognized lines.

According to the highest tantra explanation, while Shakyamuni Buddha taught *The Prajnaparamita Sutras* on Vultures' Peak, he simultaneously appeared as Vajradhara and taught the tantras. Thus, Shakyamuni is both Prince Siddhartha and Vajradhara. Similarly, on the highest tantra level we need to see that from one point of view our tantric masters are the spiritual teachers we see before us, but on another level they are simultaneously Vajradharas. Therefore, tantra guru-yoga often entails imagining Vajradhara in a mentor's heart. Visualizing this helps us to realize that, on one level, our tantric masters and we have ordinary minds and bodies, but simultaneously, on the deepest level, we both have clear light minds, subtlest communicative vibrations, and subtlest energy-wind. In other words, on the deepest level, we all have the materials for an enlightening mind, speech, and body of a Buddha.

In tantra guru-yoga, disciples need to see their mentors as Buddhas on all three levels - shravaka sutra, bodhisattva sutra, and highest tantra. Thus, in *A Ceremony to Honor the Gurus*, the First Panchen Lama taught disciples to visualize their tantric masters externally in the forms of

Tsongkhapa as a monk with shravaka vows. In Tsongkhapa's heart sits Shakyamuni, the teacher of the bodhisattva sutras. In Shakyamuni's heart sits Vajradhara, the source of the highest tantras. In Vajradhara's heart is a syllable *hum*, symbolizing clear light mind.

Moreover, as the First Panchen Lama explained in *The Essence of [Kaydrubjey's] "Ocean of Actual Attainments,"* the stacked figures also represent the gross, subtle, and subtlest levels of body, speech, and mind. Regarding one's tantric master as a Buddha on all three levels of each leads to the ultimate, definite source of Buddhahood - clear light subtlest mind and the and the subtlest communicative vibration and subtlest energy-wind inseparable from it.

The Meaning of a Tantric Master's Being a Buddha

The statement in highest tantra that one's tantric master is a Buddha is extremely perplexing. It has a level of meaning shared with sutra and tantra, namely, as explained before, that for their disciples, mentors are both contingently and conventionally Buddhas inasmuch as they can validly function for them as Buddhas and, on that basis, can be validly labeled by them as Buddhas. Mentors, however, are never inherently and ultimately Buddhas, since inherent, ultimate existence as this or that, by the power of findable defining characteristics, is impossible. Here, however, the statement that one's tantric master is a Buddha has additional deeper meanings specific to highest tantra practice.

Some spiritual seekers take the highest tantra statement to have a literal meaning. Consequently, they view all their tantric masters' actions, words, and emotional states as perfect. This frequently happens regarding dzogchen masters, since dzogchen supposedly means that everything is perfect. In *Ascertaining the Three Vows*, however, the Nyingma master Ngari Panchen made the situation clear. He explained that, in private, dzogchen masters may occasionally need to act in contradiction to the norms of generally accepted behavior. However, when in the public eye or in the company of beginners who may lose faith, dzogchen masters need to uphold strictly the liberation and bodhisattva vows. Thus, if popular spiritual teachers act improperly with students at Dharma centers, they are violating the basic Buddhist principles. Naivety over this point may open spiritual seekers to possible abuse.

Some disciples are skeptical. They feel that the statement concerning tantric masters' being Buddhas cannot possibly mean what it says. Their mentors may be like Buddhas in having gained good qualities through hard work. Their mentors may even be similar to Buddha-emanations, serving as containers for the Buddha-qualities that they see in them. Regarding their mentors actually as Buddhas may be a helpful ploy of mental labeling for gaining the most inspiration from the person, but they think, "Surely, it is just a mental trick." Their skeptical attitudes deprive them of realizing the deepest insights to be gained from the teaching. The Sakya master Ngorchon clearly stated in *A Beautiful Ornament for the Three Continua* that in the context of highest tantra, the tantric master is not merely *like* a Buddha; he or she *is* a Buddha.

In *The Heart of the Tantras: The Fivefold Practice [of Mahamudra]*, the Drigung Kagyu master Rigdzin Chokyi-dragpa explained the deeper meaning of a tantric master's being a Buddha. The meaning derives from the characteristically tantric practice of working toward Buddhahood through methods that resemble the resultant state one is striving to attain. The usual human appearance of the body of a tantric master and its simultaneous appearance as the enlightening body of a Buddha, particularly during an empowerment, are two facts about the same attribute of one phenomenon (*ngowochig*, *ngo-bo gcig*; "they are one by nature"). The phenomenon here is a tantric master; the attribute is the appearance of his or her physical body; the two facts about that attribute are that the appearance can validly be as a usual human and as the enlightening body of a Buddha.

The usual human appearance of a tantric master's body is that it is thin or fat, gets tired, sometimes becomes sick, and grows old. The enlightening body of a Buddha, however, is made of transparent light and energy, appears in a wide array of Buddha-forms, can multiply, can pass through solid objects, and never tires, gets sick, or grows old. The two appearances are two facts about the physical body of a tantric master and, in this sense, our tantric masters are Buddhas - although, of course, not inherently and ultimately Buddhas.

Moreover, our tantric masters are Buddhas also in the sense that their speech and minds have both usual human appearances and appearances as a Buddha's enlightening speech and mind. The human appearance of their speech is that it sometimes falters, is unclear, or fails to speak our languages. A Buddha's enlightening speech, on the other hand, communicates perfectly in every language, without faltering or ever being unclear. The human appearance of their minds is that they sometimes become angry, lack warmth, or fail to understand what we mean. A Buddha's enlightening mind, by contrast, is totally free of disturbing emotions, has equal love for all beings, and understands everything perfectly.

Yet, if we look at our tantric masters, how can their bodies be both flesh and blood and transparent light and energy? How can they be both old and eternally youthful? How can two seemingly incompatible facts about the appearance of our tantric masters' bodies both be true? We need to explore the matter more deeply.

Viewing One Phenomenon Validly from Different Viewpoints

In *A Supplement to the Middle Way*, Chandrakirti gave a relevant example. Suppose that three groups – ghosts, humans, and divine beings (gods) – all looked at the liquid in a specific cup. Because of different karmic propensities, ghosts would see it as pus, humans as water, and divine beings as nectar. Since the liquid does not exist with an inherent, ultimate identity as any of the three substances, the perception of each group would be valid from its own point of view. Moreover, each group would experience the taste of the liquid according to the appearance it perceived. Yet, pus, water, and nectar are not the same.

Chandrakirti's analysis also applies to our previous example of an adult and a baby looking at the same object. The adult would see it as a watch and would know the hour by looking at it; the baby would see it as a toy and play with it. Because the object does not exist with an inherent, ultimate identity as a watch or a toy, the perception and experience of each would be valid. Yet, a watch and a toy are not the same.

The situation is equivalent regarding a newcomer and a tantric disciple looking at a Buddhist teacher. The newcomer would see the teacher's body as human; the teacher's tantric disciple would perceive it as the body of a Buddha-figure. Because a body does not exist with an inherent, ultimate identity as flesh and blood or as light and energy, both perceptions would be valid. Yet, a solid flesh-and-blood body is not identical to a transparent body made of light and energy.

Even one person may validly see the same object as two different things and validly make use of it in both ways. Someone may both play with a watch as a toy and still accurately tell the time with it. One does not preclude the other. Similarly, we may see our tantric masters' bodies as human when our mentors are ill. During empowerments, however, we may see the same bodies as those of Buddha-figures, which can never fall sick. Both perceptions are correct from their own points of view. The tantric vision, however, does not negate the necessity to take our mentors to the doctor when they have come down with flu.

The Meaning of *Inseparable*

Another way of saying that the perceptions of our tantric masters as ordinary humans and as Buddha-figures are equally valid is to say that the two perceptions, or the two perceived appearances, are inseparable (*yerme y, dbyer-med*). *Inseparable*, here, means that if one validly occurs from one point of view, the other validly occurs from another viewpoint. Only in this sense are our tantric masters inseparably ordinary humans and Buddhas. *Inseparable*, then, in this context, does not mean that the two appearances need to occur simultaneously. When one perceives one appearance, one does not need simultaneously to perceive the other.

Inseparable Impure and Pure Appearances

The teachings on "inseparable samsara and nirvana" from the Sakya system of the path and its results indicate several levels of meaning of the assertion that our tantric masters are inseparably ordinary humans and Buddhas. These teachings may help us to understand better this difficult point. From among the many meanings of *samsara* and *nirvana*, let us focus here on samsara as signifying "impure" or "ordinary appearances" and nirvana as meaning "pure appearances." Further, let us focus on the two inseparable appearances in reference to our tantric masters' bodies.

Inseparable impure and pure appearances have three levels of significance relevant here. (1) The impure appearances of our tantric masters' bodies may refer to their appearances as ordinary humans. Their pure appearances may refer to their appearances as Buddha-figures. The two appearances are inseparable, somewhat as are two quantum levels of energy at which subatomic particles may vibrate. Thus, our tantric masters' having bodies with inseparable ordinary human and Buddha forms means that their bodies may validly appear as one or the other depending on the point of view, like a liquid may appear as pus, water, or nectar. Their bodies, however, do not ultimately exist with inherent human or Buddha appearances, or with both or with neither.

Moreover, there are no concrete, findable characteristic marks within our tantric masters' bodies that by their own powers make them appear in human or Buddha forms. As in the case of quantum levels of energy within an atom, different levels of appearance exist as mere possibilities, totally dependent on other factors, and not as independently existent, concrete entities.

(2) The impure appearances of our tantric masters' bodies may refer to their appearances as having conventional faults, such as improper behavior. Their impure appearances may also refer to their appearances as having a mixture of conventional faults and good qualities. Their pure appearances are ones having only conventional good qualities, such as compassion. All three appearances occur, although not necessarily at the same moment, and are inseparably valid, each from a different viewpoint. Inherent, concrete flaws or assets, however, do not exist within our tantric masters, making them ultimately impure, pure, or a mixture of both.

(3) The impure appearances of our tantric masters' bodies may refer to their deceptive appearances as if existing in impossible manners. Their pure appearances may refer to their nondeceptive appearances as existing in the ways in which they actually exist. For ease of discussion, let us call the former type of impure appearances "appearances of independent existence" and the latter type of pure appearances "appearances of dependent existence." Our tantric masters' bodies appear inseparably as dependently and independently existent depending on the minds that perceive them. There are no concrete, findable features within them – not even voidness itself – which by their own powers make them exist either dependently or independently.

Further, the three meanings of impure and pure appearances may overlap in several ways. The appearances of our tantric masters' bodies as humans may be as humans with or without conventional faults. Whether appearing as human bodies with conventional faults or as human bodies with only good qualities, our tantric masters' bodies may appear independently existent or

dependently existent. The appearances of our tantric masters' bodies as the enlightening bodies of Buddha-figures, however, would only appear exclusively with good qualities. The bodies of Buddha-figures do not have conventional faults. Nevertheless, the appearances of our tantric masters' bodies as those of Buddha-figures may appear independently existent or dependently existent.

The Basis for Labeling as a Buddha the Pure Appearance of a Mentor

Disciples may label their tantric masters as Buddhas based on the pure appearances of them as humans or as Buddha-figures, both with good qualities, whether the qualities appear to exist dependently or independently. Because good qualities are functions of Buddha-nature, deeper bases for validly labeling their tantric masters as Buddhas are their mentors' Buddha-natures. However, people may not yet realize the potential qualities of their Buddha-natures, may only partially realize them, or may fully realize them. The question, then, naturally arises concerning the validity of labeling people as Buddhas based on unrealized or only partially realized Buddha-natures. The question pertains equally to disciples' seeing their tantric masters as Buddhas and, in tantra practice, to disciples' seeing themselves and all others as Buddha-figures. For an answer, we need to turn to the highest tantra teachings.

In the context of highest tantra, as explained previously, Buddha-nature may refer to the clear-light mind. Although each Tibetan tradition explains this differently, they all agree that one aspect of the nature of the clear light mind is that it is the source of all Buddha-qualities. Another aspect of its nature is that it is devoid of existing in impossible ways. Whether the clear light mind is totally obscured, partially obscured, or completely free of fleeting stains, these factual aspects of its nature remain the same. Moreover, whether the Buddha-qualities of the clear light mind are only in potential form, partially operational, or fully functional, still the nature of the clear light mind remains the same.

In short, the deepest basis for mentally labeling a tantric master as a Buddha is the master's clear light mind. The basis for labeling is not the fleeting stains that may or may not be obscuring that mind. Nor is the basis the strength of the manifest qualities of that mind. Thus, the mental labeling of a tantric master as a Buddha based on clear light mind is always valid.

Mentally labeling our tantric masters as Buddhas based on clear light mind leads to the definitive, ultimate meaning of the instruction to see that one's tantric master is a Buddha. Seeing that the flaws that appear in our external gurus are dependently arising fleeting stains enables us to see that the flaws that appear in our internal gurus – our clear light minds – are also dependently arising and fleeting. This insight is essential for actualizing the Buddha-qualities of our own clear light minds.

According to *Difficult Points concerning Helping and Showing Respect to a Guru*, although everyone has a clear light mind, devoid by nature, viewing one's dog as a Buddha does not have the same benefit as viewing one's tantric master as a Buddha. Therefore, although the clear light minds of our tantric masters are valid bases for labeling them as Buddhas, their other good qualities, plus the inspiration we gain from them, make the labeling more effective in bringing us insight. The main qualities that may serve as further bases for labeling our tantric masters as Buddhas are their compassion, bodhichitta, and far-reaching attitudes (perfections), and the fact of their conferring upon us highest tantra empowerments.