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The Qualifications of an Authentic Buddhist Teacher

In as much as the Buddha's teachings are extraordinarily profound and vast, it is immensely difficult to be a truly qualified teacher. To be genuinely competent requires the attainment of a level of understanding which apprehends the essence of enlightened mind in its entirety, and which is completely free of any erroneous supposition. Such an individual is extremely rare. However, despite this fact, there are many well-educated teachers who have attained impressive intellectual mastery of the general tenets of the Buddhist tradition, and are proficient in instructing student in a purely academic fashion.

In fact, the training of a scholar is quite rigorous, which is partially due to the sheer volume of material that must be covered. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there is a vast collection of commentaries which expound on the sutras, tantras, and other viewpoints derived from the Buddha's teachings. The writings of Nagarjuna, Asanga, and other great scholars and realized beings were translated centuries ago from Sanskrit and brought to Tibet, where they have in turn been the subject of further commentaries by innumerable Tibetan philosophers. The tradition has undergone continuous evolution as various topics have been debated over and eminent essays repeatedly critiqued and revised in order to clarify various theories. Buddhist institutions of higher education (Tib. Shedras) of all of the major traditions of Tibetan Buddhism have certain areas of study in common, such as: the Madyamaka Viewpoint, which is considered the highest level of thought within the Mahayana-sutra tradition, through which one acquires definitive understanding of the ultimate view known as Pramana (Tib. Tsema). Pramana is the investigation through debate and analysis, of different schools of thought concerning the nature of mind's relative and ultimate cognition of phenomena. The Prajna Paramita sutra (perfection of wisdom sutras) discloses the systematic path of enlightenment according to the Bodhisattva tradition. The Abhidharma Kosha is a detailed analysis of the Sravaka and Pratyeka Buddha vehicles, which together comprise the Theravada tradition. The Vinaya (discipline); and studies in tantric philosophy.

The more one delves in depth into these topics, the more complex and extensive the explanations become. It is not unheard of for studies to last fifteen or twenty years, or more. In addition, there are also subsidiary subjects such as Sanskrit, astrology, and linguistics (which include grammar, poetry and literature).

Presently, those who follow a course of study in a Shedra normally spend twelve to fourteen years as students. Upon successful completion of their studies, they receive a title indicating their level of qualification. Their study is comprehensive and the completion of the course indicates an extensive knowledge of the subject matter. It must be remembered, however, that there is no-guarantee that the graduates have understood the teachings profoundly, since true knowledge extends far beyond the mere compilation of information.

Beyond this, if additional years of study are undergone, it is possible that the scholar may reach a point where no doubts concerning the meaning of the whole array of texts and scriptures remain, and where certitude of the various philosophical viewpoints expounded therein has been attained. Thorough examination has clarified every discrepancy, and no question is unanswerable. For such a person there is no book which has any more to teach, and upon reaching this level of outstanding academic achievement a scholar may, finally be able to compose treatises.

In Tibet, composing a philosophical work was an extremely serious undertaking. If a great scholar had a solid background in literature and debate as a basis, it was permissible to write about any of the main subjects of philosophical inquiry mentioned earlier; but one had to be

prepared to defend oneself in public debate. Great scholarship was needed because defects in reasoning which the author could not clarify were justification for the refutation of the composition and a cause for great humiliation. However, if other great scholars accepted it as a valid composition, it would bring the author respect and renown. Among those great scholars who were called "Khenpos" in the Kagyu, Sakya and Nyingmapa traditions, and "Geshe" in the Gelugpa tradition, the highest status that one could attain came when one produced a treatise that stood unrefuted by the many inevitable challenges and cross-examinations. As a result, high standards prevailed in both India and Tibet.

Although it is difficult to attain academic status, to be a highly qualified meditation master capable of effectively guiding students is also an admirable accomplishment. The actual purpose of following the Buddhist path is to achieve Buddhahood, the enlightened state. This attainment depends extensively on meditation experience. Although one has memorized thousands of books, if one does not attain that awareness which the Buddha intended, then his teachings cannot be said to lead one to enlightenment.

In order to lead a student along the path of meditation, a teacher must have thorough knowledge about every aspect of meditation, and must have practiced every aspect as well. The experiences and problems that have arisen in the teacher's own meditation practices allow the teacher to have insight into the nature of students' particular problems. Such skills cannot be learned through theoretical knowledge. Through one's own experience alone one learns to see whether or not the fruition of a particular meditation practice has been achieved, and if not, one learns how to develop it. In addition, every single student has unique aptitudes and weaknesses and therefore requires individual guidance. Clearly, only highly realized meditators are capable of guiding others in meditation.

An example of the value of this type of training is shown by the relationship that existed between the yogi Milarepa and his disciple, Gampopa. One day during the period in which Gampopa was training under Milarepa, he lost his eyesight while meditating in a cave and became completely blind. He crawled on his hands and knees to Milarepa's cave and informed Milarepa that a grave problem had arisen. He was afraid. Milarepa answered that he should not worry that this event was neither good nor bad. He diagnosed the cause immediately, informing Gampopa that his meditation belt¹ was too tight and was creating excessive tension.

On another occasion, Gampopa's meditation in his solitary retreat was suddenly disturbed by the appearance of a thousand Buddhas in the space above him. He rushed to meet Milarepa and excitedly informed him that a great fruition had been achieved in his practice. Milarepa answered calmly, "if you press on your eyes with your fingers you will see two suns, which like your vision is just an illusion. It is neither a positive nor a negative sign. So just concentrate on meditation and don't be attached to visions". Because Gampopa was able to fully appreciate the significance of his teacher's statement, the vision subsided.

It was Milarepa's vast insight that enabled him to advise Gampopa correctly. A scholar might have searched through various books, concluded in the first case that perhaps Gampopa should go to a doctor, and in the second case that the vision was a truly great occurrence and might have advised Gampopa to attempt to have more such visions.

Presently there are many meditation teachers in the world but almost all are knowledgeable of only the beginning stages of meditation, being beginners themselves. One cannot say that all meditation teachers are inexperienced, but it does seem to generally be the case. They may have the capacity to teach the beginning levels of meditation practice, but lack experience of advanced levels. This includes scholars of eminent and humble status alike, if they themselves do not have extensive direct experience of the higher levels of meditative awareness. Scholars who are relatively inexperienced in meditation still serve the purpose of being able to lecture and instruct people about the truths of Buddhism. Even so, when compared to a meditation master, an erudite scholar is inferior. A blend of these qualities would seem to be optimal were it

not for the time constraint involved. Mastery of theoretical knowledge requires years and years of study, as does mastery of the meditation experience through the various stages of tranquility and insight meditation, up to its most advanced level, which, in the Kagyu' tradition, is known as Mahamudra.

One must consider the true aim of Buddhist practice, which is nothing less than achieving enlightenment. In considering the most expedient method to gain the result of absolute realization of a Buddha, Milarepa has stated that the proper teacher, proper instructions, proper practice and proper conditions combine to produce the proper result. This refers to successfully progress through all of the various stages of attainment from the beginning up through to the final result. With this in mind, the proper teacher is an essential condition. If one is striving to be a scholar one's teacher should certainly be a scholar. If one is striving to achieve enlightenment, one's teacher should be a qualified meditation master.

The most recommended course of action which I offer to Buddhists of this present age is to gain a firm basis of theoretical understanding of the Buddhist path, and then to proceed onward by focusing as much as possible on actual meditation practice under a competent guide. Competence, in this case, is not measured by abilities to read Sanskrit or English, or the possession of a Khenpo or Geshe degree; it is measured by meditation experience and realization.

Published in Knowledge in Action, Volume 1 Number 1, 1992
the journal of the Karmapa International Buddhist Institute (KIBI)