

Dharmette: Teachers as Mirrors

Gil Fronsdal

October 15, 2025

Keywords: kalyāṇa-mitta, mirror, teacher, practice discussion, insight, Zen, emptiness, spiritual friend, encouragement, personal practice

So it's customary in Buddhism and our kind of Buddhism to call people who sit up like this and they're going to give talks about something to call them teachers. And I guess that implies that they're supposed to teach you something. So get your notepads out, get ready for some teaching. So a teacher, but I don't know if that's really what it's most about. And, you know, it wasn't my choice exactly that it's called teacher. Sometimes it's called a *kalyāṇa-mitta* that we usually translate as a good spiritual friend.

Right. That's a very different feeling about what it is. And, but one, we don't, I don't know if we have a word for this in English, but, you know, as a noun referring to a person. But one of the, if we, we could call what people like me do, is that we're mirrors. We're here to be a mirror. To somehow reflect back something about yourself, about you.

So you see yourself better. And my teachers, there was a big part of their role in my life. Sometimes I saw that I was caught in my beliefs, caught in my conceit. I was caught up in things. I got to see how afraid I was when I was young. Because when I sat with them, I remember the very first time I sat with my Zen, so we call a teacher, my Zen mirror, I was so nervous that I couldn't speak, and the teacher had to say, Gil, just breathe deeply.

And 50 years ago or so. And so it was fascinating to see that I was capable of so much fear, so much anxiety, and, so I got to see myself in all kinds of ways. And also, my teachers mirrored me, mirrored me, was sometimes I would present myself and my practice to them. And they wouldn't answer... You know, like they were supposed to teach me. I didn't get any teaching.

But they simply said, good, great. The most common thing my teacher in Burma said to me, and I saw him, I probably had something like, I met one-on-one with him probably 130 times. That we had one-on-one meetings. So it's enough to have, you know, start seeing a pattern.

And the most common thing he said to me was I would tell him how much my practice was going, and he would look at me with a little glint in his eyes, and he said, carry on. Carry on.

And it turned, I didn't know it at the time, but it turned out that was like the highest compliment he was willing to give anyone. He was really stern and tough, and if he lifted his eyebrow, like, oh, okay. Uh-oh. He was kind of like a warrior, strong, tough, warrior, general kind of person. And so his idea of a great compliment, carry on, meaning you're doing fine. So it mirrored that back. You're doing fine. Keep doing what you're doing.

I received appreciation from teachers. And I didn't realize at the time, but years later, looking back at my early teachers, that their encouragement, they're kind of validating my practice, validating I was okay, I was finding my way. Okay. Gave me the courage, gave me the inspiration to keep practicing. So mirrors. And sometimes teachers are mirrors of seeing something in others that they don't see in themselves.

Sometimes we see their beauty. Sometimes we see their potential for freedom. Sometimes we see the goodness that's there underneath all the different surface areas. Confusion that people live in, surface ways in which the mind is spinning and caught up. But to know how to be quiet enough to tune into a person and see there's more than just their mind, a spinning mind, their suffering of the day, the suffering of the year, maybe even the suffering of a lifetime. To see there's more. There's a deeper place. There's a place, there's a deeper reservoir inside of peace, deeper reservoir of goodness, of love, and to appreciate that, to see that, and somehow mirror that back or speak to that.

There is a kind of spiritual principle that some teachers follow is when they teach, so-called the teaching thing, is to be attuned to the deepest place where someone is and then... encourage it to speak, to bring it into speech, to bring it into the relationship. See it there. Okay, so what's there? Find and listen, you know, be a mirror, be a coach, be a, I love the expression a doula. Be a doula of what people are capable of and what can be born, what can arise, what can come forth. So that's a very different way of being a teacher then being responsible for people, and I'll give you advice, you know, here, do these three things, and call me in the morning. You know, or... And some teachers like that. Some teachers are really brilliant, very helpful, very helpful, but they're more like they give techniques. They go, this is, practice this, do this, try this out. And I do that, certainly sometimes, especially if people ask. But...

So, Lydia was sitting in on practice discussions today. And so I remember, as I said earlier, that when I was being trained to be a teacher, I did a lot of that. I would go on retreats with different insight teachers and would sit in on them. And one of the big surprises for me was

how different they all were. And how different people were than me. There was a kind of a natural way in which, you know, I'd never really talk to anybody deeply about their practice or seeing a teacher interact with someone in their practice. So I didn't think about it this way, but naively I would have... thought that everyone was like me. Everyone, you know, had the same issues. Everyone has the same solutions. And I'll just, you know, share myself. But to sit in and watch, you know, how different people are. Sometimes it's like a different universe coming in. Every person's a different universe. And so it's wonderful to see. But then to see the different teachers, that each of them had a gift in a different way, to draw out, to connect, to be a mirror. Yeah. And some teachers specialized in doing it through love. Some teachers specialized in doing it very analytically. Some people specialized in really asking good questions that brought something out. So there's many, many ways of being a teacher. But I like to believe that the foundation of it is we're a mirror. We're seeing something. Profound in other people that we're helping to bring forth, bring out and let it grow and develop.

So we're not responsible exactly. It's not up to us to teach you anything, but to support you, to guide you, to open the doors, to allow you to practice. And if anything, the responsibility lies with you. It lies with you to practice. And it also relies on you to be responsible for what you bring to the practice discussion, what you bring to the teacher. And, you know, so, and what you, the best thing you can bring is you bring yourself or something that's really important for this deeper self that you are.

Very occasionally people will come to a teacher and ask really abstract metaphysical questions. Right. You know, what are the 52 different types of emptiness? And there is a big list of all the different kinds of emptinesses. So how much time do we have? You know, probably by the time I get to the tenth one, all of you have left. We don't have the time. And also, it's kind of deadly if we really go through that long list. You know, that's not what we're here for, abstract things. We're here for very deep, personal things.

And maybe also teachers can be a mirror, ideally mirrors of our society, our social selves, that we can kind of see and understand the potential we have for caring for this world, caring for each other, and that we support that as well. And that's, I think, one of the greatest gifts that a teacher receives is that when we support people to be their best self and through their best self, somehow that spreads outward just to help and support this world that we're in, a world that needs a lot. So that was kind of, I didn't sit down here with any idea what to talk about, but that's what came out. So I hope that was okay. And so now we'll do some cleaning. And...