

Wake Up call

NANCY PATTON asks
KEN McLEOD, English-
born director of the
Los Angeles-based
organization,
Unfettered Mind,
and author of
Wake Up to Your Life,
(a lively, plain English
guide to living joyfully
in the present,) why
we need teachers –
and how to know a
good one when
we find one.

finding and forming a relationship with a teacher is one of the most difficult aspects of the spiritual path. Many of us fell into teacher-student relationships at the end of the 1960s and in the early 70s. We were fortunate, very fortunate.

So many things need to come together: where one is in one's life, whether the window for spiritual practice is opening or closing, the personalities of the two individuals involved, chance circumstances. I have no prescription for finding a teacher. Look, explore, interview, and, above all else, use your own good sense. Don't rely on reputation alone.

Deep in Western culture, especially in America, is a tendency to look for perfection in our teachers. Tibetans don't see their teachers the same way. I was at a conference with a number of Asian and Western teachers, and one of the Tibetan teachers said simply, "My teacher is Buddha." It was very clear that he had no expectation that his 'teacher' was a perfect being but this was how he regarded the relationship, this was the source for his spiritual guidance and inspiration. It was a subtle point, not said with the usual rhetoric, and I found it very helpful.

My teacher, Kalu Rinpoche was highly accomplished, quite extraordinary. Did I learn everything he had to teach? Not even close. But he was my primary teacher. I've done a lot of guru yoga and similar practices with Kalu Rinpoche as the focus, and I don't see any contradiction between seeing your teacher as Buddha as well as a human being. Remember, *Buddha* means *to be awake*. You have to see your teacher as being awake. If you don't, why are you studying with him or her?

Who are your teachers?

My principal teacher was the late Kalu Rinpoche [1905-1989]. He was a senior meditation master of the Kagyu tradition and holder of the Shangpa Kagyu lineage, who was living near Darjeeling, India when I met him in 1970. He was often asked by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Holiness the Karmapa to provide instruction on certain practices to groups of monks and lay practitioners, and he founded fifty Dharma centers around the world. He also established the first three-year retreat centers in the West. I undertook these long retreats twice, the last time ending in 1983.

Another important teacher was Dezhung Rinpoche, a Sakya teacher who lived in Seattle for many years, and Jamgön Kongtrul III before he died. There have been a number of others, including Thrangu Rinpoche, Nyishöl Khenpo, and Gangteng Tulku. They were all Tibetans.

A very good friend and I have been teacher and student to each other. He comes from another tradition, but we each had the approaches that freed up the other's practice so we have spent the last 15 years exchanging our respective trainings.

I also have a close relationship with a Zen practitioner. We have taught together in recent years. She brings a wealth of Zen and Vipassana training to our teaching. I learn a lot from her. So, while I teach others, I'm still a student.

Could you elaborate on these approaches?

The four approaches in spiritual work are power (the ability to go directly and just 'do'); ecstasy (the ability to open); insight (the ability to see into); and compassion (the ability to let go.)

Buddhism specializes in insight and compassion; Zen was originally based on power and the Theravada, particularly in the Forest Tradition in Thailand, interestingly, still has a strong connection with power (Tibetan Buddhism's relationship with power is muddy). Ecstatic practice is important in Dzogchen but not in most other Tibetan traditions, whereas Hinduism and Sufism have a lot. But all Buddhist traditions are very strong in insight and compassion. My friend's tradition, on the other hand, specialized in power and ecstasy. So we were able to complement each other's training.

Faith and respect in the teacher are important in the Tibetan tradition. What are your views on this topic?

In the mind-only or experience-only school, you see the world as the manifestation of your own mind. The teacher is what manifests in your world to put you in touch with your own potential, Buddha nature. That's pretty strong stuff. In other words,

Book Review

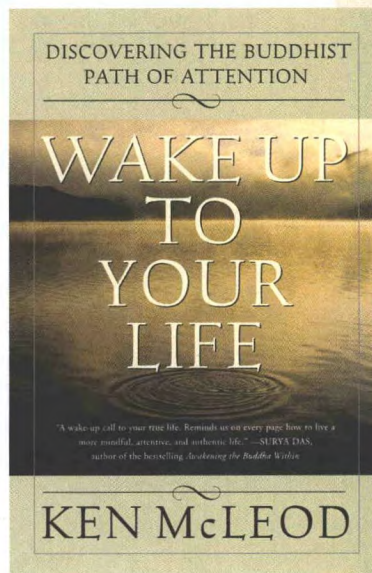
Ken McLeod's *Wake Up To Your Life: Discovering the Buddhist Path of Attention* was one of last year's Buddhist book offerings for a general Western readership. It is bound to enjoy more success and attract new readers now that it has gone into paperback. McLeod doesn't claim to be a guru, some see him as more of a 'life trainer,' whose take on Buddhism in our time is deceptively simple and easy to read. The secret lies in his years of study which include no less than seven years in retreat, and the influence of illustrious teachers, starting with Kalu Rinpoche.

This is a fresh and original how-to manual, brimful of anecdotes. It contains practical step-by-step meditations, some with exquisitely described visualizations, like the five dakinis, and explanations which shed light on esoteric practices. We learn how to build up – and tear down, with chapters like "Cultivating Attention," "Dismantling Attachment to Conventional Success," and "Karma and Dismantling Belief." *Wake Up* is sprinkled with quotes from sources as rich and varied as Goethe ("Our friends show us what we can do, our enemies teach us what we must do,") Picasso ("Only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone,") Bob Dylan's *Ballad of a Thin Man*, and this: "The story is told of a student who approached a Zen master and asked, "What happens after we die?" The Zen master said, "I don't know." "You don't know?" exclaimed the student. "But you are a master!" "That may be true," was the reply, "but I'm not a dead one."

"Oh Lord! It's hard to be humble when you are perfect in every way," as the cowboy's song goes, but this guide will take us a few more steps on the way to the perfect state of our true selves, with humility intact. Because, as McLeod reminds us, there is no "I."

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your teacher is that aspect of your mind that is endeavoring to communicate to you what it means to be awake. So, of course you have to have faith and respect in your teacher, just as you have to have faith and respect for Buddha or being awake.

How do you see the student-teacher relationship in the West and what kind of relationship do you have with your students?

A few years ago a couple of colleagues and I put together a program called "Passing on the Dharma" for Buddhist teachers. Some of the questions we asked were, "What kind of relationship do you have with your students and what kind do

are post-modern societies. They did away with the external structures that used to define role and position. Not so long ago, if your father was a shoemaker you would become one, and that sort of thing still prevails in a lot of places in the world. With modern education you have to figure out what *you* want to do – you have to develop the internal ability to define your own path. The same thing is true of marriage, economic position, education, political persuasion, and moral attitudes. By the latter part of the twentieth century, Western society had completely trashed any all-embracing moral structure, so now moral codes and ethics have to be developed internally. So, we don't depend on external structures the way people do in other societies.

You have to see your teacher as being awake. If you don't, why are you studying with him or her?

you want? Are you a minister heading up a congregation, a central figure in a monastic institution, are you a guide, a mentor, a coach, a therapist, a teacher, do you give spiritual direction or do you teach academically?" Teachers can play many different roles and each of the roles has a definite structure and responsibility. Providing support, for instance, is different from providing inspiration. Unfortunately, the different roles tend to be conflated. Some teachers want to be all things to all people and don't respect the different roles that teachers may have in a student's spiritual development.

After becoming disillusioned with being a teacher at a center, I thought, "I'll be a meditation consultant," without really knowing what that might mean. The upshot is that now I guide people in their meditation practice. When they have this or that problem, I suggest, "Try this, or that, or you need to put more effort there." I am providing support where it's appropriate, and very specific instruction where that is appropriate. I don't know what happened historically in Tibet, though I think that kind of relationship must have existed, but it's not the kind of relationship many people seem to have with their teachers. Most teacher-student relationships seem to be more formal. By comparison I have a relatively informal relationship with my students.

In the Tibetan tradition, you are taught that you must obey your guru. how do you see this principle operating in the West?

In the Vajrayana tradition it appears that you have to do whatever your guru says. But that's absurd in this country. It just isn't going to happen. America and most Western cultures

In Tibet, the guru-student relationship became part of the culture, while in India, originally, the guru-student relationship applied only to Vajrayana and was generally secret, i.e., not part of the culture. Here, in the West, I think that students should only enter a guru-student relationship when they are no longer confused by their projections onto the teacher. This generally implies a pretty advanced level of practice.

In Vajrayana one of the eight root downfalls is not obeying your teacher. Pawo Tsulak Trenga, a Kagyu teacher who was the principal scholar of his time, wrote an extensive commentary on this topic, which I studied when I was in retreat. He excoriates the view that the first root downfall means absolute obedience to the guru. He is very explicit: you have to do everything your lama tells you *only as it pertains to your spiritual practice*. He says that the first root downfall doesn't apply to how you live and function in the world.

Because the classic guru-student relationship evolved at a time when everything was structured by society, that relationship was also structured. Today I don't have any sense of being able to tell students, "You do that," and expect them to do it. Of course, in terms of meditation practice, I can and do, but as for the rest of my students' lives, I only make recommendations when I see that the way they are living is undermining their spiritual growth.

When students ask me for a perspective on things going on in their lives, they are not looking to me for the answers, but how to be present and awake in the situation so they can bring their own faculties to bear. This approach works quite well. Most are not looking for someone to follow and obey, but at a certain point a very small number become interested in working more deeply, in Vajrayana. Because almost everything I



teach is straight sutra Mahayana, I teach very little Vajrayana. However, my teacher authorized me to do so, and when students want to go in that direction I'll start giving them Vajrayana material. We also move into a different kind of relationship because Vajrayana requires a different kind of effort, but I never tell them they have to look at me as a buddha.

How does your relationship with students work in practice?

By operating as a meditation consultant, I don't have a temple to support or maintain. I have an office. People come in and we discuss practice. They make a contribution to the organization that supports me and if they are not benefiting from the interaction, they don't come back. If they won't work at the level I want them to, and they think I am an ogre, then I'm not interested in working with them. Nobody hangs around for teachings, blessings, or rituals, because there's nothing to hang around for and nowhere to hang around. The retreats I teach with a colleague are generally over-registered, so again you get people who really want to be there. That interest makes a difference in the tone of the retreat.

Many students feel that they are violating the relationship if they leave their teacher. What are your thoughts on this?

Pawo Tsulak Trengwa was clear on this issue, too. A point may come when you feel you can learn no more from a teacher. You might not have learned everything he or she has to teach but the relationship has broken down in some way. You don't have to have your guru's permission to leave. You thank him or her and make offerings and say goodbye. Atisha did this with one of his teachers. He got to a certain point and said, "Thank you for everything. Now, I'm off." His teacher wasn't pleased, but Atisha didn't violate the relationship.

But it is important not to denigrate your teacher after you leave. Remember, he or she is an aspect of your own mind and your awakening and if you denigrate this you are shutting the door to your own enlightenment. Why would you do this? Even a bad teacher may have moved something in you. Maybe he or she abuses money, power, sex, the usual stuff, but because this person opened something in you, respect that and cherish what was opened for you.

Why is a teacher important?

A lot of people in this culture think they can travel the spiritual path on their own. I don't agree. The teacher has three

responsibilities: to show you what being awake means – and they do it through their own actions and various other means; to teach and train you in the techniques you are going to need; and thirdly, to point out your own mistaken view which is getting in your way. This is the uncomfortable part. I don't see how anyone can fulfill these three functions for themselves.

A very few people awaken spontaneously, but such people typically have little sense of the path and tend to emphasize the fruition aspect of awakening. If you awaken spontaneously, maybe you don't need a teacher, but if you are traveling a path, you do.

A number of teachers, Asian and Western, have encountered personal difficulties that have developed into significant problems for their students. What can a teacher do to prevent such difficulties from damaging their relationship with students?

I started teaching in the early 1980s when a handful of teachers – and their reputations – were going up in flames. The one characteristic they shared was that they were isolated from their own community. They had no feedback on their own behavior that they would listen to. So I always make a point of having someone in my life that I will listen to. I might not like what they are saying, but if we go back to the question whether you can travel this path on your own – no, you *need* that person. Everyone needs at least one person who can and will point out where you are not awake or present.

I always have one or two people in my life from whom I have no secrets. I haven't always enjoyed that, but it has been essential: since I have no secrets from them, I can have no secrets from me.

The ultimate guru is your own mind but you are only able to learn from that guru when you are able to be present to some extent, and see through your own trips, your own projections. That doesn't happen overnight. Basically you learn how to do that from hanging out with a person who is awake. ☸

Ken McLeod established Unfettered Mind in 1990. After receiving training in the Shangpa Kagyu and Nyingma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, he was authorized by his teacher, Kalu Rinpoche, to teach and guide others in their practice. www.unfetteredmind.com

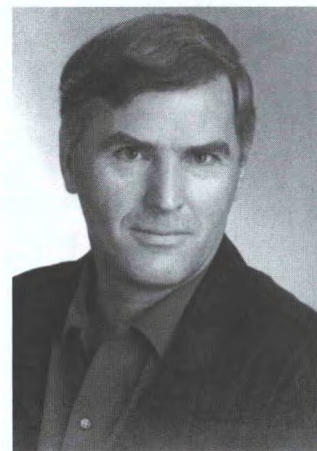


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