

week 1 reflection

The following teaching by Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche encapsulates a crucial attitude allowing us to make headway as we engage the path of Buddhadharma. In his introduction to the book, Rinpoche says: "Self-reflection is the spirit and practice of honestly looking at whatever arises in our experience, without judgement."

It requires probing some of the areas of discomfort that our idea of self (self-clinging, self-importance, ego-mind) would rather not see. This, perhaps, is why it is not especially popular. Yet, it turns out, it is also the root of the vibrant engagement with ourselves just as we are now, which is central to integrative practice.

As you read, keep in mind that the "teacher" Rinpoche mentions means more than our root guru, our Buddhist teachers, our spiritual friends in general—all beings, all events, even our own inward experiences, are "teachers."

Please read slowly, chewing on the words and stopping when something strikes you. Linger with those ideas. Pay attention to your own reactions, recognizing them as information that teaches, rather than expressions of what you are, or mandates of what you must do.

Excerpted from *It's Up to You*

By Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche

The Teacher as Mirror

Human beings need teachers on the Buddhist path to enlightenment. The teacher shows us how to look at ourselves properly. This idea may seem simple: look at your mind, see what you are doing with your mind, and change it. But in practice it is difficult to do. To see the mind clearly, we must have look without ego involvement. The teacher is especially important in this process, because the teacher points out things we can't clearly see.

The great eleventh-century Indian pandita Atisha taught that the greatest pith instructions are those that rub hard on our sore spots. Exposing those sore spots is the teacher's job. In this sense the teacher is the greatest mirror.

At times it may seem that the teacher is being hard on us. We may feel we're being criticized or never given a break, or our accomplishments are never appreciated. But we don't have to take it that way. Instead, something wonderful and fundamental could take place: we could see those things about ourselves that we don't ordinarily see.

When I was in the presence of my teacher, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the very evenness, clarity, and spaciousness of his mind naturally exposed my self-importance. I knew he could always see through my self-absorption, no matter how significant or complex I

thought my story was. This was an unspoken understanding we had as teacher and student this kind of communication was one of the ways I learned from him.

I saw this kind of interaction take place with others too. Sometimes people whose minds were wild—really crazy—would become immediately tamed by his presence. This is what is meant by the teacher as mirror: the teacher is the mirror that reflects not only how we are stuck but our basic sanity as well. This is the main purpose of the teacher-student relationship.

In order for the teacher to serve as a mirror, we have to be willing to look in that mirror. Otherwise we'll never find the dirt and blemishes, no matter how many mirrors we have around us. We may be afraid, but when a mirror is held up, we must be willing to look. This requires a very simple shift of mind. Even after many years of practice, it may not occur on its own. We need the teacher and the blessings of the lineage.

Our main connection to the teacher, the lineage, and the path is the fact that we are not afraid to look in the mirror. It actually intrigues us to see the various kinds of dirt and the cleaning up that needs to be done—and to know that no one can do this but us. We long to go deeper into the Dharma and truly integrate the teachings into our life. Unless the teachings penetrate us deeply, there is not much point in intellectual understanding. It only increases ego. We must always ensure that the teachings are aimed at reducing self-importance.

With less of important and more room for truth, the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas are always with us. No matter how difficult our life may be, there is nothing that cannot be changed by their blessings. In this way, in this life and the next, fruition will come—if we are willing to look in the mirror.

When we practice self-reflection in a gentle, joyful way, with great appreciation for our own wisdom as well as the wisdom of the lineage, the mind of our teacher is established within us. The teacher can feel secure about our path, because we've become self-reliant. We know that looking leads to liberation, and therefore we have the courage to practice self-reflection. Then everything we experience becomes our mirror, and every experience offers an opportunity to go beyond fixed mind.

There's no level of "seniority" where we get a break from self-reflection, not even after many practices and retreats. Such an expectation shows that we are on the wrong track. We may be tired and not wish to go any further, or we may think that we've already arrived. But the passion to look should never cease. It should deepen and increase. This is itself a sign of accomplishment.

On the path of self-reflection, you are the ultimate assessor of the beginning, middle, and end of your journey. Only you know what work needs to be done, and only you can do it. This is easy once you know how to assess yourself clearly.

Take time to consider the following prompts for reflection in light of this article. It may be helpful to journal about them. Again, take your time. Lavish yourself with the attention you typically reserve for others. Look deeply.

Generally speaking, to what extent does your attitude towards looking into your own flaws engage honesty without judgement?

Though we have not met formally as a group, or sealed our mandala, our program began weeks ago. The information session, registration, website membership, private sessions—all of these are part and parcel of the program as a whole.

Consider:

- What challenges, struggles, or discomforts have come up for you so far?
- Did you notice them as they arose?
- Do you notice them now?
- How did you characterize them?
- To what extent did you react habitually?
- Are you content with those reactions?
- How might you understand them differently if you saw them as a mirror aiding your self-reflection?