

# Teachers and Dharma Organizations in Transition

By Kim Allen

Imagine a dharma group that has been guided by a senior teacher, possibly its founder, for many years. Now, either by choice or due to health reasons, that teacher is about to significantly slow down or retire. What happens next?

It seems there are three basic options. In a teacher-centric group—one in which the teacher has come to represent the essence of the sangha, with the group's other leaders serving mainly as administrative support—that teacher holds sole authority and responsibility for choosing a successor. If the teacher departs suddenly and a succession plan is not in place, then the leaders will naturally try to “replace” their guiding teacher with another, later adapting to the new teacher's inevitably different style.

Another approach is for a strong senior teacher to be succeeded by a teacher council of several junior teachers, with sangha leaders having some say in how the teacher council fits in to the overall organization and exerting a small influence on its makeup. A new era begins for the group, one in which the teachers and sangha leaders must work together to steer the organization rather than leaving most decisions to the senior teacher.

This teacher council model is probably the most common approach in groups that are considering how to continue after a senior teacher retires. The new teachers may be senior students of the departing teacher, but not always; it can be good practice to bring in new people. One teacher on the council may even be chosen as the “guiding teacher,” but it is a much more

collaborative role than the one the original teacher played.

A third approach is for the board to take on the responsibility of bringing in new teachers to continue offering Buddhist teachings in line with its mission. In this model, the executive leaders have a big say regarding which teachers can come to the center. They may also consider whether the organization is a viable support or “umbrella” for teachers in the area, such that they would see value in affiliating with that organization rather than being completely independent.

These kinds of organization-centric groups often create objective written guidelines or standards for teachers, possibly in conjunction with the departing teacher. There may be additional rules and standards around operations and governance. Teachers may be offered administrative, technical, promotional, and financial support. Though relatively detached from daily administrative work, teachers must fit themselves into the organization’s way of doing things.

These three scenarios trace out a spectrum from more teacher-centric to more organization-centric. But in all cases, the organization is an entity of its own. This means that a new teacher is not the only successor—the organization itself is also continuing on and is an integral part of the process. Where on this spectrum does your organization sit?

## A Shift Away from Teacher-Centric

In the Insight tradition, with which I am most familiar, the clear trend is away from the teacher-centric end of the spectrum. One group, a variation on the teacher council model, now offers retreats “in the style of” their deceased founding teacher, given by senior students. Another group, in a move closer to the organization-centric end, is bringing in a succession of visiting teachers based on written criteria for who can teach.

Even Zen and Tibetan groups, in which the teacher is traditionally more central, incline toward having stronger organizations over time. A number of larger Zen centers have several senior teachers in addition to the abbot, all of whom work closely with a robust administration; such a structure approaches a teacher council model. Mingyur Rinpoche's organization also ran itself for several years while he was on retreat, including being guided by a group of senior teachers.

Another indication of this shift away from the teacher-centric model can be seen in full-fledged dharma organizations (not just sitting groups) that are being created without a guiding teacher at all. Dharma organizations are now considered standalone entities that can serve as vehicles for the teachings.

The implications of this shift are complex and far from fully evident in the nascent Buddhism of the West. A new teacher and an older organization may find themselves at odds over differences in style; younger teachers are currently encountering this, sometimes with painful results. A simple example might be a new teacher's novel offerings being censured by the program committee because they differ from the previous teacher's programs up to that point. These clashes can become serious, even leading to a break in relationship between the teacher and group leaders.

Both dharma teachers and organizational leaders are inspired by the wish to share and spread the dharma. Any of the models—from teacher-centric to organization-centric—can do this successfully. However, because stronger organizations tend to be more formalized, and because this very structure may limit people's encounter with the teachings, more attention and care are required near the organization-centric end of the spectrum.

## The Mixed Blessing of Formalization

It is typical for spiritual organizations to formalize as they develop. The older schools of Buddhism in the West, such as Jodo Shinshu, have already done so: The Buddhist Churches of America are led by a bishop and present a unified face to the public. The strands of Buddhism that arrived in the West more recently (and are more the focus of this article), however, show a range of styles and a lesser degree of formal structure.

Many practitioners and teachers feel some mistrust about formalization, and their concerns are well-founded. It is a natural property of organizations that they grow into entities capable of protecting themselves through various forms of exclusion and restriction. A spiritual organization can be clarifying, nourishing, and protective for some practitioners at some stages of their practice, while the same structure may be limiting to others. As one teacher put it, the institution may overwhelm “the small stammering voice” in the heart that seeks freedom.

Nonetheless, for people to cooperate on the scale now possible in the Buddhist world, formal structures have some use. Also, larger-scale entities or “meta-organizations” are emerging, such as the Soto Zen Buddhist Association and the Buddhist Insight Network (BIN). In the first few years of BIN’s annual meeting for leaders and teachers of Insight groups, it was typical for some attendees to be deeply moved, even to tears, by the realization that they are not alone in the challenges of building a sangha. The early stages of bringing people together and establishing common ground can be nurturing and often relieving.

In the transition period from founding teachers to newer teachers—and to organizations as participants in the mix—dharma organizations may struggle with multiple identities, having properties of nonprofits, schools, communities, monasteries, and churches. Meta-organizations

may be like industry associations, networking groups, or spiritual councils. It may be helpful to think broadly, bringing in the best of all these possibilities.

Opening to these wider ways of thinking can inspire new sources of guidance and modeling. Christian, Jewish, and other religious groups have weathered changes of spiritual leaders for a long time and have evolved successful methods for handling transition. In the secular world, established fields such as organizational development offer tools for building fruitful and adaptable organizations and communities.

## Many Possibilities

By whatever means the leaders of dharma organizations chart a course, a good overarching approach is to focus on fulfilling a group's highest potentials. On a broad level, this means creating an environment conducive to teaching, practicing, and learning the dharma. This can take many forms but always includes creating a safe space for the population attending the center, offering teachings rooted in deep Dharma understanding, and encouraging embodiment of the teachings being practiced. It is helpful to consciously avoid the tendency to focus more on the organization itself than on practicing the teachings.

In practical terms, creating an environment conducive to the dharma also means serving as a vehicle for teachers' livelihood. Leaders can reflect consciously on the value of dharma teachings and the wish to support the teacher(s), and create a culture in which sangha members can talk openly and think maturely about money. Many dharma organizations are not yet able to work on this level.

One other relevant trend to be aware of: as organizations become stronger and more

formalized, we can expect to see a corresponding burgeoning of new and creative teaching methods. Some teachers will not abide being part of an institution and will develop alternative approaches to teaching. In this way, the strengthening of standards and boundaries also tends to fuel innovation at the margins. Historically in Asia, this balance has served Buddhism well; we can assume it will also be beneficial in the West.

The transmission of the dharma is a different matter than the evolution of dharma organizations. The dharma continues to flow from heart to heart, as it has for millennia, while the organizations and bodies that shape and transmit the teachings arise, change, and pass.

Appendix:

## When a New Teacher is Coming...

When my friends remodeled their house, they noted that after they were finished, they knew enough to remodel a house. The same may happen for a group undergoing the transition from one teacher to another. These guidelines are gleaned from the sometimes challenging experiences of dharma organizations that have weathered this process; perhaps they might prevent some pain and conflict while also preserving the quality of the dharma container.

### Timing

Start early, perhaps as much as five years in advance for a longtime teacher. If newer teachers will overlap with the senior teacher, it is good for this interval to be long enough for the sangha to begin acclimating to the new teacher's style, but short enough that the new teacher steps up cleanly.

### Emotions

Strong emotions occur during teacher transitions. One reason is that it is essentially a grieving process, with the accompanying sadness, fear, anger, and despair. As in grief, it is best for these emotions to be acknowledged and accepted in order that they be moved through. Also, if the group has grown up around the teacher, it is likely that the teacher invisibly contains and manages certain conflicts and strong personalities among the leaders and senior students. As the teacher begins to pull back and transfer power, these forces can erupt. Perhaps the most important quality of character during transitions is patient perseverance, the willingness to just keep showing up.

## Process and Restructuring

Each group will have to decide, based on its own structure and culture, which people should be involved in decisions around a teacher transition. Whether it is just a few leaders or the whole community together, it is helpful to set clear expectations about people's roles: *Are they offering opinions? Do they have a vote? Will they actually be making the decisions?*

It can also be a good time to revisit the structure of the organization. A foundation known to be fairly stable consists of three legs: A person in the teacher role providing spiritual presence and guidance; a competent board consisting of people with diverse skills in governance, finance, communication, and other areas; and a strong administrative leader who can head up the management of the organization.

A founding teacher often plays multiple roles in this triangle, obscuring the need for each one to be present. As the teacher pulls back, it can be helpful to carefully consider who will fill each of these roles. The new teachers coming in should have some role in creating the innovations in infrastructure. Significant change may be needed, and this takes time.

## Relationships

Three situations are most likely to produce problems:

1. The sangha does not invite the voice of the new teacher(s) with an open mind toward making changes.
2. The new teacher(s) do not speak up about changes they would like to make, instead adapting passively to the existing culture.
3. The departing teacher does not adequately let go and allow the organization and its new teacher(s) to find their way.

In all these cases, it is helpful to be aware that the community surely carries some thought, speech, and behavior patterns from its time with the prior teacher, such as unexamined assumptions about how things are done and topics that are more or less acceptable for discussion. The transition works best when these are allowed to be acknowledged and modified.

## Expect the Unexpected

Even when care is taken, surprising turns of events can and will happen. The best preparation is developing a sangha with good channels of communication, transparency, and some confidence in its ability to see things through. In some cases, it may be appropriate to seek guidance or training outside the sangha. The board, executive director, and even teachers may need assistance to navigate the organizational change.