

***Dancing with Life* Study Guide for Teachers**

Thank you for your interest in using *Dancing with Life* as a teaching text. I've developed this study guide to provide you with recommendations for how to teach the material in the book and to help you address certain challenges your students may encounter. The suggestions in this study guide do not comprise complete teachings; they are shorthand notes and, therefore, aren't meant for students to read.

NOTE: This guide is intended for your use exclusively. Please agree to honor the teachings and not distribute it or share it with others, including your students or other sangha members.

General principles to consider in teaching *Dancing with Life*:

I. As I point out in Chapter One, the insights of the Four Noble Truths are interrelated; therefore, as your students progress through the insights you might encourage them to go back and re-read or reflect on previous insights. As they understand more advanced insights it will deepen their understanding of previous insights. For example, once they've read and practiced the insights of the Second Noble Truth, if you instruct them to go back and read the First Noble Truth again, their understanding of the First Noble Truth will open up a whole other level.

II. One way to understand *Dancing with Life* is that it is a teaching about psychological development as well as spiritual development. Therefore, as students practice each insight, they're directly working to mature their egos. The flowering of this is noticed as they gain more independence around ego issues.

III. Some students have difficulty distinguishing between the first and second or the second and third insights of the first two Noble Truths, so it might be helpful to lead a group discussion in which the whole group verbalizes the differences.

IV. A classic teaching challenge that has been wrestled with for hundreds of years is the teaching of the Third Noble Truth before the Fourth. There are two problems: First is that when students read the Third Noble Truth it feels to them like the climax and that they've reached the end of the teaching when in fact the work that will lead to the climax is contained in the Fourth Noble Truth. A second problem is that the Third Noble Truth is difficult to comprehend without a strong experience base. For both of these reasons, you might want to have students read section four of the book before reading section three.

V. Some students can become discouraged because they perceive the Four Noble Truths to only be about suffering. In fact, every insight brings less suffering and, therefore, more happiness joy and meaning. You may need to point this out to students in your introduction. Another approach is to describe the three kinds of happiness (Chapter 22) in an early lesson, then point out the following: As you begin to have realizations around the First Noble Truth, you will have more happiness based on conditions because your mind is not so reactive to conditions. As you start to realize the insights of the Second Noble

Truth, you begin to experience the second kind of happiness because your mind states are healthier and you're less caught in grasping. Finally, even a foretaste of cessation brings such unconditioned happiness and provides a new basis for meaning and joy.

VI. Some students have questions about the difference between the second and third kinds of dukkha. One way to explain the difference is that the second kind of dukkha, which is based on anicca, is located in time, while the third kind of dukkha is based on a single moment—in any given moment there is the truth that there is “no there there.”

VII. It's important for you to know if your students understand the difference between attachment to outcome vs. commitment to their goals. It takes students a long time to get this difference, so a group discussion around this can be very helpful.

VII. Students get very excited when they have their first taste of knowing that they know. On the positive side, it provides strong motivation for continuing to practice. On the downside, it can lead them to stop at a superficial level of this insight. One has to continue working at knowing that you know in order for it to mature into full realization. It would be helpful to your students if you shared your own experience of how you have deepened in this insight.

VIII. When you begin to teach the insights of the Third Noble Truth, it is critical that you distinguish for your students between your own experience of cessation and your views as to what this truth is describing. A good foundation is to take students through the teachings of arising and passing (page 172), which is something they can experience for themselves. You might want to make arising and passing a focus in your own practice weeks before you teach it so that you have some personal experience to refer to.

IX. Another point of confusion for many students is the gradual vs. sudden realization of cessation. You are teaching the gradual path. Therefore, if a student reports a sudden moment of insight or asks, “I'm already Buddha nature, so why should I bother with meditation?” your response is that the gradual path will help them deepen their insight and integrate it into their daily lives.

How to teach this book:

I encourage you to teach *Dancing with Life* from your own perspective and experience base. However, here are some suggestions that may help you structure your approach:

- Make a weekly reading assignment. Some leaders are assigning whole chapters each week, while others are varying the length of the assignment from week to week. Your students may find it helpful if you give them a couple of questions to reflect on in their own lives as they read the assignment.
- Consider giving students one of the weekly teachings from the www.dancingwithlife.org website for their reflection.
- You might also have them focus on a “keyword” of the week, such as “dukkha,” “attachment,” or “intention.” You might ask them to come up with their own

definition of the word and to notice examples of that word arising during the week.

- During class you might break the group into dyads or triads for sharing or discussing a particular point.

The core materials for teaching *Dancing with Life* are the book itself and the weekly teachings that can be accessed on the dancingwithlife.org website, which I recommend you structure your classes around. From the website you can also download an audio file of an introductory *Dancing with Life* dharma talk by me. And I will be offering periodic teleconferences to answer any questions you may have or challenges you've encountered.

Following are examples of weekly assignments from Meg Agnew in Seattle:

Week 3

Please read Chapter 3. For your reflection and for our discussion you might wish to consider one or both of these this week: In what areas of your life are you resistant to acknowledging the existence of suffering? After noticing when a feeling of dukkha has arisen in your mind, ask yourself, how much of this suffering is an objective fact and how much of it is your emotional resistance to it?

Also read this interesting excerpt about the translation of the word dukkha from the Pali-English dictionary on www.accesstoinsight.org: "No single English word adequately captures the full depth, range, and subtlety of the crucial Pali term dukkha. Over the years, many translations of the word have been used ('stress,' 'unsatisfactoriness,' 'suffering,' etc.). Each has its own merits in a given context. There is value in not letting oneself get too comfortable with any one particular translation of the word, since the entire thrust of Buddhist practice is the broadening and deepening of one's understanding of dukkha until its roots are finally exposed and eradicated once and for all. One helpful rule of thumb: as soon as you think you've found the single best translation for the word, think again, for no matter how you describe dukkha, it's always deeper, subtler, and more unsatisfactory than that."

Week 4

Please read Chapter 4, "How Suffering Got a Bad Name," and consider how suffering is viewed in our culture. With respect to that view, here are a couple of questions to consider: Was there a time or instance in your life when you resisted changing a hurtful situation because to do so would have felt like admitting to a perceived failure or humiliation? In response to a major loss or tragedy in your life have you ever experienced our culture's attitude of denial or dismissal toward your suffering? Also look for opportunities this week to work with Phillip's reflection in Teaching #9: In the First Insight the Buddha asks you to carry your suffering without judgment and without resistance. Try this week to "catch yourself" resisting and instead just bear those moments with compassion and mindfulness in your heart.

May your teaching of this material deepen your own practice and your understanding of the dharma. May your understanding of the dharma be a benefit to your loved ones and to all those with whom you come in contact.