

The Guru
Drinks
Bourbon

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse

EDITED BY AMIRA BEN-YEHUDA

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To all the charlatans—
without you, the spiritual journey would be just too boring.

Devotion is the Buddha
Devotion is the Dharma
Devotion is the sangha
Devotion is mother
Devotion is father
Devotion is master
Devotion is purifying
Devotion is merit
Devotion is the path
Devotion is the fruit
Devotion is the boat
Devotion is the other shore
Devotion is a wish-fulfilling jewel
Devotion is a spell
Devotion is blind
Devotion is awake
Devotion is direction
Devotion is the means
And devotion is the end

—Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse



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Guru devotion is the head, heart, blood, spine, and breath of the incredible Vajrayana, the path of Buddhist tantra. The Vajrayana is not a safe stroll in the countryside. In fact, safety is probably the least of our concerns. The Vajrayana's way of dealing with ego and the emotions is hazardous. The methods are sometimes even reckless. Therefore, the tantric path is the most adventurous of all Buddhist paths. If this is not an adventure, then there is no adventure. I am assuming if you are reading this book, you are not a wimp and you have chosen to take this risk.

Introduction

VAJRAYANA IS AN ADVENTURE

HAVE YOU EVER heard of a Tibetan singing bowl? They never existed in Tibet until some cunning inventor who really knew how to package things capitalized on a pro-Tibetan sentiment and came up with this bell. Now you see them everywhere, as if they are Tibetan culture itself. Even the Tibetans in Dharamsala and Kathmandu have adopted these singing bowls as part of their own culture. It is the same with Chinese fortune cookies, which are not Chinese at all. They were invented in America based on a Japanese recipe, and now they are served as if they are the quintessence of Chinese food, even in authentic Chinese restaurants. This is the sort of danger we face, if we are not careful. One day, beautifully packaged, nicely marketed, inauthentic Buddhism will be offered up as the real thing. So scrutiny is important: scrutiny of the teachings, scrutiny of the teacher, and scrutiny of the student. That is the reason I wrote this book.

It's also important to recognize the distinction that exists in Buddhism between theory and practice. Theories are ideas, like "all things are born from neither the self nor the other," and practice comprises techniques, things like sitting up straight. Theory and practice often appear to contradict each other. Theory encourages referencelessness and directionlessness, while practice is full of references and directions. But these directions are leading the practitioner to the referenceless point of no direction. The guru principle is a practice. It is a technique, not a theory. In fact, it is the most supreme technique.

While this book may help students who are searching for the guru or those who are trying to maintain a relationship with the guru, it's not wise to think that the techniques found here work for everyone. Nor is this the final word on the matter. It is merely my word. The organization of the book—in particular, chapters 2–4—is based on the advice of Jigme Lingpa, but what I have written is based on my own experience with my own teachers and my own so-called students, who are bound to me by their karmic debt. Therefore, subjects such as

“sex as an offering” are included, which might give you a jolt if you happen to think Buddhism is all about peace, nonviolence, vegetarianism, mindfulness, belief in reincarnation, and sitting.

Also, I must point out that the view and technique of the Vajrayana path are so vast and so rich that it’s impossible for me to explain everything. But it’s my hope that you will have the endurance to finish reading this book and that it will at least help you develop some familiarity with the world of Vajrayana. I hope you will begin to appreciate that Vajrayana is not just mantra, ritual, deity, guru, mandala, and tantric sex.

This book is for those who are naturally Vajrayana-inclined, like Milarepa and Shantideva, who were not satisfied with ordinary logic and rationality, and who didn’t readily accept the known world as it appears. It is for those who don’t have time for instruction books, who don’t trust maps, and who have the daringness to rely on another human being. It is for those who don’t seek a safety net, who would rather have the rug pulled out from under their feet than have some sense of security and direction. It is for people who want to be challenged. This book is for those who started out enthusiastic about practicing tantric Buddhism and then discovered, much to their dismay, that in order to follow the Vajrayana Buddhist path, they must rely on a guru as a guide.

Deciding to follow another human being—not a god, not a machine, not nature, not a system of governance, not the sun or the moon, but a shower-taking, sleeping, yawning, shitting, moody, bribable being—is either the most stupid thing a person can do, or the most rewarding. It is a gift to have this inclination and the tenacity to follow it. It is a gift to have doubtless confidence. It is a gift to be able to kill doubt with doubt. Not everyone has these gifts.

One of Nyoshul Lungtok’s students had these gifts. Once while doing the guru’s laundry, he found a shit stain and thought, “Oh, the Vajradhara shits.” But having received instructions on how a student must regard the teacher as Buddha, he immediately reprimanded himself, “How can I think the Vajradhara shits?” But then he reprimanded himself again, thinking, “Is this just me being a sycophant?” Then for a third time he reprimanded himself, coming to the conclusion that being a sycophant is just a concept, a fear. And after all these scoldings, he still followed the guru, not blindly but wholeheartedly.

Once you have started this journey of practicing Vajrayana, many things can happen, and you have to be prepared. It’s important to have faith, but it’s good to also have doubt and use reason. Often faith comes in the aftermath of doubt and doubt comes in the aftermath of faith. And the one that comes second is often much more powerful. In the end we have to abandon both.

The Vajrayana is a path of the union of wisdom and method, the union of

science and faith, the union of myth and truth, but many materialists, those whose sights are not set beyond this life, don't see the nonduality of these dualities. They may be awed by the vastness and depth of the theory of nonduality but disregard faith and devotion, even though faith and devotion are the vehicles that effectively deliver you to nonduality. They can accept the logic of truth but then snobbishly dismiss myth and ritual. They don't seem to understand that myth is the only means to understand the truth, because everything we say is a myth.

Even Vajrayana practitioners find it difficult or don't even think to try to marry these seemingly unmarriageable dualities. For example, many apply the method, such as prostrating to the guru or offering a lotus flower, hands beautifully folded in anjali mudra, but they do so as a ritual without applying wisdom. Prostration is surrender, but very few people prostrate with genuine confidence; they don't think, "I am prostrating to the deity who is none other than myself, and likewise the deity is prostrating to me." Knowing that the deity and the prostrator are one and the same is the ultimate prostration.

Here, in this book, I will try to show that the guru is actually like the horizon. A horizon is apparent—a line where earth and sky appear to meet. But in reality, they never meet. There is only an illusion of an ending point, a point of reference where we can stand and measure and assess. In this way, the guru is like a horizon between wisdom and method, myth and truth, science and faith.

DEFINING TERMS

There will be terms throughout this book that may be unfamiliar to new students, and that even longtime students may only think they understand. While I made some effort to avoid Buddhist jargon and idioms, I didn't want to oversimplify. Moreover, some jargon is priceless.

The Three Yanas

The Buddhadharma has existed for more than twenty-five hundred years. It was practiced during the time of Jesus, the Crusades, all the Chinese dynasties, the Second World War, the dawn of the Internet, and countless other historical episodes. It has traveled from the land of white-clad, bare-chested Ganges bathers, to face-saving, filially pious ancestor worshippers, to rugged, musicless, institutionless snow-peak dwellers, to elegant, meticulous minimalists, to guilt-oriented believers in "innocent until proven guilty." It flourished in times when

spiritual seekers were the majority—when sannyasins were venerated, and when giving alms to yogis so that they could wander held a prestige equal to today's habit of establishing scholarships for students to go to Harvard. It has flourished in times when kings and queens used religion as a means to glorify themselves and strengthen their power. It has flourished in times of marijuana blowing and flowers in the hair. And it flourishes still in times of extreme materialism.

The fundamental purpose of all the teachings of the Buddha is to help beings understand the truth. Because there are infinite types of beings with infinite ways of misunderstanding the truth, the buddhas have taught in infinite ways. Each and every method is different—sometimes slightly, sometimes radically. Over the years, the unique methods of the Buddha were loosely grouped and labeled by scholars and historians. They found it convenient to lump the teachings into categories based on language or content or geographic location. As a result, we now have different so-called schools of Buddhism, or *yanas*.

The Buddha warned about categorizing, because when there are categories, preferences begin to take root. Inevitably, one category is then considered to be lesser than the others. People become sectarian and elitist—for example, are you an Apple user or a PC user? Nevertheless, throughout this book, out of necessity and to avoid confusion, we have to use some of these categorizing terms. Primarily, we will discuss what many people consider to be the three *yanas* of Buddhism: Shrivakayana (such as Theravada), Mahayana (such as Zen), and Vajrayana (such as Shingon or Tibetan tantric Buddhism).

The Mahayana Buddhists in places like China and Japan and the Shrivakayana Buddhists in places like Thailand and Burma don't all approve of the Vajrayana Buddhists' use of gurus. For that matter, they don't approve of many Vajrayana methods, and to their credit, they have the words of the Buddha himself to support their point of view. The Buddha said in the Dhammapada, "I cannot remove your suffering; you must remove your own suffering," and, "I cannot share my enlightenment." He also said, "You are your own master; no one else can be your master." Pilgrims visiting Bodhgaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment, will find these famous sayings inscribed on plaques at the Mahabodhi temple. Bolstered by these statements, Shrivakayana and Mahayana Buddhists chastise tantric Buddhists for this guru business, which seems to promise that an external master can remove suffering and even bestow enlightenment. To them guru devotion goes against the Buddha's word.

However, from the Vajrayana point of view, the guru-student relationship is very much in line with the words of the Buddha. There is a reason that guru devotion is the quintessence of the Vajrayana. As we shall see, it does not contradict the Buddha because ultimately the tantric student understands that the

guru is not an external being.

The Causal Paths and the Result Vehicle

We often refer to the tantra or Vajrayana as the “result path,” or result vehicle, and to the Mahayana and Shravakayana as “causal paths.” What do we mean by these terms?

Let’s say someone gives you a basket with some eggs, a few mushrooms, a bit of cheese, and an onion and says, “Here are the ingredients for an omelet.” The word “ingredients” implies that these items will *cause* an omelet; the potential is there in the basket. However, a master chef would not want to waste his breath explaining the contents of the basket because he already sees it as the omelet itself. He has the experience and mental faculties to simply say, “Here is your omelet.”

The difference between saying “This will become an omelet” and “This is an omelet” is that the former lacks a certain confidence. It lacks the bigger perspective. These semantics may sound insignificant, but they are very important: words and language reflect and actually shape one’s attitude and beliefs. For example, describing someone by choosing a phrase like “he can become a good person” will spark a different reaction than if you were to say “he *is* a good person.” This is always true for everything that is said or written: every word is meant and interpreted differently by different people. So of course, words like “love,” “compassion,” “mind training,” “devotion,” “prayer,” “virtue,” “morality,” “blessing,” and especially the topic of this book—“guru”—have different meanings and connotations in the Shravakayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana and therefore give rise to different attitudes.

On the causal paths, the Shravakayana and Mahayana, we are told we have the *potential* to become the Buddha; we have all the ingredients. But in the highest teachings of the result path, the pinnacle of the tantra, we are told nothing needs to be altered or prepared, that whatever or whoever you are *is* the Buddha; in fact, every sentient being is Buddha, and every place is a Buddhafield. Therefore, tantric disciples with the right faculties will see the guru as the Buddha and use that understanding as a means to discover themselves as the Buddha. This perception goes both ways. When a tantric guru gives initiation to a student, it is done solely on the confidence that the student is the Buddha.

One may wonder, “What, then, are tantric students doing if the guru and the student are already the Buddha? Why are they practicing the Dharma? Why do they need guru devotion?” Most people in this world haven’t had the good fortune to be informed that they are the Buddha—not even one single time.

According to the texts, the fact that you have heard or read this truth even once is the result of so many lifetimes of good karma. But do you actually believe it? And if you believe it, do you act accordingly? Do you have confidence in that understanding—not just intellectually, but as an experience?

We are not meant to read the sentence “All beings are Buddha” and then close the book and keep it on a shelf. Following the path means acting like a buddha, thinking like a buddha, dwelling like a buddha, manifesting like a buddha, texting someone like a buddha, listening to a nagging friend like a buddha, waiting in line at the grocery store like a buddha, dressing in black tie for a dinner at Buckingham Palace like a buddha. The technique of cultivating the discipline to maintain awareness that all beings are buddhas, including Donald Trump and Pol Pot, and that every place is a Buddhafield, including Patpong and Las Vegas, is what we call the Vajrayana, the result path.

In the result path, because all phenomena are equally pure and perfect, there is no difference between a disciple and a guru—they are equally Buddha. A nihilist academic from Oxford University, an eternalist priest from the Vatican, and a yogi from the Himalayas are equally Buddha. There is not one ounce of difference among them. A disciple equipped with the proper faculties and conditions can even extract blessings from Richard Gombrich or Stephen Batchelor. But the causes and conditions must be exactly right for the effect to take place. If an average Joe meets an anarchist like Noam Chomsky and the right circumstances are not present, there is little chance that Dr. Chomsky will lead Joe to enlightenment. At the end of the day, it’s a safer bet for Joe to seek out someone with the accoutrements of a guru. Chances are that a dreadlocked yogi sitting on a tiger skin by the banks of the River Narmada or at least a serene monk under a banyan tree will do a better job of lighting a spark of inspiration than a cynic or a linguist.

It’s Joe’s karma, which goes beyond just choice, that will determine his path. Some people are more inclined to invest time and energy in pursuing that spark of spiritual inspiration, and others are more inclined to pursue the satisfaction of intellectual masturbation by reading Noam Chomsky. These inclinations and connections depend on cause, condition, and effect—a specific form of karma we call “tendrel,” which we will discuss in more detail later.

In the causal paths—the Mahayana and Shrivakayana—there is no mention of the guru and the disciple being inseparable, whereas in the Vajrayana, the whole point is to realize the state of inseparability between guru and disciple. Inseparability doesn’t mean traveling together, sleeping together, or taking showers together. It’s like when a jar breaks: the space inside the jar and the space outside the jar become inseparable. There is no guru to chase around the

globe, and there is no you who misses the guru. There is no guru to supplicate and no you who has the burden to thank the guru. If you find this difficult to chew and swallow, it might be because you cherish the emotion of longing for the guru. You might think if you don't miss the guru, you're being sacrilegious, so you hang on to this separability. If that's the case, maybe the causal path is for you.

In the causal path, the guru is like a model, an ideal, a master to whom you pay homage and respect, to whom you make offerings and whom you follow. As a Mahayana Buddhist, no matter how much in awe you are of your guru, you would never aspire to achieve the state of the guru in this lifetime. You may aspire to acquire a certificate of recognition of having become a guru to show others, but there is no actual aspiration to achieve the enlightened state of the guru. A Zen Buddhist would never claim that his or her sensei is the Buddha or is the Dharma. To them, the sensei is a respected teacher, a preceptor, someone who leads. There is no method for a Zen student to aspire to be one with his sensei; it's just not on the menu.

In the tantra, a guru can be a model, an idol, a preceptor, even a boss but also must be much more than that. The guru is the path, the guru is the Dharma, the guru is the Buddha, and the guru is the deity. In fact, ultimately in the tantra, the guru is everything, from the tip of Mount Fuji to the dust under your feet—the cool breeze, the sound of cicadas, a symphony, the sun, the moon, the stars, the cosmos. To be precise, everything that can be reached, illuminated, or fathomed within the sphere of the mind is the guru. The illuminator, the mind itself, is, therefore, the inner guru.

Pith Instructions

Have you ever bought a new gadget—say, a rice cooker—and spent hours poring over the manual that tells you everything the rice cooker can do but doesn't address the features you're actually interested in until page 300? Who has the time and the appetite to decipher all of that? It's so much faster and easier to sit with someone who is already rice cooker-savvy, who can demonstrate the essentials in a fraction of the time. Moreover, the rice cooker manual is written for a general audience, so it can be only generally helpful. It doesn't take into account the idiosyncrasies of all rice eaters who might have fifteen fingers or a third eye or who are master chefs.

Similarly, it can be generally helpful for Dharma students and practitioners to read Buddhist sutras, shastras, and tantras if they have the time. But each person has different needs, so they might go through many of these texts before finding

the one that works for them. Or, instead, they can seek out someone who is Dharma-savvy, an authentic lineage guru, who can teach them what they really need to know through the individualized pith instructions that have been passed from master to student in an unbroken lineage from great mahasiddhas like Guru Padmasambhava, Naropa, Atisha, and Virupa to the masters of the present day.

When administering pith instructions, a skillful master will choose methods that were created for specific cultures and habits and also invent or slightly modify instructions to suit the specific needs of individual students. This method is favored by tantric gurus and students who genuinely appreciate the benefits of studying the vast Buddhadharma but are acutely aware of how little time there is in this life. Having already developed absolute confidence and trust in the path, they would rather cut to the chase and invest their time in precious pith instructions that deal directly with practice.

It's good to have a balance of studying theory and receiving pith instructions. It's like learning how to drive a car. Every car comes with an owner's manual, and a new car owner often devotes an hour or so to studying how the car works—what all the dials on the dashboard indicate, how to set up the cruise control, and so on. The manual will tell you everything you need to know about how the car functions, but it doesn't give you information about how to drive it. For that you need a driving instructor.

A driving instructor has had years of driving and teaching experience and is able to adapt the standard method of teaching to suit the individual needs of each student. Perhaps one student is eager to learn quickly and schedules a week-long intensive, whereas someone else is content to have one lesson a week and isn't in a hurry to take the driving test. Both students learn the same skills to pass their test, but in a slightly different way. Or perhaps the driving instructor's 8 a.m. student is always yawning and making errors at the beginning of the lesson but drives extremely well by the end of it. After a couple of lessons, the driving instructor might suggest that the student drink a cup of coffee at 7:45 a.m., just before they start driving. This isn't the sort of advice that the student would find in an owner's manual. For people who are already tense and agitated, coffee might be the last thing they need—perhaps a sip of a margarita would do the trick.

In this example, this owner's manual is like the tantric texts, the theory. The driving instructor is the guru. Drinking coffee before a lesson is a pith instruction. Pith instructions are unique to the student, versatile, colorful, unorthodox, and not always entirely logical. They are quite flexible and at times quite dramatic and outrageous. They are not universal.



© Josef Schulz

This is not an instruction book for people to follow step-by-step like a manual for a camera or a rice cooker.

At a time when the Beatles had ponytails and it was all the fashion to wear bell-bottoms, smoke marijuana, wash with vegetable soap, and keep long fingernails, there was a rebellious freedom in the air, a trend of going slightly against the system. There was also a trend of spiritual seeking. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche came along and insisted that all the Vietnam War–protesting Dharma students wear khaki uniforms, ties, and suits with pins. He even made them march like British soldiers on American soil. He combined Japanese simplicity and elegance with colonial British style and imposed all of this on the Woodstock-going hippies. It sounds crazy, but each command was so skillful. These were Trungpa Rinpoche’s pith instructions. They worked because they were well grounded in the stainless view and designed with wisdom, skillful

means, and compassion. And there was genuine merit, devotion, and compassion between him and his disciples. Who would have thought that of all the people in the world, these antiestablishment rebels would take to this?

Now the conditions have changed. The exact same techniques—the suits, the marching, the pins—taught by a different teacher, in a different time, in a different setting, without firm grounding in the view, without a genuine wish to enlighten other beings, would be ridiculous, a mere child's game. Since Chögyam Trungpa, there have been a lot of wannabe Chögyam Trungpas who mimic his actions. But time and again they have proved that to manifest crazy wisdom, one must be absolutely sober. Where the lions leap, the fox should not jump—it would only break the fox's rib.

If a Zen master asks, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” at the right time to the right person, such a seemingly ridiculous question can be a profound and valuable pith instruction. Likewise, methods such as ngöndro (the classic Vajrayana preliminary practice), visualizing yourself as the deity, controlling the breath, the infinite and elaborate construction of mandalas, burning food, wearing amulets, using emotion as the path, and not treating emotion as a nemesis can all be pithy and profound. The Vajrayana's mantra recitation is as absurd as the sound of one hand clapping, as pointless as concentrating on the philtrum just below the nostrils. Yet mantra can be a powerful nutcracker that cracks the shell of conventional thinking.

While these instructions are important, it's even more important that we learn how to interpret Buddhist theory. To return to the example of learning to drive: Think of how many times people say, “Drive carefully.” It's good advice and something drivers in general all want to put into practice, but *how* to drive carefully isn't explicit. In fact, “drive carefully” is a theoretical statement open to interpretation. Different drivers should be careful for different reasons and in different ways.

In the ngöndro, we have a practice of accumulating one hundred thousand prostrations. Many people benefit from completing this preliminary practice, but for others it's not necessary. Milarepa, for example, probably didn't do one hundred thousand prostrations. Instead, his teacher, Marpa, refused to teach him even one word of Dharma until he had built a stone tower. As soon as the tower was completed, Marpa instructed Milarepa to tear it down and start again, not just once but many times. This unreasonable treatment, the noncommonsensical construction, the forced penance, not to mention the verbal, physical, and emotional abuse endured by Milarepa, were all Marpa's methods intended specifically for his disciple. The account of Marpa's demands and Mila's willingness to obey has inspired countless people ever since. The story itself is a

pith instruction on “no questions asked,” but this doesn’t mean unaccomplished, immature teachers should start ordering their students to build towers.

Wishing to help cut delusion once and for all, an accomplished guru may instruct a successful Hong Kong student to quit his dream job at Morgan Stanley and sell hand-painted postcards in Goa for a living. Or wishing that a student actualize the truth in this lifetime, a guru may instruct a lazy, idealistic, leftist hippie from Byron Bay to get a job at Sotheby’s auction house in New York City. Doing prostrations, letting go of comforts, and going against principles all aim at the same result: dismantling the perfectly engineered machine of illusion.

All these methods work. Don’t get fixated on the idea that all Vajrayana students who aspire to raze the walls of duality must follow the Tibetan tradition of doing one hundred thousand prostrations. That would be like thinking that every driver must drink a cup of coffee before they get in the car. Then again, if you avoid doing prostrations because you think they are just for Tibetans or because the very idea of lying down and standing up one hundred thousand times exhausts you, you are deceiving yourself. In that case, you shouldn’t do one hundred thousand prostrations—you should do two hundred thousand. Never opt for the easy way out. Be ruthless toward the desires of the mind.

Guru

In ancient India, people used the term “guru” with genuine veneration. If a guru was not a savior, at least he or she was worthy of trust, someone to lean on. Spiritual gurus were associated with wisdom and protection, leading the way on a path to the truth. Now the word “guru” is frequently associated with power, sex, money, hypocrisy, and, in the Tibetans’ case, thrones, brocades, entourages, and glittering monasteries. It has been reduced to mean a person rather than a path or a technique.

As I have said, language and definitions have a powerful impact on our understanding, so it’s important to discuss the various meanings and interpretations of “guru.” The Sanskrit word *guru* is elastic. Taxi drivers call each other “guru.” Students call their math teachers “guru.” But the tantric Buddhist word “guru” means something much more than “friend” or “teacher.” “Guru” is not the same as “priest” or *huófó*¹ (Chinese for “living Buddha”).

Chinese also have something called *fawang*, which means “Dharma king,” but this concept has nothing to do with Buddhism; it’s cultural. Its rise in popularity has created a rush of activity among the Tibetans to acquire the *fawang* title. Imagine a Vatican with one hundred popes, some of whom are just ten years old and barely know how to wipe their noses. That is the kind of result the Tibetans

are getting.

Even the Tibetan terms *tulku*, meaning “manifestation,” and *yangsi*, meaning “reexisting” or “reincarnation,” are not synonymous with “guru.” Just because someone is a priest, a *huófó*, a *tulku*, or a *yangsi* does not mean he or she is a ready-made guru to be sought after.



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THE HIGHWAY

When you travel from city to city, there is an advantage to taking the highway. Small roads might lead somewhere, but you also might end up driving in circles. Guru devotion is like an entrance ramp onto Highway 101: once you merge, you can relax a bit. Without a guru, your chances of reaching your destination of enlightenment quickly and painlessly are not as great. You may end up stuck on a bumpy road in the swamps of *samsara*, which is often mistaken for *nirvana*.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is organized into three main sections, plus one for anyone who is bold enough to think they might be guru material. I am hoping to raise questions that will help sharpen the critical mind and maybe provide a few tools to analyze gurus, follow gurus, and ultimately turn the phenomenon of the guru into a

technique for training the mind. By reading this book you might come to better understand the risks and implications of entering a guru-student relationship, as well as the potential benefits of having such a relationship.

Choosing a Guru, Following a Guru, and Taming Your Own Mind

By no means should you expect that when you turn the last page of this book, you will have learned a step-by-step method for finding a guru with definitive guidelines for how to assess and appraise a vajra master. At the end of the day, only you can make the decision, and it may very well be made based on something beyond simple logic and reason. You might end up choosing someone just because he doesn't eat garlic, or doesn't chew gum.

Why bother with a human guru and all the problems and uncertainties he or she brings? Why not just invest in a good DVD player and listen to pre-recorded Dharma teachings over and over again? Or take an online distance-learning course? Or read books? This may work if your intent is to gather academic facts, but just be clear, then, that you are not on a spiritual path. Even if you want to learn vipassana, you can go only so far by watching a stranger on a screen telling you, "Breathe in . . . Breathe out . . . Sit . . ." If you want to eradicate delusion from the root, then video learning alone is probably not enough. Any guide that can be switched off and rewind while you browse a pornographic magazine or gamble is not going to work. The spiritual coach has to derail things and upset the norm at unexpected places and times.

Most likely someone who thinks, "I don't need an outer guru; I am my own master, just like the Buddha said," is oversimplifying the Buddha's words. If you look carefully, all the great practitioners who may have said "I am my own master" also had gurus. Even Shakyamuni Buddha had Dipamkara, and Guru Padmasambhava had the eight vidyadharas. They never denied it.

If someone insists they are their own guru, we can try to give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they are, but the chances are slim. There are ways to check. Someone who really has mastered themselves has no qualms bowing down to another guru, for example. Actually, they bow even deeper, like great warriors. They have that confidence. But it's more likely that someone who claims to be their own master is the embodiment of deep insecurity.

Many people are suspicious of gurus, for understandable reasons. Some skeptics lack the merit of understanding the guru principle, and others have a strong aversion to even the most genuine gurus. And of course there are the charlatans.

Not everyone who follows the path of Buddhadharma must have a tantric

guru; it's optional. If you are not following a tantric path, you don't need a tantric guru. If you were brought up in a very moralistic, puritanical environment and you have a preconception about what spiritual guides should or should not do, then you may not be open to the Vajrayana path. But if you decide to seek out a tantric guru, you must understand the consequences.

Keep in mind that whereas marriages can be arranged, romances cannot. Husband material is not necessarily lover material. The guru has to be like both the husband and the lover—but in order to point out your true nature, the Buddha, the guru is more like the lover. For obvious reasons, seekers tend to look for their gurus among the titled. It wouldn't occur to most students to look for a guru in El Haram² or SoHo or at a gas station. The guru has to remove the veil that is obstructing your true nature. Someone with such abilities might be hiding out anywhere in plain sight, not just in a monastery or on a high throne.

In modern society, especially in the West, people are uneasy with the concept of obedience to a guru. Someone might proudly and without hesitation bring a scientist or an economist to a social gathering, and the guest would be warmly welcomed and shown respect. But they are less likely to introduce their spiritual guru to the same crowd, or if they do, they wouldn't expect such an easy reception. Having a master is not something modern people brag about, unless they are talking about maybe having a yoga master or a kung fu master. Friends might even poke fun at that. It's easier to hang around with scientists and economists.

It would be very interesting to calculate how much destruction of the environment has been done by scientists and economists compared to the destruction caused by yogis and spiritual teachers. Dangerous as a self-proclaimed guru may be, it's likely the scientists and economists have done more serious long-term damage to this planet and the people who live on it. But we will probably continue valuing them and respecting them, giving them prizes, courting them, and involving them in decisions that affect the entire world.

Choosing a guru and deciding to follow him or her to enlightenment is as precarious, exciting, rewarding, and destructive as falling in love and getting married. You know it's risky, but that's the part that cracks you open. This is your journey. You are choosing the tantric path so that the cracking happens. Placing your life in the hands of a guru is much scarier than waiting to be unveiled at an arranged wedding. Our pride and our ego should always be on edge, not knowing what will happen next.

Once you choose the guru, you may need some guidance on how to commit to that relationship. It's like that next step after the wedding. Because you are going to see or be seen by the same person, ideally, for the rest of your life, there will

be a lifetime of chances for you to be surprised by this person and to expose things within yourself that have always been hidden. So we will discuss how to follow a guru.

People tend to lose sight of the ultimate goal when they decide on the tantric path. They get caught up in having or not having a guru and, if they have one, which lineage he comes from, or else they're concerned with having a quantity of gurus. Having a guru is not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is to be enlightened, and for that one needs to tame the mind.

Of all the forms of training and discipline in Buddhism, mind training is considered the most essential. In order to train the mind, there are methods, such as renunciation, to help you develop revulsion toward worldly endeavors and to increase the value of spiritual life. Then there is training, such as shamatha, to help you remain undistracted or at least discover how distracted you have been and through that make your mind flexible and malleable. Then there are higher trainings, such as vipassana, which lead you to see the true nature of your body, feelings, ideas, and values. All these quintessential Buddhist practices are encompassed by the path of the guru. Thus, one should approach the path of guru devotion as a sophisticated form of mind training rather than with the negative connotation of surrendering or following or becoming a sycophant.

The whole process of getting acquainted with the guru is a big part of the path. Every stage—from itching to find a guru to the agony of searching for one to the vulnerability of putting your life in someone else's hands—correlates with methods like renunciation and training of one-pointedness. This is the unfathomable, inconceivable, brilliant method of tantra.

STACY AND THE BLESSINGS OF THE GURU

A long time ago I was in Australia, staying at the home of my student Stacy Stain.³ She had almost everything she wanted in life: a house, a car, a dream job as a bank manager. But the one thing she really longed for was a romantic relationship. She was quite a devoted and experienced Dharma student, and she knew it was petty to ask for mundane things, but in this case she couldn't help herself. She poured out her troubles to me and asked for predictions, *mos* (divinations), and prayers. So I said I would do prayers. But then . . . I didn't. Not on purpose, mind you; my schedule was very full and I simply forgot.

Later that week a Dutch Rwandan hunk named Nick came to the teachings, and the two ended up together. Stacy's life was suddenly lit up and very exciting. She came to me one morning, glowing and a little disheveled, and

enthusiastically thanked me for my help. She wouldn't listen to me when I said I had nothing to do with it. How much could I protest? She really believed I had sent Nick to her. "The blessings of the guru," she claimed.

There was a good reason I protested when Stacy Stain was praising me: when I saw this man, I could immediately smell a problem. But she was too head-over-heels in love to see it. Sure enough, things fell apart after I left Australia. She wrote to me, apologizing for all the wrongdoing she had accumulated in her past. She was sure losing her lover was her bad karma or a punishment from me. And she would not listen to me when I objected. She gave me no chance to say that if anything, from a spiritual point of view, it was actually her *good* karma that caused Nick to leave. Even from a worldly point of view she only needed to look at how much time it took him to take out his wallet when it was time to pay for a meal. He always managed to hesitate until the moment just after she'd reached for hers. And if he beat her to it, it was usually to "go Dutch."

I wonder why, if Stacy insisted on crediting the guru for good things, she couldn't see Nick's leaving as a blessing.

LIBERATION THROUGH IMPRISONMENT

If your ultimate aim is freedom—liberation, nirvana, whatever you choose to call it—surrendering to a guru may seem almost contrary to that goal. But some of us believe that yielding to this kind of bondage is actually the best way to achieve ultimate liberation, that to make your way along this path, it is essential to place your ego in the hands of a qualified guru.

Submitting to the guru—complete, total surrender—is, ironically, a form of freedom. The benefit is that you no longer have to search for direction. In the guru-student relationship there is a sense of duty that will always imprison you. But this imprisonment is a choice you are making. If you think about it, when you are out there free, you don't know what to do with all your freedom. But when you are in a prison, confined within four walls, there is a schedule, and you have boundaries. This is what is known as "path." It gives you a direction.

The potential for abuse of power exists. However, once you have completely and soberly surrendered, you may not interpret certain manifestations and activities of the guru as the abuse of power. If you want to be fully enlightened, you can't worry about abuse.

The ego is a companion from the very beginning; it accompanies you on your journey all the way to liberation. But as you get closer to enlightenment, you become enlightened out of the shadow of the ego. You become liberated from

the bondage of the ego. Ironically, this companion who got you started on the journey will be discarded. By then, your definition of abuse will change. Just as we abuse our headaches with Panadol, you will consider ego a malady, and you will abuse it with wisdom. If you worry about abuse, you are unconsciously wanting to protect your ego. This is true not only in the Vajrayana, but even on the Shravakayana path.

This idea of letting someone abuse your ego might make your non-Buddhist friends and family freak out, like if you told them you are into submissive bondage. But we are assuming you have a level of maturity and sanity and that you have chosen this path with eyes wide open.

One thing to look for in a guru is that he or she has the skill to guide you according to your capacity. The tantric path should not send you full-speed directly into annihilation of your ego if you're not ready. In fact, a tantric master will be breaking a tantric vow if he or she teaches without customizing to the student's ability. It's considered one of the gravest mistakes for a teacher.

For this reason, the tantric path must begin with preliminary practices and intensive mind training. These practices are designed to engage the ego by speaking its language. For instance, the preliminary practice of taking refuge in the three jewels could be seen as a mechanism that reinforces the idea of ego because it suggests there is an ego that needs protection. And then comes bodhichitta practice, which asks you to extend that refuge to all sentient beings. This teaches your ego that its own demands and needs are not so important. In this way, you gradually begin to work with the ego, giving it less and less sustenance. And eventually the ego is destroyed.

The tantric guru doesn't have an obvious Western equivalent, but a benevolent dictator is a good analogy. Intellectual, clever, democratically elected presidents value information and knowledge, but in trying to be democratic, they end up running in circles attempting to fulfill each individual's wishes and demands and working to keep their approval ratings up. In the end, they actually achieve very little for the country. A benevolent dictator, on the other hand, is able to follow his own sane judgment and occasionally turn a blind eye to what may appear politically incorrect, enabling him to make quick decisions that, in the long run, allow him to lead the country effectively.

Similarly, a tantric master will lead effectively, authoritatively, but only after the subjects have chosen to follow. A good tantric master gives the seeker complete freedom to scrutinize him or her and even provides the tools necessary for proper analysis. Only after the guru knows the student has wholeheartedly chosen him or her will the guru bypass norms, ethics, and social expectations. For your own benefit, the guru takes charge. This is compassion.

Oftentimes our way of critical thinking is very unsophisticated and petty. If you meet someone who can really enlighten you but you get bogged down by things like his kleptomania or his misogyny, it's unfortunate. Is trading enlightenment for those values worth it?

We should rejoice that not all Buddha's disciples were like Shariputra and Kashyapa—serene, with bare feet and a begging bowl. From time immemorial we have had characters like Kukuraza, Drukpa Kuenley, and Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje. I am so proud as a Buddhist to venerate the mahasiddha Darikapa, a prostitute's slave, as one of our own. In the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, Buddha Shakyamuni himself said the lotus will flourish only in muddy water. We cannot afford to forget that—otherwise Buddhism will end up becoming a puritanical, moralistic system that will stake a claim as an organized religion and start a republic.

KILLING ASSUMPTIONS

A few years ago I saw a comic strip of some students approaching a yogi on a mountaintop. This yogi had a bottle of bourbon in front of him. With a look of surprise, one student says, "Oh! The guru drinks bourbon too?" illustrating the assumption that gurus should set an example of virtue. Disciples are often surprised if a guru drinks alcohol, eats meat, or has girlfriends. But in the tantra, you cannot make assumptions. In fact, assumption is a weakness that tantric Buddhism will toy with and ultimately kill.

While some followers are put off by the Vajrayana's incorporation of sexual imagery and wine, there are others who take the Vajrayana path because of these same things. Or because in their minds Vajrayana is less misogynistic than the other yanas. To them, the segregation of men and women in the Mahayana and Shravakayana traditions is a form of misogynistic fundamental religious extremism. You can't really say one yana is wrong and another is right. But if you have strong feelings about how a guru should behave, you may not be fit for tantra. The reason Taylor loves Reggie can be the very reason Bon Bon despises Reggie. Likewise, all the personal qualities that attract you to a particular guru can very well be the qualities that turn others off.



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Assumption is a mouse, and tantra is the cat.

When I told my Tibetan friend Wangchuk the story of watching His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa dipping tobacco and spitting the juice into carefully folded papers, I was full of praise because to me, the Karmapa was so elegant and majestic even when he did something so truck driver-like. His habit of popping this disgusting stuff into his mouth while sitting on the throne had such an impact on me, in a nice way. So many people feel nostalgic about his famous love of birds, but I was just as inspired by his snuff habit. It increased my devotion. But Wangchuk immediately denied that it ever happened. He insisted that the Karmapa would never use tobacco. When I finally convinced him, he implored me not to tell this story to anyone else. I had to say, “He’s not good enough for you now? You would prefer a Karmapa who doesn’t do snuff? And you want me to keep it a secret?” As if the Karmapa needs to be protected from a bad reputation.

It’s not just Wangchuk—we all want our leaders to be perfect.

When I recounted the same story about the Karmapa’s snuff habit to Kyabje

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, he advised me to collect that spit in the envelope the next chance I had and make a life-protecting amulet from this precious substance. Unfortunately, I never had another chance.

If you think collecting spit is disgusting, there are still countless Buddhist paths to choose from. You may be “happier” on a spiritual path that confirms your beliefs, values, ethics, and morality. But if your goal is of the highest sort—not limited to saving the world or dismantling your own ego, but to liberate all beings—you could be perfectly ripe for Vajrayana. Instead of being a conformist and settling on a secure and safe path, you should dare to follow a path designed to unsettle you, a path that will destroy your comfort zone. And you should be persistent in that daring.



© Sarah Lucas

The compassionate tantric guru's function is to deconstruct your assumptions, so expect the unexpected.

1. *Huófó* is especially problematic because as soon as the “living Buddha” doesn’t behave like the dead Buddha—the Shakyamuni Buddha whom you’ve concocted in your mind—doubts will arise. And this is

unfair because you have no idea how the buddhas of the past behaved.

2. The red-light district of Cairo.

3. Some names, like this one, have been changed throughout the book.

The Foundations of Guru as the Path 1

THE PERIOD OF TIME one spends searching for a guru should be considered the most important, rewarding, and challenging part of the voyage, so one should not be impatient. In fact, the search itself should be taken as the path.

DELIBERATELY ENTERING THE MANDALA

If you are reading this book because you are looking for a guru or you are interested in gurus, most likely you are a path dweller, which inevitably means you are not perfect. So bear in mind that every decision you make, you make as an imperfect being. We imperfect beings benefit from having guidelines and templates, blueprints and maps. We need reference points to help us determine what makes a good guru and what makes a bad guru, what makes a good student and what makes a bad student.

For those who are just beginning, it's important not to surrender to just any human being as a guru. Those who have a curiosity in the Vajrayana shouldn't leap to take tantric abishekas. Once you consciously request and receive an initiation and deliberately enter into that mandala, then the bestower of that initiation has become your vajra master.

You can afford to take your time. Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé said that if you long for a guru but are still searching, there is always Shakyamuni Buddha, our common guru. Pray to him that the appropriate guru or gurus will appear to guide you.

THE OUTER GURU: AS BUDDHA AS IT GETS

In the Vajrayana, the guru has three aspects: the outer guru, the inner guru, and the secret guru. It's important to be clear about these before entering a path that uses the guru as a method for awakening. The great Sakyapa master Könchok Lhundrup explained that the outer guru is the physical person you can see and communicate with, from whom you can receive verbal and symbolic teachings

and instructions. The outer guru is “as Buddha as it gets.” The inner guru is the nature of your mind—in other words, a mind that is not thinking of a “thing” but is simply cognizant and undeniably present. And the secret guru is the emptiness of all phenomena.



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LEARN WHAT CANNOT BE TAUGHT

Once in ancient India, a father asked his son to learn from a great master who lived nearby. The son obeyed and after many years became as learned as his master. But when the son returned to his father, instead of a celebration, he was met with gloomy dissatisfaction. The son didn't understand why his father wasn't more pleased. He told his father that the master had confirmed he had taught him everything there was to teach. "That is precisely the problem," said the father. "You have learned everything that can be taught. Now you have to go back and learn what cannot be taught." So the son returned, and the master was very pleased to receive him.

The inner guru and the secret guru have no skin color. They have no title and no seat. They have no form to be clad in silk brocade. They are not bound by moods, attitudes, or culture. And somehow the absence of these attributes adds to their value in our minds, and we hold them in higher esteem than the real

McCoy. Outer gurus are invariably complicated entities because they are tangible and lovable. They have moods and attitudes and phone numbers. They are less mysterious because they yawn and go to sleep when they are tired. But all three manifestations of the guru—outer, inner, and secret—are equally valuable. There is no hierarchy.

We begin the path of the Vajrayana by imagining, fabricating, making believe, “meditating” on the outer guru as Buddha. By the power of our imagination, we see the color of the guru’s skin as gold like Shakyamuni or lapis lazuli like Vajradhara. We may see the guru’s body with the extra arms of a tantric deity, and the guru’s gender switching from male to female or female to male. After a while, we begin to see this living and breathing person as Buddha.

But this “seeing,” contrary to what you might think, doesn’t necessarily mean the guru will appear on your doorstep tanned with gold or encrusted with lapis lazuli. It means you will no longer interact with the guru as a dualistic, ordinary being as you once did. How *will* you see the guru? The classic explanation is that interaction with the guru will be a direct experience of form as emptiness and emptiness as form; it will be a mingling with the jnanas and kayas. This explanation is not so far-fetched. Just think about how your perception of a person transforms from the moment you meet them as a stranger to when you fall in love to when they become your lover. As your perception changes, the experience changes.

By the time you manage to truly free yourself from your limited perception of the guru, you will also be free from the limited perception of color and shape. Gold will be indistinguishable from the color of a sponge mop. A thousand arms no longer stupefy or get in the way—in fact, it becomes almost ridiculous to think that a perfect human being would have only two arms. At this stage you stop worrying about all attributes—size, weight, gender, et cetera. Their significance melts away. It’s like nettle soup: once it’s cooked, you don’t worry about the stinging hairs anymore.

The guru is not a trophy, nor is seeing the guru as the Buddha the end of the story. To be happy with just that would be a contradiction of the Buddha’s words. To focus only on the Buddha would be like focusing on a finger that’s pointing to the moon instead of looking directly at the moon. When you recognize your own mind as the Buddha, that is the final victory. That’s when you become your own master. You no longer seek, find, venerate, follow, or obey one particular person or object. This is the glorious uniqueness of the Vajrayana. Without recognizing your mind as the Buddha, the Vajrayana would be a defective path akin to Kim Jong-il-ism.

MRS. PING

Mrs. Ping of Taiwan has everything she could wish for in the worldly sense. Her closets are full of couture clothing with the tags still on. She can have the best seat in the best restaurant in Taipei at the busiest hour at the last minute, and she doesn't even need to call and wait on hold for a reservation; she can just tell her secretary to do it. She hasn't used public transportation in her entire life, because there is always a chauffeur-driven car waiting for her.

To a certain extent, this convenience has also spread to her spiritual world. Because of her generosity and patronage, she doesn't have to search for her gurus; the gurus come to her. She is constantly being called upon by important lamas, and she can request an audience with various "His Holinesses" at the touch of her phone at the oddest of hours. She gets a great sense of satisfaction because her ego is massaged every which way.

But it is interesting to note that, in addition to the many more glamorous ways someone in her position can have her ego massaged, she has chosen the spiritual method, even though it can be painful. She has this complicated mixture of fishing for gratification and genuinely seeking liberation. She has realized this is the only meaningful thing to do. It's amazing that she has this genuine desire.

Many of the lamas who visit Taiwan are spoiled. After Mrs. Ping manages to book a table at the most exclusive restaurant for them, they might cancel on her at the last minute. They move into suites in five-star hotels for months at a time and never ask to see the bill. Because of her worldly ability, she takes care of the tab. She almost boasts about it because this is something tangible she can do. It's only money. But there is also a danger that one of these gurus might tell her, "You can't eat crab anymore." She has to keep up with her social life, and no crab would be a problem. It's things like this that get to her a little bit, but she has continued seeking a spiritual path.

Lately Mrs. Ping has been getting tired of all these demands of the outer guru, so now her favorite subjects are the inner guru and the secret guru. She is trying to find a way out of her reliance on the outer guru. It's scary to have someone dictating your life, especially when you are used to dictating other people's lives. Suddenly there is this mortal telling you what to do. Ironically, she wants to learn about the inner guru, but the only one she can consult with about it is the outer guru himself. If she wants confirmation that she is successfully getting in touch with her inner guru, the only one who can give her confirmation is an outer guru.

THE HUMAN BRIDGE

If the concept of the outer guru as Buddha is vast beyond comprehension, recognizing the inner guru and the secret guru is even more vast. In the beginning, we can only form a hazy idea about any of these three aspects of the guru on an intellectual level. To truly understand the inner and secret gurus we need a bridge that extends from one shore to the other—from ourselves to our inner and secret gurus. The only bridge is a person we can touch and see and with whom we can share experiences, who can be a reference and an example and who has the familiarity and knowledge to introduce the inner and secret gurus. The only bridge is the outer guru.

The relationship with a guru can never be simple. We human beings have a habit of hope and fear, and we each come saddled with our different cultures and characters. As long as we are bound by these distinctions, we are deluded, and as long as we are deluded, our relationships are complicated.

Through the veil of your everyday deluded perceptions, the outer guru may seem like an ordinary person. He shares your taste for pizza with anchovies but also drinks strong coffee, which you don't like at all. He appears to get cranky when you don't get it right. He's a human being. But he wasn't born in your neighborhood, so he's exotic and interesting. The more exotic, the better, especially if you're a naive and gullible disciple easily impressed by colors, shapes, and races. The best is when his skin is a completely different shade. Then again, if he's too exotic it doesn't work.

BEYOND HUMAN

It's difficult to accept a guru as "beyond" human because we practitioners are human beings ourselves; there is a part of us always looking for familiarity. We want our guru to be shaped like us and to like the same love songs we do. On the other hand, we want our guru to be exceptional and sublime—but not too exceptional or too sublime. If the guru had three eyes, we wouldn't know how to handle that. We buy gifts for the guru and imagine how surprised and pleased he will be to receive them. At the same time, we want the guru to be clairvoyant, if not omniscient, so that he will already know what we are bringing. It's complicated, our mind. So the guru needs to serve both purposes: being an ordinary human who can make sense, and also being one who has all the skills to take us beyond the human state. The guru must be half ordinary being and half

sublime being.

The work falls in your corner. You won't have any trouble seeing the guru as a human being because that's already your habit. But you'll have to work to make that person a hybrid by "seeing" him or her as sublime. You have to do whatever it takes—educate yourself, habituate yourself—to see him or her as sublime. And most important, you have to have the merit and the ability to think that way. This is why we have mind training and guru yoga.

BEYOND DUALISM

While many err on the side of expecting too much of a guru—like constant worldly emotional support and advice—others reject a human guru altogether. It's as if they are afraid to relate to a living being. They say things like "I am my own guru," using the convenient and educated-sounding excuse that everything, including the guru, is the nature of mind. But after some questioning, it becomes clear they don't have even a faint understanding of what "nature of mind" means.

I've met many middle-age Europeans who resent the Abrahamic religions they were brought up with for infecting them with the virus of guilt. At some point along the way, some of these Europeans managed to rebel, perhaps when they were teenagers during the post-World War II era. Some of these rebels managed to get excited about Buddhist teachings; they were turned on by concepts like "everything is mind" and "you are your own master," and they remain excited to this day. These beliefs align with their rebellious nature and validate their resentment of organized religion. Intellectually, these ex-Abrahamic Dharma seekers no longer believe in original sin, but because of their upbringing, the habit of feeling guilty and sinful is still strong. This type of person has a tendency to overenthusiastically wave the banner of inner and secret gurus.

This attitude—that the inner guru is enough—is often adopted by those whose intellectual orientation is slightly nihilistic, or who are from very controlling, high-achieving families and resent the idea of yet another powerful person breathing down their necks.

Then there are others who like to be led. Even when it comes to mundane issues, they don't trust their own judgment or inner voice. They can barely go to the grocery store without being full of doubt. They also tend to be a little bit lazy, asking the guru for advice on every little thing that pops into their heads. This type of person has to learn to trust him- or herself and rely less on the outer

guru. They might find that the more they trust the inner and secret gurus, the more they rely on and love the outer guru.

Ultimately, the question of whether the inner guru is enough for you is irrelevant if your spiritual aim is to attain enlightenment. But there is an easy way to find the answer. If you can overcome any and all external circumstances, then maybe you don't need the outer guru, because by then all appearance and experience arise as the guru anyway. On the other hand, if a practitioner is not able to control circumstances and situations, then all kinds of mind training are necessary. Therefore, one needs to be led, to be poked, to be spoon-fed.

To find out whether or not you are controlled by circumstances and situations, there are myriad things you can do, such as skip lunch. If you are a man, wear a bra and walk around in public. If you are a woman, go to a fancy party in your bedroom slippers. If you are married, see if you can tolerate someone pinching your spouse's bottom. See if you are swayed by praise, criticism, being ignored, or being showered with attention. If you get agitated, embarrassed, or infuriated, then more than likely you are still under the spell of the conditions of habit and culture. You are still a victim of causes and conditions.

When a loved one dies or the life you are trying to build collapses, it's likely that your understanding of the inner and secret gurus will not ease the pain. Nor will your understanding of "form is emptiness and emptiness is form" provide solace. In this case you need to insert a new cause to counter these conditions. Because your understanding of the inner and secret gurus is only intellectual, you cannot call upon them. This is where the outer, physical, reachable guru is necessary.

As long as you dwell in a realm where externally existing friends and lovers are necessary, as long as you are bothered by externally existing obstacles like passions and moral judgments, you need a guru. Basically, as long as you have a dualistic mind, don't kid yourself by thinking that an inner guru is enough. When you reach a point where you can actually communicate with your inner guru, you will have little or no more dualism. You will no longer be repelled by or attracted to an outer guru.

Therefore, the outer guru is necessary until you at least have the gist of the inner and secret gurus. When you realize the inner and secret gurus, you won't even be able to find the outer guru anymore. Mrs. Ping will have no one to book rooms for, but she will not be disappointed.

DEPEND ON THE TEACHINGS, NOT THE TEACHER

The Buddha said to Ananda,

- Rely on what is taught, not on the teacher.
- Rely on what is meant, not on mere words.
- Rely on the definitive teaching, not on the provisional.
- Rely on nonconceptual wisdom, not on mere intellect.

Preferably, we enter the Dharma and continue pursuing the Dharma because we know the Dharma itself is reliable. We are inspired by the teaching, not the teacher; we are attracted to the truth, not the truth teller.

You may ask, “How does this fit with the Vajrayana view that the guru is essential?” The answer bears repeating again and again: In the Vajrayana, you transform the guru into more than a person. The guru is the path.

WHAT LED YOU ONTO THE PATH OF THE DHARMA?

How each individual enters the path of the Dharma is so personal. There was once a young gangster named Tsangyang Gyatso (not to be confused with the Sixth Dalai Lama) who stole a team of horses from a traveler. Because he was the youngest of the gang, it was his job to herd the horses up a steep hill. One of the horses was pregnant and couldn’t walk. Tsangyang Gyatso became so infuriated that he slashed her stomach with his knife and the foal came gushing out. As the mother was dying, she kept taking care of the foal with her last bit of energy, cleaning it and nuzzling it. Her expression of motherhood triggered so much regret in the gangster, so much feeling, that he broke his knife, tossed his gun, and became a disciple of the great Nangchen Tsökyi Rinpoche.

Nangchen Tsökyi himself belonged to a wealthy family in Tibet, but somewhere along the way the family had picked up a bad habit of gambling and lost everything. In desperation, they started engaging in petty theft and robbery. Eventually they were caught, and the whole family, including Nangchen Tsökyi, was put in Nangchen prison, where they starved. His family’s complete decline from the wealthiest clan to a bunch of petty thieves gave him a deep understanding of the impermanence of life. While imprisoned, he witnessed and experienced intense suffering, which led him onto the path of becoming a great practitioner and then a great master.

More recently, in 2015, a video of Sogyal Rinpoche dancing with his students floated into social media and instantly created an uproar. It’s very interesting to see. There are people who think he looks cute and roly-poly, and some people who think he looks silly. Others think the video is a complete disgrace to the Buddhadharma. But a Taiwanese teenager saw it on YouTube and thought, “How

nice that Buddhists dance in the temples,” and ended up taking refuge. Clearly, all varieties of circumstances, settings, faculties, and connections can turn people to the Dharma.

MERIT AND KARMA

On the Vajrayana path, the challenges are twofold. One challenge is that the Vajrayana is infinitely vast and deep. The profound path of the Buddhadharma, with its voluminous sutras, countless shastras, complex subjects (like Prajnaparamita, Madhyamaka, and Pramana), and all the arguments of ancient Indian philosophers, takes years to sort out. To have even a vague understanding of these, one must study diligently. Only through hearing, meditating, and contemplating is it possible to have a fleeting glimpse of the meaning of these teachings.

The other more daunting challenge is that the path is incredibly simple and raw. The quintessential teaching of the Buddha—the nature of mind—is difficult to understand, not because it is complicated but because of its unbearably naked quality. One common method for deciphering the truth is through commentaries, analysis, arguments, and research. But the more we try to decipher this simplicity through academic studies and intellectual analysis, the more we get sidetracked, deterred, or worse, we end up constructing very convincing concepts that we mistake for the simplicity itself. Therefore, one must work hard to accumulate merit. Accumulating merit is the one and only way to cultivate trust in simplicity. But many of us have to first convince ourselves that accumulation of merit works.

We must keep in mind that the goal is not just understanding simplicity. Far from it. A good guru will mock a yogi who displays even the most advanced comprehension. A yogi should not be satisfied with mere understanding; a yogi must aspire to *experience* the truth. But a brave guru will even disregard the yogi’s prized experience. The most sublime yogi will not settle until he actualizes the truth. How is actualizing different from understanding and experiencing? To know the answer, you need a guide, a guru.

At the end of the day, you and only you will decide which particular being can guide you, who can enlighten you, who can tame your emotions, who can lessen your selfishness, who can encourage your enlightened qualities to grow. So your decision-making faculties need to be clear and sharp. It makes sense to prepare yourself by honing your skills of discernment. Of all the tools a path dweller can use to make decisions, knowledge (*yeshe*) and merit (*sonam*) are the most useful.

And as Longchenpa said, of these two, accumulation of merit is the most potent, at least initially, because it is easy to grasp; there are tangible things you can do. And this increased merit gives strength to the power of your personal judgment. Knowledge and analysis can do only so much.

Certainly, you should analyze a teacher before you take him or her as your guru, and you should study the path before you enter, but above all, a fundamental spiritual connection must be present. If you don't have a connection, then the guru-student relationship cannot exist. It's not something you can force. Studying diligently, attending teachings, and taking notes works to a certain extent, but connection to the Dharma—and especially if you want to be a tantric practitioner, connection to the spiritual master—is not necessarily created through intellectual rigor and academic study. You cannot methodically school your way to a karmic link.

The world of “connections” is so complex. When you see a camera-laden tour group of nouveaux riches Russians stepping out of a five-star hotel in Kathmandu, ready to embark on a package tour of Boudhanath and Swayambu, it's a safe bet that they don't have even a drop of devotion to the Buddha. For all you know, they are staunch Russian Orthodox Christians. But because of so many causes and conditions, they have made this trip to Nepal and are prepared to follow their tour guide in a circumambulation of the Boudhanath stupa, and along the way they happen to view thangkas and buddhas and maybe bump into a great yogi in an alleyway. This alone could plant the seeds of connection that may materialize five hundred lifetimes later.

The connection becomes even more potent if the Russian tourist happens to generate a good feeling in his heart when he sees the giant eyes of the Boudhanath stupa—not just awe of the exotic but a genuine sense of peace and serenity. Then maybe he might be inspired to buy a book to read about what this person named Gautama had to say twenty-five hundred years ago. These decisions strengthen the karmic link. It gets even better if a bodhisattva or practitioner happens to be sitting nearby, praying, “May all sentient beings have a connection to the Dharma.” Such aspirations will definitely help ripen the Russian's karmic connection. This is why as practitioners we are very much encouraged to do aspiration prayers.

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

Before embarking on your search for a guru, your intentions should be clear. As with everything, motivation is of utmost importance. Why would you even want

to have a guru?

At the very least, the quest for a guru should be fueled by a revulsion of worldly life. If not revulsion, then at least some understanding that success in worldly endeavors is not the ultimate answer. A step up from that motivation is genuine confidence in and attraction to the spiritual life and a desire to understand the truth. And even better is an attitude of a warrior wishing to understand the truth not only for himself but for the sake of all sentient beings.

For such a grandiose journey, you want to have a guide, a coach, someone who will show you how. Someone who will give you the support, who will correct you, who will pull the rug out from under your feet, and who will not let you go astray. That is the ideal motivation, which will immediately give you a good sense of what type of guru you should be looking for.

A good teacher will analyze the student to see if the motivation is truly enlightenment, and in turn, the student must analyze whether the teacher is interested in the student's enlightenment. When the guru checks the student's motivation, they might find something in addition to enlightenment, some extra motivations. That's OK, but enlightenment has to be the most important.

But preferences vary. Many people are attracted to the wisdom of the Buddha, the view, the philosophy of Buddhism, yet they are not inspired by Buddhist teachers, the gurus, and some of the other paraphernalia. Invariably, Buddhist teachers are human, which is not necessarily attractive to other human beings seeking to be inspired. Some people are attracted to the Buddha's wisdom but are put off by all the images, practice methods, and props. Some may associate images of tantric deities with immorality. Others are put off by serene-looking monks because they are *too* moral. They think, "I will never be as pure as that." Many are attracted to people sitting with straight backs on meditation cushions. Others feel intimidated by rosaries.

Even though you may not yet have a clear picture in mind, you can contemplate what your ideal spiritual path and spiritual guide would look like: A tantric guru? A Mahayana guru? Or just a spiritual guide? And what does being a model spiritual practitioner mean to you? You probably have some sort of idol. Are you the type of person who gets inspired when you see a disciplined practitioner of simplicity? Or are you someone who is broad-minded enough to be unfazed by a pompous, flamboyant, outrageous manifestation of a guru? Are you OK with a guru who exhibits bad taste, gold-plated teeth, Armani suits, and Rolex watches, and who displays lots of electronic gadgets? Do you want your guru to be above the fray? A role model? If the fact that a guru goes on dates distracts you from the path, then you should avoid gurus who go on dates.

Married or single, celibate or not, how your guru relates and how you relate to

your guru really depends on your preference. Maybe you just want someone who is happy to answer all your questions. Many university professors can do that; in fact, they are much better at presenting historical data and backing it up with references in footnotes. And if you follow them, you won't have the extra baggage of needing to keep your samaya vows.

So right at the beginning, seekers should have in mind what they want out of a guru. If you have certain principles and you think that it's inappropriate for a guru to live in luxury (and understandably so), you should pay attention to that.

There is a reason Shakyamuni Buddha chose to communicate with the methods of walking barefoot with a begging bowl. Austerity, living the simple life—these are safety measures but not guarantees. For the time being, you can use this manifestation as a crutch. You can be inspired by abstinence and moral purity. You can look up to someone who doesn't indulge in the same things you do. Especially for beginners, choosing a guru who has taken a vow as a monk or a nun is often a safe option with fewer loopholes.

But are you sure you want your role model to be an ascetic? Wearing simple cotton clothes and humble beads, and maybe carrying a begging bowl? What kind of person are you? It's not easy to communicate with an ascetic if you are not an ascetic. Cats can talk to cats, but cats can't talk to fish. So if you are George Soros's wife and your guru is Milarepa, there may be a big communication gap. You may be able to admire Milarepa—"Oh, that great ascetic guy in the mountain"—but that's about it. That's not helping your enlightenment. It's a bit like putting a photo of Mahatma Gandhi in a murderer's house.

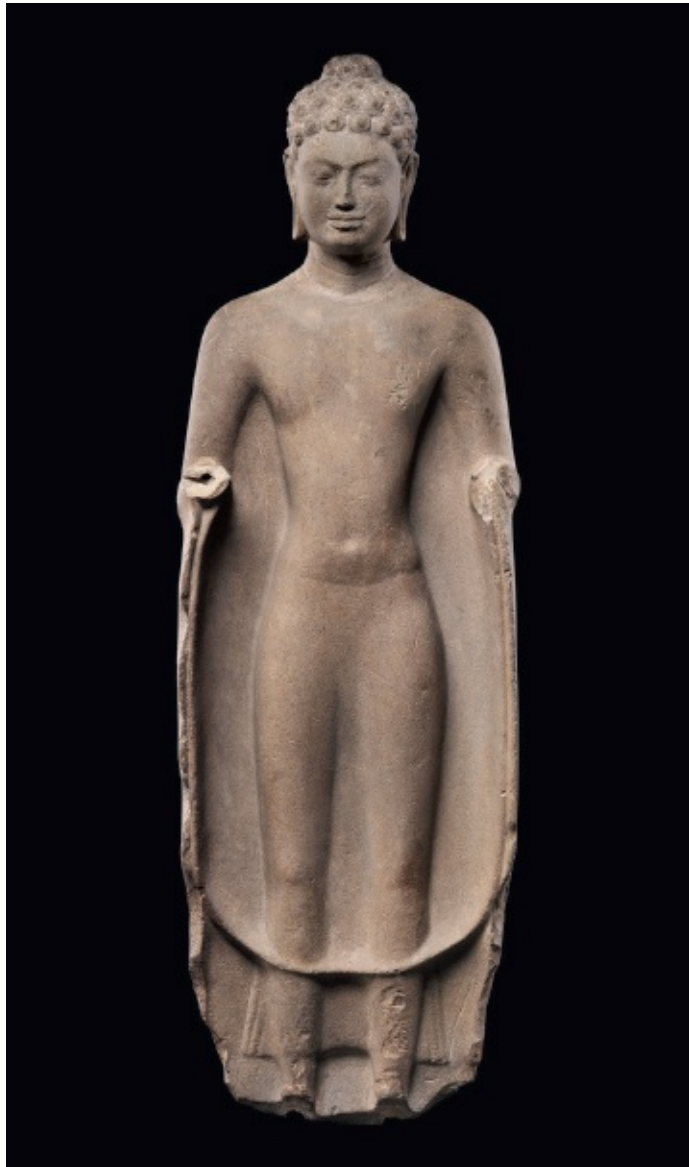
Then if you have a celibate teacher who leads you safely from point A to point Z but who suddenly around point Y ends up becoming not so celibate, what will you do? If you realize that this man can do the job, will you abandon him just because he has changed? Maybe his decision not to be celibate is the skillful means necessary to pull that rug out from under your feet. Your guru's weakness may upset you or create doubt, but the very reason that causes disillusion may be the reason he can inspire you.

Maybe you think the guru should be like a poetry book that you read for inspiration. It inspires you to think about this hermit practicing in a cave in the Himalayas, even if you are a complete manifestation of the opposite of that. You hope you never have to sleep in a cold, bat-infested cave. If that's the case, then maybe you are not a disciple; maybe you are just a romantic. If that ascetic guru living peacefully in a cave happily dropped everything to become the head of the World Bank, would you still be inspired? If he did so at the request of his own guru, that would be an indication that he is a perfect disciple.

Actually, the image the guru projects is not that important. You cannot make finite decisions based on a guru's seeming austerity or lack thereof. A filthy rich guru could also give you what you really need—enlightenment. Someone who lives in luxury, someone who is fussy about what cut of meat is being served, might well be the best person to do the job. What he values, his view, how he approaches that view, how he doesn't get caught up by distractions that are the opposite of this view—this is what you need to emulate; this is your role model. These are the qualities you are supposed to be attracted to.

Are you particularly attracted to a guru because he is rich? Glorious? Beautiful? Friendly? Easygoing? These are not ideal reasons for choosing a guru, but at the same time they are not to be dismissed outright, because many times these external things can trigger your spiritual journey.

The essential purpose of studying, hearing, contemplating, reading books, and receiving teachings can be to wisely examine yourself. As imperfect beings, we can't always trust our own minds and our own judgments. We can't always justify why we do what we do. But contemplating our motivations for seeking a guru, even a little bit, is not going to hurt. In fact, it may go a long way in helping lay the foundation for the long, precarious journey of the guru-student relationship. Questioning your motivations and goals may not completely save you from getting lost, but it's a good safety measure.



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BUDDHA GOT HIS JEWELS BACK

You don't see frescoes of St. Francis of Assisi playing roulette. It would be offensive to his followers. Similarly, when Theravada Buddhists see the Jokhang Buddha in Lhasa wearing a crown, it is unacceptable. In their minds, one of the greatest things the Buddha ever did was renounce all the comfort and wealth of his kingdom. But there in Lhasa's most holy shrine, the Buddha seems to have gotten all his rings and jewels back.

DEVOTION TO THE GURU

We often hear that the tantra is for the disciple of superior faculties. This doesn't necessarily mean you have to have a high IQ to practice. These superior faculties have nothing to do with how many degrees you have or whether you can count stars or solve a Rubik's Cube. In the Vajrayana, the greatest faculty is devotion. Listening, contemplating, studying, and analyzing are common methods for seekers of truth, but in the end, the real understanding of emptiness can arise only when the mind is free of reference points, cultural hang-ups, values, the burden of logic, dialectics, reason, speculation, rationalism, and hypotheses. This is called devotion. Of all possible superior faculties, devotion is supreme.

Two Supreme Methods: The Practical and the More Practical

The Vajrayana offers two supreme methods for accumulating merit: developing compassion for sentient beings and generating devotion for the guru. We can always accumulate merit through veneration of the Buddha, but for beginners this may be too abstract a concept: we have never seen the Buddha, and we haven't met anyone who has met him. He's purely our imagination. The guru whom you have encountered, on the other hand, has appeared before you within your own capacity, and you can communicate with him. You can think of him as a buddha—not Shakyamuni but *your* buddha, if that's all your merit can handle. As your ability becomes more efficient, the projection of the guru becomes more sublime. Therefore, the guru is the perfect object through which to accumulate merit. With the guru, you have personal contact, a personal relationship; you can actually have an interaction. In the tantras it is said again and again that to venerate even one pore of the guru's body has much more merit than making offerings to thousands and thousands of buddhas.

For many of us, generating compassion for all sentient beings is very abstract; devotion to the guru feels more practical and feasible. Even if we manage to generate a vague idea of what "all sentient beings" might mean, we might be able to sustain compassion for them for a day or two, but it's difficult to feel compassion for all people at all times. Devotion to a guru whom we have chosen for ourselves is much more practicable. Our compassion for all sentient beings is always marred by partiality and projection. Devotion to a guru, however, is very personal and much less abstract. It can begin with admiration, awe, obedience, and inspiration, though they may all be sporadic.

Gurus Don't Fish for Devotion

Most Vajrayana students are convinced they have boundless devotion for their guru, but in reality what they feel is more like admiration, in the same way they

might admire a political candidate whose ethical and moral standing reassures them. Not only is that not devotion, it's actually quite dangerous. If the politician ignores you or does something slightly unsavory, even just once, the next chance you get, you will probably not vote for him. Likewise, if the guru at some point ceases to reassure you, you will want to switch gurus. This fickleness is what keeps politicians on a continuous campaign trail, trying to prove their worth and distributing freebies to make people feel special. No guru should have to campaign in order to fish out devotion from a student.

Some admiration may come naturally at the beginning of a guru-disciple relationship, but how do you get beyond merely liking the guru to true devotion? You can start by checking your motivation. Forget about enlightening all sentient beings; you should be following the guru because, at the very least, you're seeking your own enlightenment. Yet many people approach the guru with a less straightforward motivation.

We know what it feels like to be single-minded in our intention. Just think about the last time you were hungry and decided to go to a restaurant. You were probably very systematic in selecting a place, finding a means to get there, reading the menu, ordering food, and eating it. But too many students are motivated by complicated agendas that don't aim directly toward enlightenment. For example, their motivation may be dominated by a longing for the guru's unwavering attention. Such a motivation can only bring suffering. The poor guru who has five hundred students will eventually have to take notice of some of his other students, and inevitably, those he isn't paying attention to will feel cheated, abandoned, and terribly unhappy.

Devotion and Karma

To have devotion to the guru is to trust the undeceiving law of cause, condition, and effect—in other words, karma. As we develop an understanding of karma, devotion will increase simultaneously. Lacking an understanding of karma, we make the mistake of believing karma and devotion to be in opposition. One symptom of this lack of understanding is the defeatist attitude that suffering cannot be changed, that it is somehow predestined and therefore devotion to a guru is pointless.

The way karma works is never deceptive, however. If the right causes, conditions, and effects have been gathered, it is possible to change, for example, an uncooked egg into a cooked egg: we have no doubt that when water, heat, and the correct cooking time are combined, the egg will be cooked. Our trust in that process, that science, is not a blind trust. We experience this kind of trust quite

naturally. Similarly, our trust in the guru's ability to lead us to enlightenment isn't make-believe. Devotion doesn't mean we serve a raw egg on a plate and pretend it's been cooked. That would be what is called "idiot's devotion."

No matter who we are or what we know, whether we are objective, critical, scientific, superstitious, or religious, we all believe in something. All human beings, even the most critical unbelievers, believe in their own "gods" of reason and logic; they believe in their personal assessment of the truth. What else does any human being truly have? But a large part of faith, trust, devotion—whatever you want to call it—is ignorance.

Going beyond Rational and Irrational Devotion

There are three types of devotion: rational devotion, irrational devotion, and beyond rational and irrational devotion.

Saraha, the guru of the great Nagarjuna, defined devotion as trust in cause, condition, and effect—trust in the nature, the game, and the play of karma. This type of devotion is rational devotion. Irrational devotion, though, has no basis in logic. It's like believing in an almighty, truly existing god, or that the moon will speak to you, or that something does not exist because you haven't seen it or heard it or because it doesn't exist within your mind's sphere or cannot be proven.

Of course, we must avoid irrational devotion; this hardly deserves mention. But in the tantra, ultimately we must go beyond rational devotion as well, because in the tantra the basis of rationalism is very narrow and subjective and is always rooted in assumptions. Having devotion that is beyond rational and irrational is unfathomable, especially in this day and age, in which rationalism is cherished, prized, and encouraged. But in the Vajrayana, as long as our devotion is bound by limited logic and reason, we will always have preferences, and we will reason our way out of devotion.

MERIT

Methods for Accumulating Merit

If actualizing enlightenment depends on merit, you may wonder, "Which comes first: the guru or the merit? Isn't the guru supposed to teach us how to accumulate merit, after all?" The answer is that there are plenty of ways to accumulate merit that don't require a guru.

To accumulate merit, we can rely on simple deeds, like being kind to others,

not cheating, not killing, not lying, and other universally acknowledged good practices and activities. We can also accumulate merit by going on pilgrimage, offering incense and flowers, and lighting butter lamps. All the while we can accumulate merit by keeping that aspiration to find a guru who will act as a guide on the path to enlightenment.

So instead of wasting time with all the shenanigans of guru hunting, feel free to burn incense or light a butter lamp. Generate kind thoughts, like, “May all beings have fresh water,” or “May those who are lost in this very moment find their way.” And you can upgrade your merit by thinking, “May all beings realize the truth. May all beings be free from delusion.” Ultimately, these actions will create the conditions for bumping into the right person.

Merit Will Have Its Way

You may plan to choose your guru rationally, after thorough investigation and contemplation, but be aware that you may end up ultimately choosing based on pure impulse and emotion. You may find that when you take the leap, it happens inspiringly, wholeheartedly, uncontrollably, shamelessly, embarrassingly, audaciously, irrepressibly. On the other hand, you may be known as irrational and emotional, but when it comes to this, suddenly you are the most sober and finicky person. Either way, even though you think you have the luxury of making a decision, it’s not really a decision. Your having scrutinized and selected the right guru is just an illusion.

People say things like, “I feel a powerful link with such and such teacher.” It is important to have that kind of feeling, because for those who are seeking enlightenment, the most important link is the spiritual link. Such feelings can be a catalyst: your feelings toward a hairy-chested guru from the Himalayas could lead to a wondrous, meaningful spiritual journey. But also remember that our feelings are fickle, and powerful emotions are not necessarily a sign of a past-life student-teacher connection.

Connections are not exclusive to teachers. As sentient beings, we have all been linked to one another in every different way: debtor/creditor, mother/child, predator/prey, lover/mistress, headhunter/victim. So your feelings for a guru might merely be the result of some garden-variety karmic debt you have to pay. Nevertheless, you should not dismiss them. (The importance of following your instincts will be discussed further in the next chapter.)

The workings of karmic connections and merit are infinite and often inexplicable. The Lee family of Hong Kong has the most amazing karma to be connected with some of the greatest masters of this century. The family is well-

to-do, and they are blessed not only with the resources but with the wish to host many of these masters, many of whom often stay in their home for months. The youngest Lee daughter was a very rational, sober, and critical-minded student. She didn't take things for granted and asked the most intelligent questions of anyone in the family. While the rest of the family hosted these lamas out of traditional-style devotion, her devotion came out of rational thinking and analysis. The visiting Buddhist masters were able to answer her questions in such a way that she was convinced and satisfied.

But somewhere along the way she bumped into a self-proclaimed master, who declared that he had the key to the land of Amitabha. He somehow managed to mesmerize her, and now that cool-hearted, intellectual, analytical, critical young girl is a sycophant. What a loss for her: to have gone completely astray when the great masters are readily available in her own house. This can only be a factor of merit and karma.

There is other living proof of karma all around us. Just look at all these Westerners with no reason whatsoever to be Buddhists, let alone tantric Buddhists, who are now on this path. They grew up with the iconography of Cinderella and Jesus Christ. Maybe they went to Catholic school or Hebrew school, or maybe they had socialist, atheist parents. Yet so many are inspired by the serene, compassionate appearance of the Buddha. Then there are others who feel connected to Guru Padmasambhava, who, with his hats and his retinue of dakinis, couldn't appear less like a simple monk. They are inspired not only by the Buddha but by the tantric phenomena—by deities with horse heads, skull cups, seed syllables, and deities in union.

Merit Dictates How We Perceive the Guru

There has to be a set of reasons why Prashant likes to eat raw onions. He seems to even get a thrill out of the tingling sensation it sends up his nose. The phenomenon of harsh onion smell doesn't ever arise in him. Such causes and conditions don't exist within Joon: she always checks that her hamburger doesn't have onions. And yet they are together as a couple. Why? There must be chemistry and another set of causes and conditions that draw these anti-onion and pro-onion people together, bypassing the discrepancies in their perceptions.

"Causes and conditions" is just another way of expressing the word "karma." Merit is any karmic activity that takes you closer to the realization of truth, toward love and compassion. Thus merit plays such an important role in our spiritual life. It must be karma that led the Chinese to revere the Buddhadharma many centuries ago and then, more recently, to deconstruct Buddhism under the

banner of the Cultural Revolution. And karma had a hand in how Buddhism came back to China almost overnight in the 1990s. Yet in Buddha's own birthplace, India, many Indians don't even know who Buddha is—again, because of their karma.

When Buddhism first came to China, it was a period of great exchange. Spices, fabrics, musical instruments, noodles, beliefs, and diseases were all traded back and forth. But because of karmic conditions, especially the merit of the Chinese Buddhists, Buddhism became one of the longest-lasting imports from India.

THE INNER BUDDHA

As Jigme Lingpa said, the moon has all the qualities necessary for its reflection to appear on the surface of a clear lake. If the moon did not have a shape or substance, and if it didn't reflect the light of the sun, it would not be possible for it to appear on the water's surface. Furthermore, the quality of clear water is that it can reflect, and when the moon and the water—two entirely separate entities—are perfectly aligned without any obstruction between them, a reflection of the moon will appear effortlessly, without intention. Similarly, our inner Buddha has qualities that enable it to manifest effortlessly and without intention. When there are no obstacles, the Buddha will reflect spontaneously in sentient beings who have the merit.

Some beings have the merit to enjoy the reflection of the inner Buddha in the form of the outer historical Buddha Shakyamuni, who came twenty-five hundred years ago. Some have the merit to enjoy the reflection of the inner Buddha in the form of a large fish during a time of famine. For others, the Buddha may be stone statues, paintings, a lotus, a garden, or any of the other material objects that give sentient beings temporary happiness. And those with the most supreme type of merit have the ability to see nondual bliss as the Buddha.

The process of relating to this reflection of the inner Buddha is called devotion. As long as there is the stream of thoughts, there is no end to the projection of samsara. Until the end of samsara, there is no end to the path. As long as there is a path, there is devotion. And as long as there is devotion, there is an outer teacher.



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THERE ARE GUARANTEES

If you have encountered a genuine master and you have the right, favorable link, enlightenment is guaranteed within this life. Even if you have an unfavorable connection, by upsetting the guru—maybe by scratching his favorite Bentley—samsara is guaranteed to end. If your motivation is to achieve enlightenment, you have nothing much to lose and everything to gain.

MIRIAM'S DILEMMA

Miriam was an intellectual, intelligent English woman born to a Persian family. I met her when I was studying at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. She also studied comparative religion at SOAS, and was a lecturer on Buddhism and Hinduism at the University of Bath. She was very well versed in Asian philosophy, especially ancient Indian logic, and she thoroughly understood the *Madhyamakavatara*. She could sometimes explain concepts such as emptiness and dependent arising better than trained religious teachers because she didn't have a biased attitude. When she explained, she did so methodically, scientifically.

Miriam came to see me many times, even though I had nothing to teach her. She had no philosophical questions to ask because she knew the answers better than I did in some cases. Nevertheless, she would often come to our Buddhist

practice gatherings at my small flat on Notting Hill Gate. About ten people would show up, mostly staunch Buddhists, to do feast offerings and chant. My friend Yvonne was often there and, much to my embarrassment, would uncontrollably blurt out her devotion with hiccups and twitches in the presence of Miriam. I couldn't help but wonder what such an intellectual was thinking of these groupies carrying my shoes and treating me like a supreme being.

One day Miriam made a point to be the last to leave so we could be alone. She was obviously in a mood, so I asked her what was wrong. Tears sprung from her eyes as she told me that she wanted to have devotion but could not. She might have felt some affinity for me because we were both committed to the same philosophical exploration, but that affinity stopped short of devotion to me as a guru figure. By nature she was very critical of spiritual gurus and especially wary of anything resembling a cult figure. So even though her conviction to the philosophy was strong, devotion was not arising. What's interesting is that even some of Miriam's own students in Bath ended up developing devotion through her lectures, yet she never did.

I could not advise her except to say that devotion is not something you can develop through learning alone. But for her to shed tears because she lacks devotion is something to pay attention to. Aspiration alone is very powerful. Her feeling of something lacking might eventually lead her to a more vigorous search. Although I don't know where she is now, I sometimes hope that she has not stopped shedding those tears.

BEFORE ALL IS SAID AND DONE

As much as you would like to believe that you have the right to choose your master, that you can learn the art of choosing, that you are informed about the guru, and that you have the freedom and ability to assess that information, your karmic link and merit will ultimately make your decisions for you. Most of my gurus just happened to me. I never had the luxury or ability or time to analyze, assess, or choose. It is because of merit that I have found some of the most accomplished masters, and likewise, not having that luxury to analyze and assess is also a product of merit. My analytical mind could not have found anything better.

So in addition to honing your analytical mind, learning to play the game of karma is crucial. Things like prayer and offerings can be game changers. In some cases, if you have the right merit, you won't even have to search; the guru will find you at the most unexpected place and time. The guru will just happen to

you.



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You choose the guru, so you are the master.

Being Savvy Analyzing a Guru 2

CONSCIOUS DECISION

CONTRARY TO WHAT people seem to think these days, simply taking refuge with a lama doesn't necessarily mean that he has become your Vajrayana master; he is just a refuge preceptor. A vajra master is so much more. Some of the dysfunction of today's guru-disciple relationships stems from spiritual seekers taking any Tom, Dick, or Harry as their vajra masters with little or no consideration of the consequences. Nowhere in the Vajrayana texts does it say that the moment you meet a person who claims to be a Vajrayana master, you should immediately take him as your guru and do whatever he says. That will bring unworkable pain. Having no discretion is dangerous and stupid, like a hungry dog stumbling across a piece of meat and devouring it.

The Buddhadharma is the path of the *sugata*, the "bliss-gone one," meaning it is ultimately characterized by bliss, not pain. Therefore, the Vajrayana path of guru devotion is also painless, contrary to how it might sound to some. It's not like putting yourself under the tyranny of a despot.

Think about businesspeople who work tirelessly to reach their goals. They understand the benefits of hard work. They know the struggle of late nights and sweating will pay off. Therefore, the work itself brings a certain kind of joy because there is a sense of satisfaction, a sense of moving forward. Similarly, when you are convinced that enlightenment is possible in this lifetime, you might not mind the hardships involved. With the conviction that the guru can show you the nature of mind, the anticipation of that glimpse, the hope that it will come swiftly, inspires you to do whatever it takes, whatever he asks. This is what we call devotion. For this kind of pursuer, devotion transforms the pain into bliss.

Of course, you must be careful who you devote yourself to and when. The tantric guru materializes for each person in a very individual way. Let's say you hear of someone who is considered a vajra master by masses of people. So you attend his public initiation with an enormous crowd, thinking, "Not all those people can be wrong," and anyway, your friend has an extra ticket. The tantric

guru speaks about ecology and world peace, and you have no argument with that; you may even be moved by his humility. Along the way you may get some kernel of the Buddhist ideas of love and compassion, maybe a vague idea of interdependence. Does that make you a Vajrayana student and him your Vajrayana master? Probably not.



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Your search is a necessary part of the path.

But it's not impossible. If you develop a strong connection to the teachings and the teacher in the midst of that public ceremony, even though you are totally new to this Vajrayana business, the seed of a Vajrayana student-teacher relationship could be sown. Or if the guru's words or actions or laughter shift something inside you—genuinely, not just as a spark of inspiration—and suddenly all the worldly values you used to think were so important, like praise

and fame, seem slightly less important, and you begin to see your fellow worldly brothers and sisters as beyond dualistic distinctions, and you no longer have a preference between Mother Teresa and Donald Rumsfeld, then perhaps yes, you are a Vajrayana student and that person is your Vajrayana master.

There are a lot people wandering into large public tantric events these days. Sometimes people participate in a ceremony because they happened to pick up a glossy pamphlet lying next to a poster advertising tantric sex workshops at a new age coffee shop. Or they go because a friend mentions it at a rally for world peace or against nuclear proliferation. You cannot say that this starting point is completely invalid. It is possible that such people could, along the way, get inspired by the teacher and the teaching and even manage to enter the tantric path properly. But this kind of beginning is something that you should really beware of.

In contrast, Naropa *consciously* went looking for a Vajrayana master and *consciously* asked to receive teachings. He was already very well versed in basic Mahayana teachings but was not satisfied with that. He didn't just bump into Tilopa. Nor was Tilopa advertising in the markets. He wasn't handing out pamphlets or sitting on a glittering throne with a sound system and a spotlight. The sight of Tilopa feasting on live fish must have been quite unpleasant, from an ordinary point of view. But Naropa knew what he was looking for, and he knew Tilopa could deliver, so he consciously went to him and made the request.



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Devotion transforms the pain. The pain is the bliss.

If you request a Vajrayana initiation deliberately and you know what the stakes of taking Vajrayana initiation are, then you have become a Vajrayana student, and whoever is giving that initiation has become your Vajrayana master. It is so important to understand what is taking place during the initiation. It is similar to when a monk takes vows in the Shravakayana tradition. At the ceremony he is asked pointed questions: Are you sober now? Do you speak human language? In other words, they are asking, “Do you know what you are doing?” They even ask if you are real or if, rather, you are a mirage or an illusion. They ask if you have permission from whoever is your guardian—your king, your master, your girlfriend, your boyfriend. They ask if you have a penis or if you are a hermaphrodite, because you can’t be a monk if you are a hermaphrodite. In this way, you will be asked questions again and again. If you

meet the criteria, only then you can become a monk. The communication has to be clear.

GYALTSSEN HAD NO CLUE

When Gyaltsen's family sent him to a monastery at age six, like many Tibetan families do, he had no concept of what he was getting into. How could he? Many adults don't even understand the significance and purpose of the ordination rituals. Gyaltsen was probably excited by the new robes, the haircut, the initiation ceremony, and how all his family members proudly congratulated him. But by age eleven, Gyaltsen began to develop at least a limited understanding of what it meant to be a monk. He gathered that he shouldn't kill or steal, but primarily that he was not allowed to have sex with women now or ever.

A few years passed, and Gyaltsen woke up as a teenager with hormone levels as high as a kite. By then there was a television at the monastery, so he could watch cheesy romantic Bollywood films that glorify love and romance. Bollywood planted ideas of "happily ever after" in his young mind. In the society where he dwelled, monkhood was a prestigious vocation, but ironically, this prestige ended up being an attraction for teenage girls. When something is prohibited, you value it much more. Gyaltsen, with his hormones blooming out of control, began to flirt. He invested time and energy in composing love letters. Even though one of the girls he fancied was living within the same compound, he sent the letters by post because he was too shy to speak to her, and hence he became an accidental romantic.

It began with innocent exchanges of letters and presents, but one thing led to another, and Gyaltsen ended up breaking his vinaya vows by having sexual intercourse. He knew what would happen if anyone found out: he would be disrobed, bringing shame to his family, his monastery, and his lineage. The pressure of expectations made it too difficult to confess, so he kept his offense quiet and suffered the agony of not doing the right thing. With heavy guilt, he kept wearing the robes meant only for monks and participated in confession ceremonies meant only for celibates. According to the Vinaya, if there is one monk with broken vows in a confession ceremony, the entire ceremony is spoiled and the confession of all the monks invalidated. "I am certainly not the only monk who has hidden his truth," Gyaltsen reasoned. This kind of concealment must happen all the time in face-saving societies.

Often people take Vajrayana samaya vows at initiations in the same manner Gyaltsen took monk's vows. Some take initiation without even knowing what's

happening, and others do it out of peer pressure. They don't realize the promises they're making. For example, once they have taken a higher anuyoga tantric initiation, to look at a woman as a lesser being is to break one of the most important root vows. Initiates end up breaking so many of their vows unknowingly all the time. In the Tantrayana, the consequences of breaking vows are much more serious than breaking vows in the Vinaya.

If I were the khenpo of a big monastery, I would probably have to declare all the monks to be vow breakers. Some people think the only way a monk can be disrobed is by inserting his thing into one of the three holes, but it's just as much a violation of his vows to download pirated films or software. There is a rule: do not take anything that is not offered. If something taken is worth more than the cost of a meal, it is considered stolen. A movie download costs a few dollars, so in my view, all those monks who watch pirated movies have broken their samaya vow. And just think of all the pirated versions of Microsoft Office in India—that's a few hundred dollars each.

FOLLOWING INSTINCTS

The Vajrayana is very much based on mind, and therefore feelings and inclinations are important. If you have an uncontrollable urge to follow someone, it may be a continuation of a certain guru-student relationship you had in your past lives. In the case of following your intuition, conventional ways of assessing the guru are not necessary.

When Milarepa first laid eyes on Marpa, Marpa was plowing a muddy field of barley in a cold wind. It was all rocks and slush—nothing remotely resembling the brocade, incense, and parasols we so often associate with gurus these days. But upon encountering this man, Milarepa was so moved that he felt a bodily sensation. It's believed that Marpa stopped working, surveyed Milarepa from head to toe, and then asked him to finish plowing the rest of the field. He also offered him a little wine. And there began the great Kagyu lineage, which went into the ears and minds of some of the greatest kings, queens, and emperors this world has ever hosted, including those of the Qing dynasty. This relationship could not have arisen merely because of Milarepa's mundane aspiration for a dharmic connection. There must have been a residue of a long-existing karmic link between those two.

Even some of my own students, who I sometimes refer to as my "victims," have approached me without much sober assessment. After a long search for a spiritual path, Mr. Watson from Australia ended up with me after having some

significant dreams. He woke up instantly trusting me. Ms. Coelln from New York City says she knew she had a connection with me when she first laid eyes on my feet in 1996. She thought I was wearing Japanese tabi socks, and this alone made her decide that I was her guru, so she started attending my teachings. Mr. Peters reckons I became his Vajrayana master because, after his countless supplications for teachings, I finally gave him instructions in the men's toilet at Denver International Airport, just before I flew away. Mr. Peters had always been awed by brocades and thrones, but somehow the gentlemen's toilet at the airport did the trick. Another one of my student-victims, Stephanie, claims that upon hearing my theory that Van Gogh could have achieved enlightenment if he had the right view, she knew I was her teacher. She says it was as if she were hearing things for the very first time, and that was the beginning of our relationship.

So we are led by our emotions. But if possible, this is where modern Dharma students should be careful. The devil's advocate "head" must be invited to rein in the touchy-feely "heart." If someone truly inspires you, this is good, but to be a vajra master, he or she must have the skill and method to crack open your cocoon. If someone can do this, no matter how seemingly undistinguished he or she may be, this person is your master. It could be a khenpo with no rank at all. Appearances mean very little here. I admire those who follow Alak Zenkar Rinpoche. He looks like a hot-bun vendor on a street in China, but appearance is definitely a deception in his case. When it comes to dedication and contribution to the Buddhadharma, especially within the Tibetan lineages, he surpasses anyone with colorful robes and gigantic names.

Within my own circle of groupies, there are a few old fogies whose first encounter of me was when I was hanging around in the cheap pubs of London, wearing jeans and a T-shirt—hardly looking like a Tibetan lama. Somehow they became Vajrayana students. Today when I see them, it's encouraging because it confirms the Buddhist concept of karmic debt. Their approach to me as a Vajrayana teacher did not begin with all the usual props and sound effects.

So it's absolutely understandable when people are taken when they meet someone like Surya Das, who looks 110 percent Jewish, with his overgrown beard and oversize belly. His presence and his speech, and his very pushy being, inspires them. Not only inspires but unravels their cocoons and prevents them from going astray.

Our normal, rational assessment does not always need to take precedent. This person who can wake you up becomes what we call "guru with the three unsurpassable kindnesses." Even if the guru doesn't teach with moving lips, he can be your master. It's very individual. In this way, you can even get the nature

of the mind transmission from someone like David Noodle.

EVEN THE SHORTCUT OF THE TANTRA TAKES TIME

Deciding to enter the path of tantra, the path of “whatever the guru says,” is a big commitment. If you were considering marriage, you would want to take time beforehand to understand the character of your potential spouse before deciding whether you want to bind yourself to that person. The same is true with the guru. Only after considerable analysis should you make the decision to enter the path of tantra. Only with critical intelligence can you choose not to have any choice. This is the highest form of mind training. Of course, after you get married you will still discover new things about your husband or wife, even after decades of being together, and that is also true of committing to the guru.

Even though tantra is a swift path, there are stages. In the Hevajra Tantra it is said that tantric students should first be given all the general teachings, beginning with the analysis-driven study of Vaibhashika, Sautantra, Chittamatra, and Madhyamaka. These emphasize the importance of critical thinking.

Analysis and critical thinking usually take time, and not all of us are blessed with that luxury, especially those of us who have entered that path late in life. And we have to remember that, as much as we like to feel in control of our decisions, we are subject to causes and conditions. It's only to a certain extent that we will ever be able to control the outcome. Though there is much value in analysis and critical thinking, don't deceive yourself by thinking it is the ultimate solution.

HEARING

A superior student longs for a guru out of a strong wish to purify the temporary defilements that obscure his or her fundamental essence, which is ultimately flawless. In the Mahayana and Vajrayana we call this essence buddha nature. The student understands intellectually that the buddha nature is there, as in the classic example: when we see a plate encrusted with spaghetti sauce, we have confidence that if we apply some soapy water, we can experience a sparkling clean dish.

In order to purify the defilements, the teachings and blessings have to penetrate. The most accessible way for the blessings to penetrate is through

hearing, so ordinary people are encouraged to listen to teachings. To this end, a guru who can provide accurate practical information is very important, even if he or she isn't your root guru or tantric master. So, at least in the beginning, a guru with knowledge of the Dharma who is from a traditional, institutionalized path is a safe bet.

Through hearing penetration, you acquire a tool to be penetrated by contemplation. And then gradually you develop the capacity to be penetrated by meditation.

THE TYRANNY OF ACADEMIA

Throughout the ages and in many different places there have been customs for people to formally enter a guru-student relationship. It can be as simple as asking, "May I be your student?" This kind of ritual can be very challenging, reassuring, and nerve-wracking all at once. Wracked nerves are good. The hope of being accepted, the fear of being rejected, could very well be part of the yoga of guru.

Mr. Tyler, whom I taught when I was invited as a guest lecturer to Oxford University, was very academically minded. But for years after my visit, he kept seeking me out, wanting to hang around me, at times to my annoyance. He wanted to be there when I was watching football, when I was going for a walk in an English garden, when I was eating out. And he sometimes would ask for a private audience, which always ended up with him saying completely useless things. He would behave so uncomfortably that I refused to give him an audience anymore. Then one day Mr. Tyler said he had one last request. He was sweating. He became nervous. Finally I got the point: he wanted me to be his teacher. I can see why he had been so awkward. For years he had presented himself as an academic, and switching was difficult for him.

In places like Oxford University, to admit devotion while being academic is like admitting you are gay in a homophobic environment. How likely are you to come out of the closet? As much as academics want to think they are liberal and open-minded, their tyranny of objectivity is ruthless.

If you are fortunate enough to experience a dilemma like Mr. Tyler's, asking a Vajrayana master to teach you is the turning point. This is your first prostration (not necessarily literally). It's a sign that your pride is coming out of its shell, because even with the fear of rejection, you have seen the value of having the guru, and you persevere. That alone is the beginning of a very important practice.

WHO CAN TEACH?

Buddhism is becoming popular in traditionally non-Buddhist places. There is already a shortage of genuine teachers in this world, but teachers who understand the culture, language, and habits of these new students are even more rare. This has not stopped a whole slew of self-proclaimed gurus from emerging like a disease. It's more important than ever for seekers to ask, "Who can teach the Dharma? What are the qualifications? Can one be a Buddhist teacher without a tradition or a lineage? With a certain amount of experience and knowledge, can anyone legitimately start to teach? Should these teachers be taken just as instructors, or should they be taken as gurus?"

We have this phenomenon of Tibetan rinpoches with elaborate monasteries and eye-catching histories, but they can be hard to reach, and, apart from very few, they often serve Tibetan communities better than international ones. Meanwhile, at the Dharma centers that are cropping up all over the place, Tibetan culture and customs and even language are promoted, which of course many people are interested in because of the exotic factor. But many of these centers act almost as collection agencies for donations that are sent back to monasteries in Tibet or Bhutan or Nepal, or to the resident lama's immediate family.

So how do we bring the Buddhadharma to all the students in Slovenia, for example? Some of these Slovenians don't want to learn customs; they just want to study what the Buddha taught, and that has nothing to do with Tibetan culture. Do they really need to know the perfect way to fold and unfurl a white scarf?

Of course, there are amazing lamas who, despite exuding Tibetan-ness, somehow still benefit many people through the power of genuine care for students, the genuine practice of wisdom and compassion, and the almost urgent quality of dedication to the Buddhadharma. For example, Chagdud Rinpoche went to Brazil and built a Tibetan temple, and now all his South American students are chanting in Tibetan and wearing Tibetan dress. But one never feels that Chagdud Gonpa is merely a cultural center. It is a living spiritual center, because behind all that Tibetan paraphernalia, many of Chagdud Rinpoche's students do actually care and invest their time and energy in view, meditation, and action.

If you are only looking for information or practice instructions, you can actually get what you need from anyone who has basic knowledge. Many times, seasoned non-Tibetan practitioners have a much better understanding than Tibetans, or at least they speak your language, so it can be much more

productive to develop a relationship with them. Just try to understand that there are limitations. For instance, just because somebody has completed a three-year retreat and spent five years at a shedra, is this person qualified to teach? Yes, probably, if it's just a matter of providing information and instructions for the path practice. But should you take him or her as your guru? This is another matter.

The bottom line is this: it's all very individual and ambiguous, and perhaps it should be left that way. Ambiguity is a good thing. Once there is a system, things tend toward ruin.

CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE AND THE CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE BUDDHADHARMA

Choosing an authentic guru is not like choosing an authentic Italian restaurant. When you evaluate an Italian restaurant, you measure it by how Italian it looks and how Italian it tastes. Are they serving the pasta as *primi piatti*? Do they hang bulbs of garlic and wine bottles on the wall? Are there Italian folk songs playing in the background? But your choice of guru should be based primarily on his or her ability to reveal your buddha nature, either directly or indirectly. Whether the guru does this using Tibetan methods or Chinese methods or a completely invented method doesn't matter.

Some people consider Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche to be the most notorious perpetrator of spiritual abuse in history, a man who died because of alcohol and indulgence. It's understandable to think this way because of how he chose to manifest. Generally there is this notion that spirituality and vices like sex, alcohol, power, and money go together like oil and water. But it seems Trungpa Rinpoche was able to use vice as a skillful means.

Sometimes you can tell the greatness of a teacher through the greatness of the students. After meeting many of Trungpa Rinpoche's students over the years—witnessing their seriousness, their veneration to the Buddhadharma, their dedication to the guru—I cannot dismiss them as crazy and ignorant; I cannot say they are a disgrace to the Buddhadharma.

Just as some people are inspired by the Dalai Lama's humility, laughter, and nonviolence, many of Trungpa Rinpoche's students were attracted to him because of his outrageousness. He came to America in the early 1970s and worked with a very rebellious group of hippies, spiritual seekers, and Vietnam War protesters. They were the least likely type to bow down to a khaki uniform,

and yet Trungpa Rinpoche was able to work with them in this way. More than six hundred families left their homes and jobs and moved from all parts of America to some gloomy place called Halifax. They created schools to teach wisdom and compassion. Their children grew up thinking twice before squishing a mosquito. Some of his students even became monks and nuns—exemplary ones, like Ani Pema Chödrön. And even long after he passed away, they continue having genuine interest in dependent arising. They value nonviolence and promote contemplation, and they dedicate a big chunk of their lives to meditation and retreats. And this community is not like the segregated Amish; rather, they are very much blended into society. Their symbolic warrior, discipline, is directly and indirectly associated with dignity, courage, and enlightened society, qualities that that part of the world gravely needed.

Are there any serene, gentle monastics from Chögyam Trungpa's generation who have accomplished this much in the West? I'm still looking.

I had a very heated argument when I was at Oxford University a few years ago with a member of the Buddhist studies faculty. He simply could not understand anything Trungpa Rinpoche did, from beginning to end.

The British have this very romantic idea about ancient culture and wisdom, which is reflected in their academia. If an Englishman wants to study Buddhism, he begins by examining the root texts in original Pali or Sanskrit, and he studies the code of conduct Buddha prescribed for Indians twenty-five hundred years ago, and he feels loyal to that ancient atmosphere. Many of us have these romantic notions, not realizing the contextual nature of these early rules. When we see a serene Theravada monk begging in the streets of Mandalay at sunrise, it makes our day. But if the same smooth-shaven, maroon-robed man was seen begging alms on Kensington High Street next to the Hare Krishnas, it would offend the sensibilities of the uptight British. Removed from his romantic setting, the monk is little better than a pest.

In the early days when the Buddha was teaching students in small groups of six or twelve, sometimes they misbehaved. Each time they did, a conference was held, and they decided how to handle it. There was one disciple named Charka who became a monk even though he was still in love with his wife. One night he went sneaking back to his house to speak with her alone. When Buddha learned of this, he created a rule that no monk should sit alone with a woman. But Charka couldn't stay away, so he went sneaking back again, only this time when he talked with his wife, he made sure to stay standing. So a no-standing rule was created. But then he went back once more and talked with his wife while walking around. So another rule was made. And this is how the many volumes of the Vinaya came about in such explicit detail.

These rules and codes all came about as requirements at that time and place. None of them is related to the truth; they were just guideposts that people of that sangha needed to help them stay on track to the truth. The word “vinaya” in Tibetan is *dulwa*, and it means anything that has to do with taming. Guardrails and leashes can help with the taming process.

Of course, not all rules apply to everyone. Like “monks should not eat after midday”—what if a monk is sick and needs nourishment? Or “monks should not wear garments above the waist”—what if they live in the Himalayas? The monks of Magada didn’t need to wear wooly vests or sweaters, but if the Himalayan monks had interpreted this habit as a strict code of conduct, they would have frozen to death. Or “monks must walk gracefully and gently”—what if the building is on fire? Walking gently becomes less important. So the person, the place, and the time all need to be considered.

My English friend seems to have forgotten that after Buddha offered these rules and regulations to his immediate sangha, he said the Vinaya will have to be determined by time and place. Aside from the four root vows—abstaining from sexual misconduct, stealing, killing a human being (born or unborn), and major deceit—there are no rules that apply across the board.

The point is to work with your mind. The point is to uncover your ego, your assumptions. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche needed to discipline his students so that they were not distracted and had a direction. Morality leads disciples like a beacon, but he knew he could not merely impose the rules of ancient Magada on post-Vietnam War hippies. His instruction to these hippie-dippy students to wear suits and ties was a modern-day version of instructing monks to wear robes. The point of following the Buddha’s words is not to put on a costume party. The drills and uniforms were a timely method.

I have been struggling with a handful of leftist students of mine who live on the dole in places like Australia and England, with no plans to ever work. They genuinely believe they’re doing a great service to their countries by accepting social services from the government because, in some roundabout way, it helps keep the economy running. They believe there is such a thing as a free lunch and that they are entitled to that free lunch. They project an image to the world that to be a Buddhist you have to be a freeloader.

But Trungpa Rinpoche taught that you can be a Buddhist and still be a successful banker or entrepreneur. This was a huge contribution to modern Buddhadharma. If Trungpa Rinpoche had manifested as a typical monk from Surmang—wearing robes, exuding serenity, begging alms, and behaving perfectly from a vinaya point of view—at least he would have entertained those romantic, ancient morality-loving British. But would he have been able to reach

all the others? Could he have inspired thousands of people to adopt the ancient vinaya rules of shirtless, dinnerless monastics? It's well and good to daydream about the glory days of shaved heads and wandering ascetics, but if the venue and the times have changed, the methods must also change.

My friend Wendy was an early student of Trungpa Rinpoche's, and she told me what it was like to attend his abishekas: "Rinpoche would have us waiting, sitting all day, sometimes for two days. We didn't go home to sleep. For Vajrayana teachings we could be sitting until well after midnight. I don't recall ever sitting any less than two hours before teachings began."

One might think he was acting like a madman, but looking at his methods, we see that the ambiguous start times gave students time to think and provided ample opportunity for frustration and boredom to arise before they entered into something very profound. "It was too late for me to see this as crazy," said Wendy. "I longed for the atmosphere in which the teachings were expressed, proclaimed, illuminated. It was difficult, grueling, irritating—all of these. But it seemed to be all of a piece." Isn't this better than other lamas who arrive promptly as advertised in the pamphlets and give the highest tantric initiation to anyone who has paid for a ticket, like it was some kind of Broadway show?

Outsiders might think the followers of Trungpa Rinpoche sound like fanatical, idiotic cult followers who were lured by a charismatic leader akin to David Koresh. But all you have to do is look at Trungpa Rinpoche's legacy of books to see what a great and benevolent master he was. Even something as seemingly simple as his choice of words, his terminology, is so telling. He was teaching concepts like "your nature is the Buddha" to an audience with strong Abrahamic influences, whose reference points were concepts like sin and heaven and God. How do you insert the idea of buddha nature into the heads of people like that? He came up with the term "basic goodness." It's a brilliant choice of words that could have come only from someone who had not only knowledge but confidence, compassion, wisdom, and a karmic link to the Dakpo Kagyu lineage that can be authenticated and traced back twenty-five hundred years.

In years to come, people will come to realize and appreciate that Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche never claimed to be a prophet or a messiah; he simply claimed to be a follower of Shakyamuni. This is his single most important quality. He was proud of his Kagyu lineage. The meticulousness with which he invited the Sixteenth Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, and Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche to Boulder, the way he presented them to his disciples—this kind of humble devotion and scrupulousness is not a David Koresh thing to do.

And these devotees are no dummies. They are productive members of society—doctors, lawyers, psychologists—with acute critical thinking skills. They have

had many opportunities to encounter other seemingly well-behaved teachers in their lifetimes, but their hearts are still with Trungpa Rinpoche. They chose him not just because they admired him but because of what he taught and what he did to inspire them.

In return, he truly trusted his students. Tibetan lamas who have authority don't really trust outsiders to take the lead. So Trungpa Rinpoche appointing a Western regent was a brave move, ahead of its time. It made such an impact, giving students hope that maybe one day they could be accepted, maybe one day they could play a part.

So to be savvy at choosing a genuine tantric master takes much more skill than being savvy at identifying a genuine Italian restaurant. You have to be a critical thinker, able to temper the surge of feelings and emotions, yet also be open-minded and courageous enough to appreciate those feelings and emotions. Presented with a half-drunk, half-paralyzed man in an army uniform who has no legitimate army, and who remains utterly silent for hours, your head might say, "He's crazy." But if you already know what you want, and you're persuaded by what he says, not how he appears, and if you're open and courageous enough, an unstoppable longing just might take over your heart, and with an incredible sense of trust you will plunge into the arms of this strange man.

WHERE ARE ALL THE FEMALE GURUS?

The gender issue is talked about more openly these days, and rightfully so. Many have asked why there were not more women teachers in the past, and whether there will be more women teachers in the future. Strictly speaking, gender has no influence on whether someone is qualified or not. Just as the guru doesn't have to be from your same culture, the guru doesn't have to be the same gender. But people have this passion for wanting to have equal representation—black, gay, hermaphrodite. Those sentiments should not interfere with your quest for enlightenment.

Woman or not, lesbian or not—it doesn't matter. The guru has to craft and deliver the path and patiently lead temperamental, ignorant, stubborn, lost, sentient beings along that path, never giving up until the disciples have reached a state of enlightenment. Outer manifestations should have no bearing. A female guru may or may not necessarily know best how to talk to a woman. A female guru could be really inspiring to a male disciple; there is a natural communication between opposite sexes that can be beneficial. We need to bear in mind that whatever seems helpful can be a hindrance, and whatever seems

like a hindrance can be helpful.

Nevertheless, there is some excitement about having women gurus, and we are seeing more and more women Dharma teachers manifesting these days. It's very heartwarming to have that wish fulfilled. However, the fact of the matter is that there hasn't been a culture of supporting female teachers in Tibet or in the Theravada tradition because of pervasive male chauvinism. And because of that, there are fewer women teachers who are ready to teach. It's a new phenomenon, and too much hype too early on might backfire. It's a bit like if Bhutan started trying to produce Leica-quality cameras: They certainly could, but there is no tradition, so there needs to be some allowance for trial and error. The Germans have already been through that, and they have the camera-making technique perfected.

That said, the world is blessed with a few exceptional living female gurus. Jetsun Kushok, for example, is thoroughly trained in her tradition. As the daughter of the revered K n family, she gave path and fruit teachings to a large audience of Sakya monks in Tibet in 1955 when she was seventeen. This is notable for many reasons: not just because she was young but because it was an era when women were not teaching in Tibet, let alone at the Sakya Monastery to an audience of several hundred monks. Not long after that, she was exiled to North America. It was as if Princess Anne, with all her royal trappings, were forced to live in a foreign land. For years, Jetsun Kushok lived anonymously, resorting to all kinds of unexpected jobs for survival, like weaving. She was a mother and a wife, she cooked and cleaned, yet she continued to confer teachings at the level of any great master of the time. Now she is again recognized as one of the most important lineage holders of the Sakya tradition.

Then there is Chagdud Khandro, who is not a Tibetan, but after spending a long time with Chagdud Rinpoche, one of the most authentic Vajrayana masters, as a disciple and wife, she has demonstrated that she is a great practitioner able to inspire many disciples. She works tirelessly to uphold Chagdud Rinpoche's legacy, despite the suspicious, envious eye of Tibetan opportunists. Her humility and her totally ordinary appearance remain intact, whether she is confidently presiding over ceremonies and Vajrayana rituals or washing a dish.

There is definitely a bright future for women gurus because of how the world is changing.

THE QUIRKINESS OF GURUS

There are gurus who are qualified from a spiritual point of view, but their

disciples have to deal with some quirks and eccentricities. From a mundane human point of view, such gurus are not your normal, workable, easygoing sort of people. That's not what they're aiming for. They can be difficult to get along with, fussy, and narrow-minded. They're not likely to be your buddies. You wouldn't invite them over for a casual cup of tea so that you can blurt out your every thought and recount the ups and downs of your mundane life. Nor would you invite such a guru to a conference on the leadership of monasteries and Dharma centers.

Of course, this is all very subjective. I've seen many students who are devoted to such gurus, and it's clear they are able to produce great practitioners. I met one of Chatral Rinpoche's students, a Western woman who had recently visited him, and I asked her what advice he had given. She said, "Don't plan anything more than three months in advance." Such good advice. All I could say was, "Oh well, there go your cheap plane tickets."

There are also great beings who are friendly and easy to get along with and who are indispensable at leadership conferences. While they are not lesser because of it, they are not necessarily good gurus.

A student must be savvy in extracting the nectar of the Dharma from different lamas with different approaches and styles.

A CERTIFICATE FOR THE INEFFABLE

These days we see many aspiring gurus collecting paraphernalia like letters of reference and documents confirming their authenticity from higher gurus. From a philosophical Vajrayana point of view, this is the most ridiculous thing. It's like asking for a certificate confirming that you would make a good soul mate or certifying you as worthy of romantic love. All these props, like certificates and diplomas, complicate matters because they become reference points. And they are not necessarily authentic; anything can be bought for a price these days.

There seem to be certain groups out there that wish to develop a job description for gurus so that they are more accountable. But institutions and certificates will never work with a tantric guru. Job descriptions and confirmation of Vajrayana gurus were unheard of a thousand years ago or even a hundred years ago. They were definitely not handing out guru certificates during the time of Naropa and Padmasambhava.

There is no doubt that Naropa was a great being. He was the head of the famous Nalanda University. Many kings were patrons of Nalanda and sent their children there to study with great scholars from across the region. To be the head

of such a university was to occupy one of the most prestigious positions possible. But Naropa was not driven by that kind of worldly achievement, so he left. This is where the real prestige lies: in his leaving.

Imagine if the president of Peking University or Harvard quit to go trawling the ghettos, devotedly talking to the homeless and prostitutes night after night and finding more meat and meaning there than in any lecture room or laboratory. Naropa was looking for something higher, something that could not be taught in the university, something that is beyond usual logic. And for this he did not need a certificate.

Nor was Naropa seeking a new career as a guru. He became a guru only because his student Marpa found in him the attributes of love, compassion, wisdom, caring, and skillful means. Marpa surrendered his body, speech, and mind to Naropa. Thus Naropa became a guru, and the Kagyu lineage was born, with Tilopa and Naropa being recognized as its founders.

Naropa knew the sole purpose of practicing the Dharma is to liberate oneself and all sentient beings. The aim should never be to become a Dharma teacher. But nowadays, under the pretext of needing to propagate the Dharma, the notion of Buddhist teacher training keeps springing up in every corner.

The problem is that there are so many charlatans. Some charlatans actually have a little knowledge of the Dharma, and then there are those who have no knowledge at all. But the worst are those educated, worldly charlatans with no care for the Dharma or sentient beings, who become the most successful of all. Because of them, one can't reject the system of teacher training and references. They could serve some purpose.

WAVING THE BANNER OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

Lack of critical thinking can contribute to the creation of charlatans. When I went to Eastern Europe, students of this bloke Ivo from Romania approached me with the most cunning attempts to get my endorsement of their teacher. I could smell their plot from the moment I landed. With genuine feeling, they gently peppered me with praises for him, then slowly began insisting that he was worthy of my affirmation. They used all the old tricks, like telling me that other lamas had already offered endorsements, so mine would just be the cherry on top.

If someone is waving an endorsement letter around, chances are he has a weakness. He's relying on a piece of paper because he can't speak for himself. The very fact that he has gone through the hassle of acquiring an endorsement

letter disproves exactly what he wishes the letter to confirm. The perfect way to create a charlatan is to depend on pieces of paper and not use critical thinking. Your good judgment can usually discern when something is good and authentic without any marketing or publicity.

In Kyoto I went to buy a bit of gold powder that I needed for the face of a Manjushri statue. I went to a seven-hundred-year-old shop that had no sign and no advertisements. Once inside the door, I could tell that the family was more interested in upholding a tradition of quality than selling a product. They knew that if the gold was incomparably good, genuine seekers would come, even from as far away as remote Bhutan. I was embarrassed because I didn't bring enough money to make a purchase, but the way they treated me as a customer was worth more than the gold itself. They were so happy that their materials were appreciated. Their business card was so simple, and beautiful. I haven't shared it with anyone because I get the feeling they don't want to be disturbed by looky-loos. They were so elegant about the way they didn't seek out customers, whereas lamas who wave their endorsement certificates are so inelegant, like those shopkeepers at fake Prada shops in Bangkok, shouting their hearts out trying to move product.

CELEBRITY GURUS

Some disciples treat their gurus like movie stars. They go around wearing necklaces with the guru's photo, or they hang the guru's picture on their wall. Some kind of fall in love with the guru, but it's more like an infatuation, the way others fall for their therapists. It becomes very personal and can easily be mishandled.

Many Tibetan lamas—also Thai, Burmese, all kinds of Buddhist teachers—allow a kind of merchandising of their image. It's very confusing. The extent of promotion often correlates with their level of insecurity. They have a feeling of having to sell themselves. At public events in Taiwan some Mahayana monks emerge from a lotus onstage, and thousands of fans have this kind of ecstatic experience. It's as if these spiritual characters are worried they will lose their relevance. Like, "If you don't do this, someone else will take over"—as if the Dharma is a brand like Apple that needs to keep up with the market, otherwise Samsung will take over. Printing business cards, bags, announcement banners, fliers, buttons with the lama's face, billboards proclaiming the greatness of the teacher . . . aren't there other ways to reach sentient beings who need the Buddhadharma?

During the coronation of the fifth king of Bhutan, many dignitaries were invited. Also on hand were one or two very enthusiastic Tibetan lamas who were not at all interested in the coronation ceremony itself. Savvy marketers, they came prepared with bagloads of business cards and advertising for all kinds of courses and monasteries. They had small gifts, like lapel pins, and they went running up and down, making sure no one was deprived of these presents. With the widest ear-to-ear smiles, they flaunted their social networking skills.

Now, it is very hard to criticize their behavior because one could claim they did all this self-promotion with the sincere motivation of saving the souls of all those poor dignitaries. Or one could claim that such noisy promotion was their skillful means to propagate the word of the Buddha. At the end of the day, only those lamas know where their motivation lies, how much of what they do is to promote their own agenda, their own home base, their own kingdom. Only they know how much their activities are tied up with the eight worldly dharmas,¹ such as planting seeds of praise and building a protective shell to escape criticism.

Often these noisy lamas are adept at connecting with people, and many times these people buy into this kind of creature. Yet there are other great beings whose only concern is the life of the Buddhadharma, who have no skills and are not built for this kind of socializing. Many times, these amazing teachers go unnoticed.

Buddhists don't go knocking on doors like evangelicals or Jehovah's Witnesses, trying to convert people. But many Tibetan lamas who advertise, especially those who are not that well informed, seem to think this is what people want. To a certain extent it's true: the show seems to make some people really happy. Personally, relentless and aggressive advertising makes me cringe.

No matter what the motivation, some of the Tibetan lamas' promotional outreach is totally out of sync with the culture they are trying to tap into. Some communication is fine, but they should really take into consideration who will be on the receiving end. Instead, they print pamphlets about how great they are, including long lists of the unpronounceable names of their past lives, which are meaningless to most Westerners. It would be interesting to see how a Tibetan would react if he were given a pamphlet celebrating someone because he is a reincarnation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

PULLING RANK

Your guru could very well appear somewhere and in a form you least expect. Having a title or not is irrelevant to the qualities of the guru. Your guru could be

a janitor or a banker or an academic—whoever inspires you, leads you, and gives you the confidence to practice the Dharma.

There are gurus who come from great institutions, like the Sakyapas, Karmapas, and Dalai Lamas, with long, renowned lineages. They are easy to identify, which makes your search much easier. Their schedules are published on websites, and they have centers on many continents. The force of conditioning to trust the institutional gurus is quite strong. It's a practical choice.

Then we have gurus in the tradition of Patrul Rinpoche and present-day Alak Zenkar Rinpoche, who never belonged to a legendary monastery and who have no entourage or patrons. The fact that this list is so short indicates that there are simply not that many gurus in this tradition, and even if there are, their greatest quality is reluctance to be renowned or popular. They are inconspicuous by nature.

So the searcher must be alert. A random nun or yogi who looks like a beggar may hold the lineage better than the showy lama, because during their guru's lifetime they may have been the ones who managed to receive what we refer to in the tantra as the transference of the guru's mind.

Gaton Ngawang Lekpa of the Sakyapa was not an illustrious, high-ranking lama. In fact, he was so poor and rough-looking that people called him Gabenma, which means "the stray from Ga." Upon hearing the great master Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, he approached him and tried to receive the Sakyapa path and fruit teachings. He was handpicked from the crowd five times and kicked out. Eventually he was allowed to stay, and even though Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo had many illustrious disciples from all the different lineages, it was Gaton Ngawang Lekpa who gave the whole path and fruit teaching to Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's incarnation Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö.

It's telling that when Chögyam Trungpa came to America, the fact that he was from Surmang meant nothing to his American disciples. Likewise, the Karma Kamtsang lineage was not important. The Americans were simply moved by his innate qualities as a teacher—his brilliance, his compassion, and his skillful means—and this is one of the most healthy ways to start the guru-student relationship.

So before you pursue someone with certificates and rank, or get swept away by a lama who posts selfies with higher-ranking lamas, check your motivation. Maybe you are just looking for the gratification of having an unreachable guru. Perhaps your devotion and understanding of Dharma really is so great that you need to see your guru only once in a blue moon and from a great distance to get everything you need. Or perhaps you are too cowardly to be too close to a guru, so you choose someone with more students than he can handle. That's not to say

that a guru should always be physically by your side. Your guru is not like a mobile phone, always at hand when you need it. But as with your physician, communication has to be there.

Though essentially unnecessary, the rank of a lama does serve a purpose. Institutions and titles can provide a measure of safety. Just like it might be safer to go to a popular restaurant because it has been written up in guidebooks, popular lamas come with many personal endorsements. Then again, the system is not foolproof; reputations can be bought. You can always go to a restaurant and check for yourself, but in the spiritual world, it's much more difficult to come to a conclusion.

This is all just to say that those who are seeking a guru should not look in only one direction; they should look beyond titles and hats. They should also look beyond their romantic ideal of a guru, whether it be an ascetic or a crazy wise man.

WHEN TIBETANS TEACH NON-TIBETANS

Tibetans have been teaching non-Tibetans all over the world, but there are very few teachers who can actually teach the Dharma to Westerners. With all due respect, even the most preeminent teachers of my time, though they have been marinating in Western culture, keep teaching as if they are still in Tibet. In fact, many of them have become even more Tibetan than before. Perhaps because they are far away from home, they develop a more vigorous sense of duty and loyalty to their country, and their Tibetan-ness becomes even more inflated.

Tibetan lamas are building communities all over the Americas, Australia, and Europe. Westerners, not knowing what real Dharma is, completely fall for the Tibetan culture they discover there. Culture is tangible, experiential, and for some people it can be refreshing to assimilate. They find it exciting to wear some sort of uniform, and it can be uplifting to congregate and sing songs in unison. There's a "get together" feeling that makes people feel secure. And what makes it seem all the more special is that these cultural trappings can be correlated to Dharma, like "red means compassion," "blue means emptiness," and so on. So the chances of miscommunication when Tibetans come with their paraphernalia are great; it becomes difficult to differentiate between the fundamental Dharma and the symbolic Dharma.

But one cannot say that paraphernalia doesn't work at all. In fact, as much as there is a risk, sometimes this exotic aspect can be very attractive and inspiring to people.

GURU POLITICIANS: LIKE DRIVING A FERRARI IN KATHMANDU

When a Tibetan lama teaches a nomad, the nomad is most likely only after some kind of blessing for health, wealth, and prosperity, not enlightenment. This kind of blessing has a function in Tibet, just as shamanism and fortune-telling do elsewhere in the world. Lamas are sought out for guidance on mundane issues regarding family and community, and in some instances they have become social leaders, even rulers.

It's not so surprising that someone who is venerated as a spiritual master might rise up to be a king. As much as modern society idealizes independence and freedom, part of us longs for direction and guidance, even dictatorship. We want someone to tell us what to do. This longing for direction could subconsciously play a role in our motivation for seeking a guru. We are looking for a dominatrix, not a guru.

Idolizing and supplicating the outer guru should not be done at the expense of losing touch with the inner guru. We are not supplicating an almighty, independent creator. The whole purpose of the outer guru is to fish out the inner guru, to teach us how to tap into the space between past thoughts and future thoughts and, if possible, remain there. That moment *is* the inner and secret gurus. Even if we manage once in a blue moon to encounter this state, managing to remain there for more than a moment is rare. We don't even have the habit of wanting to do that.

Devotion to the guru helps us develop the habit of wanting. But we cannot expect the guru to do the job for us. We may be awestruck by the charisma, the power, the hats, the height of throne, the titles, and all the props. We are comforted by the idea that he will lead us and take care of us. But if we don't use the outer guru to develop our inner and secret gurus, we will always remain at square one. We will be bombarded by emotion whether we win the lottery or hear that our boyfriend is flirting with another man.

All along the inner and secret gurus are there—so close yet so far. But to go straight to the inner guru is impossible. Even if we do our practices, it takes effort and mindfulness to turn them into antidotes to our habitual patterns. This is what we need the guru for, but we forget because the guru has so much influence and charisma and spirituality and skillful means. We end up asking for all kinds of other mundane advice not related to enlightenment. Of course, the spiritual and mundane are difficult to separate. In fact, turning mundane life into the spiritual is the aim. But along the way we forget to use the outer guru for his or her main purpose. It is such a waste, like driving a Ferrari in Kathmandu.

This human habit of worshipping and kowtowing has stained the guru-disciple principle, and as a result, the Vajrayana in Tibet became very muddy and confusing, whereas in India, masters like Haribhadra functioned solely as tantric teachers. You don't hear about great masters like Saraha becoming a leader of a big monastery or campaigning for world peace, human rights, and zero waste with goody-goody bumper stickers.

It's not as though Vajrayana masters are not allowed to become kings or queens. They are allowed to do whatever they like. In fact, in India there were many great tantric practitioners who were public figures, even royals. For example, King Indrabhuti was a tantric practitioner, but he did not make a display of it. He might have had tantric students visit him in the dark of night, during his free time. His spiritual life had nothing to do with the court, nothing to do with the nation.

Historically, the number of tantric practitioners in India was limited to a very dedicated and secretive lot who did not display their veneration. There are no classic stories of great Indian tantric masters giving abishekas to hundreds of thousands of people and displaying tantric rituals and mandalas. Today, it would be like you individually choosing Douglas as your king with no one else knowing and you both making sure no one is looking. This clandestine aspect kept the tantra pure, unstained, whereas massive initiations are almost second nature for Tibetans, a habit that is now being inherited by modern tantric students.

The downfall comes when the spiritual path and worldly matters are entwined and the guru becomes an institution. Things become organized and conventional. There's no way out of this growing problem; we just have to realize that that's what's happening. It's not as if all those institutionalized gurus are bad; many of them are really extraordinary. The spiritual contribution to the Dharma by the Fifth Dalai Lama is mind-boggling because he was also the one who united Tibet. He was politically astute and powerful, and he was a practitioner.

Patrul Rinpoche said that even though it's possible to ride the two horses of secular and spiritual, the balance is almost always in favor of worldly matters. The spiritual aspect ends up being very flimsy, and the worldly aspect takes over. Therefore, many Tibetans have ended up being busier leading monasteries or nations than leading their vajra disciples.

THE MORE DEGENERATE THE TIME, THE MORE EFFECTIVE THE TEACHINGS

All this may sound discouraging, as though in this age of materialism,

information overload, and skepticism, the guru-student path is impossible. But it's said that the teachings of the Buddha, and especially of the Vajrayana, are more effective and work more quickly in degenerate times than at any other time. Our negative emotions may have reached their highest possible pitch, and we may engage in more negative activities than ever before—but that is exactly why the teachings of the Buddha, and especially those of the great tantric tradition, resonate with such force.

As it says in the Chetsün Nyíngtik teachings, “During the degenerate times, sentient beings are tormented by powerful emotions like a blazing fire. If wood is added to the fire, it will only create more fire. Likewise, all kinds of virtuous actions, particularly the tantric teachings and especially the Mahasandhi teachings, may become more profound and powerful.”

TIBETANS AND ANALYSIS

Analysis of the guru was once strongly encouraged in Tibet. There are many historical accounts of practitioners testing the lamas. Somewhere along the way, however, this culture of analysis was forgotten, giving way to the habit of kowtowing. Spirituality was upstaged by leadership.



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“As times degenerate, the teachings—especially the higher teachings—will have an even greater effect.”—The Buddha

Imagine if there were a Kim Jong-il type of leader in a Himalayan kingdom, and he was also a tantric master. Citizens of that Himalayan country would be discouraged to question their dear leader. But if this same Kim Jong-il were visited by an American whose only interest was to meet a tantric Buddhist master—not to migrate there and become Himalayan—the American would not feel compelled or obliged to obey the law of the land. It would be a difficult situation for both parties. Kim Jong-il would have to know how to separate his political power from his spiritual teaching.

Tibetans often criticize Western students. They think, “Oh, Westerners don’t know how to sit. Westerners stretch their legs,” and so on. But the worst is when they are critical of Westerners for analyzing the guru, which is what every

disciple is supposed to do. But when an Englishman walks into a Tibetan center to meet a vajrayana master, there is no sign on the wall encouraging him to be critical, no pamphlets about analyzing the guru. Maybe there should be. If it doesn't help, at least it will arouse necessary skepticism.

Of course, there are limits to analysis. There is a folktale of a Chinese emperor who never managed to receive proper teachings from Sakya Pandita because he was testing Sakya Pandita again and again. Even though Sakya Pandita proved to be a great master, the emperor's skeptical habit was ceaseless. Eventually the intended guru, Sakya Pandita, died, and they say that because of this, the people of the Yuan dynasty had to receive the teachings from Sakya Pandita's nephew, Drogon Chogyal Phakpa.

If you are genuinely seeking the truth, you have to come to a conclusion at some point. Otherwise, like the Chinese emperor, you'll end up wasting your time. If you keep on analyzing somebody, you will always find faults.

The fault doesn't necessarily always exist externally. If the analyzer is bound by hope and fear, more likely he or she will find endless faults. No one, not even the Buddha himself, can please everyone. His own cousin Devadata was disgusted by the Buddha. He spent all his life basically criticizing the Buddha's deeds. Even though everyone saw the Buddha as a perfect being, Devadata did not.

DISPLAYS OF DEVOTION

Once I went to Texas to visit my old friend Jim. I came unannounced, and he told me he had a few appointments that couldn't be canceled. But because I was staying at his house he arranged for me to join him for a lunch with his friends from the National Rifle Association, all of whom were staunch Republicans. I think some of their relatives were members of the Ku Klux Klan. He introduced me to them as his "friend" rather than his guru.

Of course, Jim didn't want his friends to think he's somehow enslaved or that he was being taken for a ride by some opportunistic Himalayan guru. We like the idea of freedom, independence, self-reliance. The term "guru" has a connotation of submissiveness, so it was understandable that he didn't want to be teased for being caught up with some charlatan.

But when his friends had all gone home, Jim was willing to do anything I told him to do, almost going overboard. I suspect that even after all these years he might still have a limited understanding of the tantric practice of guru devotion. He seems hesitant to question me, as if the tantric system doesn't allow for

critical thinking, doubt, or analysis. It's unfortunate because the tantra puts so much value on critical thinking, especially in the beginning. It's not a path of tyranny. Does he see the guru as simply a dominant master? Does he feel like he is participating in some kind of exotic cultural ritual by obeying? Or does he actually see the guru as the path?

In contrast, there is Susanna Blue, who has, right in front of my eyes, warded off potential Dharma students by overdoing her public displays of devotion. She is anxious to perform prostrations whenever she sees a lama, no matter what the situation may be. She doesn't want to seem to be lacking in devotion. It's very shortsighted and irresponsible of her to be so indiscreet. In the process of expressing their love and devotion for their guru, some students make the mistake of ruining the guru's image. Their guru might be in retreat in a hidden place, and the students make use of that to promote the guru.

Jim is welcome to hide his devotion to a Himalayan guru from his Tea Party friends, but I hope his discretion is a matter of skillful means motivated by a wish that others don't get the wrong idea about the Vajrayana, not because he's ashamed. Until he has chosen not to have any choice, it's perfectly fine if he introduces me as the janitor of the house.

So you have the freedom to analyze, and you are encouraged to do so, but at some point you have to enter into this world of decidedness. This takes bravery. It's very scary, because analyzing is like a handrail: it's a support; it creates security. The rational mind justifies things, and it makes you feel comfortable. Everything is checked. But from there, you have to take this leap.

When you finally decide, "OK, this person is going to be my guru," it will not delete all your doubt overnight. You have made this decision after a lot of analysis; that doesn't mean you are without doubt. But your decision is now taking the lead. It may even be good to tell your prospective guru, "Look, I've decided I want to be your student, but at times I will doubt you." The guru has to understand. If there is a guru who expects you to have no doubt from the time you step through the door, this guru is an idiot. Actually, this guru doesn't have the ingredients to be a guru.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES

As we evolve, culture evolves. And as much as culture serves as a vessel or a medium to interpret the Dharma, culture is also a big culprit. For instance, Confucian culture is so strong in China—there is great reverence for the master, the leader, the father—and this gets mingled with the tantric concept of guru. It's

easy to differentiate between shit and gold but much more difficult to differentiate between highly polished brass and gold. Similarly, so many Confucian values, like reverence for the master, resemble the Vajrayana principle of guru devotion, but they are absolutely different.

A Vajrayana master will impose Tibetan culture on an Israeli student, even though that culture means nothing to the Israeli. Of course, if an enlightened master enforces Tibetan dress, Tibetan food, and Tibetan ways of thinking, and this really crushes the Israeli ego and habits, it can be taken as an enlightened method. But ultimately, if the Dharma is to be established outside Tibet, culture and habits must communicate. Culture is not what is being transferred; it's not the point. If you are Israeli, no matter how fully devoted to your Tibetan master you are, the chance of you becoming a Tibetan in this life is zero, whereas tapping into your buddha nature and applying appropriate methods for waking yourself up from delusion and reaching enlightenment are very possible.

There is no right and wrong here. You cannot say outright that cultural trappings don't work at all. For centuries, the Tibetans had never seen a lotus flower. There are no lotuses in Tibet; the idea was imported from Indian culture. The only thing they knew was that the lotus grows in mud, yet they painted lotuses and visualized lotuses. They were and are such a big symbol. The same is true of the wish-fulfilling cow. There were no cows in Tibet in those days. Cultural images and icons have their purpose. They are definitely not the Dharma, but they can serve to communicate it.

GOOD GURU CHECKLIST

How do we recognize an authentic guru? It isn't easy. The list of necessary qualities is subjective, which means that ticking boxes on a checklist will help only to a point. The followers of Jim Jones, Rajneesh, Surya Das, Sogyal Rinpoche, and the Dalai Lama must have all analyzed their chosen leader to some degree before offering up their one-pointed devotion.

The modern world is so materialistic, yet there is still a very strong habit of moralistic judgment. When King Trisong Deutsen offered his wife, Yeshe Tsogyal, to his guru, Guru Rinpoche, and then after some time Guru Rinpoche asked Yeshe Tsogyal to be with Acharya Saley, would this be morally acceptable in today's modern world? Can we accept this arrangement without flinching for a moment? The three-way relationship would be unthinkable today, maybe even criminal.

There's no definitive checklist, but there are a few criteria that, even with our

limited human capacity, we can generally apply. It's impossible to know if a spiritual guide has all these qualities because it takes someone enlightened to recognize an enlightened person. These general criteria have been tested for centuries, and at the very least we can assume they will not do much harm.

It's almost impossible to find a guru in this world at this time who has all the noble qualities of a Vajrayana master described in the ancient tantric texts. But in the Mahayana sutras the Buddha offered advice about what to do if we can't find an authentic master. He said if you encounter a person who talks about buddha nature, such a person should be venerated as the Buddha himself. If you think about how many millions of people there are who talk only about food and clothes and bank balances and never about buddha nature, you see why the Buddha would say such a thing.

In this degenerate time, if you can find a guru with even a few of these qualities, then you should consider accepting him or her as your teacher because such a person is so rare, on the verge of extinction.

The good guru

- ☐ has realized the ultimate view
- ☐ is open-minded
- ☐ is reluctant to teach
- ☐ is tolerant
- ☐ is learned
- ☐ is disciplined
- ☐ is kind and never denigrates others
- ☐ has a lineage
- ☐ is progressive
- ☐ is humble
- ☐ is not interested in your wallet, thighs, or toes
- ☐ has a living guru and a living tradition
- ☐ is devoted to the three jewels
- ☐ trusts in the laws of karma
- ☐ is generous
- ☐ brings you to virtuous surroundings
- ☐ has tamed the body, speech, and mind
- ☐ is gentle and soothing
- ☐ has pure perception
- ☐ is nonjudgmental
- ☐ abides by the Buddha's rules of Vinaya, Bodhisattvayana, and, of course, Vajrayana
- ☐ fears wrongdoing

- ☐ is forgiving
- ☐ is skillful

Has Realized the Ultimate View

As Guru Padmasambhava said, our view should be as vast as the sky and our actions as fine as flour. And so it is for the guru. One can often guess whether or not a guru holds the view by the fussiness of his actions. And the extent to which his actions complement the view may indicate how vast his mind is.

But one good indication that someone has the ultimate view is if he or she is especially fussy about anything to do with karma—for example, not stepping on insects. The opposite would be someone who says, “Everything is emptiness,” and then squishes a mosquito. Some people think that realized beings are free to do whatever they want. Actually, a fully realized being does not fall into any extremes. There are two stories that illustrate this.

In one story, two monks are conducting a puja with many tantric ritual substances. One monk is very devoted and a good practitioner but not very learned, whereas the other is not a great practitioner, but he has read and memorized every text. During a break, the literate monk places his vajra, a ritual substance, on the floor. The practitioner monk is alarmed and asks accusingly, “Why do you place such a precious item on the ground?” The learned monk smirks and says, “You have no understanding of the Vajrayana. In the Vajrayana the vajra is Akshobya and the earth is Buddhalochana Dakini: they are the father and mother consort, so the floor is the rightful place to put my vajra.” This monk has the right information—what he says is true—but I grew up hearing this story as a scolding from my teacher. He warned me never to act like that intellectual monk because the vajra is a ritual substance and must be treated with respect, regardless.

In contrast, there is the famous story of two monks crossing a roaring river. Just as they are about to cross, a woman approaches them in distress, asking for help. The old monk offers to carry her across and hoists her on his shoulder. He places her on the other shore, and they part ways. An hour later the young monk, who has been quietly seething, bursts out, “How could you, a monk, carry a woman?” The older monk replies, “Why are you still carrying her?”

Someone who has a vast view will fear karma. Karma-fearing people will stay away from the kind of person who kills and rationalizes that everything is emptiness, that ultimately there is no being to be killed and therefore no act of killing. Karma-fearing people are better off getting cozy with someone like Ben from Kongpo, the village of my family.

Kongpo Ben went to Lhasa on pilgrimage and was overcome with devotion when he saw the Jowo Buddha statue. But he was worried someone might steal his shoes when he circumambulated, so he asked the statue if he minded holding his shoes. After he was done with his kora, he fetched his shoes from the statue's lap and praised him for being so kind. "Please come to my house for some fermented wine one day," he said. And the statue replied that he would come. They even set a date in the spring. This is one of the few times the Jowo statue is known to have spoken. One day that spring, Kongpo Ben's wife came back from fetching water from the river and said she had seen someone from Lhasa who had come to visit him, standing in the middle of the river. Ben ran to the river and jumped in, thinking the Jowo might be drowning. He caught hold of him and brought him to his house. Now they have built a second Jowo temple in Kongpo in remembrance of Ben and his guest.

If your guru has the view of emptiness, he will be karma-fearing. He will be more impressed by Kongpo Ben's shoes than by someone's attempts to piously justify killing a mosquito.

Open-Minded

A guru should be open to accepting cultural and habitual differences. For example, if the guru is Tibetan, he or she should be able to value a sincere hippie Australian student's offering of a treasured seashell as wholeheartedly as a Chinese student's offering of a kilo of pure gold. An open-minded guru should be able to work with an American whose strong habit is to believe in a soul and who might be confusing that soul with buddha nature. An open-minded guru should be able to recognize that the habit of Dharma bums with their antiestablishment barter society is not necessarily practicing renunciation. An open-minded guru should understand why his lesbian students are having a hard time visualizing a male consort. An open-minded guru should be able to understand why Jewish people might have trouble accepting the concept that everything is a product of past causes and conditions and therefore there is no such thing as good and evil. An open-minded guru should know that his Chinese students' habit of saving face is not necessarily a fear of wrongdoing. An open-minded guru should understand why a Swiss student may not appreciate a wish-fulfilling cow.

Reluctant to Teach

Keep an eye out for someone who is not eager to be your root guru. That person may have many more root guru qualities than the more ambitious ones. Often the

one who is reluctant to teach makes the best teacher.

Tolerant

Many gurus claim they are straight shooters: they say what they think without inhibition or filters. But if they dish it out, they should be able to take it. They should embody tolerance. But most of the time, critical gurus don't tolerate criticism very well. One way to check is to watch how the guru handles bad publicity. Check the Internet to see whether he or she has ever been met with scandal, and if so, how did he or she react? How a person handles praise and criticism, gain and loss, fame and insignificance, happiness and suffering is all very telling.

Learned

Given that we are in the second decade of the twenty-first century and our merit is as it is, and the power of our endurance and spiritual seeking is not so great, we must rely on some outer signs and indications, such as scholarly accomplishment. Gurus who have knowledge of and respect for all the different lineages and schools of Buddhism can be especially effective. Even if they don't have time to develop complete and thorough understanding of each school and lineage, if the guru is genuinely respectful, not just diplomatic, he is a much greater resource for the student. When such a guru evaluates a student and realizes this person needs something he cannot offer, he can at least point the student in the right direction, like a foot doctor sending a patient who has a headache to a neurologist. But many clannish gurus will actually insist on giving the student foot medicine instead of headache medicine because that's all they have, and this can have very unfortunate outcomes.

Scholastic training is an important quality for a guru and one of the easiest to verify. It's much more difficult to determine what kind of accomplishment the guru has achieved through intuition, contemplation, or practice. For one thing, scholarly gurus will willingly engage in discourse about view, meditation, and action with students. If a guru can talk, at least the students can analyze him much faster than they could someone who doesn't speak at all. If the guru has not studied, he might avoid questions and sidestep conversation about texts. So newcomers are encouraged to ask about the sutras and shastras. The bold ones can even ask exactly which books the guru has studied. In particular, the hearing, contemplation, and study of Madhyamaka and Prajnaparamita are essential.

Gurus who lack understanding of the Dharma usually end up putting all their emphasis on rituals of every variety—making offerings of smoke, water, and

fire, conducting elaborate Mahakala pujas, and so on. They cannot teach view, meditation, and action, so they teach only action. Meanwhile, the precious life of the students ebbs away.

On the other hand, if a guru overly emphasizes the view of emptiness, it can distract the student from the importance of meditation and action. Without an appreciation of cause, condition, and effect, the student may end up thinking, “Well, everything is emptiness, so I can do whatever I like. I don’t have to light lamps. I don’t have to do prostrations. I don’t have to do pujas. I don’t have to become vegetarian.”

And if a guru doesn’t emphasize bodhichitta, it can deprive the student of the merit of benefiting others. Likewise, a guru who encourages a practice that requires grasping and fixation, such as shamatha, but who doesn’t introduce a practice of no-fixation, like vipassana, is depriving the student of the open, vast, free, spontaneous, uncontrived practice of the view. And a guru who introduces no-fixation right at the beginning without a foundation practice that makes the mind malleable, such as shamatha, will spoil the freshness of the student.

At all times, the guru must be skilled in balancing wisdom and method; otherwise, the guru will not benefit the students. Such skills will more likely be evident in a guru who is learned.

Disciplined

It is nearly impossible to judge the level of discipline a guru has. We can ask, “How much do they practice what is preached? Are they living up to what they say?” But this is a very subtle thing to ascertain. We never know how accomplished a person is.



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JIGME LINGPA'S DEFINITION OF A SUBLIME BEING

You may come across someone who isn't ruffled by the eight worldly dharmas. Such a person is definitely on the way to becoming a sublime being. You may meet someone who has absolute engagement with the eight worldly dharmas. Such a person is definitely a sublime being.

For now, you can try to observe how much he or she cares for sentient beings—how much time is spent benefiting others and worrying about them. How kind are they? That is the most important quality but is also, ultimately, something very difficult to judge.

We also want to learn from someone who at least appears to be meditating. When a teacher seems to practice, it's encouraging; when a teacher is disciplined in his conduct, it inspires awe. However, some may ask, if you consider your teacher as the fully awakened Buddha, why does he need to practice if he is already enlightened? We can interpret this as the guru showing us the way, like a master chef demonstrating techniques for his disciples. The master chef can teach by expertly preparing delicious food while the chefs-in-training watch. Later the students can practice and learn on their own by following the chef's example.

Kind

There is no one in the entire realm of sentient beings who cannot appreciate genuine kindness. We can benefit most from someone who speaks soothing and encouraging words but who is not afraid to be firm.

But even kindness can be an act, a show; it's difficult to know whether it's genuine. To find out, you can watch the guru and observe if his gentle kindness persists even when things are really going upside down. If the guru appears to be kind and generous in the midst of conflict, in this degenerate time, you cannot ask for more.

Even though kindness is an important quality of the guru, bear in mind that our emotions can cloud our interpretation of the guru's actions. Often we call someone kind, but the person is just massaging our egos by granting our wishes and satisfying our wants. It's not easy for us to see that the guru is kind continuously, in all situations. Kindness is not always imposing what *you* think is good. In the Buddhadharma, kindness is an action applied by the guru to bring you closer to understanding the truth. Thus, Marpa's harsh treatment of Milarepa was an absolute kindness.

A guru must be like a mother whose only child is crazy. The mother will have to devote extra love and compassion to this troubled child. The guru must know how to cultivate a culture of kindness. If the guru is kind to others, it's a good sign you might get the same treatment.

Kindness is the foundation of bodhichitta. Where there is kindness, bodhichitta is very likely. When you see smoke, you see the fire. If the guru has genuine bodhichitta, which embraces all sentient beings, then this person is qualified to be accepted as the guru.

Has a Lineage

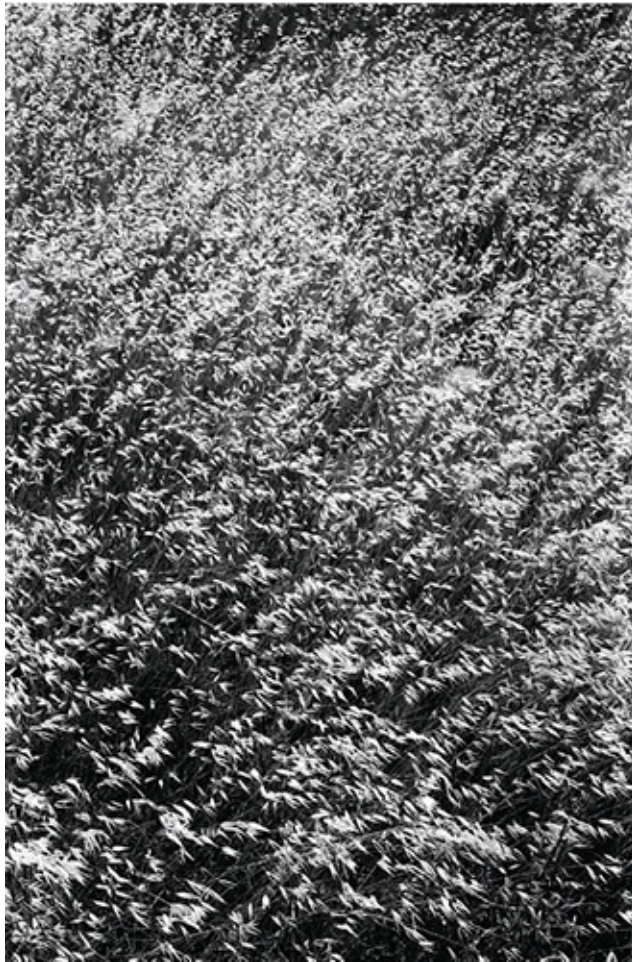
As I have said, in this degenerate time, it is almost impossible to find a guru with every single one of the necessary qualities, so if you manage to find a teacher with even a few good qualities, you should consider taking him or her as your guru. But one quality that is indispensable is the authentic guru lineage. As the great Sakyapa master Drakpa Gyaltsen said, a guru without lineage has no blessing. Lineage establishes a pedigree of sorts and is an absolutely necessary component of the path. Lineage is a history; it provides authentication. Where there is a lineage, there is a path, and the path has been tested.

Any path leading from one place to another is a product of causes and conditions, and the Buddhist path is no exception. Working with causes and conditions is the essence of the Buddhist path. In the beginning—*especially* in the beginning—we strive to no longer gather negative causes and conditions, and

we learn how to apply positive causes and conditions. Eventually we gather the specific causes and conditions needed to disentangle ourselves from causes and conditions altogether.

For the Vajryana practitioner, the right causes and condition are of utmost importance. Of all the many causes and conditions, lineage happens to be an extremely decisive factor. On a fundamental level, lineage is a condition that, in our human mind, authenticates the teaching and the teacher. A lineage can be a reference point: you can refer to what has been done by all the lineage gurus prior to your own guru, and this will oftentimes help build confidence in the teacher and the teachings.

A lineage of teachers is like a flight of stairs. In the Vajrayana, at the very top of the stairs sits a blue buddha, who is generally known as the primordial Buddha and sometimes, under certain conditions, by the names Samantabhadra or Vajradhara. This primordial Buddha is beyond history. “He” is beyond human distinctions. “He” symbolizes the nature of your mind. The guru lineage is the staircase that leads you to this primordial Buddha. The whole apparatus of steps is an illusion, but it is a necessary illusion. The very first step of your ascent on this staircase is the most important, and on this step is your present guru.



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The barley seed you have in your hand came from billions of barley seeds before.



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LINEAGE IS NOT A BATON

Lineage is not like a baton that one person passes to another person and then to another, leaving the ones behind empty-handed. It's like the flame of a lamp. If you light one lamp and then keep lighting more lamps, the first lamp still has the flame. There are no distinctions. There is a continuum.

As Buddhists, we can rejoice that we are followers of Prince Siddhartha, who came twenty-five hundred years ago. He went through so much hardship and did so many great things in his previous lives. Finally, he managed to defeat the maras and achieved enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. And now we are his followers. But the question arises: Who taught the Buddha?

A skeptic could say that twenty-five hundred years was so long ago, and that there was no technology to record the Buddha speaking; his disciples didn't even

write things down—they relied on oral transmission. If we claim we are following this person from the days of Plato and Aristotle, one may wonder how much of what we hold true is what Buddha actually taught? It could all be nothing but Chinese whispers.

We, as Buddhists, openly admit that there were a lot of commentators who intervened. In fact, we praise them. We boast about Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti. Gendun Choephel replied to the question “How do we know the Buddha is great?” by saying, “Because Nagarjuna said so.” And why do we buy into Nagarjuna? “Because Chandrakirti said so.” And how do we know Chandrakirti is right? “Because my teacher said so.” And how do you prove your teacher is right? This part is up to you: you must make up your own mind.

This dependence on your own mind is what makes the inner guru of the tantra so important. The tantra introduces an abundance of methods for discovering and maintaining the inner Buddha, which does not need to be searched for anywhere other than your mind. Having an unobstructed inner Buddha as the basis of the lineage is quite important. Therefore, to put one of the most profound concepts into the most mundane language, it was the inner Buddha that taught Buddha himself.

Someone trained to think in Vajrayana terms might say this talk of lineage is very dualistic—us and them—which is considered a negative. The most universal cause of suffering is dualistic mind. The supreme downfall is separating subject and object, separating relative truth and ultimate truth. The magic that frees you from this suffering arises from actualizing the union of the ultimate and the relative. Yes, the notion of lineage is very dualistic, but it is a dualistic method designed to bring you to the realization of nondualism, and therefore it is an indispensable method. Lineage is the most immediate way to bridge the relative and the ultimate, and for now we need these bridges. You will find nirvana only within samsara. You will find wisdom only within the emotions. You cannot find wisdom by getting rid of emotions. You will find the truth only within the untruth.

Nondualism does not mean that two things come together to make one. They have always been one; it is our dualistic mind that has separated them. This is the challenge of the path. Because we cannot see the union for the time being, we practitioners have to work with this apparent separation. We have to *sort of* accept this separation because if we were to fully understand the union, then we would be realized beings and there would be no need for the path. But as it is, we have to dwell in the realm of the dualistic mind and speak that dualistic language, and only from this standpoint can we try to comprehend concepts such as “one taste.” From time to time we even have to use the deceptive word

“union,” which implies two becoming one.

After years of testing Naropa through bringing all forms of hardships upon him, Tilopa finally decided to give Naropa the first initiation. He manifested the entire Chakrasamvara mandala and asked Naropa to whom he would prostrate: to Tilopa, or to Chakrasamvara, the deity? Naropa thought to himself that he could always see Tilopa, but this was a rare chance to see Chakrasamvara, so he prostrated to the deity. Tilopa chastised him for not knowing that the deity is none other than the guru.

Progressive

The Buddha advised that the practice of the Vinaya has to be progressive, adapting to time and place. Over time, the nature of emotions, hang-ups, reference points, and neuroses have adjusted because of changing culture; therefore, the solutions have to be progressive.

One can be progressive and still traditional. The guru should not insist that students visualize the offering goddesses in the cartoonish Tibetan thangka style; if a student wishes to visualize something more akin to Billie Holiday, that should be fine—it doesn’t alter the practice. Likewise, if the student wishes to add a few items to the mandala plate, like headphones and false eyelashes, the guru should rejoice.

Humble

People sometimes talk about a guru having “spiritual gifts” or “spiritual powers,” and it’s not clear what they really mean. Maybe they mean clairvoyance or some sort of a healing energy. In the tantra, if a lama has such talents and they can be used to benefit others, it can be good. But these attributes are not any more impressive than if the guru has good taste in ties. It might impress some people, but if the guru is inept at delivering enlightenment, he or she is completely useless.

Similarly, if a guru performs saintly acts, such as visiting sick children or serving the homeless, from the tantric point of view, this is no more impressive than lying on a bed of nails—that is, if your goal is enlightenment. Of course, a seemingly compassionate lama could inspire compassion and kindness by setting an example. But so could a magic trick, like bending a spoon. A magic trick could suddenly wake you up, reminding you that everything is your perception. And maybe that could lead you to realize the nature of your mind.

Some gurus claim to have been granted a special spiritual insight that has transformed their own lives. I have heard of self-arising seed syllables appearing

on the tongues of gurus in Tibet. While some may mock this guru and the genuine Dharma practitioners who follow him, people I know and trust swear they have seen the special signs, and these people are not on drugs or into aura healing; they are researchers, biologists, et cetera. The only special qualities my own gurus ever mentioned they attributed to *their* gurus. They never claimed to be on the same level. This humility has inspired so many students, and it has made me embarrassed of my temptation to boast about my own qualities and my itch to impress others.

This is not a hard-and-fast rule, but it's usually safer to go with a guru who is not interested in fame. There is a chance that some gurus might be madly designing and printing pamphlets and buttons for the sake of all sentient beings. Not all lamas who are zealously promoting themselves and sitting on the highest thrones have an ulterior motive; some might actually be humble. But the greatest teachers of recent times said repeatedly and with complete conviction that they were not enlightened. They claimed to be totally ordinary beings, and they exhibited their humble devotion to their own gurus and teachers again and again.

For example, when I asked Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche for his treasure teachings, his response was that there are so many great treasure teachings and that his were completely useless. He said I should not be wasting my time pursuing him. Instead, most of the time all he talked about was his devotion to his own teachers.

The present generation of Dharma students is a by-product of a culture that aggressively promotes self-esteem, and they are puzzled to hear that a lama like Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche expressed humility. It's as if they prefer to hear rinpoches boast that they are the greatest enlightened beings. People would sooner fall for a false claim.

Though we can't make a blanket rule, generally anyone who blatantly claims they are enlightened likely is not. And there is something even more sophisticated to watch for: while a guru may not flagrantly self-promote, he could be subtly encouraging an environment where rumors of his enlightenment are leaked to the public by his devoted students, who think they're doing a service to the guru and the Dharma.

Recently in Bodhgaya, I listened as a Chinese master addressed more than one hundred of his devotees under the Bodhi Tree. He gave a long sermon lasting almost four hours, in which he repeatedly said he was on the brink of becoming a buddha and therefore his disciples should be very fortunate that they were receiving teachings from him. He said even though he could become a buddha at anytime, for the sake of his disciples he decided to remain a bodhisattva for the time being, and therefore they should really appreciate him. He also said he is

the only authentic master in the world, and if any of his disciples had any other masters, they should renounce them and follow him and only him.

First, I was amused. Then I thought about the karmic debt these one-hundred-odd students must have with that master. Karmic debt is the accumulation of causes and conditions that have yet to be exhausted. In their previous lifetimes, these students must have made the Chinese guru listen to their own improbable stories and made him believe their tall tales, or maybe they feasted on his flesh and drank his blood and now it's payback time. Then I had another thought: This man has no inhibition, which is probably a good thing. It's much better than wagging the flag of fake humility. There is a good chance he really believes what he is saying.

I have a student from Beijing named Crazy Ball who recently became a Buddhist independently. When I told her how I have to practice, how I have to watch my mind so that it won't go astray, that my pride needs to be kept in check, that I need to be on guard from my hypocrisy, that I am depressed because I am still materialistic after all these years of practicing and following some of the greatest masters on earth, she got so worked up and angry. "If this is the case, then why am I coming to you?" she demanded. "Why are you even teaching?" The more I said, "You are right," the more emotional she became. She was left wondering where to go next.

Not that I have so much humility, but she could not understand the small amount of fake humility I tried to exercise. The culture of humility is so rare, and even if there is a bit on display, it's usually fake, so students like Crazy Ball can't even see the benefit of it.

Not Interested in Your Wallet, Thighs, or Toes

The guru and the student will inevitably have a very close relationship. A disciple is supposed to reveal everything openly to his or her guru, who has positioned himself to lead the disciple to enlightenment. In the midst of this disclosure, when the student is open and exposed to the guru, if the guru's interest is drawn immediately to the disciple's wallet, thighs, or toes, there could be grave consequences. The guru is supposedly the enemy of the emotions: his sole interest should be in unveiling ignorance. Not adding emotion, ignorance, and confusion.

Has a Living Guru and a Living Tradition

You can learn a lot by observing the devotion of teachers to their own gurus. Your guru should have his or her own guru, and furthermore, they should have

pleased this guru. If your teacher is in awe of his own (preferably living) teacher, the chances of him behaving carefully is much greater because a guru who is also a devoted disciple believes in consequences and is less likely to take you for a ride.

Many gurus nowadays don't even have gurus. Or if they do, they have spent only a very short time in their presence. In that short time they may have managed to gather letters of authorization, but have they gathered teachings? It's worthwhile trying to find out how much time this person actually spent under the guru's wing, and not only that, but also whether he or she practiced what the guru practiced and satisfied the guru's wishes, even if superficially.

Disciples who spend ample time with their gurus pick up seemingly mundane but telling habits, figures of speech, and gestures. Once when I was very young at a crowded puja, an old monk came and prostrated to me. My attendant, a disciple of my previous incarnation, said, "I think he is one of Chökyi Lodrö's disciples." He recognized the distinctive way the monk folded his palms together. This is something you will slowly learn to recognize.

Many spiritual seekers these days seem to have no problem following self-proclaimed gurus who boast about having no guru. These students are actually attracted to the suggestion of independence and self-revelation. It's completely mind-boggling. Any guru who claims to have received the teachings out of the blue is providing the perfect reason not to follow him or her. I would sooner follow someone who says, "I spent thirty years with my guru, but I have not learned anything; I was just hanging around, cleaning the toilet, washing dishes." Such a disciple will have something that can be extracted.

Longchenpa said that in the mundane, ordinary world we rely on the person who is experienced, the one who is learned and mature. We rely on a carpenter who not only knows the theory of carpentry but who has been an apprentice, who has been taught, and who has the direct experience of selecting the right wood and using a saw. So of course, if you are looking for something as important as enlightenment, you should rely on an experienced teacher.

Many tulkus, monks, and khenpos are sent by lineage holders to the West, and while some of them have been adequate, most of them haven't managed to inspire students. Just because someone is ordained as a monk or has a geshe or khenpo degree, even if the person is a tulku, it does not mean that person is qualified to be a tantric guru. These distinctions and ranks are not all meaningful. Likewise, a married yogi with dreadlocks, swathed in exotic yogi robes, who boasts of mastering esoteric tantric methods from rare lineages and insinuates that he can deliver multiple orgasms may not necessarily be the real thing.

That said, if a teacher appears in your neighborhood with a résumé that says he has gone through certain established monastic training, studied in a shedra, and meditated in a three-year retreat, you will have some foundation to trust. In this ever-rational and mundane world, the probability of easily finding a root guru among the scholars, rinpoches, tulkus, and three-year retreatants is at least greater than finding one at the grocery store.

Devoted to the Three Jewels

A guru who is devoted to the Buddha, Dharma, and sangha will always try to cultivate the atmosphere of the paramitas, the perfect attributes of a bodhisattva, and the chances of being led astray are slim. Such a guru is more likely to influence you to meditate and practice, to lead you onto the path of liberation and not sidetrack you by encouraging you to be a “good person” with vegetarianism, environmentalism, simple living, relaxation techniques, mindfulness, *ahimsa* (nonviolence), and so on. If the guru’s mind seems to be immersed in the Dharma, and if that makes your confidence in the Dharma grow, then that guru is functioning.

You might think it’s a given that all gurus have devotion: of course a guru should trust in the three jewels. But it can’t hurt to ask. Some teachers, especially modern teachers, fall into a gray area. If you are afraid to ask, you can just observe: How often do these gurus mention the life and teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha? And do they portray Buddha as a human being or a messiah figure?

Many Japanese masters have a penchant for linking Zen and Christianity, and from time to time I hear someone list Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad together as messengers of peace and love, all lumped into the category of “great saviors.” What choice is there but to agree? You could also lump Steven Spielberg and Yasujiro Ozu together as “great directors.” Spielberg is obviously successful, but if you lump him together with Ozu, you risk devaluing the unique influence of Ozu, trivializing his great vision and forgetting the challenges he had to overcome.

From a distance you can spot general common values, such as love and kindness, in any religion. But someone who is truly devoted to the Dharma knows you will not find the unique aspects of the Dharma—nonduality, the union of ultimate and relative truth—in Christianity. Nor will you find the qualities of the Buddha—such as the ten powers, the four fearlessnesses, the four miraculous powers, the eighty minor marks, and the thirty-two major marks—in Jesus.

Of course, as Buddhists, we are not lobbying for narrow-minded, fundamentalist, extremist Buddhist jihadi gurus, but we also don't want a wishy-washy blender-of-all-faiths who gaily waves the banner of "all religions have value." In that case, why bother calling ourselves Buddhists?

Trusts in the Laws of Karma

The chances of you meeting a Buddhist guru who says he or she doesn't believe in cause, condition, and effect are slim. But because karma is such a vast concept, there will be different levels of belief or understanding.

Encountering a guru who is well versed in emptiness and yet raises all forms of hell to save one insect crawling under the carpet is so inspiring. Similarly, a guru who deliberately stops a student from opening a free clinic serving the underprivileged in favor of doing aspiration prayers on a mountain indicates an amazing understanding of cause and effect. One has to be quite open-minded when evaluating another being's understanding of karma.

Once I was traveling with Pekar Rinpoche and a Tibetan gave us all socks as an offering. It so happened that the socks Pekar Rinpoche received were very small. The Tibetan had made a mistake and purchased baby socks. We were already overloaded with luggage, and many of the mindless, careless rinpoches of today, myself included, would have immediately tossed these baby socks into a trash bin, seeing as they couldn't be used. But Pekar Rinpoche insisted on bringing them along for the ride. When I commented about the fuss he was making, he just smiled. Later he tried to sell the socks, and I heard him speaking sharply to his attendant, a young Tibetan layman who must have made a puzzled remark about this transaction. Rinpoche scolded him, saying that these socks were offerings and therefore could not be wasted. If they could not be worn, at least they could be sold, and the money could be used to make incense offerings or light butter lamps, which would directly or indirectly create a karmic connection for the one who made the offering. Pekar Rinpoche's love and compassion, and his veneration of karma and its consequences, are exemplary.

Many younger lamas who did not grow up with financial hardship take offerings for granted. There is even a term in Tibetan, *kor*, for this ungrateful receiving of offerings. When a guru does not fully appreciate offerings, if he doesn't contemplate all the hardships that people went through to be able to give them, there is potential for *kor*, which is the most efficient way to stain a lama.

A guru who fussily switches off unnecessary lights to save electricity and recycles used envelopes as note paper but who without hesitation makes the most abundant offerings of food and flowers on feast days is a guru who trusts in

karma.

Generous

Generosity doesn't just mean freely giving money and material offerings. It's inspiring to be around someone who has the typical outer signs of generosity, but one can also offer things like information, time, apologies, acceptance of one's faults, or the freedom to study with other lamas. Outer offerings are good as well. At the end of the day it's easier to be with someone who doesn't take a long time to take out his or her wallet after lunch in a restaurant. Gurus who make generous offerings to other gurus and to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the sangha are inspiring, especially those whose offerings are made without a trace. Gilding the temple roof in gold is generous in a bright and vivid way, but a guru who lights hundreds of thousands of butter lamps in secret, with no announcement or advertisement, is the one who can inspire deluded beings like us even more.

A lama can test a student by telling the student to donate all his or her wealth. Likewise, an aspiring student can test the guru by not making offerings and watching for signs of disappointment.

Brings You to Virtuous Surroundings

A good guru is like a parent whose only interest is to instill in you the best habits possible. A guru who sways you to be generous, disciplined, patient, and diligent, who encourages you to be without distraction, and whose influence leads you to be famished for the truth, for shunyata, for boundlessness, is a guru you can trust. A guru who will bring you to virtuous surroundings, where you will not get so worked up and entangled in samsaric worldly values such as fame, gain, and attention, is a valuable guide.

Has Tamed the Body, Speech, and Mind

If the guru is wild in body, speech, and mind, how can he or she tame the minds of others? A guru who is short-tempered, sectarian, afflicted with many hang-ups and obsessions, envious, or competitive has a slim chance of effectively guiding disciples.

Gentle and Soothing

Longchenpa said that in degenerate times sentient beings have heightened emotions and are therefore fragile. The guru must exercise the utmost care and

love for students, and speak with gentle manners and soothing words. Endless criticisms and scoldings will tire students out and make them lose their confidence.

Has Pure Perception

The guru must have pure perception of his own guru and, if possible, of all phenomena. On a more individual level, the guru must have pure perception of his or her students. Pure perception is the foundation of the Varjayana. Even in the Mahayana, pure perception is the driving force behind working with a disciple. As Lord Maitreya said, a bodhisattva must know that other sentient beings have buddha nature and that they can be enlightened. So a guru must have confidence that the student's defilements, no matter how hideous, are temporary; they can be purified and removed. No matter how long it takes, no matter how tedious a job, a guru with a strong view of pure perception will not give up on the student.

Nonjudgmental

A guru should be able to see a student's potential and know that any negative quality the student exhibits can be transformed and that therefore that student is a worthy recipient of aspiration. There should be no competition, no preference for some students to get enlightened faster; it's not a race.

If the guru judges too much, valuable time will be wasted. Excessive judgment indicates a lack of understanding of the fundamental view of dependent arising and equanimity. A path designed by such a guru will have a panicky and finicky quality.

Abides by the Buddha's Rules

Your guru should believe in what he teaches. Teachings, essentially, are disciplines. If you are fortunate enough to have a guru who observes the discipline and codes of conduct prescribed in the Vinaya, the Bodhisattvayana, and the Tantrayana, you can rest assured that the guru will never abandon you. You can rest assured that the guru will always teach you because he is bound by the vow to teach, to liberate, and to save all sentient beings from delusion.

Fears Wrongdoing

Most religions stem from people wanting to do the right thing, often with a basis of shame, guilt, and fear of wrongdoing. Shame is the great-grandmother of

ethical and moral systems. Even though ultimately the tantra transcends all concepts, as long as it's practiced by human beings, it will be tied to some form of ethics and morality. Therefore, initially, even the Vajrayana path will be bound by infinite forms of ethics and values, shame, guilt, and fear of wrongdoing.

For beginners, fear of wrongdoing has value. Vajrayana practitioners cannot simply adopt the lifestyle of dogs, which have no qualms about having sex with their own parents or siblings. They can't be like cats either, snatching food from other animals without any concept of stealing. Until they are accomplished beings like the great Kukuraja, whose pet dog was his consort, both the guru and student must have some assumption of dos and don'ts.

Forgiving

Forgiveness is a key ingredient of compassion. Your guru must have the attribute of forgiveness to lead you. When a guru forgives your misdeeds, it's an indication that he has accepted you as his responsibility.

Skillful

Even though the journey is without a goal and the fruit is beyond aspiration, one needs to go beyond understanding these statements. For that, one needs a path and a guide. The guide must lead students to actualize this goal-less goal.

In most professions—construction, taxi driving, medicine—there is a job to be done. Being a Vajrayana master is no exception: the master's job is to enlighten the disciple. If that is too big a job, at the very least, the master must lead the disciple to a point where he or she can manage independently. How the master accomplishes this, the methods used, are not specified, but it must be done as quickly and painlessly as possible.

“Quickly” might involve taking a detour, because for some students, short is long. “Painlessly” might mean taking the scenic route, because shortcuts can be unpleasant, with no rest areas and no cushions, which might cause some disciples to become disheartened and leave the path entirely. And for some, the path of no path is the best path. Either way, you need someone with the skills to show you the way.

The master must have many methods to choose from. When a master chef takes on a protégé, he might do things like hide the recipes or deliberately remove a key ingredient. These skillful means teach students to think for themselves. A good guru can do that.

It's not always easy to know what skills a guru has. Some very academic gurus can tell you which page number you should read in which edition of a text,

and can remember exact dates. This is impressive if you are a university student, but if you're following a spiritual path, it may not be what you need. What you need is someone who can actually turn knowledge like that into something useful for your path, someone who can teach you how to learn.

A guru must also have the skill to work with your temporary defilements, because even though the defilements are temporary, they have existed since beginningless time, and they will not be easy to eliminate.

The Buddha was so skillful. There were times when he praised generosity as the most supreme attribute and taught the nonexistence of the Buddha and the illusory self of all beings. At other times he told stories that began, "When I was a monkey . . .," as if there were a self, as if there were a monkey, and as if there were a past, present, and future. He would declare, "Anyone who speaks the words 'buddha nature' should be venerated as a teacher." But then he would turn around and say, "All compounded things are impermanent is like saying the pile of garbage is jewels." When he was scrupulous he could be the most scrupulous. This style seeps into how Buddhists practice to this day.

On the day that King Ashoka offered a million gold coins to all the monks, the sweeper of the monastery gardens offered one single gooseberry to a monk who was thirsty. That night when the chief monk was reciting the names of donors during the evening prayers, he named her first, before Ashoka. We must think like this. One gooseberry offering is an abundant gift, but a pile of gold that would fill the earth isn't sufficient for one word of Dharma.

The guru should possess both flexibility and rigidity.

TWELVE-YEAR PLAN

Even if we had a comprehensive checklist and set of rules, which I am in no way aiming to provide, there is no simple way to judge a guru, because fundamentally the mind of the one who is making the judgment is already contaminated by preconceptions and hopes and fears.

The *Vajramalatantra Sutra* suggests that it takes twelve years for a student to analyze the guru, and vice versa. But who has that much patience? And after you spend twelve years with a guru, your judgments might naturally start arising, because you've already been wedded to him or her for so long.

Regardless, it's recommended that beginners do a thorough background check of the guru in question—listening to the stories that follow a particular guru around, reading books and other literature, evaluating his or her social media. Also, don't limit your search to just one guru; leave the mind open to other

options, apparent or unseen. Just because a guru is adored by hundreds of disciples does not prove his or her authenticity. As history has shown, hundreds, if not millions, of people are very capable of creating a phenomenon of group denial.

You could settle with the first person who sparks your interest, but it's wise to seek out different types of teachers from different age groups, with different styles, from different lineages, before making a commitment. They may open your mind. Perhaps you have a preconception that you don't like a certain type of guru, but you might be surprised to find that that is the very type that benefits you most.

Actively analyzing for at least a year will go a long way in helping you sort out your preconceptions. After a year of guru window shopping, you can narrow your search down to a handful. Then you can receive some general teachings from these few finalists to see if you understand their language, if you can grasp the essence when they speak. Just listen. Don't necessarily take him or her as a teacher or a master or a guide who will dictate your life. Throughout this period you have to question your ability to judge. This is not like assessing a teacher of science or math or geography, whose skill at teaching is easily assessed. You have to tread carefully and have a bigger vision because we are talking about enlightenment for all sentient beings.

Remember that throughout this search, because these would-be gurus are trying to give you spiritual guidance, even if you are not satisfied, a certain amount of respect has to be shown. That's not to say you can't consciously try to upset them from time to time by doing unexpected things. Testing their reactions is a method of analysis. You can do things like borrow money from the guru and pretend you forgot to pay him back, then see if and how he demands it. When any potentially upsetting situation naturally arises—when things don't work out how he wishes, or if someone disparages his lineage or the way he looks—this is a good time to observe how your candidate behaves. But try to do so with genuine respect for this person who is trying to teach the Dharma.

A long time ago, on my very first trip to Indonesia, one of my hosts took me on a journey from one city to another, arranging for me to travel on a local bus and then a third-class train. I was quite experienced with this kind of travel, having regularly taken trips to Bir in northern India on the local bus. In those days there were no luxury Volvo buses with plush seats and air conditioning; you had to ride with the chickens. So my Indonesian journey didn't faze me. Many years later, this man told me he had taken me on this rough journey to test me, to see if I was spoiled, which I thought was very good thinking on his part.

Because life is short, we don't have the luxury of analyzing the guru forever.

After a considerable amount of time attending public teachings or receiving personal instructions, hanging around the guru, and closely observing the manifestation of the guru in times of chaos, one must ultimately come to a conclusion. After some time, if one doesn't have a strong feeling for a particular guru, it can be taken as a sign of not having any connection. As feeble as they may be, our emotions trump rational logic. The feelings one has or doesn't have are a result of a karmic connection beyond this life.

Once you feel certain of your emotional and rational impression of a particular person and you think he or she might be your guru, you can test the relationship by requesting more complete teachings. Until this point you shouldn't have felt compelled to wash the guru's underwear, but now you can. And you can start making some nice, harmless offerings, like fruits, flowers, and incense—offerings that will not cause any post-generosity grief or regret. You might also want to test your own pride and ego by beginning to prostrate and show customary respect and veneration for this person. Now you begin receiving teachings not as a university student listening to a lecture but as a patient listening to a doctor's advice.

If your conviction has not swayed and is in fact becoming deeper, then with the understanding that to follow the Vajrayana path you must have a guru, you begin offering body, speech, and mind and making preparations to take initiation. But it bears repeating again and again that taking initiation is big business. There is nothing more grand or more dangerous than receiving a tantric initiation.

When I was giving a series of initiations in a Nyingmapa monastery in Spiti, high up in the Indian Himalayas, the local Gelugpa abbot would come to my room with all kinds of formalities, offering katas and paying his respects. It's customary for Tibetan lamas representing a monastery to receive visiting lamas like this. He would come regularly to the initiation hall just before I would give the empowerment and make a ceremonial mandala offering. But right after the mandala offering he would take leave. Only once he stayed for the Prajnaparamita transmission. But for the rest of the tantric initiations he would leave. Some of my students observed his refusal of the initiations and even criticized his behavior as being very sectarian. But I found his behavior admirable and elegant. He didn't know me, so why would he intentionally create an irreversible karmic link with me? We should all be so cautious. We should all be more loyal to the Dharma than to social expectations.

Many lamas and practitioners do avoid receiving teachings from certain high lamas, but they are not straightforward about it. Because of the pressure of political correctness, they bring all kinds of excuses or leave town when the lama

is coming.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE TAKING INITIATION

After spending a considerable amount of time with your prospective guru, the following is a list of questions you should ask yourself before you finally decide whether to take initiation:

- How much is this guru really generating bodhichitta within me?
- How much of this guru's influence and teaching is turning my non-virtuous thoughts and actions into virtuous thoughts and actions?
- How much of this guru's teaching and manifestation is managing to turn my virtuous action into the path of liberation?
- How much of this guru's manifestation is helping me realize the union of compassion and emptiness?
- How much is this guru's presence and influence making me less interested in worldly endeavors and glory?
- To what extent are this guru's teachings making me nonsectarian?
- How much is this guru's teaching generating in me devotion to the Buddha?
- How much is this guru's teaching making me fastidious when it comes to not harming other sentient beings?
- How much of this guru's teaching makes me value devotion to the guru, triple gems, and karma?
- How much does this guru's teaching make me appreciate other students who have other good teachers?

WARNING SIGNS

Here are a few things to watch out for:

- Gurus who shamelessly boast about their rank, their endorsements, and which high lamas have bowed to receive teachings from them. It has become so ridiculous.
- Gurus who flaunt their Mercedes Benzes, as if dacoits and gangsters don't have the same taste in cars. A Mercedes Benz doesn't make a guru one ounce better or one inch higher or one iota more qualified to teach.
- Opportunistic gurus who see a market for spiritual guides. They aspire to teach because as a guru, they can be influential, make a lot of money, have a

staff.

- Titillation over someone with a title connected to a long legacy. Just because someone is from a long and illustrious lineage does not necessarily mean he or she is a qualified master *for you*.
- Gurus who seem to be very entangled with their families. When their worldly family connections matter to them, they will have so much to take care of.

BAD GURUS

Indulgent

Many Tibetan lamas, especially those who lead a life of debauchery, would say that in the Vajrayana we do not have to abstain from worldly life and sensory pleasures as long as we're not attached to them. But how do we know if someone is not attached? Who can measure that? This is where active analysis can come into play. One method could be for students to consider stealing some item from among the lama's possessions, or pinching the bottom of the lama's girlfriend, and seeing where that leads. Only then will you know if the lama's nonattachment argument is just an excuse for indulgence or not.

The decadent lifestyle of certain lamas is actually causing a lot of problems. Forget the raised eyebrows of the rest of the world—even their immediate circle of ordinary monks is influenced. Many of these monks did not choose the monastic path on their own. They were put there by their parents, like Gyaltsen was, or they came as refugees. Some were sent out of a sort of clannish, tribal compulsion. A family might say, "We belong to this lineage, therefore my son belongs to this monastery." So the young boys' motivation for living at a monastery and shaving their heads is not necessarily wholehearted renunciation or a thirst for enlightenment.

A good teacher can teach, but a better teacher is someone who can inspire and lead by example. You can always argue that image is not important. Of course, not if you are genuinely seeking a path of enlightenment and you have pure vision. Then if you find somebody who owns forty-nine Rolls-Royces and who can lead you to enlightenment, by all means, offer another Rolls-Royce and receive the teaching.



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In the process of analyzing the guru, bear in mind that the guru might also be analyzing you.

As a practitioner on the Bodhisattvayana path, even if you can't inspire hundreds of people, you have a responsibility to never drive away a single person from the Dharma. The indulgence of these lamas is, if not driving away aspiring practitioners, definitely discouraging some. This is where karma works so incredibly. What else but a karmic connection could allow students to fall for flash and glitter?

Spoiled

The next generation of spiritual seekers will have a very interesting time, especially if they are going to rely on looking for a guru with Tibetan blood. Many of today's so-called tulkus were isolated and coddled as children and

remain that way until they are in their late thirties. These young teachers will use their predecessor's reputation and names as their calling cards. And those cards are going to run out fast. They don't have a lot of personal relationships, and therefore, they become narcissists. They are more interested in what goes on in their own minds than in the minds of others. They don't know how to share. Many of them have never experienced rejection. These are all warning signs.

The Tibetan tulku system has many flaws, especially its current output of tulkus, who are not trained in a manner that fits with the times. The system is not keeping up with the fast pace of change. Here is this kid who suffers what is called "a higher birth." He is identified as a reincarnate tulku at a very young age and is treated like a kind of prince from then on. He summons his playmates, and when they arrive he ignores them and plays with his expensive video games. He doesn't let his companions play; they are expected to just watch. The other kids wouldn't think to complain because they have been told that this child is special, this child is an important rinpoche. Now spoiled kids like this are growing up, and if you accept them as your teachers, it's going to be interesting. (More on the tulku system in the final chapter.)

Also, many of today's teachers have entered an elite class, and elites by nature are antidemocratic. Although some of them might be very good at giving lip service to the Dharma, elitism conflicts with the spirit of the guru. Not only is elitism antidemocratic, it's fundamentally the worst kind of dualism. Elitism and guru yoga completely contradict each other, because the whole point of guru yoga is to actualize the guru state, not just be a sycophant and follow your dear leader eternally. This kind of elitism might be more prominent in Confucius-influenced Chinese thinking, which leads people to confuse guru devotion with a hierarchical system in which one person is above another.

Four Kinds of Guru to Avoid

According to Jigme Lingpa, there are four different kinds of guru to be avoided. First, avoid a guru who is like a wooden millstone, constantly talking about his family, lineage, history, and monastery. A wooden millstone is very noisy but doesn't do the job.

Second, avoid a guru who acts like a frog in a well. These lamas, even though they have no enlightened qualities, must have had a shred of karma to be reborn as powerful, influential, good-looking people from good families. Now they think they are special. Of course, their disciples also are made to think that way, and therefore they also praise the lamas, making a complete circle of praise to reinforce something that is completely untrue. When these gurus see other

masters who have much better qualities, instead of recognizing their qualities, they stubbornly think, “I am better than he is.” They are like a proud frog that lives in a well, boasting about its abode to a frog that lives in a lake he cannot even fathom.

Third, avoid a mad guide. Some gurus have a sliver of knowledge of the Dharma and may have met good gurus. They may even have a bit of supernatural power. With these they make people believe they are much more capable than they are, which gives them power. With that power they do all kinds of crazy things. They display a kind of madman quality, flaunting that they transcended mundane worries and cares. They don’t care about benefiting sentient beings. They don’t care that their activities may end up harming or disillusioning someone. This is what happens when you have a mad guide leading you.

Fourth, avoid the blind captain who insists on guiding you. The guru is on the path to enlightenment, same as you, but he or she must have more realized qualities of knowledge and realization. If the student is on the path of accumulation, it makes sense if the guru is on the path of application—otherwise the guru will not know how to advance the student. One might think, “Aren’t we supposed to see the guru as the Buddha?” This is true. Once you have taken a person as your guru, there is no turning back. But before you take anyone as your spiritual master, it is imperative that you see whether any of these qualities are there. Otherwise you will both be rudderless.

Bad Guru Checklist

If a fresh banana leaf is wrapped around a piece of old fish, the leaf will acquire that fishy smell. Likewise, if you follow a nonvirtuous friend, you will acquire nonvirtuous tendencies. Negative habits are contagious. Here are some warning signs to watch out for: a guru who

- ☐ lacks knowledge
- ☐ has no devotion to the Dharma, his or her own guru, or the sangha
- ☐ doesn’t have a living tradition
- ☐ takes you away from virtuous surroundings
- ☐ has an untamed body, speech, and mind
- ☐ is proud and hypocritical
- ☐ is quite nasty and vicious to others
- ☐ has no pure perception
- ☐ is judgmental
- ☐ is fussy about food, drinks, possessions, and hotel rooms

- ☐ does not abide by the Buddha's rules of Vinaya, Bodhisattvayana, and, of course, the Vajrayana
- ☐ praises himself in all his speech even though he uses words of humility
- ☐ subtly denigrates others
- ☐ does not fear wrongdoing
- ☐ has no power of forgiveness
- ☐ has a very weak sense of shame
- ☐ gives teachings that provide no antidote
- ☐ has a self-cherishing agenda
- ☐ is annoyed by your disciplined Dharma practice

There are lamas nowadays who spend a big chunk of their time setting up their weekly, monthly, and annual teaching schedules, designing websites, printing pamphlets and posters, and making commemorative USB sticks and tote bags. And then at their teachings, half the time is spent name-dropping and boasting about how many people came to their previous teachings. Afterward they pose on the lawn for big group photos, up front and center. If Vajradhara had an ordinary human body with human emotions, this behavior would give him goose bumps of embarrassment, and he would hang his head in sadness.

Direct Correlations between Bad Gurus and Their Disciples

- If students hang around with gurus who don't have much knowledge, the students will also become dull and ignorant, even if they are not excessively involved with the guru's ignorant activities.
- If the guru has a short fuse, the students become agitated.
- If the guru is lusty, the students may drop their pants easily.
- If the guru is a pack rat, hoarding, and stingy, the students will have excess luggage.
- If the guru is distracted, the students will have no quality of alertness.
- If the guru is vain, the students will also become egocentric.
- If the guru is prideful, the students will have strong sectarian leanings.
- A jealous guru will produce students with competitive minds who should be avoided like a poisonous plant.
- A guru who has no renunciation mind produces students who cling to this life.
- A guru who gives the concept of the Buddha's view but doesn't create the conditions for disciples to practice is basically producing students akin to rich people who are so stingy they don't even spend their wealth on themselves.

- Gurus who have not studied but never simply admit, “I don’t know,” deprive students of the right information and of the quality of humility. Furthermore, they are fostering a world of insecurity.
- A guru who has no devotion toward his own guru or the Dharma will cause the blessings of the students to vanish like a mist.
- If a guru is overly relaxed, the students’ virtuous activities will slowly fade and nonvirtuous activities will have a chance to shine.
- If a guru is not fond of rituals, such as making offerings, then the students may lose the inclination to make offerings.
- If a guru only imposes a single method, such as meditation, the students will be deprived of a wealth of skillful means.
- If a guru does not respect the sangha, the students will unconsciously be influenced by a nonvirtuous community.
- If a guru does not value deity practice, the door of attainment of the students will be extremely narrow.

A FEW MORE CRITERIA

So, how do we determine the good gurus from the bad? A rule of thumb is that it’s better to avoid those lamas who are worldly, materialistic, and vain, who love to press business cards into the palms of everyone they meet but are too insecure to attend public ceremonies for fear of being seated lower than someone else. Avoid the kind of lama who displays letters from high lamas confirming how great he or she is, and who loves to have photos taken with those high lamas, as well as miscellaneous celebrities, to impress his or her students. You might also avoid lamas who use offerings to support their own large, extended family and who buy enormous homes, the newest and most desirable cars, and the most expensive watches yet rarely make offerings to the triple gems.

Readers may wonder if such gurus really exist. Unfortunately, they do—now more than ever. Many of them are from the younger generation. Many of them don’t even know how to hypocritically disguise these tendencies. They openly display their Rolex watches on Instagram and Facebook. They flaunt their cars, their Armani shirts, the piles of cash from their Mongolian sponsors.

There are gurus who are so fussy about the style in which the students venerate them and what kind of offerings the students make. And there are gurus who have tricky agendas, who are very sneaky and skilled about hiding their downfalls, even from themselves. There are gurus who seemingly hold grudges and who have pride or attachment to their belongings. There are gurus who don’t

have the compassion to liberate all sentient beings. There are gurus who have aggression and very short tempers, who are on edge and easily annoyed. It's advisable to avoid all these gurus, especially if you're a newcomer, because once you take the abisheka, there is no way out. He or she might be a qualified master, but there's a very good chance unfavorable things will happen if a guru behaves in these ways.



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DON'T LET THE SHADOW FALL

In the sutras it is said that a master, or a spiritual friend, with negative qualities is the biggest obstacle in your Dharma practice. You should not spend time with such people, nor talk to them. You should not even let their shadow fall over your limbs.

Once you take the initiation, once you take someone as your guru, then you

must think, “This is my projection.” Until you have the ability and understanding to realize this is your projection, your judgment will overrule and you won’t have pure, open vision. You can still listen, and you can still be there, but without accepting the guru as your projection, it’s not advisable to take tantric teachings.

All that said, activities that appear to be all the wrong reasons for following a guru could turn out to be the right ones for a disciple with superior faculties.

WHY CAN’T THEY BE PERFECT?

Why are our human gurus so apparently fallible? Why can’t they be perfect like the Buddha? A human guru will often exhibit some of the inherent flaws and imperfections that we also struggle with, but as a result he or she will be a far more effective teacher than a “perfect” guru. Ironically, it’s human fallibility itself that provides the guru with the most effective tools. If a guru manifested as a completely perfect being, you might not be able to communicate with him or her because you are not perfect.

Gurus who go strictly by the book, who present themselves as perfectly well-behaved manifestations, could quickly become predictable. Students will learn how to hide from them and will know exactly what to expect. There would be no surprises. The Vajrayana is the path of the rug being pulled out from under your feet, so you need someone who knows how to do that. There has to be interaction for rug pulling to take place, so the guru must reside on some human level, which naturally includes flaws.

The point of the Buddhadharma is to guide us down a path that results in our becoming buddhas. From the Vajrayana point of view, our aim should be to become the guru, not to ensure endless rebirths spent at the feet of a buddha. More precisely, our aim is to realize the state of the guru, to discover the innate guru, to be the master of everything—our ego, emotions, impure perceptions, and dualistic thoughts. To become inseparable from the guru would be extremely difficult if the guru were inherently pure and the student inherently impure.

ABUSE OF MONEY, POWER, AND FAME

When people talk about bad gurus, they often focus on moral and ethical failings involving sexual abuse and alcohol. Alcohol is harmful in many ways, especially

if the alcoholic is a guru. Not only does it harm the guru, but because this person is supposed to set an example and be a model for the community, drunken behavior might end up encouraging other alcoholics. And it goes without question that sexual abuse is destructive.

But sexual and substance abuse are usually easy to spot, whereas there are much more insidious and pervasive abuses taking place in the spiritual world. These abuses are more subtle and therefore more dangerous. Three intoxicating habits compete for the Worst Forms of Abuse Award: money, power, and fame.

When a guru is fooling around with girls, people are quick to throw accusations, whereas when money is concerned, it becomes more dodgy. There is always a seemingly good excuse—“oh, he’s wheeling and dealing to benefit the monastery,” for example. The money habit is so tricky because in this materialistic world we live in, we can’t avoid dealing with money. Every step we take costs something. Currency is how we communicate these days, and it can be useful. But maybe people should also pay close attention to the money bit because of money’s destructive potential. It’s like a disease that doesn’t look like a disease even though it’s rotting your insides. Money issues can and have corrupted the teachings. One really wonders why the lamas need to tool around in the best cars and live in the most luxurious homes, as if these accoutrements are absolutely necessary for the propagation of the Dharma and will benefit all sentient beings. It can’t be the case because there are also lamas who have absolutely no material wealth, yet they benefit beings and Dharma endlessly.

Then there is the addiction to power. Like any intoxication, power has its own inherent ignorance that causes suffering. It creates veils of deception. It’s not easy to keep up with the pressure, the stress, the expectations that people project on powerful people, gurus included.

Of course, our gurus must have certain powers. In the texts we are told that the three qualities of the teacher are omniscience, compassion, and power. But in this case we are not talking about worldly power. We are talking about the power to dismantle the net of defilements of the disciples and nothing more. Beyond that, any kind of worldly power is very dangerous unless the guru is a sublime being who knows how to use it for the benefit of the larger world and all sentient beings.

Much as we’d like to think, “Wouldn’t it be great if the prime minister were a tantric Buddhist?,” when a guru who is not highly realized becomes socially or politically powerful, it doesn’t bode well for society or government. Political power wielded by gurus as spiritual heads is obviously bad for political and social systems, but the saddest thing is that it dilutes, corrupts, degenerates the Dharma. For the seven hundred years that Tibet was ruled by lamas, there was

no investment in infrastructure, schools, defense systems, the economy. Why? Because the lamas had no idea about these things, and in their view, such worldly activities didn't need to be cultivated.

Fame is also addictive. It's intoxicating to be adored and treated like a celebrity. These days, Buddhist lamas and institutions are cultivating fame by blatantly branding themselves with logos and stickers and lapel pins. People have even hinted that in Kathmandu event coordinators hire people to wait in a crowd at the airport arrivals area to create a more impressive greeting when certain lamas are arriving. In Bhutan and Nepal there is a trend of erecting big gates or archways festooned with banners to welcome lamas. Loyal disciples fastidiously calculate which lama has more gates and who has the largest convoy. It's so pathetic because many of these displays are not even done elegantly.

From a spiritual point of view, it's odd to create a brand around a teacher. One justification is that publicity could be excused as a skillful means: making a louder noise provides more people with the opportunity to connect with and access the Dharma. But fame shouldn't have to be contrived. There are some teachers, like Milarepa, who became famous unintentionally because of who they were and how they taught. It's almost certain that Milarepa didn't invest time, energy, or resources in promoting himself.

Contrived fame, deliberately created fame, is a poisonous habit and, for those who have the potential to be teachers, one of the most difficult habits to let go of. The Kadampa masters said a Dharma practitioner should be ready to make three sacrifices: *to* (food), *go* (comfortable environment), and *tam* (fame). It's one thing for a teacher to miss a good lunch and forgo a warm jacket but much harder to let go of the fame aspect. Gurus often may have the ability to go without food and comforts, but they simply cannot resist pointing it out. Consciously or unconsciously, they may think, "What's the point of abstinence if you don't get the good reputation that goes with it?"

And for a lesser guru, more worrisome than no reputation is a bad reputation. It takes a great being to be daring enough to cultivate a bad reputation.

VOWS OF CELIBACY

If your tantric teacher is a monk who has taken the vinaya vows, he's not allowed to venture off the path of celibacy; he is still bound by the Vinaya, the Buddha's framework for discipline. It's important to understand that tantric vows do not cancel out vinaya vows. In fact, in the Vajrayana the second most

important tantric vow is to never break the pratimoksha vows, the basic rules of monastic discipline. Therefore, if an ordained monk has intercourse with a guru who is an ordained bhikshu, he is breaking his vinaya vow, and by breaking the vinaya vow, which is invariably going against the words of the Buddha, he is breaking the tantric vow also. Nevertheless, there are quite a handful of lamas who have broken their vinaya vows and continue making appearances as if they have not. There is even a rumor that a few lamas have not discouraged abortion when they have slipped up.

If this is true, these teachers are deceiving the Buddha and lying to people. Most probably they are taking advantage of their students, and if so, it's sexual misconduct. And if abortion is encouraged, they are killing a being. These are fundamental nonvirtuous actions.

Unfortunately, some of these lamas not only have broken their vows, they continue to give ordination, deceiving the whole community. There are more and more incidences of lamas concealing which vows they have taken, so the situation is murky. Many people in the inner circles know about these violations, but they live in a face-saving society, so they don't speak up. They quietly begin to lose respect for the system and the lineage. In this way, these lamas are contributing to the degradation of the Buddhadharma. It also happens in the other yanas. The abbot of the famous Shaolin temple in China, Shi Yongxin, was recently accused of being a swindler who fathered children with two different women, despite having taken vows of celibacy. Not to mention his plans to build a \$300 million luxury resort and golf course in Australia.

The Buddha never said that once you become ordained as a monk there is no way out. People are allowed to give back vows and become part of the lay community. But in the status-conscious society of Tibetans, giving up vows is considered shameful and embarrassing. In the past when monks and lamas, even very high lamas, have openly given up their vows, they have often been mistreated and shunned. They are considered a disgrace to their parents, their clan, their village, their gurus, their monastery. The Sixth Dalai Lama, Khamtrul Tenpa Nyima Rinpoche, faced massive disapproval by the highest members of the Tibetan government because he gave up his monk's vows for his many consorts. There was even an account of some monks planning the assassination of the Sixth Dalai Lama when he decided to take a consort. His monks thought, "Well, he'll reincarnate anyway—we might as well end this version." So out of fear and pride, many of the younger generation of monks and lamas feel they have no choice but to hide their broken vows, which then spoils the system.

As for students and teachers having sexual relationships, if one is a monk or nun bound by the vinaya vow, having sex is a violation of that vow. But if you

have taken this person as your Vajrayana master and you have no doubt whatsoever, and if you have devotion to see him as the Buddha, Dharma, sangha, deva, and dakini, the guru's command is your practice. (Wait, wait. Keep reading. I will explain more about this later.) Even if he says you should now become a Christian, this can be taken as part of the path. As a tantric practitioner, obeying the guru's order is the Vajrayana practice. You would not just become a Christian: you would still be fundamentally practicing Vajrayana because you are following his instruction. You would not break your refuge vow by taking Lord Jesus as your savior. The guru would remain above Lord Jesus.

As long as you do whatever the guru says, anything you do—regarding religion, ideology, sex, anything—is a tantric practice. Because in the tantra, your guru is the Buddha, your guru is the Dharma, your guru is the sangha, and by doing what he or she says, you are on the path.

ISMS AND ORGASMS

In the Vajrayana, isms are not important at all.

Once the great master Shakya Shri took his disciples to Yelung shedra, where there was a statue of Guru Rinpoche. He told them, "This is Guru Rinpoche. There is no difference between this statue and a human being. You should make resolutions in front of this statue to do something virtuous, whether it is sadhana practice or mantras or virtuous deeds." Then Shakya Shri said, "From my side, I've been thinking that I will take a vow never to recite one prayer or supplication, one shloka of a text, or one mala of mantras ever again." Here we see a clear Vajrayana juxtaposition. He is renouncing all the isms, but at the same time he's doing it in front of a statue and telling his students to keep practicing. This is a profound subject.

If an immature, unaccomplished guru says he wants to have sex with his student who happens to be a nun and dismisses the nun's vow as trivial, then this guru must bear the consequences. He's destroying the nun's guaranteed seed of liberation, her vow. Such an act is not only uncompassionate, it's non-virtuous. For the guru to plant compassion in the mindstream of the disciple, he must have it himself. But in this case, instead of the guru leading the student to the path of liberation, he destroys the student's only seed of liberation.

If they do engage in sexual activity and the nun's vow is broken, there are consequences. The nun, however, may not generate any bad karma at all, especially if she goes through with it reluctantly and only because her guru asks. In this case, she may even be creating merit. But this unqualified guru is

breaking his vow to the Buddha, and his karmic consequences are a thousandfold more powerful.

Now, if your guru is someone like Tilopa and you are a student as sane as Naropa, then forget about sex and vows. If your Tilopa-like guru says you should jump from the highest cliff, then you will not have any qualms about doing that. If you have enough merit to meet a great being like Tilopa, you must already be quite accomplished.

I know a French guy who claims to have devotion toward me as the Buddha, so I tease him: “If I am the Buddha, what happens if I give you a bomb and tell you to throw it into a crowd of one hundred people? And what if each of those hundred people is dead set on killing one hundred more people, some of whom are bodhisattvas? Would you do it to save all those other people’s lives? If you did, you would accumulate merit by saving bodhisattvas and also by shortening the one hundred peoples’ negative actions. But you will have killed one hundred people. Yes or no?” His reaction was most interesting. He said, “You would never ask me to do a thing like that because you’re a Buddhist.”

Playing with Fire

We say the world is changing so much—that it’s becoming more progressive, more modern—but there are a few things that just don’t change, and one of them is sex. Almost universally, there is still a mind-set that sex is taboo, something you do in secret behind closed doors. As Gendun Choephel said, when we talk about sex it’s always in hushed tones. Obviously we have a totally different tone if we are talking about a guru and a student having lunch, shaking hands, or even hugging. Sex is an intimate relationship, a connection between two people, whether husband and wife, strangers, doctor and patient, or, of course, spiritual teacher and student. When it comes to sex between the guru and the student, things get complicated—not just for the two participants but for anyone in the know.

In the Vajrayana sex can be a path—in fact, a very important, albeit difficult and dangerous, path, like many other Vajrayana paths. Some people are even attracted to the Vajrayana partly because they have heard of this method of using sex as the path, consciously or unconsciously. It’s good that they are attracted to the Vajrayana at all, but this concept creates problems. The point of the Vajrayana path is not to have good sex, it’s to be liberated.

If you have a sexual relationship, almost always you will get swept up in different kinds of attachment: love, jealousy, longing for more, all of that. A sexual relationship between a guru and a student comes with all the usual

cultural and human habit baggage. So unless the student and the teacher are absolutely clear about what's happening, they should really try to avoid sex. Offering the body in this way is not just like offering a service like a massage or a cup of tea, or stitching the guru's torn socks. It is an offering, but much more than that, it is a path, because there is extreme emotion involved.

Both the guru and student should not kid themselves thinking they can handle it. Intimate relationships are like playing with fire. First, you need to build a fire, so you need all the elements: wood, air, spark. If you have too much wood and not enough air, the fire dies. If you collect wood but you have no spark, you will die in the cold mountains. The likelihood of a guru who knows how to turn desire and passion into the path meeting a disciple who can handle it is almost zero, and the chances of one of them developing attachment are very high.

In the Mahayana sutras it is said that there are three defilements: ignorance, aggression, and desire. Of these three, the most insidious is ignorance, and then slightly less insidious but easier to abandon is aggression. The easiest to recognize and least negative but most difficult to abandon is desire, because desire is in the family of love and compassion and tolerance. They are all intertwined with the desire for physical contact.

Because we live in a desire realm, physical desire is such a powerful element of being human. It's one of the biggest generators of emotions, and emotions can be used as the path. In order to practice this path of union, one needs to surrender totally. Those who embark on this path should never think of it as a relationship. If you can't help yourself, then at least you should know there is much more to it than a lovey-dovey, touchy-feely, sticky relationship. You should have a genuine attitude of using this as a path. If you can actualize this attitude, it can be quite rewarding.

Even within our lifetimes, there have been gurus and disciples who have managed to travel this path, which is so inspiring. I myself have witnessed some of the greatest masters who have lived on this earth spending time with certain women practitioners, and through that connection everything blossoms—physically, spiritually, atmospherically. This is happening even today, but for obvious reasons I can't name names.

When there is the perfect path of union, the blessings are simultaneous. It's like when the sun rises, causing the lotuses to bloom: through these women and their incredible presence, wisdom arises, practice matures, and sentient beings benefit. In one instance, an exalted consort offered a simple notebook to her yogi master, and this resulted in some of the most important commentaries ever written. After the yogi master passed away, I saw this consort again, and she brought the complete presence of that master. This has happened more than a

few times.

But more often we have seen people who have fallen from grace. The ratio of gurus who can enlighten beings by having sex is not increasing. But from the path's point of view, it is not impossible. Remember, in the tantra, *everything* can be used as a path. The only things that cannot be used on the path are wrong view, covetousness, and harmful thoughts.

There is another reason why sexual relationships between two practitioners can be used as a path, which cannot be detailed here. But in short, if you know how to rub two sticks together, you can create fire. Likewise, if you know how to unite two seemingly opposite genders, you can create bliss and therefore wisdom.

FINALLY, NO JUDGMENT

You are choosing a path more than a person. Prior to taking a Vajrayana master as your guide, really ask yourself what you would do if your teacher did something improper or illegal. Or what would happen if your teacher instructed you to do something that appears contrary to the Dharma. Think carefully, because once we have taken the guru as our master, as Vajrayana practitioners, no matter what behavior our guru displays, we are not to make any judgment. So if your teacher seems to be sleeping around or taking money under the pretext of breaking habits, it will be a test of your devotion.

Let's say Brooke thinks I am the Buddha—not just theoretically or because it's expected of him as a student of the Dharma, but he actually sees me as the Buddha with strong conviction. This will ripen the fruit of his merit, and he will receive the blessings, regardless of whether or not I am actually the Buddha. Now, if I take advantage of that and abuse him in any way—physically, financially, emotionally, or sexually—I will have to deal with my own karmic consequences because I am an ordinary being, bound by the laws of cause and effect. In fact, in this kind of situation, because I carry the guru title I am more privileged, and therefore the karmic consequences will be much graver. On top of that, because I'm using the Dharma to take advantage of him, the consequences are even more intensified. Nevertheless, Brooke, with his pure perception, will actually benefit from having devotion to me.



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A FOUNDATION IN PHILOSOPHY

Buddha himself said, "In front of the one who has devotion, the Buddha will reside." This statement is very much in line with the principle of Chittamatra Buddhist philosophy, that everything is your mind. It's also the very foundation of the tantric view. Gradually enhancing that view and applying it to everyone so all beings are buddhas is the foundation of the guru-student relationship.

So this is another reason why, before practicing guru devotion, it is advisable to have a strong foundation in Buddhist philosophy, which grounds you in the understanding that all phenomena are dependently arising, that everything has no inherently existing substance, that everything is nondual and therefore equal, and that the absolute nature of all beings is the Buddha. Through this you come to a philosophical understanding that everything, including the Buddha and the guru, is your projection, and your path will be a complete path of wisdom and method.

If you think the guru exists externally as a truly existing perfect being, like a half-human, half-god, then you are on the way to a very hideous, destructive, and utterly deceiving path.

But I repeat: once you have taken the guru as your master, you are not to judge any of his or her behaviors. Are you ready to accept that? Or do you want to negotiate? Maybe you can ask your guru to sign a document stating, “If you hit me, I will quit being your disciple.” Or do you have the courage to take this huge leap with no agreements, no padding, no security, no safety net?

For the student who needs a safety net, it’s not as if the Vajrayana way is the only way; there are countless paths and methods to choose from. The root of all the Buddha’s teachings, the Shravakayana, and the heart of the Buddha’s teachings, the Mahayana, are both equally complete paths. Every single path Buddha revealed to us is complete and perfect with all the necessary training. It’s not as if you have to invent a new path.

But there are advantages to the Vajrayana path. It is a quick path—or it can be if the disciple knows how to listen, contemplate, and view with a grand attitude. The goal we are aiming for is not far off in the distance; the goal is already here and now, just as the path is working here and now. The path is practical. People sometimes think twice about getting onto a spiritual path because they worry about having to give up so much. There is this feeling like, “I can’t be a good Dharma practitioner because I like to have sex, I want good food, I want to have money in the bank, and I don’t want to stay in a cave.” But the Vajrayana doesn’t place any importance on austerity. Or one might say it has a different interpretation of austerity. If you as a disciple have the right view and attitude, you can have all the fun you can imagine and still achieve enlightenment—in fact, faster and with less pain than on other paths.

And the Vajrayana doesn’t have a prejudice against emotion; you can have your emotions and your enlightenment too. The attitude of the Vajrayana makes no distinctions between wisdom and emotion if you apply the view. The classic analogy is camphor, which can be seen as poison or as medicine. Or like a scientist who sees water and H₂O as the same thing, a Vajrayana master sees emotion and wisdom without distinctions. With that attitude or view the Vajrayana makes little if any distinctions between right and wrong, moral and immoral, pure and impure.

As Vajrayana Buddhists, our aim is to go beyond dualistic thought. Dualism is our primary obstacle. But most of us are so used to dualism, we can’t effortlessly migrate from the land of dualism to the land of nondualism. We are so comfortable with dualism; we almost can’t do without it. The language of

dualism is the only language we speak. Even as we approach the concept of nondualism, for the moment we have to squeeze it into the sphere of dualism because nondualism is inconceivable to the ordinary mind. And even if we have a glimpse of nondualism, intellectually, we are not attracted to it. We may even be afraid of it; we are afraid of losing all our references. Therefore, we have a desire to cling to what little duality we grasp.

The other vehicles, such as the Mahayana, address the weakness of sentient beings by deliberately employing the dualistic concepts of right and wrong. In these other vehicles you will see safety measures, rules, clear directions, signposts, benchmarks, indicators. They are safe; they provide clear direction. The disciples appreciate being told “this is the right way” and “this is the wrong way.”

As we reach to the Vajrayana, the Higher Tantra, there are few, if any, dualistic distinctions remaining on the path. Because our fundamental aim is to go beyond dualism, it’s fitting that the path itself would be nondual.

A lotus flower placed in a beautiful bowl of fresh water and a still-beating heart dripping with blood in a cup made out of a human skull are equally perfect offerings in the Vajrayana. The ordinary rules of beauty and perfection have been removed. It may be unfathomable to the ordinary mind. But without the impediment of rules and barricades, the Vajrayana can move quickly. Though it should be said: speed is not without danger.



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Be careful not to let human morality intervene with the wisdom of the Vajrayana, because if you do that, you are replacing gold with grass.



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There is no contradiction between the need to examine the guru and the understanding that the guru is our own perception. In fact, the two positions complement each other. Basically, we must always examine our own perception. Other than that, there is nothing to examine.

Even if you gather all your courage and decide to travel this path and take someone as your guru—a great master, an authentic lineage holder—you may still see his shortcomings. You may look the other way and try to negotiate with yourself, thinking, “Well, he has human habits, he has personality issues, but he has other qualities to lead me to enlightenment.” For timid practitioners, that’s all you can do. Eventually one’s aim is to genuinely develop trust and devotion based on wisdom.

Keep in mind, when you are still in the analyzing stage, you don’t have to turn a blind eye to the guru’s behavior. But you don’t have to be judgmental, and you don’t have to publicize everything you witness, blurting it out to whomever you meet. You could always choose simply not to go down that particular path.

1. The eight worldly dharmas, as given in verse 29 of Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, are hope for happiness and fear of suffering, hope for fame and fear of insignificance, hope for praise and fear of blame, and hope for gain and fear of loss.

Being Savvy Following a Guru 3

TEACHINGS DON'T JUST RAIN DOWN

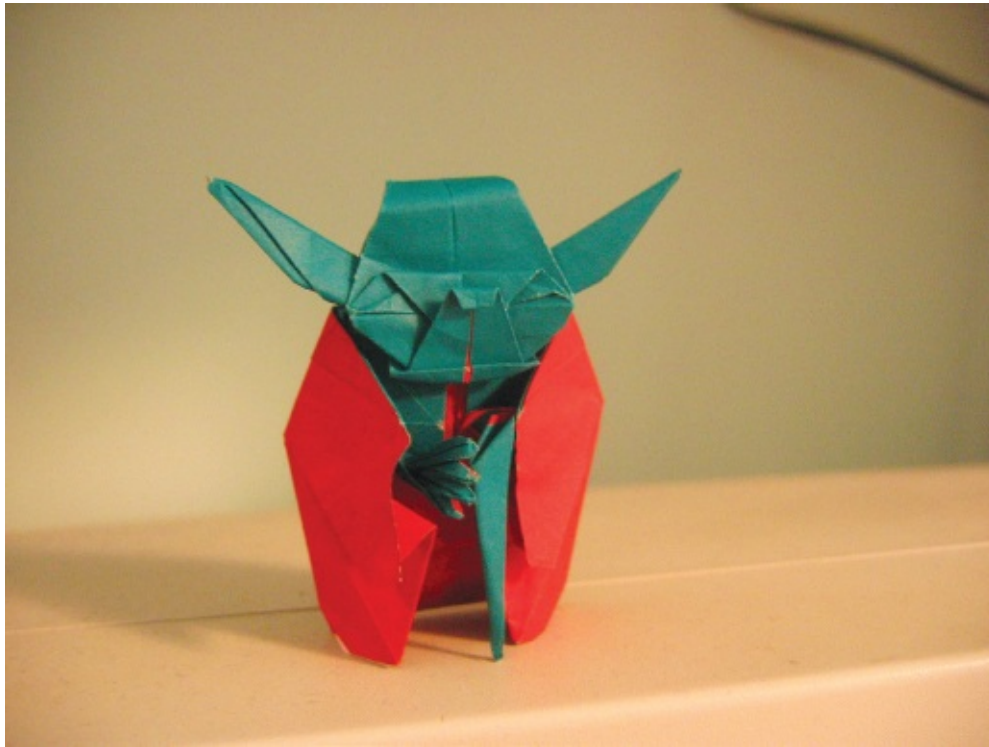
AS PRACTITIONERS, we must ask for teachings: we must supplicate the teacher to turn the wheel of Dharma. This is encouraged not only in the Mahayana but in all the yanas. This is why we have the seven-limb supplications. There is so much benefit in requesting teachings, especially if you supplicate not just for your own benefit. If you request teachings with a motivation triggered by renunciation and compassion (bodhichitta)—if you are requesting the teachings to benefit all beings—this is the supreme way to request.

But if the guru is a proper, brave, qualified master, he might not give the teaching even if he seemingly has all the knowledge, time, and place to give it.

I requested specific tantric teachings from Kyabje Dejung Rinpoche many times over the course of two years. Finally, one day in Nepal, instead of sending me away, he told me to wait. He appeared to go through the hassle of searching his suitcases and summoning his attendants to search for his almanac. I think I had to wait an hour. He didn't answer my questions—he didn't even look in my direction as he was reading the almanac and making notes. Finally he said, "Good. This is the seventh time you asked, so I will teach you."

SUPERFICIAL FEARS

In the tantric texts we read that the guru is more precious than all the buddhas of one thousand eons because none of the buddhas of one thousand eons could arise without your present-day physical guru. Likewise, thinking of the guru for a single moment is more powerful than meditating on a deity for one thousand eons. Therefore, the ultimate object of refuge is the guru, and all other objects of refuge—the Buddha, Dharma, sangha, deva, dakini, and deities such as Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara—are none other than manifestations of the guru himself. Based on this, we train ourselves to accept that whatever the guru does is enlightened activity.



"Try not. Do or do not. There is no try."—Supreme H.H. Yoda

Yet, when we first approach a guru, we may likely view him or her merely as someone who can protect us from ordinary fears. Most of us are not even aware of the more sophisticated fears at play, even though they are the fundamental source of our suffering. So we come with these superficial fears, such as the need for confirmation, the need for a companion, the fear of loneliness, lack of direction, family issues. Wishing to be free from these needs and fears, we search for a guru, get cozy with a guru, even commit to a guru.

But if the guru-student relationship is based only on superficial fears, it will become very corrupted, because superficial fears are endless. What you are afraid of this year may or may not scare you next year. There will always be new fears, and you will always be looking for ways to alleviate them. When the guru can't do that for you, there will be a sense of dissatisfaction, if not disillusionment.

If you are really serious about following the Vajrayana path, the guru-student relationship must gradually lead to the guru protecting you from your own self-clinging. Ultimately, the guru's job is to protect the student's dualistic mind, and this is where things begin to get complicated, because many times, the students don't want this protection. If the guru is not brave—not compassionate enough or not completely realized—the guru might end up massaging, encouraging, and

feeding the self-clinging of the student instead.

ROOT GURUS: ONE OR MANY

There are many different ways to define “root guru,” or *tsawei lama*. A root guru can be a person from whom you have received the four initiations: the vase, the secret, the wisdom, and the word, or “suchness,” abishekas. With these initiations, you take him or her on as your guru. But here we have to also define what we mean by “receive.” I’m sure many of the readers of this book have received more than fifty initiations already and probably didn’t even have a clue what was going on. The highest definition of receiving an initiation is a bit too much to go into here.



I AM VAJRADHARA

When Rechungpa asked Milarepa, “Whose manifestation are you?” Milarepa said, “I don’t know. I could be a manifestation of all three lower realms put together, but if you think I’m Vajradhara, you will receive the blessing as if I am Vajradhara.” Keep this advice in your hearts.

Your receiving of those four abishekas, especially the word “abisheka,” creates a certain connection between you and the guru. And if the guru’s instructions can somehow give you a glimpse of the nature of your mind, then he or she is definitely your root guru. As for the question of whether to have one or many root gurus, there is no clear answer, no rules. But don’t be surprised if you hear a very zealous Tibetan practitioner say you should have only one.

The Tibetans’ attitude toward the root guru can be very tribal: many choose their root guru mainly by geography. Tibetans and Bhutanese living near my monasteries will often consider me and only me their tsawei lama because I’m associated with their villages, and some consider me their root guru because I happen to be the grandson of the root guru of their grandfather. But not everyone has to be bound by this kind of habit. This defilement of choosing the root guru based on geography and family lineage shouldn’t stain those who are not Tibetan or Bhutanese.

An American or a Taiwanese, for example, has the luxury of being free to choose any guru they like. But given this freedom, some end up window shopping for many different gurus, looking for companionship and confirmation and gratification. And then, overloaded with many gurus, they may end up hearing conflicting advice. Sometimes that can be stressful, and there is risk of taking advantage. When you have many different advisers, you can choose whatever piece of advice entertains your ego’s wishes, and the whole point of the spiritual path is lost.

When I was young, my family would often have dinner with other families who had children my age. Sometimes after dinner I would overhear the adults planning who the young girls should marry. The girls were there, washing dishes and chatting, paying no mind to the fact that their futures were being planned out for them. I felt real pity because they were not being given an opportunity to make decisions about their own lives. Then it even happened to me in my late thirties. A group of friends who shall remain nameless were strongly lobbying for me to get married to a specific someone. Who were they to choose for me? Anyway, I was an impossible case. I had become so picky that even the shape of a finger would have had to be exactly the way I liked it. Meanwhile, many of those girls whom I had felt so sorry for were happily married to the men their families had picked. The point is that when you have too many choices, you become sophisticated, and when you become sophisticated, things become complicated.

Someone like Mrs. Ping might try to please all the gurus, gradually assembling a whole collection of them. She really enjoys that chorus of confirmation. And if she has many gurus, she can use them by asking the same

question to all of them until one gives the answer she wants to hear. Then she takes this response to all the other gurus, and as a gesture of respect, the other gurus confirm. So check whether that kind of manipulation is happening, and check your motivation for seeking out many gurus. You may simply wish to have a collection of illustrious gurus to boast about.

There are those who insist we should have only one guru. In all the sutras, shastras, and tantras, there is never a mention of such a rule. There is no limit. It can be enriching to have many gurus. It can also be confusing and disorienting and time-consuming. If a certain guru says you should have only one guru and should follow only one lineage, I would almost take that as a sign to not follow that particular guru. On the other hand, if this advice is coming from someone who is thoroughly compassionate, someone who knows you and whose wish is to save you from going astray, it should be taken with gratitude.

In practice, students can have more than one guru in the same way a tree can have many roots. Or you can have one root guru and many branch gurus, for example. Or you can even have branch, fruit, flower, and leaf gurus. You can follow as many gurus as you like, as long as you can cope with it. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo had over one hundred gurus, as did Nesarwa Khyentse Wangchuk, Shalu Losal Tengkyong, Longchenpa, and Ngari Panchen.

If you want to follow only one guru, that's also fine. The Indian masters usually had one guru and one deity practice, and they reached extraordinary levels. Atisha Dipamkara was critical of the Tibetan habit of practicing many deities. He said that in India there are practitioners who achieve hundreds of thousands of attainments though one deity, whereas in Tibet, practitioners who practice one hundred deities end up achieving nothing much.

PREMATURELY LISTENING TO THE VAJRAYANA TEACHINGS

Much of the tantra was not available until recently. Now you can get even the most secret teachings from random gurus or at a bookshop. Prematurely listening to or reading the Vajrayana teachings is a bit dangerous because you may develop a misunderstanding. To unlearn a concept is much more difficult than the initial learning process. Even if you feel that you are ready, you should check this impulse again and again.

Students who are aspiring to be tantric disciples must first establish a strong foundation in understanding the tantric view. Without a proper foundation of understanding the view, all the tantric meditations, methods, and substances could create a disturbance in students because many of these methods are

designed to be politically incorrect and are not meant to complement the conventional way of thinking.

If you look at the accounts of the lives of gurus in ancient India, you will find that the Vajrayana was not given that easily. And when the guru decided to bestow the teachings on a particular practitioner, he or she would usually find a secluded place, out of the mainstream, and do it in secret. The tantric practitioners of Nalanda University and Vikramalashila were especially discreet. No one knew they were teaching the Vajrayana. And when it came time for the disciples to become serious practitioners, the most accomplished ones left their universities entirely.

Somehow such discretion was not really enforced in Tibet. There the Vajrayana became part of the day-to-day culture. People were never prevented from entering temples with explicit sacred images like skulls, naked dakinis dancing on corpses, or deities with extra heads. Such unfettered access was completely unheard of in ancient India. Imagine if the security passcodes and maps of the Pentagon were available in any shop and displayed for all to see.

When Tibetan lamas started teaching beyond the Tibetan community, they taught just as they would in ancient Tibet. They didn't take into account that Buddhism is less than a century old in places like New York, and that in many cultures the concepts of karma, rebirth, the four noble truths, and interdependence—let alone tantric principles—are completely foreign. For example, the Tibetan concept of the mind and what is referred to as mind in the West are like water and milk, so in many cases when a Tibetan lama and his Western student have a conversation about wisdom, there are so many assumptions but no shared foundation. When a Westerner hears the phrase “the nature of mind is wisdom,” it's through a different set of filters and habits, and there is room for misinterpretation.

If any fundamental miscalculations are made during a Tibetan lama's transference, then it probably has something to do with this miscommunication.

COMMUNICATION

The Mahasandhi texts say that the absolute nature of everything cannot be expressed even by the Buddha. Therefore, the art of communicating something that cannot be communicated between a student and a teacher is challenging.

There are infinite methods of communication and infinite settings for the communication to take place, from under a banyan tree, where the teacher is seated on a grass mat with a disciple seated humbly before him, all the way to a

guru on a tiger skin teaching a disciple who is completely adorned in fine ornaments. Theoretically, there is no reason why tantric teachings cannot be given at a Hooters restaurant or at a bar as long as there is proper respect, appreciation, love, and devotion. In the ancient paintings, we see depictions of the Buddha giving teachings to his disciples while seated upon a rock with a little bit of grass on top. That rock isn't very high. His disciples are no more than a foot lower. But the message conveyed is that the teacher should be higher than the student—exalted, respected, held in high esteem.

The use of thrones and brocades came about in Tibet, China, and Mongolia because of how people there interpreted this idea of elevation. The Tibetans interpreted it literally and immediately constructed thrones no lower than four feet. In reality, the guru's seat could be as small as just one cushion or an extra piece of grass, putting him or her only slightly above the student. I wonder what a Theravadin thinks when he enters a Tibetan monastery and finds the seat of the lama positioned higher than the image of Shakyamuni Buddha. It makes me sweat with embarrassment.

It's probably safe to say that there can't be a proper guru-student communication if the guru never steps down from the throne, unless the guru is a completely enlightened omniscient being who can communicate through telepathy, light, or supermagical powers. The guru is supposed to act like a doctor, and the disciple is the patient. How can a doctor treat the patient if he doesn't know what's wrong? He has to know some of the symptoms in order to diagnose the disease. If there is no communication, or if the communication is staged, formal, or rehearsed, then invariably, it creates a distance between the doctor and the patient, making the chances of a proper diagnosis slim—unless the guru is an omniscient being or his stethoscope is fifty feet long.

So when you are looking for a guru, it's good to consider how approachable he or she is, how much communication will be possible. This does not mean the guru needs to know all the personal details of your life. Some people end up using the guru as an adviser for every little decision, like what kind of food to feed their pets, so much so that they even develop a sort of fear or guilt when they think they aren't keeping the guru in the loop enough. This kind of routine might hinder rather than help you on your path. A guru's role is to guide you to enlightenment, and to do this a guru needs to know just the minimum.

I remember one yogi in Bhutan who was a student of Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He would turn up to see Rinpoche maybe once a year. Somehow, even though he lives in a totally isolated place, he always seemed to know when Rinpoche was in Paro. They would talk for maybe four or five minutes, then he would disappear. Those few minutes were enough because the doctor and patient

could communicate so well.

While you are still in the deciding stage, if you have any doubt about a guru's behavior, you should express that to him. Let's say you see him beating up a fifteen-year-old girl and you come from a culture where this is unacceptable. If that disturbs you, you should say so. If you cannot express this directly, you can write it down and send it to him. There are many ways to communicate. If you keep on expressing your doubts and he doesn't change his behavior, and if the doubts keep coming, then maybe you should not follow this guy. But once you have taken him as your Vajrayana guru, you are stuck. You have made your decision, and this is something you have to accept.

IS THE GURU OMNISCIENT?

Interpreting instructions from the guru is not so easy. Words cannot always be taken literally, so there is room for misinterpretation. So often we hear according to what we want to hear, and instructions become tainted by our assumptions and projections.

When Yvonne asked me whether she should be in a relationship with Yannis, I said yes, because they already seemed to be in a relationship—why not? Yvonne interpreted my simple “yes” as a vajra command, and I have a strong feeling she went back to Yannis and told him he had to be with her, that this was the guru's order. So today they are still together as husband and wife. Or sometimes students ask if they can come to a teaching, and if I say, “Why not?” this gets interpreted as a 100 percent command.

It's important to listen carefully and not add layer upon layer of your own assumptions or inferential logic to what the guru has said. For example, if a lama teaches formless teachings, such as shamatha or vipassana, and out of necessity deemphasizes ritual, then the students who normally have no inclination toward rituals (maybe because they think they are just cultural practices) could interpret the teaching to mean “never do pujas.” Or if a guru says the Mahasandhi is a supreme practice or the Mahayana is a greater vehicle, the tendency is for students to immediately look down on the Shravakayana as lesser. These are grand misinterpretations.

When Miss Lucinda first came onto the Vajrayana scene, she bumped into a book by Patrul Rinpoche called *Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Around that time she was going through the phenomena of interconnecting influences: tiring of her old husband, enjoying a laid-back life, and developing genuine interest in a spiritual path. When one reads *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, one finds so much

about the futility of worldly life and the benefits of the ascetic life. This reinforced her wish to escape her situation. But the fact of the matter was she was living on the dole with four children, two of them very young. When her guru told her to get a job and save money, she couldn't understand why that would come out of his mouth. She was expecting him to parrot Patrul Rinpoche and encourage her to go live in a cave. So she chose to interpret these instructions as a test. But it wasn't a test. Her guru was looking at her situation, her children, her potential and was trying to help her. So many Dharma practitioners in their sixties have no assets, no bank balance, and he thought she should avoid becoming like that. No matter how many times he told her she should get a job, she kept on seeing it as a test.

There is a predicament of not knowing on what level to take the instruction. In what context was the instruction given? Was it for you personally, or for some other person or group? If the guru tells a vegan to drink milk, it could be for health reasons, or the guru may be testing the student's devotion. Or maybe the guru doesn't remember that the student is a vegan and has no idea this is a challenge. A beginning student could maybe remind the guru that she is a vegan. An advanced student could either drink or not drink. But she will not be bothered by obeying or not obeying.

The lion's share of gurus are as passive and inert as vegetables. The guru may not be trying to do anything skillful at all, yet the student reads so much into a simple instruction. They create their own paranoia. All too frequently students think the guru knows all, that the guru is omniscient. I have to confess that on many occasions I have even let them think so. But sometimes I have to admit, "No, I really didn't know the situation." Of course, the more I protest, the more they think it's just humility talking. So it seems the guru is in a win-win situation temporarily, but it can revert to a lose-lose situation very easily.

A Buddha has the ability to block everybody's ears when he doesn't want them to hear certain parts of teachings, but ordinary gurus can't do that. So maybe someone needed a specific instruction and you overheard it by accident. Hearing an instruction not necessarily meant for you might cause years of misunderstanding. So clarification is important, especially for beginners.

There is, in fact, an entire labyrinth of interpretation that is quite difficult to navigate. In the same way that an ice skater has to know how to skate and stop at the right time, one has to be quite skilled in negotiating the path. Clearly, the main thing is your motivation. The rest you come to learn as you progress.

It's a pity that the use of classical terms is diminishing. They have been overtaken by colloquial terms, and many times colloquial terms have a cultural stain. For example, women are referred to in the Tibetan sutras as *rigkyibumo*, which can be translated as "daughter of the noble family," but in colloquial Tibetan words like *khyeman*, which could mean "lower birth," are used instead. This kind of denigration is never found in classical texts—not in the shastras and definitely not in the sutras. Similarly, *kalyanamitra* is rarely used these days, even in the Mahayana. Instead we have the word "lama" or "master." A *kalyanamitra* is not a master but a virtuous friend, almost like kin.

We need a word to communicate, and in the Mahayana we use the word "master." It's something we can understand. We not only use the term "master," we use the phenomenon of master, for practical reasons. The problem with saying "master" is that it implies there is a servant, and these words are provocative in this day and age. Nonetheless, some element of that dynamic, especially for the beginners, is unavoidable.

In the Pali Theravada tradition, respect is given to the *sekha*, the disciple in the higher levels of training. Because *sekhas* would never publicize their attainments, laypeople are left to their own judgments on the matter. It is only through the *sekha's* conduct, understanding of the Dharma, and other visible signs that the disciples develop respect.

In the Mahayana the traditional way to relate to the guru is by showing reverence—prostrating, welcoming the guru, polishing his or her shoes, making offerings. In the sutras there is a story about how Shakyamuni Buddha attained his *ushnisha*—the most precious and most magnificent mark of the Buddha's body—by paying homage to and venerating his own master.

In the Vajrayana we say that the guru is more than a master—but even that does not illuminate the essence of the guru. The guru is the only thing that matters. The guru is the root of spiritual realization. The guru *is* the Buddha, not only a reminder of the Buddha.

In the tantric method there are three stages of visualizing the guru: thinking the guru is the Buddha, seeing the guru as the Buddha, and seeing yourself as the Buddha. When we say we have to think of the guru as the Buddha, we are not just talking about respect or admiration. Remember the example of the omelet: for a seasoned omelet maker, the ingredients are seen *as* the omelet. We are talking about an attitude. A view. If you have never tried Tibetan butter tea, you might be disappointed when you try it for the first time. But if you are told, "This is soup," then it may taste better, because there is no assumption of tea. It is a kind of mind training. By removing your preconceptions you end up actually

seeing the guru as the Buddha. And then that leads you to see your own nature of mind as the Buddha.

In the Vajrayana you still venerate the guru—you welcome him and polish his shoes—but it's done with a very different, very grand attitude. You are not merely polishing the shoes of a master or your superior; rather, you think that this yawning, sleepy, ordinary-looking person is a reflection of your true nature, the Buddha.

FINDING A BALANCE BETWEEN DOUBT AND TRUST

As you follow the guru, initially you need a healthy amount of doubt, for all the reasons we have been citing, and also you need common sense. For dwellers on the path, a considerable amount of doubt is not only accepted but encouraged. Then, from time to time, you must force yourself to consider another kind of doubt: doubt of the doubt itself, like Nyoshul Lungtok's student. Because after enumerating all the impressive reasons why your doubt is justified, doubt is still your own projection, and it could be based on lopsided perceptions and prejudices that you cling to so dearly.

You should also generate trust. Trust your motivation that you chose this path of the guru with a wish to be free from suffering and to help sentient beings. Trust the law of cause and effect. Because your motivation to follow a guru is triggered by renunciation and compassion, the right kind of seed has been planted, and eventually it should bear the right fruit. Also trust the Buddha and the Dharma. Ultimately it is the Dharma in which you are taking refuge.

Such an artful balancing of trust and doubt should be applied.

FLAUNTING THE GURU

When Guru Rinpoche came to Tibet, he refused to mention the name of his guru. There are many accounts of this kind of discretion. Especially as a tantric Buddhist, one tries not to mention the guru's name, let alone flaunt that he or she is one's teacher. The guru, deity, and consort are the three things meant to be kept totally confidential because they are the most sacred. Ideally, one should even keep the fact that one is a tantric practitioner secret. But we always end up corrupting these methods. In fact, nowadays most people carelessly flaunt their gurus, even me.



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From time to time remind yourself that this is just the path, the means, not the goal, the end.

Oftentimes, students are not aware of the possible negative consequences of being overly enthusiastic about their guru devotion. Instead of inspiring others, such enthusiasm could actually put others off. For example, some older students in Bhutan instruct completely new beginners to do things like eat the guru's leftover food and put socks on the guru's feet and tie up the guru's shoelaces. It's fine when the Bhutanese do this when among themselves, but making a display of it in front of someone who is just beginning to be inspired by the Buddha's teaching is unskillful. The newcomers may not necessarily be open to the path of seeming sycophants.

We are in an age where we need to inspire people in a very different way. Creating situations that put people off from the tantric wisdom tradition is so unfortunate. So watch your behavior: you may be the direct cause of breaking a connection to a potentially good student.

FOLLOWING AT ALL COSTS

To follow a guru, you have to navigate so much. You have to wrestle with your

instincts, go against your character and habits. You should realize that navigation through struggle is the very essence of the spiritual journey: crossing mountains, valleys, rivers, and deserts in search of the answer. This is a voyage that you have chosen to take.

According to Longchenpa's commentary on *The Treasury of Dharmadhatu*, a guru will test if a student is ready for the more profound teachings by assigning various difficult tasks, even being deliberately abusive. At this point the guru may be contrary and demanding, and the student might find certain tasks extremely difficult to accomplish willingly. You can read unbelievable tales of the great Bodhisattva Sadaprarudita and other practitioners on the path who followed their gurus at all costs: Naropa with Tilopa, Yeshe Tsogyal with Guru Rinpoche, Milarepa with Marpa, and all the recent gurus with their gurus.

There is something very special about obeying without asking any questions, not just orally but mentally—instinctively not questioning. There is so much freedom there. I once accompanied Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche, who was traveling with two of his students. We took cars and trains and taxis and then made our way to the airport. When I asked the students where they were going, they said they didn't know because Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche had all the boarding passes.

But it is not easy—or it shouldn't be. What if the guru asks you to take off your clothes in public? For most people, this would be too embarrassing. Then there are people like Douglas, who are emotionally and habitually comfortable being stark naked. Basically, he grew up running around naked and currently practices nudity as part of his hippie lifestyle. So if a guru were to ask Douglas to go naked, he would not question it at all. But if he were asked to propose to his Punjabi girlfriend or get a nine-to-five job in a bank or wash Jakob's underwear, he would have a much harder time agreeing. Those tasks would be a real test of Douglas's ability to do what the guru asked.

For some disciples, it's fun to make a show of carrying out the guru's every wish, particularly as it's an opportunity to reap the harvest of becoming famous in the sangha for being an obedient student. For example, Suresh was happy to be told to hang around with all kinds of girls for the sake of the Dharma because he is naturally a very horny man. But his obedience would be tested if his guru sent him someone who is not his type. In this case, seeming obedience can be deceiving.

EXPERIENCE IS LIKE A MIST IN THE MORNING

As Vajrayana students, we are told that we should do exactly what the guru tells us to do and that everything our master says should be taken seriously. At the same time we're told that we must never fixate on anything we hear, imagine, learn, or read. At first glance these two instructions appear to be contradictory. An important point to remember is that whatever information we gather, we also filter, so what we're left with is a very particular kind of understanding unique to ourselves.

This understanding is not realization. It's not even an experience. It is like a patch that will eventually fall off. It's fine to be covered in patches of understanding because sooner or later they are bound to fall off so that experience can be revealed. However, we should also be aware that living with all these patches will prolong the time we spend on the path to enlightenment. How much time do we really have left in this lifetime? Twenty years? Thirty, if we're lucky? Given that everything we have understood so far is nothing more than a patch that's holding together our version of samsara, are any of us really willing to spend another ten years believing in that reality? We must, therefore, be prepared to peel off those patches.

But be aware that once the inner skin has been exposed, it's possible to mistake it for the fruit, which is why we must always be ready to accept that it is just another skin. This is not a principle we apply only to hearing, contemplation, or reading; it's even more relevant when we meditate. This is what is meant by the Tibetan saying "Experience is like a mist in the morning. It will evaporate."

SACRIFICE

We have to realize the Dharma is priceless. That does not mean Dharma is free. Practicing Dharma requires sacrifice, and sacrifice comes in many forms. If you are a hippie-dippy person and your guru tells you to get a job at a bank or to become a CEO, that is probably one of the most effective forms of guru yoga you could do. And if you are a fresh Ivy League graduate and your guru tells you it's time to do a nine-year retreat, following that suggestion would be a good act of renunciation.

SAYING NO TO THE GURU

If a guru asks you to do something and you can't do it for whatever reason, you

should know that you are allowed to say no. And that guru has a responsibility to not insist. If you really can't obey and the guru insists, it is the guru who is creating the seed of breaking samaya.

There are sometimes valid reasons why we can't obey what the guru asks. We might not be mature enough, not brave enough. And in this case, if the issue is forced, the disciple might develop wrong view toward the guru and the path. Normally, a wise and skilled guru would be able to detect hesitation right away. But if the guru doesn't know how to read our behavior or pretends that he doesn't, we can openly declare that we will not be able to obey him and provide the reasons.

However, if we are able to do what the guru asks but we simply do not wish to obey in the interest of saving face or because we are being swayed by one of the eight worldly dharmas, then a skilled guru will keep insisting until our egos topple.

You may not think you can follow through with a command, but the guru has more confidence in you than you do in yourself. Here again, the guru may insist. But communication is important. The guru has to be skilled. For example, the guru can start by partially insisting, little by little. And then it's the student's responsibility to try.

But there are gurus who don't think through whether a student is able to do something. A guru might say, "Bring me a flower from New Zealand right now." There are many gray areas, but with the right communication, misunderstanding can be avoided. And as the saying goes, you can only do your best. Also, "it's the thought that counts!" Never give up. You may not be able to follow every instruction, but you can have the aspiration to.

Keep in mind, this is only within Vajrayana practice. In the Mahayana, if your guru tells you to do something nonvirtuous, you don't have to do it. In fact, you can respectfully argue against it. And the same is true for all the other vehicles.

GURU DEVOTION AND PURE PERCEPTION

To understand the core meaning of guru devotion, it helps to use the term "pure perception," because "guru devotion" is overused and has become distorted. People claiming to have guru devotion often tend to be mere sycophants. True guru devotion is the practice of pure perception, seeing with nonduality. But to reach that point we must train our minds and condition ourselves.

Before pure perception is possible, we must first be convinced that everything is our own perception. We do this through hearing and contemplation. It's not

too difficult to accept that everything—not just beauty—is in the eye of the beholder. When you see something you like, you perceive it as desirable and good. Likewise, if you see somebody you don't like, then the perception is negative. Kindness, tolerance, impatience, wrath are all your own perception.



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When bees make honey from nectar, they don't destroy the flower. They just take the essence.

If you feel kindness instead of wrath, you have a different perception. If you are more tolerant than impatient, you have a different perception. If you know life is impermanent, you see things differently. When your annoying friend is suddenly diagnosed with terminal cancer, your perception changes.

If we learn to accept, even in a limited way, that everything is subject to our perception, then pure perception of the guru is more achievable. Coupled with pure perception, guru devotion has nothing to do with being a sycophant. It's really about exercising your own perception.

HOW TO GENERATE DEVOTION

Most of us think that because we have studied the Dharma for a while we have understood a few things. We may have understood a little, and we may have even had some fleeting experience. If we are aware that this knowledge and experience can always be improved upon and transcended, if we are not satisfied with the little that we have, if we have the courage to let go of what we have and still hunger for more, this is the dawning of devotion. This is a sign of humility. Humility is the moisture or fertilizer from which devotion will grow.

To help that devotion grow, remember the following:

- Your friends, family, identity, or projects, big or small, will not provide you with the fundamental basis necessary for bliss and happiness.
- Absolutely everything around you is impermanent, even your body, and while you can be sure you will die, you can have no certainty about when, where, or how.
- The people with whom you associate, who accompany you through this life, will all eventually lead you to pain.
- All your relationships are temporary. When you check into a hotel you don't immediately start thinking that you'll spend eternity with the managers, maids, and waiters. Your home, your friends, your ideals and values are just part of a hotel experience. Sooner or later, you will have to check out and leave them all behind.



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Gyalwang Je of the Drukpa Kagyu said, “It is doubtful whether or not one can be liberated through meditation. But there is no doubt that one can be liberated through devotion.”

- The triple gems are glorious. Think often on their enlightened qualities, and whenever possible, try to associate with a virtuous friend, a guru who will point out your mistakes honestly.
- Nothing happens randomly; everything happens according to the mathematical logic of cause, condition, and effect. To this logic we owe our complete trust. Modern people already trust the function of karma on some level: for example, we know that a marigold is not created by a god but that it grows from a seed when all the necessary conditions come together. What we don’t all have is the more profound, undeniable trust in karma. This is what leads to so much disappointment and the feeling that life is “unfair,” especially when we do our best to do the right thing yet suffer unexpected consequences. We trust only the immediate and obvious causes and conditions and never suspect that there are layers and more layers lining up behind them.

If you arouse these thoughts in your mind, devotion will also be aroused.

FOUR TYPES OF DEVOTION

According to Jigme Lingpa, there are four different types of devotion:

(1) *Inspiring devotion*: You read and hear the words of the Buddha and they make sense, and therefore you feel attracted to the Dharma. Ideally, this is the kind of devotion you begin with.

(2) *Desiring devotion*: Like a bee desiring pollen, you have a desire to create certain qualities in yourself—the desire to apply the teachings and attain their result.

(3) *Trusting devotion*: You begin to see the unsurpassable and nondeceiving quality of the triple gems, and therefore you have confidence in the master and the teaching from the bottom of your heart.

(4) *Nonreturning devotion*: Once you're convinced that the thing above you is the sky, nothing will shatter that conviction. Once you have developed a trust in view, meditation, and action through hearing, meditation, and contemplation, you will never see the guru as anything other than the Buddha. You enter onto the path of the Dharma with strong determination and a conviction that you will never turn back. This is what we call “non-returning devotion.”

HOW TO MAINTAIN DEVOTION

One Kadampa master gave very simple advice on how to maintain devotion, much of which you may have heard before. But there are a few pieces of advice you need to hear again and again:

“*Devotion for the Dharma is a noble wealth.*” Devotion for the Dharma is a noble wealth that rarely arises. When devotion is aroused in a beginner, it may be stained by hope, expectation, and fear, and that's fine for the time being. Even to have this much devotion is encouraging.

“*Catch the wave of devotion.*” Devotion is an entry point, like a wave. If you are a surfer, you don't want to miss that wave. Once you catch it, it can carry you through your practice. So when you are first inspired by devotion, don't wait! Catch it and use it. If devotion suddenly arises when we are in the middle of making coffee, driving home, or at any random moment, our habit is to think, “Feeling devoted like this is really good!” and make a mental note to try to practice later. What we should do instead is practice immediately, even if there is no time. However short the practice has to be, do it straightaway. Even if you

have time only to say a short prayer to Guru Rinpoche, do it.

“Samsaric chores never end.” Jigme Lingpa was so wise. Some of us imagine there will come a point when we can give up our samsaric activities and worldly duties completely and devote our time to the Dharma, but Jigme Lingpa pointed out that such a time will never come. It’s not that you must cease all worldly activity and only practice the Dharma but rather that you should train yourself to remember that your worldly activities don’t come to an end. He is saying that you shouldn’t kid yourself into believing that at some point in this lifetime you won’t have anything else to do. With this procrastinating attitude—imagining that there will be an end to our activities—we may never begin to practice. Samsaric endeavors are endless and fruitless; samsaric activities never end. So whenever and wherever devotion arises spontaneously, use it. Don’t imagine you will be able to practice later using that moment of devotion as your inspiration, because by the time you practice, the devotion will have been exhausted.

“Generate endurance.” Generate endurance when your devotion is tested. For example, if you have been practicing long and hard but you don’t experience even a single meaningful dream and your day-to-day inspiration and enthusiasm for practice wane, at such times practice endurance. Even if it feels as though you are merely mouthing the words, keep trying.



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Catch the wave of devotion.



© Rudolf Stingel

Samsaric chores never end.

“Develop a sense of urgency.” We have no idea whether or not our plans for this life will work out. Therefore, develop a sense of urgency about your practice, and don’t delay setting foot on the spiritual path.

ETIQUETTE

Etiquette is essentially a form of ritual; it is bound by customs and culture and therefore has myriad manifestations and myriad purposes. Etiquette can be good, but it can also become so elaborate that it overshadows the more important things. Milarepa said, “When I get sick, if no one asks after me, and when I die, if no one cries for me, and if I manage to die alone in an isolated retreat place, then I, as a yogi, will be satisfied.” He was not interested in how deeply someone bowed to him or how big his tombstone would be. Such is the attitude of great practitioners. They don’t care about outer displays; they have no need for social etiquette.

Between Milarepa and Marpa there was very little formality. Marpa didn’t have to wear elaborate hats or play hypocritical games for the sake of pleasing

his student. Milarepa also never played hypocritical games to please his teacher. But nowadays if a teacher even hinted at practicing the methods Marpa used on Milarepa, he would lose his students instantly.

In Bhutan the practice of veneration has almost been reduced to a form of etiquette. The Bhutanese feel obligated to bow and receive blessings, so they end up bowing to just about any being whose name even remotely resembles a rinpoche or lama. Usually the lama will place his hand on their heads at ceremonies or at significant partings or greetings, but now it's become excessive. They receive blessings every morning, every evening, every time they have been apart for a while.

In contrast, once I was in Lhasa circumambulating the Barkhor and this tall Khampa followed me a few times around. Like many Khampas, he openly stared at me, without inhibition. Finally, I grew tired and sat on a bench, so he approached me. "I heard you are Dzongsar Khyentse," he said, and I replied, "Yes, I think so, that's what people call me, anyway." He then undid his long Khampa braids that were wrapped around his head and said, "In that case, can you put your hand on my head?" But he didn't bend down, and I had to exert quite a lot of effort to reach the top of his head. Then he wrapped his braids back around his head and took out his wallet. He kept maybe ten renminbi, and the rest he crumpled up and shoved in my bag without any envelope or formality. He said something in Tibetan akin to "Don't mess up"—indicating that he had surrendered to me, and I should take care of him. I met him many times after that, and never again did he ask for a blessing. For him, a onetime hand-on-the-head was enough to do the job. He didn't feel obligated to be blessed again and again.

This Khampa was unique because there is a whole institution of Bhutanese and Tibetan etiquette that I have noticed being imposed on Western students over the years. Often it just doesn't work: the customs are not designed for the Western body. A Tibetan shouldn't bully a Serbian to stick out his tongue to show respect. If an American dressed in a business suit publicly sticks out his tongue as a gesture of respect to his guru, it looks ridiculous, especially to other Westerners who are there because of genuine curiosity and in search of a guide on the path.

General etiquette, like standing up when the guru walks in and offering things with two hands, can be elegant and inspiring. But there is no one way to do it right. Every culture has very beautiful etiquette and forms of politeness. This might surprise Tibetans, but I'd say the English are much more polite than Tibetans on many levels. Even rowdy, noisy mainland Chinese have their own etiquette, which you can spot if you're familiar with their culture.

It is of utmost importance to remember that the foundation of etiquette in the guru-student relationship is pure perception; therefore, not seeing the guru as a peer is the quintessence of etiquette. Ritualistic etiquette does have its place. It's important in the cultivation of discipline. Tantric practitioners especially can use etiquette as a tool for mindfulness.

The effect of etiquette also depends on motivation. Properly dressing and putting on lipstick to see the lama can be a vehicle of accumulation of merit. If a lazy man with a revolutionary attitude who detests wearing formal clothes dons a suit and tie when visiting a lama with the motivation of showing respect, he is accumulating merit. Often when you go to a Western Dharma center you'll find a shrine room full of shabbily dressed men and women. They can bother to put on a suit to go to the office, but they choose to wear a nightgown to Dharma talks, and on top of that, they bring half a suitcase of paraphernalia and treat the shrine room like a common neighborhood yoga studio. There is no etiquette, no attempt to create a ceremonial atmosphere.

CULTURAL CHAUVINISM

We should not value our guru simply because it is a custom, and we should not relate to him only in a customary way. Although there are general instructions about how to behave—like when the guru comes, you should open the door, walk to his left side, not step over his shadow, sit lower than him—these are not just rules; their sole purpose is to bring mindful awareness. But over time they have become customs. I have seen my own Bhutanese attendants going on and on about how Westerners don't know how to sit and giving all kinds of directions to visitors. Bhutanese are struck with cultural chauvinism, mistaking cultural practices and etiquette for true devotion.

Some Westerners have much more devotion toward the lamas than Tibetans and Bhutanese because they are less likely to be tainted by custom and tradition. Devotion is not obligatory for them. Someone from Ohio may not know where to place his feet at a puja because, unlike many Bhutanese, he wasn't raised in an environment with pujas, stupas, and prayer flags. Yet he will leave his comfortable job, travel far from home, learn a strange language, adapt to strange customs and diets, and wholeheartedly follow the guru and the Dharma. These Westerners are not stupid: they are educated, critical-minded. They don't have any cultural reason to have devotion, yet here they are.

ETIQUETTE VERSUS DISPLAY

It should be said that how students relate to the guru in public is important. Unless you have gotten permission, all the general rules of etiquette still apply, like standing when the guru stands and not breathing with your mouth hanging open. At the same time, you have to be skillful depending on the situation. If you make a big hoo-ha while in the presence of nonbelievers, it might exhaust the seed of someone else's inspiration. Even though my friend Sandra may have a good motivation when she collects the scraps of leftovers on my plate and serves them to people as a blessing, it's very possible it could create a misunderstanding among nonbelievers or the newly inducted. Why is it that a Westerner who comes a day early suddenly thinks he can wield expertise over the new arrivals?

There are so many skeptical people these days, and to get carried away by your so-called devotion and show it off by staring adoringly at the guru and even licking his toes can easily put off people who might otherwise be curious about Dharma. As a Dharma practitioner, it is your responsibility to inspire others to follow the path of the Dharma. You must, therefore, present yourself appropriately, particularly in relation to your guru—with your guru's permission, of course.

DEVOTION TO A FAKE GURU

As I have said, it is possible to have a karmic link with a fake guru who is not teaching out of kindness, but if the disciple interprets him or her as the embodiment of kindness and has complete devotion, there can still be some benefit. The guru doesn't actually have to be enlightened, but if the disciple thinks that he or she is enlightened and venerates this person as an enlightened being, the disciple will receive the blessings accordingly. This makes the challenges of guru devotion even more challenging and the gray areas even more gray.

There once was a powerful, wily lion with the most beautiful fur, who was pursued by many hunters but never captured. For some reason, the lion became tame whenever he saw monks in robes. He was inexplicably devoted to the sangha. One day a hunter disguised as a monk was able to get close enough to kill the lion. Because of the lion's veneration toward the saffron-colored robes, he accumulated ninety-nine eons of merit—even though the hunter was not a

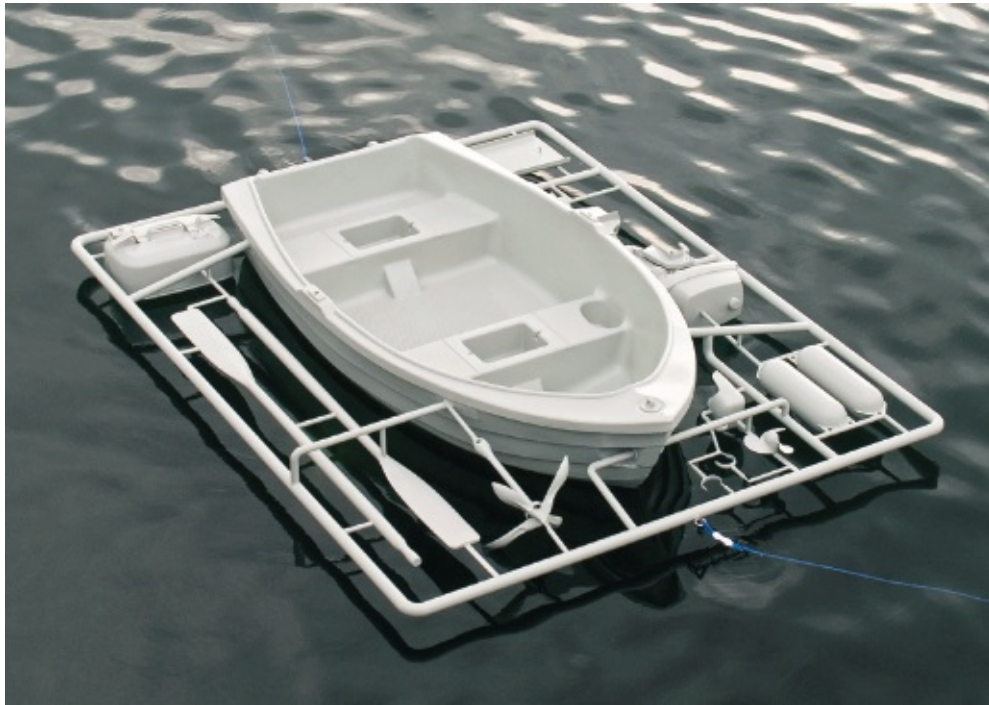
genuine monk. This lion eventually became Shakyamuni. Veneration to the Dharma has so much merit.

It really depends on the devotee. If a student is very accomplished and still sees the fake guru as the embodiment of all the gurus, he or she will be able to extract blessings. Of course, if the object of the devotion is not fake and the devotion is there, then the path of devotion is very swift.



© Hengki Koentjoro

To feel no devotion whatsoever for your guru is like being a stone on the floor of the deepest part of the ocean. There is a whole ocean above you, and there you are, a round pebble that can't absorb even one drop of that water.



© Michael Johansson

To have no devotion is like being in an unmanned ship that just sits on the surface of the water and doesn't go anywhere. A spiritual path with knowledge but no devotion will not take you to the other shore.



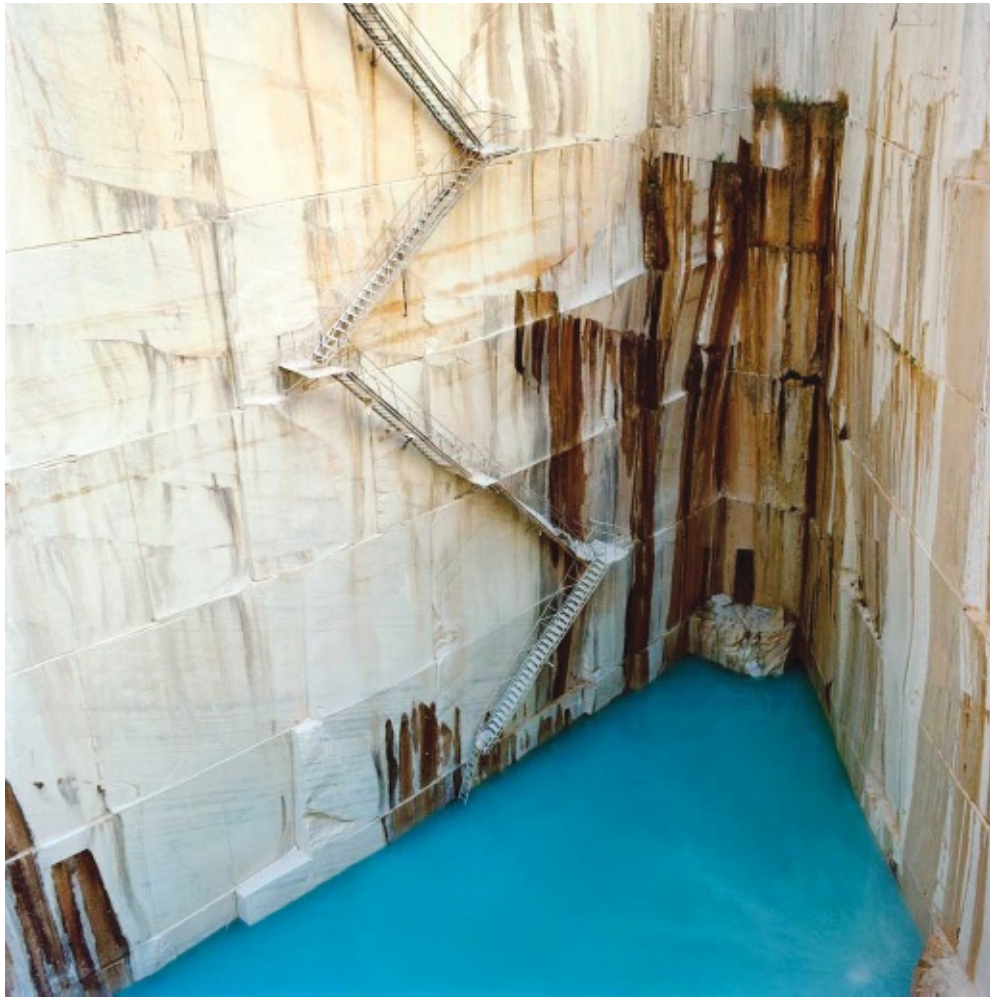
© Jaap Scheeren

Without devotion, you are like a blind person visiting a temple famous for its frescoes. A person who has devotion is like an artist who is trained to see beauty in everything, to whom even a garbage bag is a piece of beautiful, profound art.



© Candace Fladager

Without devotion, a student is like a burnt seed from which it is impossible for the shoot of bodhichitta to grow.



© Tito Mouraz

If you lack devotion, it is as if you are falling into an abyss of suffering with no hope of escape.



© Kechun Zhang

Approaching the Dharma without devotion is like landing on an island of golden pebbles yet having no hands with which to gather them.



© Bahman Farzao

Devotion is like an impossibly fertile tropical country where things grow easily and without any effort. If you have devotion, enlightened qualities simply grow. Those who have knowledge without devotion won't notice the enlightened shoots that spring up from all phenomena.



© Ekkehard Altenburger

Devotion is like owning a house that's well sealed off against intruders. All kinds of negative emotions may approach, but they will quickly move on because they have no access.

MAKING OFFERINGS

It is believed that encountering the Vajrayana is a far more rare occurrence than encountering a buddha. When all the circumstances come together and the right time and occasion for the Vajrayana to be taught arises, it is extremely special. Those of us who have even a curiosity about the Vajrayana must have some merit. And to actually encounter someone willing and able to teach is something truly precious.

In the Vajrayana it's said that there is nothing greater a practitioner can do than to remember the guru, so maintaining a relationship with the guru is of utmost importance. To preserve that thread, we make offerings, and of all the offerings, the most supreme offering is putting the instructions, the Dharma, into practice. Just doing this will be enough to please the countless buddhas and the lineage gurus, and if your guru is a qualified guru, this will be the single deed that will please him. By putting the Dharma into practice, you are becoming a

source of bliss for so many sentient beings. There is no greater philanthropic act than that.

Tantric texts suggest that the second best thing we can offer is our service, from polishing shoes to making photocopies to running a Dharma center to drafting a letter to looking after a household to gardening.

Micheline is a French nun who is like a walking storeroom: anytime, anywhere, you can ask for something completely random, like a button, and she will have it. Micheline was asked to look after a house on Avenue Victor Hugo in Paris. She was such a good caretaker of this house, which was a residence for many great masters such as Dudjom Rinpoche and Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. But every time I was passing through, she would sigh in that way that French people do and say how much she longed to do retreat. It was difficult for me because, knowing that practice is one of the most precious offerings one can make, I couldn't discourage her from her longing. But retreat centers are not the best and only place to practice; she could well become like so many retreatants I have observed who end up not really practicing during their retreats.

Micheline would be much better off cleaning the house where great beings have walked and slept than doing a three-year retreat, if only she could appreciate that she is breathing in the same rooms where two of the great-est masters of the modern era also breathed, brushed their teeth, woke up, taught; where their DNA may have fallen; where beings just like the Buddha himself, in person, have stepped again and again. The opportunity to clean and put in order a place—which according to the tantra is equal to Bodhgaya, because it's the dwelling place of one's own root gurus—is so precious. Like Micheline, many Vajrayana students who dedicate their lives to running centers and ironing the guru's clothes don't seem to know that these activities *are* practice.

Finally, the tantric texts suggest making material offerings, especially on the day of an initiation. This is considered quite auspicious.

As discussed earlier with the omelet example, the Vajrayana is the result vehicle. As a Vajrayana practitioner, you practice perceiving the guru as the Buddha and the deity of the mandala. Ideally, this is not a matter simply of imagining or visualizing but of actually seeing the guru as such. Because this is difficult for ordinary people, we train in the application of tantric methods in the same way an art student trains in how to see. In this case, we are not learning only how to see but how to taste, how to smell, how to hear.

Thus you will find in different tantric sadhanas a variety of methods for seeing the guru, maybe not even as a whole but in parts. For example, the guru's body is divided into different mandalas, or the five buddha families, and you can make offerings to each part. Offering to the guru's eyes is like making offerings to

Ksitigarbha and Maitreya. Offering music is like offering to Vajrapani and Dripa Namsal (Sarvanivarana Vishkambhin). The right nostril is Akashagarbha, and the right side of the tongue is Avalokiteshvara. The left nostril is Samantabhadra, and the left tongue is Manjushri. So instead of making offerings to different deities, you can make offerings to different parts of the guru's body and those eight attributes or deities.

Not only is the guru the deity—even the offering substances are seen as the deity. Even the practitioner who is making the offerings is the deity. There is so much merit in thinking in these ways.

The tantric texts say that mentally and physically making offerings to the guru—giving things like music, swords, ornaments, sons and daughters, mothers and sisters, countries, nations, and so on—is far greater than making offerings to thousands of buddhas for thousands of eons, especially, as Longchenpa said, if you do it on days you receive initiations.



What to offer: everything from a piece of fruit to the head on your shoulders.

The benefits of making offerings to the guru are inexhaustible and infinite. It is the supreme method for accumulating merit because the guru is the source of both merit and wisdom. By the blessings of making offerings to the guru, you will be better able to contemplate ultimate truth, and you will long for it more and more. Often people long only for the guru's blessings for longevity or success in worldly activity, but the quintessential blessing of the guru is for the greater ability to understand the Buddhadharma in general and in particular the intricate teachings of karma and shunyata, and to conceive the inconceivable and express the inexpressible teachings.

SEX AS AN OFFERING

In the tantric texts there is not one single shloka that says a student should offer gold but should not offer sex to the guru. Similarly, there is nothing that says you should offer tomatoes but not onions.

The value of the practice of offering very intimate things like sex depends so much on the individual. If you encounter a master who has a reputation for roving eyes and flirtatiousness and you find that unacceptable, simply don't get close, or wear a blanket or fluffy clothes. This advice may bring to mind the attitude of men who blame the victim: "Oh, that girl shouldn't have been wearing a miniskirt—of course she was molested." But unfortunately in many parts of the world, especially in Asia, causes and conditions such as skimpy dress are misinterpreted as an open invitation. Those causes and conditions need to be changed. It's definitely possible. Just look at places like Brazil, where skimpy dresses are accepted, even expected. In the meantime, if you don't want something to happen, you should try not to create that situation. I wonder how people got turned on during the Stone Age.

Of course, it's mind-boggling that in India—a land with so much culture and thousands of years of discourse on ethics, morality, compassion, and love—even those who protest against the rape situation wonder if the victim may have been asking for trouble. Deep down they are thinking, "She shouldn't have worn those clothes." I don't know about other cultures, but generally speaking, in Asia there is so much sexual repression, especially in certain parts of the Middle East, India, and Tibet. As a result, it's possible that many Arabs and Tibetans think Western women are loose. The respect they offer to their own women is not offered when they talk to Westerners, and that's not acceptable. Bikinis on television don't help; it just confirms their thinking. Yes, as a principle, it's

completely wrong to think like that. But the fact of the matter is that it's likely seekers will search for a guru in Asia, and this is how the mindstream of some people works there. This is why a fluffy blanket might be useful, especially if you don't want this lama gazing at you as he is about to orgasm.



© Patty Carroll

What to wear when you go to India: dress like a mummy.

But if you want something from this lama and you are testing him, then by all means, approach him in a complete set of Agent Provocateur lingerie. Or if being risqué is how you express your individuality, go ahead and wear a skimpy dress to a puja, but if you don't want the guru to look at you or touch you, you might tell him beforehand that this is your self-expression and it has nothing to do with trying to be alluring. Communication is essential when you are mingling with different cultures.

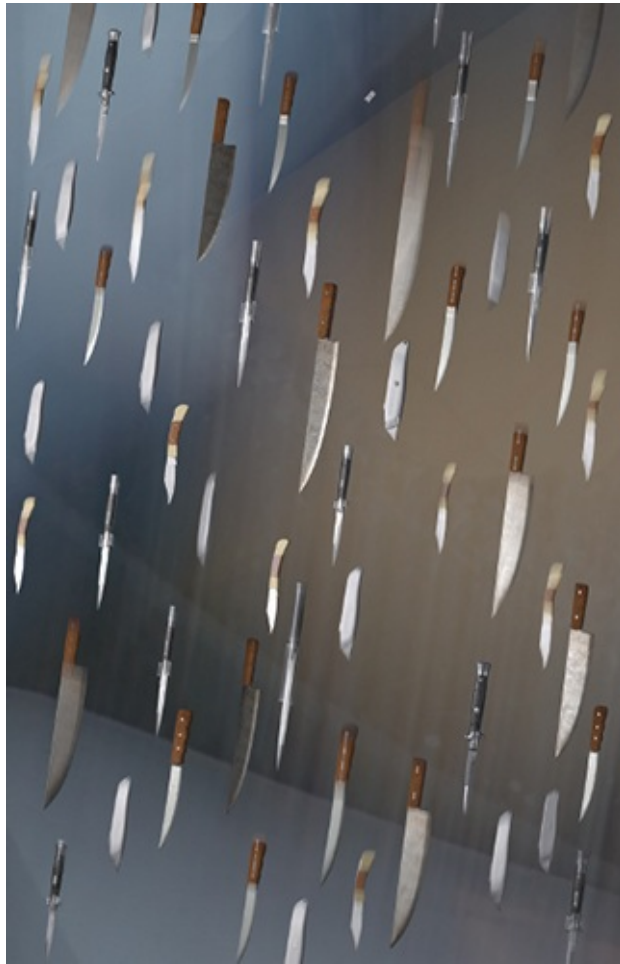
SAMAYA: KEEPING, BREAKING, AND RESTORING

Your Guru Needs to Go on a Diet

From a strict tantric point of view, if you perceive your teacher as a human being who has weight and height, you have already broken several samayas—especially if you pass judgment, such as thinking that one hundred kilos is too heavy and the guru needs to go on a diet. Even if you perceive the guru as being bound by gender, this is a breakage of samaya. If you are concerned about breaking samaya, it's an indication that you have reached a stage of being quite a good practitioner. In the beginning it might help to pretend to have pure perception as a means to train the mind and also to inspire others.

When gurus manifest human qualities and weaknesses, a seasoned and savvy student can reap merit by thinking this is just another symptom of the guru's limitless kindness. But for those of us who cannot tune our attitudes this way, we can at least have human affection for a guru who sneezes, coughs, and feels sleepy.

Ultimately, we aim to see all phenomena—tables, feathers, mountains, lovers—as interpreted by mind and therefore by our own unique perception. Going through the process of transforming each and every individual we meet and perceiving them as a manifestation of the Buddha is time-consuming and complicated. So the Vajrayana teachings recommend, instead, that we exercise pure perception on one person with whom we have some special affinity. Because students feel respect for a guru who has revealed the path to enlightenment, we can start by working with this one individual. We can get used to the idea that however the guru manifests, good or bad, is all our own unique perception. Then gradually we can start to include the rest of phenomena in this exercise, and this is how we build confidence in our own perception.



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OBSTACLES

In the tantras, sutras, and shastras we learn that Mara, the demon king of obstacles, sends his biggest obstacles to interfere in the relationship between the student and the teacher. Guru devotion is the most powerful path to the destruction of ego, so Mara's obstacles between the guru and student must be equally powerful. Students should be aware of the hurdles and learn to outwit, be cruel, or adopt an indifferent attitude when they come. Don't let Mara bother you.

It is also why having devotion for the guru and developing pure perception are so good for us. We are the ones who gain from this practice.

So, first we train ourselves to accept that everything we encounter is the product of our own perception. Gradually we include all phenomena. And ultimately, we achieve nondual perception. By developing a habit, the door of devotion will be 90 percent open.

Abishekas and Samaya

Abisheka is an exclusively tantric method. Ultimately, abisheka is an introduction or an unveiling. If you wake up with amnesia and someone comes to inform you who you are, what your role is, and what you can claim as yours, it's important that this person be trustworthy and the information accurate. Receiving the information is like receiving an abisheka, and the informant is like the guru. It's important that the guru knows what he's doing.

Over time "abisheka" has become almost synonymous with "blessing." Abishekas do have an element of blessing, but the core purpose of the abisheka is to remove the veil that has prevented you from recognizing your true nature.

There are many kinds of veils, but for the sake of simplicity, we speak in terms of the three veils: the veil of body, the veil of speech, and the veil of mind. Interestingly, these three are also referred to as the three gates. In the Vajrayana they are called the three indestructible vajras: vajra body, vajra speech, and vajra mind. This last set of labels refers to the absolute reality of body, speech, and mind, which needs to be unveiled and discovered.

To the student who has a good grip on bodhichitta, who has prepared with a foundation of basic mind training, like *lojong*, who has a good understanding of interdependence, and especially who has a strong conviction in the tantric path and devotion to the guru, the guru will give abishekas at the appropriate time and place.

There are many different levels of tantra. The methods of abisheka can be generic in some of the more common tantras, whereas the Anuyoga Tantra, the Higher Tantra, has more profound levels of abisheka. The three higher initiations, which we call the secret, wisdom, and word initiations, purify the defilements of prana and bindu.

In the Anuyoga Tantra, the guru will choose the appropriate time and situation to introduce the disciple's five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness—not as ordinary senses but as the five buddha families. During the abisheka the guru will unveil the student's consciousness, body, feeling, and so on as functioning as Akshobya Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, Ratnasambhava Buddha, Vairochana, and Amoghasiddhi. To do this, the guru might use substances such as a vase, crown, vajra, and bell.

In this degenerate time, the theory and logic of abisheka is almost inconceivable. But it's a bit like a villager with a new phone being shown how to insert a SIM card, charge the device, make a call, and so on. The person who teaches how to do these things is merely unveiling the features of something the villager already has.

For most of us, it's inconceivable that the noise of a car honking or a police

siren is mantra. It's unacceptable. But with the proper guidance of the guru, and if all conditions are met, the guru can make the disciple hear all sound as mantra.

The fourth abisheka is the most important abisheka and has many different names and labels. Yet even though it is such a profound method, people casually refer to it as if it were underpants. They ask, "Have you gotten pointing-out instructions?" as if they were readily available.

We often refer to the fourth abisheka as the wisdom abisheka. Here the guru will introduce this very-moment-mind—not the past, not the future, but this very cognizance—as the Buddha. The guru can give the fourth abisheka again and again, and at any time. It doesn't necessarily happen when the guru is sitting on the throne with horns blowing and incense waving. It can happen while you are peeing in a toilet next to your guru. The guru chooses the precise time and place and then does something that derails the train of your defiled thoughts.

If the abisheka is bestowed properly and received properly, a permanent shift in the student's perception will occur. And when that happens, the initiation is received.

If the disciple is of superior faculties, then after the fourth abisheka, no samayas need to be kept. By the time a disciple of superior faculties receives the fourth abisheka, she will have accomplished her goal. Because most of us have not reached that level, we have longing, admiration, trust in this path. We intellectually understand, but we keep falling into our old habits. So what we need to do from the moment we receive the abisheka is maintain that awareness of our samayas. Samaya is like the alarm, the guardrail, the discipline that keeps us in check. All of this is why the guru is so important.

No other vehicle provides these tools.

Receiving the Abisheka

Naropa strongly advised teachers to ask disciples, "Can you keep this samaya?" again and again and again, especially if the students are about to receive an initiation. This question exists in all the abisheka texts, but now the abisheka has become so ritualized, and unfortunately, these key parts are being skimmed through.

In ancient times practitioners did not receive many initiations—maybe just one in a lifetime. And that one could take years to receive. They may have first taken refuge, and then a few years later, the bodhichitta vow, and then a few years after that they were asked, "Can you really keep this samaya?" Only then did they receive the first abisheka, maybe just the vase abisheka, and then they waited a long, long time, and only then were all the other initiations given. But

nobody has the patience anymore, and they want to receive so many initiations. When you receive many initiations, there is no time for this kind of prolonged undertaking.

There was once a very young prince who was destined for the throne. One day his attendants took him on an adventure to see the bazaar, but he got lost in the crowd. There were throngs of people, and somehow he took a wrong turn and never found his way back home. Days, months, years went by, and he became a beggar, stealing, hunting, and fishing to survive. He grew older, met a woman, and ended up having a family. As the years passed, he totally forgot who he had been. All the while the palace was searching for him. Finally, one day he was spotted in a market and was brought to a minister. They told him he was the prince and that his father was dead. They wanted him to take the throne.

That is what happens when we take an initiation. The minister was not transferring the royal line to the prince—the line was already there—but without the minister he had no knowledge of his royal blood. He needed someone to point out that he was entitled to the throne.

What Helps Us Understand the Truth Is a Method

The aim of following this spiritual path is to actualize the truth. Unless we understand the truth, we are constantly deceived by believing that everything illusory is real. This belief is what we call delusion. Having delusion creates emotion, and emotion breeds endless karma and its consequences. This cycle is what we call samsara.

Anything that will help us understand the truth is what we consider a method. Codes of conduct are methods. The codes of conduct of the Buddhadharma are based on the view. A seemingly ritualistic and cultural rule such as “monks must shave their heads” has nothing to do with the Buddha having some kind of allergy to hair. When a monk decides to take 250 vows with the motivation to actualize the truth, it becomes a method. Whatever he can do to counteract vanity and attachment to the body can be cultivated through meditation, reading, and contemplation but also through applying physical rules and limitations, like shaving the head or wearing specific-colored robes.

To even think you are a man or a woman, let alone to think you are ugly or beautiful, is breaking Vajrayana samaya. To consider your five aggregates as ordinary is violating the Vajrayana samaya. To look at a place like Lucerne and think it's a clean and beautiful land in contrast to Beijing is breaking samaya.

A tantric practitioner's sole aim is to see everything as pure and immeasurable. Note that the Vajrayana meaning of “everything is pure” is not

that everything is fresh like mountain air and lakes and swimming pools and lotus ponds. That has nothing to do with purity. Harboring any kind of dualistic distinctions is impure and a breakage of samaya.

It is almost impossible to keep samaya, especially for beginner Vajrayana practitioners. But there is no such thing as first learning all the details about samaya and then keeping all samaya intact and then beginning to practice the Vajrayana, because to keep the samaya perfectly is the completion of the path.

Because the path of the guru is the greatest feature of the Vajrayana, violating samaya with the guru is also the gravest offense. As mentioned earlier, there are many different degrees of violation based on your motivation and capacity. Disagreeing on small matters like whether Tom Cruise is handsome or not is not going to make much of a difference. Context is also a factor. If you are in a situation in which you are supposed to think every being is beautiful and every being is a deity—such as during the practice of developing meditation, or *utpattikrama*—and Tom Cruise walks by, Tom Cruise has to be actualized as a sublime being.

The moment you intentionally take the abisheka, your samaya with this person, this guru, has started. More precisely, from the moment you have accepted him or her as your vajra master, you have accepted the responsibility of keeping samaya.

Maintaining the Samaya

Because of this view, maintaining the samaya can be elaborate or very simple because it all boils down to having pure perception of the guru. But there are methods to help you maintain samaya, elaborately and physically, such as reading the sadhanas and reciting the mantras you have pledged during the abishekas. These commitments can become quite elaborate. You can make feast offerings to the dakas and dakinis on designated days or, if possible, every day. You can always travel with a vajra and bell and tantric substances such as a kapala. But all of these can be condensed into one method: having pure perception toward the master.

Breaking Samaya

Beginning tantric practitioners take note: there is no way you will not break the samayas. But not every broken samaya causes the experience we call vajra hell. People in Vajrayana circles have to be careful with saying things like, “If you doubt your guru, you will go to vajra hell.”

It’s not that easy to go to vajra hell. If you are not doing something on a grand

level, you cannot make big mistakes. If you build a rocket to the moon, the potential for glory is equal to the potential for catastrophe. But if you are looking for the nearest 7-Eleven and you take a wrong turn, it's not going to be the biggest disaster of your life. But this doesn't mean you should not aim for the moon. The real mistake for a student is not aiming high enough. A potential tantric student who does not pursue the path of the Vajrayana is such a loss.

In order to go to vajra hell you have to truly take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and sangha. On top of that, you must have taken bodhisattva vows and a Vajrayana initiation. If you have entered into the Vajrayana mandala and then you slander the path and the master as phony, shamanistic, and culturally bound, this is a sure way to get into vajra hell. If you have reached a point where you can go to vajra hell, ironically, you have to have entered the Vajrayana path quite deeply. The gravity is equal to the realization. The greater capacity you have, the more ability you have to make mistakes. If you know better than to go against your samaya but you still choose to misbehave, you better watch out.

You won't go to vajra hell just for being ignorant. Most people who attend initiations come, drink some saffron water, and eat some dough with some sweets inside. They don't receive the initiation just by sitting there and listening. If that were the case, then pity the dogs and birds that happen to be hanging around the tent. Without even requesting, all these creatures would receive initiations and straightaway break their Vajrayana vows and be sent to vajra hell.

Vajra hell is a profound concept. It's not necessarily a place where you burn in molten iron surrounded by hell guardians with hideous faces. Vajra hell can be a place where you become so attached to the logic of karma that you get entangled, so caught up by rationality that you cannot get beyond it. In vajra hell you will never understand the profound meaning when we say shit and food have one taste because you have stubbornly and absolutely become rational. Having broken an extreme samaya vow, you may end up being reborn with a habit of not trusting the grand view. You will end up a person who needs to have the omelet assembled before you see it as an omelet. And that, in the Vajrayana view, is even worse than burning in hell. This strong habit of no confidence in the method is a heavy loss for you.



© David Pike

It is believed that Shravakayana vows are like clay pots: once you break one, it's difficult to mend. Mahayana and Vajrayana vows are like golden pots: even if you have broken the pot, a skilled goldsmith and proper attention can make it even better than before.

Restoring Samaya

Even though breaking samaya in the Vajrayana sounds very grave and hopeless, the profound Vajrayana path is not without plenty of means of restoring all kinds of breakages. Offering your body is considered one of the best ways to restore the samaya. Therefore, in the tantra there are offering practices, such as kusali practice or feast offering. And of course, one can always restore samaya through the recitation of the Vajrasattva mantra.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said,

If you regret having disobeyed or displeased the guru, it is important to offer your own body, either physically or as a visualization—for example, by cutting off your skull and putting your intestines and limbs in it, and then transforming them through visualization into nectar and offering them to the guru.

Treatment of Samaya Breakers

It is said in the Vajrayana texts that if a Vajrayana student has broken his or her samaya with a guru, the rest of the students should not associate with him or her. In fact, you are not even supposed to be in the same room.

This principle has been abused by gurus and Dharma practitioners. Some gurus have conveniently used it as a threat, intimating that if the students break samaya, it will hinder the longevity of the guru. No Vajrayana master with any kindness would ever use this kind of blatant blackmail. Likewise, the other sangha members make the student's life miserable. This is not at all in accordance with Buddhism, let alone Vajrayana. As followers of the Buddha, we are supposed to embrace all beings with love and compassion, especially those who have violated the samaya.

The fact remains that if a person has consciously and deliberately broken samaya, he or she is not fit to be in the mandala. That person should not participate in feast offerings or take initiations with other students, and it's good for the sangha to avoid doing tantric activities with him or her. But at no time should this person be looked down upon or despised. As a follower of the Buddha, they are the most worthy objects of compassion.

CONFLICTS

Too Close to the Fire

If you become very close to the guru and spend too much time with him or her, you may start finding faults. It doesn't matter who the person is. When we human beings spend a lot of time with others, we start to notice traits that we simply don't like. It says in the *Jataka Sutra* that as we become familiar with something or someone, we also become discontented—which is probably why we are always looking for something or someone new. Those who keep their distance usually attract far more admiration than those standing right next to us.

Similarly, if your hero is distant and unreachable, the duration of your hero worship will be extended. But if your hero is close and you spend a lot of time together, he or she may well become your nemesis. This is why the Buddha told his disciples that one of the best things for maintaining a relationship with the master is keeping a healthy distance: not too close, not too distant—in terms of time, geography, socialization, and emotions. Actually, we could apply this advice to almost every situation.

Keeping distance could be seen as avoiding the problem, but maybe in the beginning it is the best. Once seasoned, the warrior or the practitioner becomes more skilled, more brave, and more accomplished by getting into trouble and jumping into challenges and spending long periods of time in close proximity to the guru.

Displeasing the Guru

We are told that we should not displease the guru, but practitioners should not get caught up thinking, “I didn’t prepare the coffee the way my guru likes,” or “I don’t love the movies my guru loves,” or “I hate watching football,” as if these trivial things constitute breakage of samaya.

Things like putting too much sugar in your guru’s coffee don’t count at all, especially at the beginner’s level. All we are concerned about are actions that displease the guru because they negatively influence your path to enlightenment or obscure your pure perception of the guru and all phenomena. Entering the path with a petty mind could distract you and prolong your path.

Because the ultimate aim is to bring the student to enlightenment, the guru, too, can’t be concerned about petty things that might displease his students, like paying equal attention to everyone, attending birthday parties, and sitting where they have placed the brocade.

New students and new gurus might get caught up in indulging in such trivial concerns. Then again, with a genuine guru, it’s difficult to know for sure if he is being petty or if he is employing skillful means.

Disagreeing with the Guru

How do we deal with a disagreement with a teacher? It really depends on the situation and also the relationship. Many people ask if it’s OK to argue with the guru when having a discussion or meeting about worldly issues—brainstorming or planning. For example, you might find yourself in the position of setting up an institution or a center with your guru. If your motivation is to create harmony and especially if the teacher is encouraging, that kind of interaction—voicing opinions—is not considered discourteous. Generally speaking, this kind of mundane disagreement doesn’t generate deep emotion, so wrong view isn’t involved. You may actually accumulate merit by speaking up or opposing some ideas.

Imagine you are traveling in a maze and you know the right way out but the guru says it’s the other way. If you completely agree with him just because you are practicing devotion, it may lead you both in a more circuitous direction or to a dead end, wasting a lot of time and energy. The guru might get angry and waste more time, and then you might get scolded, and more frustration comes. In this case, you should probably insist on your way. But if the teacher still insists otherwise, then you can adopt an attitude of “What is there to lose?” You will lose only an opportunity to prove a point. Is that important for you? By agreeing in this way, you may also have a chance to accumulate merit.

If a guru stands above Thimphu and points at the corrugated tin roofs and says, “You must now have the pure perception that these buildings are as beautiful as the red-roofed villages of Portugal,” then even though these buildings look no better than war-torn Syria, you should do that. He is commanding you. You can at least aspire to think that way. And if both you and the guru are sitting in a train station in India and the guru asks you to visualize this train station as an infinite mandala with all the attributes, again, try to do that.



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Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö said, “However you treat the guru—as an ordinary person, a good and compassionate human, an arhat, a great bodhisattva on the first bhumi, a great bodhisattva on the tenth bhumi, or the Buddha himself—you will receive the corresponding blessing.”

But if you are at a Tibetan monastery where the guru is constructing a public

toilet and he asks you to help sort out some engineering problems, this is not the time for you to talk about one taste and infinite mandalas.

Criticizing the Guru

If you know clearly what the guru wants and what the guru thinks, it's quite not all right to criticize his judgment. Worse is when, having received initiation and taken this person as your guru, you think, "This guru is deceptive. This guru doesn't know how to lead me to enlightenment."

But where do you draw the line? Is pointing out that the guru might be eating too much salt for his health counted as criticism? Such a concern, even if it's critical, doesn't constitute a breakage of samaya that will send you to vajra hell. You might even accumulate merit if you've done it with a good motivation.

What if a student says, "I'm sure my guru is making films for a reason, but I can't comprehend why. I wish instead he would put that same amount of energy into teaching and writing books"? There is a little criticism in that, but it depends on where it is coming from. If the student is really wishing to learn the Dharma, really wants the guru to teach in a familiar, conventional way, this whining could stem from a genuine hunger for the Dharma.

After you analyze the guru, you can also discuss any qualms directly with him or her. If your intuition and intelligence lead you to think that this relationship is not going to work, then without judgment of the guru, you can ask questions, seek clarity, challenge, and perhaps negotiate, or at least create a dialogue to help dispel doubt.

But once you have taken initiation, if you slander the guru, or even point out negative facts about the guru, it will destroy the seed of your pure perception. The tantric texts say that even if you have done a great many meritorious things for eons and eons, if you speak about the guru in an unwholesome manner, you will never close the door of the lower realm. In other words, you will go so far astray from the opportunity to see the truth.

Clearly, once you have taken someone as your vajra master, criticism should be avoided. And if you happen to be with people who malign your Vajrayana master, you must learn how to defend with skill. Being fiercely defensive won't necessarily work, so you must be soft and maybe even appear to agree on a few superficial points. But unless you are very good at this technique, it can backfire. So perhaps the best thing to do is to avoid that conversation and those people altogether.

Developing a Wrong View of the Guru

Emotions are so unpredictable. We are all so insecure and proud. When we don't get what we want we become frustrated and start finding fault in the guru. We criticize little things like that he yawns too much or farts, and then we begin to scrutinize absolutely everything.

We get nauseated watching his adoring students running around for him and we deem them fawning sycophants who blindly agree with anything that tumbles from his lips. We then bolster our own pride by telling ourselves we would never be so gullible as to accept everything he says at face value. We imagine we are the only truly genuine people in the sangha, and courageous too, because we are among the very few to disagree with the guru, and everyone else is a hypocrite. This train of thought can only establish the habits of dislike and disgust in our minds, and the resulting pride will only destroy us.

Some students start to resent their gurus when they feel ignored or left out. They may think the guru spends time with an inner circle of favorites and excludes them. Such students need to be mindful of their insecurities, expectations, and assumptions. They must remember that this appearance could very well be a product of their imagination. They must also remember that the reason they come to a guru is for enlightenment, not attention.

Most of us are overflowing with defilements and wrong views, which becomes a problem when our opinions and prejudices fall out of harmony with the guru's wishes and actions. This can stir up wrong views about the guru.

Again, enlightenment is the main purpose of having a guru-student relationship; therefore, it's a waste of time to ask petty questions and seek confirmation of all your values and judgments. The constant need for evidence that you have been properly heard by the guru can become an obstacle. Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé, quoting Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, said that the two most important events of our lives—birth and death—can't be negotiated and debated, so what's the point of deliberating about all the other petty things in between? It's totally useless.

Once we understand that the true nature of our mind is the guru, we won't have to worry about whether or not he hears us when we recite one of the many "Calling the Guru" prayers. And if the true nature of our mind is the guru, any wrong views we may have about the guru apply also to our own mind. The only person who loses is you.

As the Buddha said in the *Sutra of Non Arising*, of all possible defilements, the subtlest and most powerful is the defilement of karma. Those who wish to avoid being stained by karma should avoid judging others and instead rejoice, thinking, "I can never understand another person's mind and therefore their actions."

Withdrawing from a Guru

In certain cases, practitioners will realize that no matter how hard they try, there is no way to keep samaya with a guru from whom they have received initiation. For them, there is an option to withdraw from the Vajrayana master. It can be done elegantly and properly by politely declaring to the guru that the relationship is over. The guru then has to grant permission. If the parting is done in this way, the consequences are less grave; there is still a connection. But if one wishes to continue being a Vajrayana practitioner, restoration of samaya is still necessary.

In the Vajrayana everything is one essence, so of course all gurus are of one essence. But because Douglas is deluded, if he has developed a preference and wishes to renounce Lama Ülee as his guru and follow Penor Rinpoche instead, he can choose to do that. If he renounces graciously, he still has a chance to continue being a practitioner. One day he might realize that all gurus have been inseparable from the beginning. But if he renounces Lama Ülee after taking initiation, thinking that this person is just an ordinary being, then the seed of the Vajrayana path to enlightenment is burned. It's a subtle difference, but because path is all mind, it's an important one.

THE GURU'S HEIR: WHEN THERE IS NO MORE PHYSICAL GURU

Before we go into detail here, the following must be stated clearly: When we talk of "heirs," we are no longer talking about the guru principle. An heir is a human cultural phenomenon. Strictly speaking, in the Vajrayana, the guru never dies, so the notion of the heir is totally irrelevant. But because we are fundamentally dualistic beings, the way we relate to the guru is bound by ordinary physical limitations. Because of this, devotees respect the guru even after he is seemingly long gone. After he is no longer physically present, we still do not step over his shoes. Thousands of years after Shakyamuni Buddha's body expired, we still venerate him.

Because of dualistic thinking, many students suffer when the guru dies. Most Buddhist spiritual lineages have a tradition of naming heirs, usually senior students and accomplished beings, who take on the teacher's responsibilities to the students and the sangha. In addition to heirs or "regents," the Tibetans have the tulku system, which is more complicated. It's important that we not get lost in the woods here. This book is about the guru's qualities, so by association I have to mention tulkus, but this is a very big subject that requires a book of its own. Let's not get too distracted asking questions about what will happen to the

tulku system in the future. That's not the point of this book.

Whether someone is a Dharma heir or a tulku, it's very rare that the deceased guru is reflected in this being in every way, shape, and form. We are talking about two fundamentally different humans. Therefore, the disciples' relationship with the guru's heir is not going to be identical. Even if this person was appointed by the living guru, it is asking a lot from disciples to have the same confidence in another person.

I confess that, because of my own delusion, I am not able to see the tulkus of my gurus—Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the Sixteenth Karmapa, and Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche—in the same way I saw my living, breathing gurus. All I can do is try to project the aura of the Sixteenth Karmapa onto his yangsi. Likewise, I can project the elegance of the previous Dudjom, or the all-encompassing quality of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, onto Khyentse Yangsi. But I cannot feel it. Even a cough of the previous Dudjom would make me shudder. The current yangsi could shout at the top of his voice, and I wouldn't twitch. I used to fastidiously check my outfit before entering the Sixteenth Karmapa's chambers, but now I only pretend to show concern. When I was young, if I went to Dudjom Rinpoche with a comic book in my bag, I would feel his X-ray gaze, but now I walk around with much worse things in my bag and am not worried.

Nonetheless, if the guru clearly indicates that someone is his heir, following that heir is a command on the highest level, and you must do whatever the guru says. To maintain devotion and pure perception to an heir is a challenge that will grow as the structure and support of the spiritual path becomes weaker.

Often the heir apparent or reincarnation apparent has big shoes to fill, and if he is not adorned with the noble quality of humility and genuine care for the Dharma and sentient beings, the result is that he becomes insecure. This insecurity often manifests as pride. These prideful heirs are likely to ostracize the elders, freeze out the entourage of the past lama, concoct their own new styles, and cultivate new sycophants who wouldn't know or dare to criticize. With marketing skills, such gurus might gather new followers, and it may even look like their activities are flourishing. But they are probably not helping the longevity of the precious lineage and legacy that they inherited. They are just creating a new phenomenon. They are no longer heirs.

This is all a relatively new phenomenon. In ancient Tibet and Bhutan there was a natural support system for the preservation of lineage. Even though it had its fair share of corruption and mismanagement, the whole region had a strong influence of Dharma study and practice. The hearing, contemplation, and critical thinking helped prevent the practitioners, lineage holders, and other stakeholders from misbehaving. But this is not so much the case today.

When I was growing up, the number of tulkus per student was much lower than it is today because people dared not recognize tulkus. All the eyes watching and ears listening were so well informed. So people behaved. They didn't start scanning their Rolodexes for relatives who might fit the bill. It's like if you were to teach Shakespeare to a group of Oxford students: because these people have been brought up with the bard and can recite his verse by heart, you would make more of an effort to teach it correctly. There was a natural self-regulation and communal screening process in ancient Tibet and Bhutan that's now waning. Individualism is on the rise.

There is another factor that is impacting the selection of heirs. So many new Buddhist practitioners and people interested in becoming Buddhist are emerging from both China and the West. Because there are so many of these new students, they have weight; the sheer numbers give them sway. But they are new, and many lack a certain discernment. So while they are not that informed, they are eager followers, and with their relative wealth they become big donors and sponsors. They are attracted to the idea of big names and lineages and tend to champion what is obvious and in their faces. Their money speaks: they endorse recklessly, and the lamas, the lamas' families, and the institutions take advantage of this. It is having a big impact on the tulku system.

Another problem with the selection of heirs is that more and more, their value is determined by their administrative skills—their ability to run institutions and monasteries—rather than their qualifications as inheritors of the spiritual lineage. The whole purpose of the institution of the guru is to promote the spiritual path. When Shakyamuni Buddha appointed Kashyapa as his regent, he was not looking for someone who was skilled at management; he was looking for a great master to continue the lineage. Today, because heirs are selected for their skill as administrators, great administrators are taking over.

But having an administrator might be better than having the whole mandala of the guru hijacked by the guru's overenthusiastic relatives, cousins, brothers, sisters, and wives.

ADVICE OF KYABJE DUDJOM RINPOCHE

- If you do not avoid all wrongdoing, you will break your vow.
- If you do not help others, you are not a bodhisattva.
- If you do not maintain pure perception, you are not a tantric practitioner.
- If you stay confused, you are not a yogi.
- If you are biased, you have no view.
- If you focus on an object, you are not meditating.

If you are a hypocrite, there is no “right action.”
If you have hope, there will be no result.
Those who have faith have a refuge.
Those who feel compassion have an enlightened mind.
Those who develop wisdom achieve realization.
Those who have devotion receive blessings.
Those with a sense of shame are able to feel concern for someone or something other than themselves.
Those who have such concern are able to keep their vows.
Those who can keep their vows accomplish attainments.
Those who appear humble are rich in their ability to hear and contemplate.
Those who appear to lack emotion have done a great deal of meditation practice.
Those who get on well with everyone they meet and in every situation are never bored or annoyed, are beginning to emerge as true Dharma practitioners.
The root of the Dharma is mind. If you can tame your mind, you are a Dharma practitioner; and once you have tamed your mind, you are liberated.

DEVOTION IS AWARENESS

It may sound as if you must have devotion first in order to have an understanding of the view, that devotion *ignites* the practice of the Dharma. But as you become more seasoned in practicing the Dharma, especially the Vajrayana, the gap between devotion and the goal of the devotion becomes very small. As you become more skilled in practicing, you will see that devotion is the awareness of impermanence, devotion is the renunciation mind, devotion is compassion for all sentient beings, devotion is none other than the experience of dependent arising. Most important, the moment there is devotion, you have the view, and there is the awareness of shunyata.



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THE GURU AS MIRROR

Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö said, "The root guru is a display of the nature of our mind, not only in this lifetime but throughout all our past lifetimes. At times he appears to be pure externally, and at others, impure. Directly and indirectly, the only thing he has tried to do is benefit us. In this lifetime, as a result of our merit, he appears as the master, a spiritual companion."



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RARE AS A STAR IN DAYLIGHT

Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said, "Mindless children long to learn the strategies of a great king. Even though we are not ready to hear them, many of us chase after teachings on the absolute. Yet having received such teachings, those who actually put them into practice are as rare as stars in daylight."

Being Savvy Taming Your Own Mind 4

YOUR MIND WILL BECOME tamed by the very act of searching, finding, and associating with the guru. In the beginning you may not be able to make full use of the guru—you may not be able to see the guru as a mirror, or you may not be able to gaze into that mirror and see the reflection of the nature of your mind as pure and perfect—but you can begin capitalizing on the presence of the guru right from the beginning. The agony of searching and the fear of not finding, the second thoughts, the feelings of vulnerability and defenselessness, being on the verge of chickening out, and finally jumping headfirst and riding the ups and downs of the nuances and paraphernalia of guru devotion . . . enduring all of that is the most sophisticated form of mind training. One day of searching for a guru could equal more mind training than nine days of vipassana, because here you are not sitting on a secure and comfortable cushion with everything scheduled.

Presumably, you have considered how little time there is, or you are the type of person whose hopes are dashed by terms like “three countless eons,” or you are encouraged by statements like “enlightenment in this lifetime, in this very body,” or you like the idea of not forsaking creature comforts—your home and friends—and therefore you have chosen tantra as the path.

The reason it takes a long time to actualize enlightenment is because of the strong, illusory habit of ego clinging. In the Vajrayana, you consciously look for a person who will destroy this habit. It’s not the same as Atisha Dipamkara bringing along an annoying Indian travel companion so that he could practice patience. We are talking about something far more extreme than that. We are talking about peeling off the skin of all your ego-related habits, showing no mercy to the ego, systematically destroying the ego at all costs, in every way, as quickly as possible. If the whole process of finding and associating with the guru does not destroy the lifeline or extinguish the breath of the ego, it should at the very least tame your mind.



“Of all pith instructions from the guru, the one that hits your fault is the most precious.”—
Longchenpa



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Some people say you practice to achieve the same rank as the guru. No. You aren't promoted to a certain state. You have to become inseparable.

A Vajrayana student must be savvy in understanding the strategy of seeing the manifestation of the guru as the manifestation of the Buddha. This view will untangle and uproot the ego. Of course, in the eyes of the ordinary world, it might look like you have some kind of self-abusive codependency habit. But notions of self-abuse and codependency are stained by a fundamental belief that the “I,” the self, has to be healed, whereas in the guru yoga, the ultimate aim is to dismantle the self like a house of cards.

Students should be prepared to be shocked. In fact, they should welcome repeated shocks, because until the habits of hidden assumptions and expectations are derailed, they will become stronger, fatter, stickier, more comfortable, and more evasive.

GRATITUDE

One of the savviest methods for taming our minds on the path of guru devotion is generating gratitude. Gratitude is essential even in Mahayana Buddhism. According to the Mahayana, you should treat whoever introduces you to the sutra of Prajnaparamita like the Buddha because the truth of nonduality is so priceless. Just think how much we should venerate the person who introduced us to the innate wisdom of the Tantrayana, circumventing logic and analogies to directly point out our innate wisdom.

In order to make a living as a carpenter or a stockbroker, you must receive training, and if your teacher is kind enough to give you treasured trade secrets and instructions on how to succeed, you will certainly be grateful. If this kind of gratitude comes naturally when we go about our worldly endeavors, it should go without mentioning that we are naturally beholden to our gurus, who give us the pith instructions on how to undo the net of delusion.

Thousands of buddhas have come and will come, but we individuals have no direct communication with them. Due to the power of our merit, or lack thereof, when the Buddha was walking on this earth, we were not there, and we can't be sure if we will be present when the future Buddhas come. Even if the Buddha were to come stand before us today, how sure are we that we would be able to communicate? In the sutras we are told that buddhas and bodhisattvas are manifesting everywhere. We must be encountering them in one way or another, but due to our karma, we are not able to see them as buddhas and bodhisattvas.

In contrast, the present-day guru is here during our time, functioning, speaking, relating, and interacting with us. Through an inexplicable karmic connection, we have veneration, toward this person. In myriad ways the guru is trying to wake us up, explaining what is virtuous and what is nonvirtuous, what is absolute and what is relative, what is the true nature of our minds. And to the extent we are able to see him as such, the guru in front of us is the Buddha. If the mirror is only partially clean, only a partial reflection will come. But that's already quite good, and we can be grateful.

DUALISM

The quintessence of the Dharma is mindfulness. If we associate with the guru with the right motivation and the right attitude, the guru will be the best reminder of impermanence, of the triple gems, of cause and effect. If you know how to associate with the guru properly, not just verbally, you can begin to decode the sight and sound and presence of the guru. This association will do a much better job of waking you up than will shaving your head, sitting up

straight, or watching your breath.

The quintessential purpose of the sangha is to act as a companion, a support that guides us toward the right view, the right attitude. There is no better sangha than a qualified master, if approached with the right motivation and the right attitude.

The deity is ultimate, pure perception. By “pure perception” I mean not bound by right or wrong, good or bad, two arms or four arms, male or female. Again, with the right motivation and savvy, being with the guru is the fastest way to transcend all these dualistic distinctions. Therefore, the guru is the ultimate deity, dakini, and protector. The guru is essentially the path of nondistractedness. Our goal is to not be distracted by past experiences, to not rush to future phenomena, to not be distracted by hope and fear, but to be completely pure and in the present. Again, this is achieved through the mere remembrance of the guru. Therefore, the guru is the dakini and the protector.

In a nutshell, transferring from a dualistic zone to a nondualistic zone is difficult because there is no common ground between dual and nondual, and therefore there is no connection between the two. There is no commuter rail, no link at all. So, those of us in the dualistic zone can work only with dualistic methods if we hope to reach nondualism.

What makes the Buddhist path so special is that it looks dualistic, but it has that ability to liberate you from the bondage of dualism. It is a deliberate and conscious knot that is consciously and deliberately designed to undo itself. All the skillful means and methods of the Buddhadharma are like a thorn that we use to take out another thorn in our hand. The purpose of renunciation mind, compassion, the recitation of mantras, and contemplation on the breath is to dig out dualism. These practices will dismantle the puzzle of dualism. They speak the language of the nondual and have the flavor of the nondual. For example, compassion is definitely dualistic, but with heavy investment, it leads you to nonduality.

Of these skillful methods that appear dualistic but point in the direction of nondualism, guru yoga is supreme. In the Vajrayana, guru devotion is even more practical than practicing compassion. It's tangible. In the end, there is no such thing as dualistic and nondualistic.

Remembering all of this, we develop gratitude to the guru and appreciation of the path of the Tantrayana.

Imagine a beautiful casket so finely crafted that once it is shut, the seam between the lid and the base is entirely invisible. It appears to be a single, exquisitely worked piece of wood, not a casket at all, and nothing about it suggests any possible opening. This casket is exactly like samsaric life. Day after day, year after year, lifetime after lifetime, samsara has been so intricately contrived by the ego, the master craftsman, that the notion it can be broken open never suggests itself. If we stopped for a moment and took a long, hard look at our version of the world, we might detect a few tiny cracks here and there, but for the most part the thought doesn't enter our heads.

If, by some chance, a tiny crack were to be discovered and someone managed to open the casket just a little, the entire system that is samsara would be disrupted. Nothing would ever be the same again, and the one who achieved this monumental feat would have shuffled one step closer to enlightenment. Of course, you would still be stuck with a partially open casket, but its workings would no longer seem so utterly mysterious.

A multitude of inexpressible things can open the casket anytime, anywhere, triggered by the most ridiculous situations—if you have merit, devotion, and pure perception. This opening is usually initiated by the guru—by a remark, a gesture, or perhaps a note.

DWELLING ON THE GURU

If you examine the tantric path of guru yoga, paying attention to all the fine print, you'll find that the most important part is the abisheka. And the most important part of the abisheka is the dissolution at the end. The guru never remains outside, independent from you—breathing down your neck, watching over you, correcting you as if he or she were a superior being. We use the word “dissolution” because in our dualistically inclined minds, we like the idea of dissolving. But a better word is “merging,” like the space inside a bottle merging with the space outside the bottle once the bottle is broken.

In the quintessential practice of guru yoga, “yoga” has many different meanings. Yoga is like a practice. One could almost say “my daily Starbucks yoga,” or “my taking shower yoga.” It's the thing that you do—a discipline, a method, a means—therefore, in the tantra you will hear of many different yogas: yoga of sleeping, yoga of dreams, yoga of waking up, yoga of eating, yoga of postmeditation, and so on.

We also use the term “yoga” for the practice of guru yoga. When we say “guru yoga,” unfortunately it always refers to some kind of sadhana, a text. You always

begin with refuge and bodhichitta and visualizing the guru above your head or in your heart, depending on what sadhana you are using. This is not incorrect, but a more helpful way to think about guru yoga is to think,

Dwelling in the guru
Dwelling in the spirit of the guru
Dwelling in the atmosphere of the guru
Dwelling in the aura of the guru
Dwelling in the mood of the guru
Dwelling in the hue of the guru
Dwelling in the nation of the guru
Dwelling in the world of the guru
Dwelling in the universe of the guru
Dwelling in the remembrance of the guru

This is why in Tibetan we have the expression *thukyd chikdre*: *thuk* is an honorific term for the guru's mind, *yd* is your mind, *chik* means "one," and *dre* means "merged." This is the quintessence of the quintessence of the guru yoga practice. The whole point is to accomplish this merging with the guru's mind. Once the student has matured, the student will begin to realize that the guru is not bound by gender, nationality, or history. In fact, everything that is seen, heard, tasted, or felt is an expression of the guru. So there will be a time when there is no centimeter that is not the guru, not a moment that is not the guru, and at that time you will actualize the phenomenon of nonduality.

In order to understand these things, intellectual speculation is not going to help much. You have to put them into practice to begin to comprehend a different set of logic. At the moment, we don't have that set of logic. To cultivate it, supplication, beseeching, and praying to the guru are necessary for deluded, ordinary beings like us.

Supplication to the Guru

Praying to the guru is not necessarily a matter of chanting mantras or reading a supplication composed by others. The real prayer, on the relative level, is just thinking of the guru—his form, his name, his activities, his color, his shape, even his movement.

If you forget to pray to the guru for a long time, he will not complain that you haven't been offering enough prayers. But the moment you remember the guru, he is there; his compassion is there, and his blessing is there. The notion of the guru being there comes from remembering the guru. Remembering is the presence of the guru.

We can supplicate to the guru for mundane things like longevity, prosperity, good health, materializing Rwandan hunks. The main aim is to have compassion, bodhichitta, renunciation mind, and to experience the enthusiasm and joy of supplication itself so that we will have devotion. We supplicate to understand the meaning of nonduality, beginning with actualizing the nonduality of guru and student.

It helps to recite supplication prayers in a loud voice with all kinds of tunes, so as to penetrate your stubborn shell of impure perception.

Visualizing the Guru

Jigme Lingpa said that visualizing the guru above your head creates the *tendrel*, or benefit of receiving the guru's blessings, which is good for beginners. Visualizing the guru in your heart will set wisdom ablaze. For those who are no longer beginners, this should be the quintessential practice.

THE FIVE BUDDHA FAMILIES

In the tantra we are seeking not just a teacher and a guide but something like a soul mate, a connection on a profound level.

The character of each individual is based on their constitution, their physical body, and the composition of their subtle elements. This becomes even more evident in the tantric path. In the Vajrayana every being belongs to what we call the five buddha families—vajra, ratna, padma, karma, and buddha—with one or more of the families being a predominant influence. Each family manifests in a different way. It's not a mystical concept; it's functional: these actually exist within your system.

The vajra family is pacifying. The ratna family is abundant and increasing. The padma family is magnetizing. The karma family is assertive and strong. And the buddha family is spacious and accommodating. Your predominant family is said to be reflected on a mundane level, such as in your moods and your lifestyle. The families reflect even on a gross level: what you look like, your taste in music and clothing, et cetera. And on an inner level they can influence your emotions. For example, some people are passionate and aggressive, whereas others are more spacious and laid back. Some are competitive or jealous.

Of course, the guru from whom you are receiving teachings also belongs to one or more of the families. Many serious tantric practitioners will conceal the

teachings, the pith instructions, the fact that they are practicing tantra, and in some cases, even the fact that they are Buddhist. Along these lines, they would also conceal their buddha family type.



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“As long as there is mind, there is no end to the vehicle. When there is no mind, there will be no teaching, therefore there will be no dweller on the path. So there will be no end to gurus as long as there is mind.”—*Lankavatara Sutra*

In the Vajrayana there is a concept of the *yidam*, the deity, which is almost identical to the concept of the guru. Guru yoga, or accomplishing the guru method, requires you to think that the deity and the guru are one. But when we talk about the deity, there is something we should pay attention to. There is an affinity between each individual and each deity, the strength of which depends on the individual’s senses, elements, caste, and buddha family. This dictates how we connect to a deity.

The deities have many manifestations: male, female, single-headed, multiheaded, with consort, without consort, in a variety of colors. Accordingly, they perform different activities, such as pacifying, subjugating, and magnetizing. They also hold implements, like lotuses, wheels, or swords. These function almost like trademarks. All these attributes can correspond with the moods, elements, constitutions, and preferences of different students. Some

prefer orange Manjushri with his trademark sword to white Manjushri with his trademark white lotus. Many have a tendency to like Avalokiteshvara, also with the lotus trademark. These symbols and colors not only evoke curiosity and interest, they can even penetrate or trigger the individual's inborn elements, mood, and emotions.

At initiations sometimes we have methods like aimlessly throwing flowers at the mandala: the direction the flower lands indicates the deity or element or activity associated with each individual. But because all the deities are essentially one, beginners don't necessarily have to spend much time overthinking this.

To be precise, the guru and the student have an elemental relationship. It can be very evident. Some gurus just turn you on spiritually much more than others do. Sometimes a single word uttered of bodhichitta, which you have heard from thousands of other gurus, suddenly makes perfect sense when it comes from the mouth of your guru. This is a connection on a much deeper level.

It is rare these days for people to have the patience and understanding needed to identify and associate with the guru and yidam appropriate to their buddha family. To have this knowledge could help them understand how and why certain connections work and others don't. Knowing that a deeper level of connection is possible can help expand the search and serve as a form of maintenance when the guru-student relationship has been established.

NYOSHUL LUNGTOK

The nineteenth-century master Nyoshul Lungtok spent years diligently studying and practicing to realize the nature of mind, but his heart's wish was unfulfilled. Finally, one day he was introduced to the great Patrul Rinpoche, who was the key to his realization. All Patrul Rinpoche said was, "Can you see the stars in the sky?" and that was it. For seven days the cycle of samsara stopped for Nyoshul Lungtok. The experience was so intense that he no longer knew how to handle the world around him. It appeared to be a totally different place.

We, with all our petty hang-ups and fixations, cannot imagine what Nyoshul Lungtok experienced. We insist that shirts can be worn only on torsos and never on feet and that a door is a door and it is only through such and such door that it is possible to get into the bathroom. But for Nyoshul Lungtok, a so-called door was no longer merely a door but a ceiling or a meal or a mountain; a ceiling was not only a ceiling but could equally be a staircase. Everything could be and was something else; nothing was solid. Man was woman and woman was man.

Basically, all his rational worldly systems were put out of joint—all his fixations about shape, color, numbers, and ideas disappeared—and from then on he had what is known in the teachings as the “experience of great spontaneity.”

The “experience of great spontaneity” is one of the great Dzogchen terms, but these days many lamas, especially the younger ones, become so intoxicated by notions of “spontaneity” and “unfabricated” that the whole subject has become a joke. None of us really knows what spontaneity is. We imagine it has something to do with effortlessness, but that’s about it. With the logic that limits our perception, we can only infer. We can attempt to describe what lies beyond a distant mountain only by using inferential logic and imagination: we can use the mountains we already know as a reference and imagine that the same kinds of trees and landscapes must lie behind this new mountain. But we cannot see directly for ourselves.

NYOSHUL LUNGTOK’S STUDENT

After Nyoshul Lungtok’s experience of spontaneity, he went on to become a great master. One of his students was completely illiterate and had never been able to read any of the great Dzogchen texts. The only practice he knew how to do with confidence was to recite the Vajra Guru mantra of Guru Rinpoche: om ah hung vajra guru pema siddhi hung. His greatest strength, though, was that he felt a tremendous devotion for Nyoshul Lungtok. This student practiced for many years, and although he had no spiritual experiences at all, his devotion remained unshakable, even when Nyoshul Lungtok died. Then, one day many years later, as he was making tea on an open fire, suddenly a spark leapt out of the flames. A sharp pain alerted him to burning flesh, and he cried out with the exasperated expression, “AH TZA TZA!” Usually our habitual patterns and discursive thoughts are strung together so tightly that we never see the gaps between them; there is no chance for the wisdom to even peek through, let alone gaze for an extended time. At the moment of sharp pain, it’s natural for thoughts to stop. Ordinary people will pick up their thought pattern after an instant.

But because of the merit of Nyoshul Lungtok’s student, he managed to remain disentangled by thoughts for seven days, and through that he was transformed. Previously, he had been very fussy about how his tea was made—details like the number of tea leaves used and the exact temperature of the water were extremely important to him—yet from the moment the spark hit his hand, the niceties of tea making meant nothing to him. If he had been given stewed cow dung to drink, he couldn’t have cared less.

For Nyoshul Lungtok's student, all ordinary interaction and perception between subject and object ceased to exist, and an extraordinary, unimaginable dimension of the world opened up. For us to try to imagine precisely how this works is a little difficult at this stage; we can only talk about it and vaguely surmise what it might be like.

TRANSFERENCE OF WISDOM

The guru-student relationship is important not just because of the instruction the guru gives but because of the guru's ability to confer blessings, the transference of the guru's wisdom to the student. This ability is tantamount to any other skill or talent a guru may have. It requires that he or she is equipped with what needs to be transferred. If you transfer one candlelight to the next, the first keeps burning. On a mundane level, when a student prays to the guru, if that guru is equipped with realization, compassion, and blessings, then he or she is a more than worthy object of prayer.

But as illustrated in the popular tale of the old lady mistaking the dog's tooth for a Buddha relic, when there is devotion, there is the Buddha, so it is possible to receive blessings from an unworthy guru. But if the object of devotion is genuinely equipped with wisdom qualities, then obviously the causes and conditions are much more complete.

The West doesn't have a strong tradition of guru-student relationships in the sense of *guru shishya parampara*, which is Sanskrit for "the succession of disciples." Here, we are talking about an uninterrupted succession of knowledge that has been transferred or passed down from teacher to student. We are not talking about a high school teacher teaching math to a student.

In simple terms, you can think of the Vajrayana guru-disciple relationship as a very advanced form of apprenticeship. Unlike other teacher-student relationships, in the Vajrayana a vajra master can actually transfer all the enlightened qualities to the student, as if the student is the material to be cast and the guru is the mold or the form.

Tashi Namgyal was the son of a Derge aristocrat who was offered as an attendant to Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö when he was very young. Later he became my first attendant. He told me the story of how he and Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö traveled to Sikkim together in the late 1950s. Around that time, many Tibetan lamas were escaping the Cultural Revolution. Every day Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö would ask Tashi Namgyal who else had arrived from Tibet. When he heard that his close friend Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was both his

student and his teacher, had managed to escape, he expressed great relief and said, “The Dharma will be safe now.”

Tashi Namgyal said that just before Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö passed into parinirvana, he met with Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche in Sikkim and had a long conversation, and shortly after that, Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö died. Tashi Namgyal said there was an immediate and very obvious change in Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said that when Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö was alive and teaching, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was nowhere near as eloquent or majestic as he suddenly became and as we all came to know him to be. The older students could visibly see a complete transformation.

Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche received not just Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö’s knowledge; *everything* was transferred—his aura, his way of thinking. This is the ability of a great master, and the recipient might not even consciously know it has happened.

There are many examples of this in Tibet. Terton Karma Lingpa was one of the greatest treasure-teaching discoverers. Unfortunately, due to some past karma, his consort was not the most perfect consort. One day, he was invoking treasure teachings in a cave with this dakini consort and writing them down with a bamboo pen. But the pen needed sharpening, so he asked his consort to pass the sharpening knife. She artlessly threw the knife to him, and it bounced off the table and stabbed him in the groin. The bleeding wouldn’t stop, and he knew he wouldn’t live long, so he quickly summoned his son, Nyinda Chöje, who was very young at the time. Nyinda Chöje was not at all learned. He was just a boy, a drifter.

Karma Lingpa said, “I’m dying, but I have some unfinished work here.” Then he put his head together with Nyinda Chöje’s, prayed for a long time, and died. Afterward, the rest of the treasure teachings were instantly invoked by Nyinda Chöje. He was not in a trance. It was a transference—*gongpa phowa*, we call it, like downloading from Dropbox. To this day we still practice the venerated one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities of Karma Lingpa, thanks to this transmission.

We practice something akin to this transference during the guru yoga. But the word “transference” is a bit misleading: it sounds as if something foreign is being downloaded into the student. In one sense, it’s like that, but in another sense, the student already has the same buddha nature as the guru. So it’s more like the guru is rekindling something in the student or causing something in the student to awaken. The transference of a guru’s wisdom shouldn’t be understood as an aura or energy. The absolute level of transference of the wisdom mind in a guru-student relationship is inexpressible.

On the relative level, the tangible signs of a successful transference of the guru's mind to your own is that you develop more renunciation of samsaric endeavors, more compassion toward sentient beings, more devotion toward the guru, and all the while your arrogance will wane. Also, the habit of writing down experiences and putting them into a book, like I have been doing, will cease.



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YOU WANT TO BE AN OUTCAST

As a Buddhist, especially in the Vajrayana, it's not your aim to fit into society. Almost the opposite. You don't want to fit into society. You want to be an outcast.

EVERYTHING IS THE BUDDHA

Tantric practitioners are not really worshipping a guru because of his personality, his achievements, his charisma, or his reputation. It's nothing personal at all. A tantric practitioner has to see everyone as the guru. Not only that, a tantric practitioner has to see *everything* as the guru's form, every sound as the guru's voice, and every thought as the guru's mind.

So eventually all your idealizing, sycophanting, and ass kissing of a guru will mature so that you will do that to everyone, even those who irritate you the most, and everything that enters your consciousness. When that starts to happen, you are beginning to subdue and outshine appearance and existence instead of existence and appearance subduing and outshining you, which is probably what is happening in your experience of phenomena now.

WARNING

If you cherish the Dharma, if you are a karma-fearing, consequence-fearing believer of cause, condition, and effect, and if you believe in karmic debt, then guru is the last job I would recommend for you. If you don't have the pure motivation of helping others, if you have a steel heart that allows you to disregard all the things listed above, then maybe being a charlatan might be a lucrative temporary position. If you are not a very successful charlatan, probably both you and your students will not suffer much. But if you are even slightly successful in convincing others to follow you, due to their karmic debt to you, be warned: you, as a guru or teacher, cannot imagine the power and wrath generated by the expectations and assumptions of masses of students.

Trying not to ignore people, living in constant paranoia of making the mistake of ignoring people, being anxious about forgetting someone on your party list, worrying if someone will get hurt, worrying about your reputation, agonizing over the possibility of losing your students to a better teacher, trying to look austere like an ascetic while your habit of looking like a fat, rich gangster keeps kicking in, and worst of all, never enjoying a moment of privacy because thousands of eyes are always on you, watching what you are doing and who you are doing it with. . . . On top of that, all the emotional blackmail coming from all ten directions because the disciples came with supposedly goodwill and devotion will stress you out.

Advice to Aspiring Gurus 5

His name is His Holiness
He's just a teenager
He wears a Rolex watch
He comes from the lineage of brocade
His father is called Rinpoche
His mother is the daughter of a high-ranking family

AS DÖLPOPA SHERAB GYELTSHEN SAID in one of his prayers, “May I be reborn as someone who worries about the survival of the Buddhadharma.” The motivation to become a Dharma teacher must come from this attitude. The concern for the survival of the Dharma is evidence of compassion for sentient beings and devotion to the Buddhadharma. Your motivation must be thoroughly examined. We don't realize that often, despite appearances, we are serving the Dharma merely to promote our own ideas, our own values, our own center, our own lineage. If you don't have strong devotion to the Buddhadharma and compassion toward sentient beings, allowing you to give teachings is like giving a weapon to a very clever madman. It's so destructive to yourself and to others.

Strong compassion is evidenced when you look at all beings as equal to your closest loved ones—your nurturing mother, your frail grandmother, your little sister, your little brother. When we think of these relatives, we get emotional. An aspiring teacher must have this kind of sentimental, emotional attitude toward all sentient beings—not just toward defenseless street dogs but toward those who are lounging in the sun, working on their tans, with billions of dollars in the bank. We can still have compassion for such people because they are actually so poor. They wish to be happy, they wish for suffering to end, but they don't have the right information. Instead of doing what needs to be done to end suffering, they are doing the opposite. They accumulate the causes of suffering and shun all the causes of happiness.



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There are other guidelines for an aspiring teacher to consider:

- Being a teacher should not be part of some evangelizing mission. There is no tradition or mandate to increase the population of Buddhists.
- Your job as teacher is not to promote yourself or build up your ego. You should try to provide information while concealing your identity. As an antidote to your ego, try the method of bestowing the truth anonymously.
- You must always be prepared to admit when you don't know something, and even when you do know, it's good to say you don't.
- Be extra attentive to emotionally vulnerable students. They will come to you and feel some kind of solace in your presence, and at that time you must remember that it's not you in which they are finding solace; they are finding solace because you are wearing the hat of the triple gems, you are wearing the armor of shunyata, you dwell in the fort of your guru lineage, you possess the sustenance of the unsurpassable Dharma. Like an actor performing, try to remember that the audience has come to see Homer Simpson, not you.
- Encourage your students to go to other teachers. You should rejoice that they are encountering the Dharma, teachers, teachings. You should rejoice that someone is doing your job for you. Some teachers are so insecure about losing their students that they create rules like "if you receive this teaching, you cannot go to other teachers." This is clearly an omen of degenerated times, worse than if women started giving birth to babies with six legs.

If you have all the qualities and abilities of a perfect teacher, there will be no issue. But even the sixth-and seventh-century tantric texts proclaim that the times are degenerating and it is not possible for a perfect guru to emerge. If it was bad then, what are the chances now, several hundred years later, that a perfect guru will emerge? But those texts also say that if you encounter someone during degenerated times who has even just one or two of these qualities, especially respect for the law of karma and trust in the triple gems, you should venerate that person as the Buddha.

I am assuming that most of you aspiring gurus are not necessarily enlightened beings. While you may benefit from thinking you are enlightened, this does not mean you accumulate any merit. In fact, if you take advantage of your situation, you are going into the deepest karmic debt.

TULKU SYSTEM

The words "tulku" and "guru" seem to have become almost synonymous, and

that is a big mistake. As I have stated many times, a guru doesn't need to have any degrees or have a title like "tulku" or belong to a respected family or be related to a respected lama. Such connections, will, however, often be there, because we are human beings, and we often get carried away by these trappings.

A guru must act as a role model, someone who really offers his or her service to the Dharma and wishes to benefit sentient beings. Someone like Gene Smith of the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center is such a role model. Even though you may not be able to consider him a guru, he did so much for the Dharma. Yet in places like Tibet, people like him are not revered.

Instead, we have tulkus and rinpoches who are enthroned, who claim to have a higher birth and to be manifestations of great masters. This is a very popular phenomenon in the Himalayas. Kids claim to remember past lives and recognize their former attendants. There is a very stupid fascination with how these boys recognize their old shoes and implements. None of that really matters. The system may have worked back in the day when people were not too skeptical and were more inclined to believe, but it should not exist in this day and age. It may still inspire some people. It might confirm certain things here and there a little bit. But in many cases, especially now, systems like this are invitations for big problems in the future.

In my generation there were so many examples of these boys, and looking back, I can see how skillfully they were handled under the guidance of mountain-like people like Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Chokling Rinpoche, and the Karmapa. For example, the current Neten Chokling Rinpoche had detailed memories of people and spoke foreign languages even at a very young age. If a tulku displayed even 1 percent of what he did, these days it would instantly be hyped: he would be documented from every angle, he would go viral on Facebook and WeChat and Twitter, he would be sent on a publicity tour. His parents and the entourage would sell tickets to view the boy. In my day, these extraordinary events were dealt with gracefully; essentially, they were not talked about. Some of the best stories are the ones that don't often get told. But I will tell one here.

One sunny day in the 1970s, Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche was visiting Nyima Dzong, an old Knights Templar fort in southeastern France, surrounded in the four directions by four steep, rocky hills. A group of people decided to go with Tulku Rinpoche to "Amoghasiddhi Hill" to hang a giant prayer flag on a huge wooden post.

A big dog followed the group up the hill, even though its master, who was part of the group, kept telling it to go home. He even threw stones at the dog, but to no avail. As the group started to climb the hill carrying the post, some fog started

to climb from the bottom of the hill in such a way that they were unable to see the view below them.

When they arrived at the top, they all began to collect stones to secure the post into place. The weather changed: a storm was approaching, and light rain started to fall. Tulku Rinpoche read some prayers while holding an umbrella, with a group of people around him. The storm arrived, and the sound of thunder and flash of lightning became almost simultaneous. Not more than ten feet away, some kind of metal antenna used by land surveyors was struck by lightning. At this point the stone collectors thought, “This is very bad! We’re going to die here!”

Christian, one of the people who were there, said he heard a huge sound like a bomb exploding and then felt a wave of electricity shoot through his body, which made him drop the stone he had just lifted. In a shock, he first thought he was dreaming.

When he looked up where the group had been standing, he saw Tulku Rinpoche alone, holding his umbrella. At his feet were rays of black, burnt grass radiating in all directions.

The first thing Christian heard Rinpoche say was, “So blissful.” Then he turned to Christian and said, “Poor people. I have to help these poor people. Please help me stand them up.” All around Rinpoche, the other people had been thrown various distances, but none of them was badly hurt except for the owner of the dog, whose leg was burnt, and his dog, which had died of a heart attack.

Rinpoche and Christian carried the man down the hill along with the others. Christian asked Rinpoche what had happened, but Rinpoche kept repeating, “The kindness of the masters is so amazing.” Later he told Christian that many people used to be struck by lightning in Tibet. His father, Kangyur Rinpoche, knew a sadhana that could protect from lightning but wouldn’t give it to Tulku Rinpoche while he was in Tibet. When Kangyur Rinpoche settled in Darjeeling, he gave the transmission of this sadhana to Tulku Rinpoche. However, Darjeeling is not a place frequently hit by lightning, and Tulku Rinpoche thought it would have been more useful in Tibet.

The day they went up the hill, Tulku Rinpoche felt the strong presence of Kangyur Rinpoche. When the storm came he had remembered the sadhana and started doing it. He was convinced Kangyur Rinpoche had given it to him for this particular moment. He said he felt an amazing bliss when the lightning crossed his body. He added that because Nyima Dzong had been a stronghold of the Knights Templar, the local protectors were probably upset about Buddhism coming.

I’m quite sure this story has not been told to many people.

ARE THE TIBETANS THE CHOSEN ONES?

Are the Tibetans the only chosen ones equipped to teach Vajrayana? If not, somehow we have to begin this immense responsibility of entrusting the lineage to non-Tibetans. To this day, not many Tibetan lamas have managed to have that trust. This lack of trust is a repetition of what happened thousands of years ago. The Indians didn't trust the Tibetans when Buddhism was exported to Tibet. They would become jealous when a master gave secret teachings or any amount of authority to a Tibetan. And when these practitioners, scholars, and translators who went to India to study the teachings went back home to Tibet or China, transporting amazing lineages from India, many hardships befell them. People died. People had to make sacrifices. Nations went bankrupt.

We must appreciate how precious spiritual legacy is. It's like a most valuable inheritance. If you want to retire and entrust your multibillion-dollar business to the next generation, you have to give it to someone who really knows what to do. For spiritual people, the Dharma is worth much more than a multibillion-dollar company.

At the same time, we have to signal to the followers of this path that anyone can hold the lineage. Success is not reserved for a single race or gender. For a Bhutanese, it may be painful to hear that one day there will be this guru named Alex Starkey, or that they will have to receive the Rigdzin Dupa initiation from Julie Alder. But the role of guru is not just for Tibetans. Anyone who has the qualities and the know-how can do it. This needs to be said and demonstrated.

NEPOTISM

I once asked David Noodle what he thought about the book *Blazing Splendor*, and he said, "Oh, that story of Tibetan nepotism?" He may have been joking, but it's true: there is a lot of nepotism in Tibetan Buddhism.

Parents in many cultures arrange marriages for their children, making deals to pair their children off with the sons and daughters of wealthy families, and it's like that now with the tulkus. The monasteries shamelessly try to find a boy who has been born into a rich, influential family. Tulkus are then groomed to make money and rule the administration. Nepotism comes into play as soon as the tulkus have been installed on the throne. If the tulkus don't engage in the practice personally, their relatives will. Favoritism will hijack Buddhism in

general and the tantric path specifically, and there will be breakage of samaya. The lama's cousins, brothers, sisters, parents—all these people have so much say. They start steering the tulku and therefore the monastery and the lineage.

Of course, a truly devoted student would have devotion even toward the guru's pet dog, so of course a family member would be treated well. But that is only after the student has analyzed and accepted the guru. By all means, if he's a good teacher, follow him; just be aware that some lamas tend to have that weakness of nepotism. How much nepotism can you handle? All this has nothing to do with your spiritual path, which is supposed to take you to enlightenment. But if you are not careful, it can get entangled. So ideally, as Longchenpa said, a lama who seems to isolate himself from his relatives is quite good.

That said, sometimes you are better off acting like a bee sucking nectar from a flower: just receive the teaching and stay away from the politics.

ASSETS

Too many Tibetan lamas think of their Dharma centers as assets. Once when I was traveling, I met some Western Dharma students whose teacher's brother happened to be visiting around the same time, and they said this brother was taking inventory of the Dharma center's belongings to see what could be taken back home. A Dharma center's belongings should never be considered assets, especially things like gold statues and offering bowls. These are not assets. Assets are worldly things. Once gold or silver has been offered, it doesn't belong to anyone. It belongs to the triple gems.

HOW TO BEHAVE

Accountable Only to Karma

Many world religions have a hierarchical structure with a top tier that receives reports from a network of local representatives. If there is a report of misbehavior, the higher-ups are empowered to decide the fate of the wrongdoer—for example, a priest molesting children.

Some monasteries have their own kind of hierarchy: there is a rinpoche, an abbot, khenpos, lamas and lopons, and then the regular monks. Whatever system may exist at a monastery is a completely human invention specific to that location; it's not the Dharma. Nowhere in the teachings will you find a Buddhist

system of management, let alone instructions on setting up a congregation or hierarchy, democratically elected or otherwise. Certainly, there are rules and guidelines regarding the sangha, and in particular how to treat elders in the sangha, but there are no instructions on politics, administrative systems, or the organization of monasteries.

If there is a complaint within a sangha, there is no Buddhist process to penalize the guru. There is no system to say, “This guru is banned from teaching.” The Vajrayana is totally individual. There is no caliph, no sharia law, no party leader who decides who should be punished and who should be rewarded. If there is any system, it is the law of cause and effect. The guru, if he is not an enlightened being, is subject to karma, and therefore his deeds will contain their own punishment or reward.

Having no system is not a weakness. Systems are corruptible, just as anything run by human beings is corruptible. When a religion becomes a dominating power, politically or financially, there is potential for people to be mistreated. If there is no system, there is nothing to corrupt. There are many examples of Buddhists trying to create rules and structures, and in general, these efforts have had a bad effect on individual practice, as we have seen in Tibet.

Not a Profession

In the professional world, doctors, professors, and therapists have strict codes of conduct. They have boundaries. They usually take an oath. The rules and regulations are enforceable. If the rules are broken, licenses get revoked. For example, it is considered a major offense for a therapist to have a sexual relationship with a patient because of the power imbalance.

Being a guru is not a profession, especially in the Vajrayana. There is no standardized teacher’s training that ends with a certificate of completion. There is no office where you can go to apply to be a vajra master, no application to fill out. There is no rule book.

Many Christian and other religious organizations have created internal regulations and codes of conduct to protect against sexual misconduct and other behavior. Now also Buddhist activists are advocating for a code of conduct for lamas prohibiting unsolicited relationships. And it’s understandable. There have been so many abuses of power and influence between gurus and students. A code of conduct would certainly breed greater awareness and caution. But it will not prevent issues from arising. Not only are people always able to find a way to manipulate codes of conduct, the code itself is created and managed by human beings, and human beings have preferences. They have biases. Their judgment

can be swayed.

Even though people seem to think power always lies with the superiors—the doctor or the teacher—that’s not necessarily always the case. Human beings play so many strange games. Sometimes the patient is victimizing the doctor. As long as there is selfishness, there is always going to be a game. The implements of play are not limited to miniskirts and six-packs. Tears, gentlemanly manners, and all sorts of things can be used to manipulate a situation. So the ethical code of conduct for therapists, for example, serves to protect both the patient and the therapist.

But a guru-student relationship is much more complicated than a therapist-patient relationship, and the rules must be tailored to each individual. One important distinction is that being a therapist is a profession, but being a guru is not and should never be. It’s not a way to “make a living,” so to speak. One should live for the Dharma, not use the Dharma for a living. This is one of the most degenerate and dangerous things that can happen.

Therapists don’t have to be concerned about their patients’ well-being beyond this life. They don’t have to think about karma and reincarnation, let alone awakening the patient from samsara. Gurus do. In fact, that’s their main purpose. So the view is different. Also, the goal is different. The concept of “healthy” and “normal” that a therapist is trying to nurture is probably exactly what the guru is trying to eradicate.

I’m not antitherapist or antireiki or anti-crystal healing, even. These things can help. If a student has a headache, he or she should take medicine—but with the understanding that it provides only temporary relief. Similarly, in this day and age, therapeutic treatment can be very beneficial. One of the sufferings of modern society is extremely low self-esteem, and in certain cases that could become a real obstacle. People with extremely low self-esteem might not be able to understand and appreciate Vajrasattva purification because they think they are beyond salvation.

My student Daenerys has very mixed feelings toward me because she was abused by her father as a child. She had a love/hate relationship with him. She craved his love and attention but of course hated him for what he did to her, then despised herself for liking any form of attention from him. So she saw me as a teacher and as a father figure, and then emotions began to get out of control. She trusted me and wanted my attention, but she had this habit of using a sort of twisted sexual energy to get me to notice her. This kind of neurosis and complexity is something that no lamas from the eighteenth century had to deal with. Luckily, Daenerys went to a psychiatrist, who really helped her put aside these feelings so that we could have a more direct student-teacher relationship

without these pitfalls.

Tibetans have to realize that society is changing. There are new ways of communicating. Partly thanks to the Information Age, there is more scrutiny these days, especially in the West. Everyone is a watchdog, and therefore we hear much more about priests abusing children in the church and women's struggles in India. India has long endured a terrible environment of rape because many women didn't have the voice, but now their situation is coming to light. If such scrutiny were directed at Tibetan monasteries, it would not be surprising if, proportionately, the Tibetans had equal if not more instances of abuse. In predominantly Asian institutions, with their very sophisticated system of denial and concealment, you can be sure much is hidden or left unsaid. You don't hear what's happening behind closed doors at the Chinese Politburo, whereas what happens in the White House often immediately ends up on the evening news.

But this secrecy is changing, and it could be a good thing. It's not as if overnight everyone is suddenly going to be better behaved. A determined person will always find a clever way to get what he wants. There may still be many incidents of Tibetan lamas mistreating or sexually abusing boys and girls.

Transparency

It's human nature to express appreciation and gratitude by bestowing material offerings and offerings of one's time and energy. While generosity and detachment and surrender are of course very important practices for the student, any guru who accepts offerings has to be extremely careful.

One of the foundations of Buddhism is the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration, and right understanding. Right livelihood is explained as making a living in a way that does not harm others—not cheating and not deceiving, directly or indirectly. In the Vinaya, the Buddha explains in meticulous detail what might constitute deception. For example, a monk waiting in line for food should not hide his vegetables under his portion of rice to make the server feel he hasn't been served.

Many great practitioners of the past prayed to never become famous, powerful, influential seat holders because of the inherent dangers involved. The most dangerous of all is the receiving of so many privileges and gifts—the best seats, first choice at the buffet. For an aspiring guru, making miscalculations or taking advantage of this position is much worse than killing or stealing or sexual misconduct. As I mentioned earlier, there is a Tibetan word for it—*kor*—which Patrul Rinpoche stated in *Words of My Perfect Teacher* is one of the things that

will destroy the lamas and rinpoches. Killing and stealing are overtly negative activities, whereas *kor* is a slippery and subtle deceit, especially because making offerings is considered a positive part of the path. It's easier to give up killing or smoking cigarettes because we don't need to kill or smoke, but it's more challenging for someone to go on a diet because we all have to eat at least a little bit. Likewise, it's difficult for a lama to abstain entirely from privilege. The chances of a high lama getting some kind of advantage every day are very high.

Future teachers cannot be careful enough. Misusing privilege is difficult to avoid when the teacher feels he needs certain things for the sake of the temple or for the sake of the Dharma. These seemingly dharmic needs camouflage his greed and misuse. In worst-case scenarios, offerings made with sincere devotion earmarked for construction of a place for study and practice get diverted to build a lama's nephew's restaurant in Majnu ka Tila or to purchase an investment property in Kathmandu so that the lama's niece can go to private school in Chandigarh. Then this niece grows up and has no interest in the Dharma and spends her time seeking a rich husband and starting a business.

Some kind of system of transparency may or may not work. Modern culture promotes transparency in business, and Western guilt also promotes a kind of open honesty, but it's not something Asian leaders are used to, and certainly not monasteries. The Asian way is to conceal, to obscure, to save face. Asians will hide and lie about even petty things, like that they are addicted to watching football.

Lying has its benefits, by the way. It's not always completely deceitful. And while transparency sounds good, it's not a guaranteed solution. At the end of the day, transparency is a worldly undertaking, and no worldly undertaking is perfect. It can bring its own disharmony. Sometimes being overzealous about one small thing can result in a loss of everything else.

Once there was a father whose son was a bit of an idiot. The father was sleeping peacefully when a small fly landed on his head. The son thought the fly would bother his father's rest, so he hit the fly with an ax, killing his father. Overcompensation like that can happen.

On the ultimate level, transparency doesn't apply to the Vajrayana master. If some lamas promote accountability, they are only saying so to appease the general audience. In the tantra, the guru is not accountable to the student. He is accountable only to his own karma. Transparency is not a tantric responsibility.

Accepting Offerings

We should view an offering of one rupee as an example of extreme generosity.

Think, “This is so amazing,” and encourage and praise and dedicate the merit of that. Then if the next day you have the courage to accept one million dollars, think, “Well, this is not really enough.” This will help the student see the Dharma, the truth, instead of the numbers.

It’s disgraceful when instructors, especially those coming from the West, take their time opening their wallets after dining in a restaurant with their students, as if they are entitled to be hosted by their students. Even when people are “going Dutch,” they wait until the end and pay the least. This demonstrates a lack of dignity from someone who is supposed to inspire others. It may not be so important if you are teaching business or mathematics, but if you are teaching spirituality, paying for a meal involves love and compassion and generosity and merit, so you should be meticulous about your behavior.

SYMPTOMS OF WRONG LIVELIHOOD

If you exhibit any of these symptoms of wrong livelihood listed by Jigme Lingpa, maybe being a guru is not for you:

- Even though you might not ask for things directly, you drop hints about your needs in front of a person who has the potential to provide for you, at the same time concealing your possessions and money to disguise your wealth.
- You praise a past patron’s generosity in public in order to get a future patron to offer even more.
- You make a small offering to someone while calculating what that person will have to give you in order to reciprocate appropriately.
- You talk publicly about what kind of hearing, contemplation, meditation, and penance you have practiced, along with details about what it is you have renounced, how many lives you have saved, how many virtuous actions you have performed, how many feasts you have offered, and how many temples and statues you have sponsored, all as a means of accumulating more offerings.
- You heap praise on a potential donor for the purpose of accumulating offerings.
- You make an effort to appear perfectly peaceful, gentle, virtuous, and meditative in public, even though you are nowhere near perfect.
- You pretend to be honest as a way of accumulating offerings and fame.
- You pretend to have leveled the eight worldly dharmas, and then you put on a show of outrageousness, as if you were free from hypocrisy, saying

whatever comes into your mind, as a means of accumulating wealth.

- You tell one sponsor how much another sponsor has offered to make him feel obligated to do the same, or more.
- You make a display of humility, claiming you don't deserve generosity, as a means of accumulating wealth.

These are the poisons, stains, and causes of samsara. Those who wish to gain liberation must refrain from wrong livelihood at all costs.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

You should be aware of the ways of life in the countries where you teach—the culture, laws, rules, and psychology—before getting up on your throne.

Many of today's older lamas grew up in a country where it was natural and accepted for a girl to give birth when she was just thirteen. They are from places where people married when they were twelve. But even though this is accepted back home, they should know that when they go to the West, they should not make sexual advances on someone who is under eighteen.

You need to be prepared for how students of a given culture are prone to react as well. I've seen students get angry with lamas without provocation, and when they don't get what they want, they exaggerate, become dramatic, tell stories. And usually people listen, because people have more sympathy for the seeming victim.

HOW TO TEACH

The sole purpose of practicing the Dharma is to liberate yourself and all sentient beings. The aim should never be to become a Dharma teacher. But nowadays, under the pretext of needing to propagate the Dharma, the notion of a Buddhist teacher training keeps springing up from every corner. Nevertheless, there are certainly a few things to keep in mind:

If you want to plant a grove of enlightenment, you have to have a ground. To make that ground fertile, you have to have discipline and diligence. A skilled guru must find ways to encourage and inspire the student to be disciplined depending on the student's capacity.

Even if the guru himself is very well read, he or she should make the student think that education never ends. Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was always

studying and reading. He was already so very learned, but he would display this desire for more teachings and even humbly ask questions. He set an example for all of us.

The guru must be very ethical and pure but should also exude a quality of relaxed openness, never causing inferiority complexes in the students.

It's the guru's job to make sure the students don't fall into traps. If a student falls into the view of emptiness, a skilled guru should prescribe things like vipassana, or even kindergarten-level teachings. Likewise, when the guru notices a student is becoming very fussy with all the minute details of ritual, then the guru has to promote the view.

If a guru encounters a student who really wishes to practice, who has genuine renunciation, the guru should not be too elaborate with all sorts of words and phrases and languages. He or she should be, as the Tibetans say, "like a duck separating milk." (It's believed that if you mix together water and milk, the duck will drink only the milk.) In other words, the guru should just get to the point.

There should be an inspiring atmosphere for the teaching—an arrangement of beautiful offerings, maybe even a throne—but you should not be fussy about it. Otherwise both the student and the teacher will waste too much time arranging paraphernalia.

Always quote the great masters of the past. This attitude of many modern teachers acting as if they invented the truth has to stop. This arrogance breeds more arrogance and creates a world full of people who never pay respect or offer gratitude to the source of wisdom. Where there is arrogance, there is no humility, and where there is no humility, there is no chance for enlightenment.

ANALYZING THE STUDENT

Before agreeing to become a guru you should analyze your students, just as they are analyzing you—even if, or especially if, the student comes with seemingly strong enthusiasm and abundant offerings. Of course, ideally you could analyze through omniscience. But because most aspiring gurus will not be omniscient, they must take time to basically get to know the student. It's the only way. If spending time is not possible, then at least make some pointed inquiries, as if giving an interview. Ask questions. Even mundane worldly jobs require the prospective employee to sit down with the boss and be interviewed and to have a background check, so the important and special job of enlightening all sentient beings should probably involve interviews and background checks too.

To find out if your students are leaning toward virtuous thinking and action,

you can act like a parent with a child. Parents can train children in generosity, for example, by giving them something to give away to a beggar. This kind of method creates an influence that might sink into their heads and make an impression. The guru observes and then creates conditions for students to increase their virtuous activity, like making lamp offerings, meditating, taking vows, respecting others, and, especially for tantric practitioners, appreciating the deity and appreciating the grand view of shunyata.

ABUNDANCE AND VARIETY

It's good for the guru to give a variety of teachings, not always emphasizing one and only one. If variety were not good, the Buddha would have taught the same thing again and again, but he taught in myriad ways on myriad subjects. Nowadays, so many students immediately want Mahasandhi or Mahamudra teachings. So gurus, knowing that this is the market, teach Mahasandhi or Mahamudra and nothing else, even if they have no proper knowledge of the teachings, let alone realization. This has a deteriorating effect in that there will be less and less demand for other foundational Dharma teachings, so they will be neglected and will eventually vanish. How many people will understand the profound Mahasandhi without the foundation of renunciation, love, and compassion? So whichever way you look at it, we will end up losing the abundance, the infinite wealth, of the Buddhadharma.

The guru must be skilled in guiding the student step-by-step into the greater teachings. It is stated repeatedly in many tantric texts that all the foundational teachings should be introduced from the beginning, from the Shravakayana and the Mahayana to the Kriya and Charya yoga tantras to the Anuyoga. If you make the mistake of sharing more profound and direct teachings too soon, then not only are you violating the rules of the tradition, you might actually create fear and confusion. Your students might even abandon the Dharma. They could potentially develop wrong ideas and wrong views, which are difficult to undo later.

Even if the students understand a little something, it will be only a partial understanding, and having a partial understanding of the highest teachings is so dangerous. Partial understanding of the absolute truth can cause a sort of famine or genocide of all virtuous thoughts and actions. Students will become suspended in their partial view of the high teachings and will look down on things like flower offerings and circumambulating. You will have basically dried them up. They will underestimate the power of cause, condition, and effect, and

this will lead them to lower realms. For this reason, the Buddha said to Kashyapa that mountain-size ego clinging is nothing compared to clinging to emptiness.

Another danger is that Buddhism is becoming synonymous with mindfulness, happiness, and nonviolence. Many people think that's all there is. When they talk about mindfulness, they immediately think of sitting cross-legged on a cushion with a straight back. This kind of thinking will destroy Buddhism. If we choose to emphasize only one technique, the others will start to rot, and when even one rots, like a bad apple, it will spoil the whole bunch. Longchenpa saw this even in the twelfth century. He said if such degeneration happens, it will be like pouring milk inside a clay pot that hasn't been put in the kiln. The pot will crumble, and the milk will also spoil.

So abundance and variety in the teachings is so important. Otherwise, if the mindfulness movement doesn't work in a place like America, Americans will throw the baby out with the bathwater and discount all of Buddhism. This would be such a loss.

THE SIX PARAMITAS

The act of teaching contains all the six paramitas, if the teacher puts his or her heart into it:

- Transmitting the Dharma freely, with compassion and kindness and without restraint, is the most supreme generosity.
- Teaching without a wish to harm others, without the bias of sectarianism, and without defilements such as trying to impress or convert others is the perfect discipline.
- Teaching without feeling annoyed by slow-witted students and without feeling exhausted by the circumstances of conditions of time is the perfect patience.
- Having joy when teaching subjects like emptiness, love, and compassion is the perfect diligence.
- Not getting distracted generally or by the wrong motivations or inappropriate subjects during the teaching is meditation.
- Knowing that the whole act of teaching and listening is just like a dream, a mirage, is wisdom.

THE FOUR INDISPENSABLE ATTRIBUTES OF A BODHISATTVA

The aspiring teacher should possess what the Buddha called “the four indispensable attributes of a bodhisattva,” which the Buddha himself taught to the bodhisattvas:

- *Generosity*: Always giving, in some manner or another, material gifts, space, time, protection, information. The teacher’s fundamental quality should be giving.
- *Soothing words*: Avoiding harsh language. Never denigrating new students for habits such as not being vegetarian, and avoiding any sense of judgment.
- *Precise guidance*: Providing appropriate guidance in accordance with the disciple’s needs and adapting to the disciple’s capacity, constitution, and culture. Treading carefully, not scaring students away by prescribing a three-year retreat or ngöndro half an hour after meeting them.
- *Appropriate action*: Without acting in accordance with the Buddha’s teaching on view, meditation, and action, you are missing the point. If you just indulge students’ wants and desires, you are not providing a path to enlightenment, you are just entertaining. Acting in accord with what is taught, practicing what is preached.

TAME YOUR MIND

When you are teaching, it’s likely that emotions and psychological hopes and fears will arise, not just in the student but in yourself. Almost always, an emotional relationship develops between the spiritual teacher and the student, especially if the teacher is quite good at informing, encouraging, and correcting. People naturally respect the teacher, and that respect transforms into other warm feelings. Many spiritual instructors may not be prepared to go beyond the role of a provider of information. Teachers who have not managed to tame their own minds will not be able to take on the responsibility of a student relationship in which so much emotion is involved. They will get carried away by even the smallest accomplishments. Accomplishments are very intoxicating and attractive. In all cases, but especially for teachers, accomplishments should not be regurgitated.

ASSUMING THE “BEST”

Different cultures have different expectations of holy men and women, mostly

having to do with living simply and chastely. Priests and saints in the West, and similar figures in the East, are always depicted as austere and morally pure, Shakyamuni Buddha included. But he appeared as he did in his nirmanakaya form for the sake of his audience of common people. The peasants of Magada could accept the truth if it came from the mouth of a pure renunciant, not from the lips of a wheeling, dealing merchant, so he didn't wear diamond rings and golden slippers. This look was his vehicle. Only the tantric Vajradhara guru in his sambhogakaya form manifested with earrings and consorts, not living simply at all.

When the guru concept migrated to the West, something was lost in translation. Because of the habit of viewing holy men as servants of society, like police officers or nurses, gurus are expected to act as such. But a Vajrayana guru is not like a servant of society. Nor should a Vajrayana guru be confused with the pandits or pujaris of India, whose role is to perform religious rituals, practice astrology, give marriage advice, and so on. A pandit may have an eye on creating a better next life, but he is not there to annihilate the ego and create conditions for enlightenment in this very lifetime.

If you look at the lifestyle of many Tibetan lamas, it's far from austere. It's no wonder the Vajrayana is a subject of scrutiny—not only now but since the beginning. The tantric guru will, of course, be scrutinized. And of course there are charlatans, seemingly more now than before. But even during the Buddha's time there were charlatans. Many lamas live a lavish lifestyle, with big homes, fancy cars, expensive restaurants. They have intimate relationships, sometimes with multiple women. Many of them, from the Buddhist point of view, can be seen as adulterous.

Even within the Vajrayana's acceptance of some debauchery and indulgence, it's a hard sell. But one never knows where the bodhisattvas reside. It could very well be among prostitutes. They could very well manifest as debauched lamas. Conversely, the devil can manifest as an austere celibate like Kashyapa.

But as a general rule, this indulgence doesn't set a good example, and it's not helpful to the common people.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

As a teacher, you should sit humbly on this throne with the right attitude and motivation, thinking, "I shall let all beings have the eyes of the Dharma. I shall light the lamp of wisdom. I shall try to prolong the longevity of the Buddhadharma." And if you are teaching the sutras, you should think you are

Shakyamuni. If you are teaching the tantra, you should think you are Vajradhara. If you are teaching Mahasandhi, you should think you are Samantabhadra or Samantabhadri. If you are teaching emptiness, visualize yourself as Prajnaparamita. This advice is from the Buddha himself in the *White Lotus Sutra*.

When all the great masters teach, they first pray at length to their own gurus. We can learn from this attitude. Their prayer is to have a successful teaching, meaning that at least the teachings will plant a seed of habit in the ones who are listening, that the teachings will invoke compassion and bodhichitta, that they will be heard properly and inspire the beings who are listening to eventually put the teachings into practice.

After lengthy prayers to his guru and the guru lineage, the teacher will summon any beings who wish to listen to the holy teachings of the Buddha. “Any beings” does not necessarily mean only humans. Any god, ghost, asura, or any other being who has some interest in love, compassion, interdependence, and wisdom is welcome to come and listen attentively.

Then the teacher reminds the listeners and the expounder of the teaching that the motivation of teaching and learning should be for the benefit of all beings.

These steps are so important. And it’s important to remember that the teachings of the Buddha are to enlighten, not to educate.

Modern teachers must always mention the life stories of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and gurus of the past, but without delivering a completely sycophantic exposition that takes up half the teaching.

These procedures don’t necessarily apply if you are giving an important teaching at a coffee shop or in a park or on a bus. Some teachings are better suited for relaxed atmospheres. But it’s always possible to keep some of the tradition, no matter where you are. Whether you are in a living room or a temple, you can create the right atmosphere by sitting slightly more elevated than the students, having a Buddha statue, and making some simple offerings. And before the actual teaching starts, depending on the student and the tradition, you can include a variety of other steps—recitation of prayers, praise to the Buddha, praise to the teachings, the generation of love and compassion, even prostration to a Buddha statue or to the seat where you will teach. These are all human inventions, but because we are so dependent on conditions, they will help bring a sense of momentousness for both the student and the teacher.

Toward the end of the teaching, you dedicate the merit of having had the opportunity to utter the words of the Dharma, and you think with deep appreciation, “This alone comes from the blessing of my guru and the lineage,” and “All of what I taught was taught by the Buddha.” Be grateful that many

people have listened. See them as your companions, and see them as assisting you to increase this incredible activity; with that you are appreciating the sangha. If you're teaching the uninterrupted tantra, praise the blessings of the dakinis and dharmapalas. Finally, be grateful for having this body that you have obtained due to an act of your parents.

Conclusion

ENTANGLED IN THE VAJRA NET

ONE OF THE REASONS the guru is so important has to do with what we call the three vajras: body, speech, and mind. One's own body is the vajra body, one's own speech is the vajra speech, and one's own mind is the vajra mind. These vajras need to be discovered, realized, ripened, and decoded. And they need to function as the three vajras to reach fruition. As it is, we are trapped in a really sophisticated net that keeps the three vajras entangled, preventing them from meeting their full potential.

We humans have a habit of making something out of nothing—even our names. For example, if you call your child “Bob,” Bob becomes an even more solid entity, and you become trapped by that label. The label of gender is endlessly reconfirmed by the existence of gents' toilets. This book in your hands, the pen in your bag, your values, your looks, the window, your shampoo, anything we deem to have size, color, or shape—all of this is a net that traps your body, speech, and mind. The indestructible nature of the three vajras cannot function because it's completely entangled in this net.

The three vajras—body, speech, and mind—are present all the time, but the net prevents them from fully manifesting. Unrestrained, the body can go beyond height, color, weight, health. Unrestrained speech is free from the burden of misunderstanding and miscommunication. A mind ripened to its full vajra potential is never distracted, never entangled by ideas. It's free from obsession and bias.

For instance, the cup on my table is part of the vajra body, but because of the net, we have such a limited view of it. We can't see it as bigger than the universe, and therefore we are unable to put the whole universe inside this small cup. Similarly, language, symbols, and other means of communication are all vajra speech. And any cognizance or awareness, any interaction between subject and object, is vajra mind. But because of the net, we are trapped. Vajra speech and vajra mind don't function. Because of culture, education, and all our usual

habits, we are not functioning as deities.

Tantra introduces the view, the deity, and the guru to untangle the net. No matter how much understanding you have of the view, it most likely remains only an intellectual or conceptual understanding. The deity is also almost just a concept. But the guru is tangible. The guru is there like a table in front of you in your deluded mind. And if you have the karmic predilection for admiration and devotion, it's the best delusion you can have. This delusion has the power to decode your delusion.

GURU IN THE BARDO

You will find your guru devotion to be the most practical, hands-on, easy-to-remember tool during the most crucial time of your life: when you are dying and after you die—when you are in the bardo. If you haven't managed to practice enough or don't have adequate wisdom and merit to become enlightened within this lifetime before abandoning this body, then you must continue the thread of practice and try to achieve liberation at the very moment of death. However, when all the elements and gross consciousnesses dissolve into the state of dharmata, if your weak practice does not allow you to recognize dharmata, then naturally, you will bounce. The perception of subject and object will begin to arise, discursive thoughts will begin to spin, and once again you will begin to experience all the visions and sounds and attributes of the bardo. If you as a practitioner are steady and confident enough, you may still have the opportunity to realize enlightenment. But as bardo beings, it will be difficult to resist looking for hideouts, clamoring for rebirth and for the comfort of reference points. But even then, by the strength of remembering a little practice you have done, you may still have some hope of attaining a higher rebirth, or of reaching a better hideout.

In the bardo, if you can't remember all the wisdom and methods you have been familiarizing yourself with during this lifetime, at least try to remember the view, the deity, and the guru. But the chances of you remembering the view and the intricate details of the deity in the midst of the uncertain turbulence of the bardo are as slim as seeing stars in daylight.

It is the guru, again, that will be the easiest reference point to remember. By remembering the guru, you can grab hold of the state of enlightenment or any one of the other stages of the bardo. Even failing all those stages, as you enter into your next life's mother's womb, by remembering the guru, you can reclaim the right aspiration, the right family, the right vessel for Dharma.

“The merit of being led by a sublime being is beyond comparison, far better than the merit of kings and queens. Even if you may not always practice, if you have a constant wish to practice and a constant concern about not being able to practice, you are far wealthier than the most materially successful person. If you put emphasis on generating the motivation to be kind and to enlighten all sentient beings, there is no comparison. You have surpassed what any other religion or spiritual system can do.”

—JIGME LINGPA

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The End.

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