

## Discovering Buddhism 4 – The Spiritual Teacher

### ***Reading 4: Relying with Action***

This lesson introduces the second half of how to rely on our spiritual masters; namely, through our actions. In *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hands*, this topic is mentioned only briefly (in Day Nine) as an entrée into the explanation about how to meditate on the stages of the path, i.e., how to rely on the spiritual master by following their practice instructions.

#### **The readings here are drawn from:**

- "Devoting to the Guru with Action" in *The Heart of the Path: Seeing the Guru as Buddha* by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, edited by Ailsa Cameron, Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, 2009.
- Sessions Four and Five of DBaH course 4: "The Spiritual Teacher" by Ven. Constance Miller
- "A Commentary on The Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion" by Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey

#### **Also read for this class:**

- *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Day Seven: "Devoting Yourself to a Spiritual Guide"

#### **Meditation:**

- The Advantages of Proper Reliance and the Disadvantages of Not Properly Relying on a Spiritual Guide

#### ***Excerpt from:***

### **Devoting to the Guru with Action**

*by Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche*

Chapter 15 of *The Heart of the Path: Seeing the Guru as Buddha* by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, edited by Ailsa Cameron, Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, 2009.

#### ***4. How to devote to a guru with action***

With guru devotion, seeing the guru as a buddha, we are able to devote ourselves correctly to the virtuous friend with thought and we then naturally devote ourselves correctly with action. Easily and joyfully we are able to follow the guru's advice, practicing the teachings according to his instructions, which is the best way to devote to

the virtuous friend with action. Correct devotion to the guru with action comes easily as a result of correct devotion with thought. How well we are able to devote ourselves to the guru with action is determined by how well we devote ourselves with thought.

Through training our mind in the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha and generating respect by remembering the guru's kindness, we hold the guru in our heart, cherishing him as the most precious person in our life. Because of this feeling, we never find any hardship in carrying out any advice he gives us, even if he asks us to do something difficult. Rather than finding it a burden, we are happy to do it and see it as the most worthwhile thing to do in our life. We know from our own experience that following the guru's advice is easier when our devotion is strong. When our devotion is weak, however, being asked to do even a small thing becomes a burden.

There are three ways to devote ourselves to the guru with action:

- (1) Carrying out the guru's advice
- (2) Offering respect and service
- (3) Making material offerings

### **(1) Carrying out the guru's advice**

The main practice—and the best offering—is the first one: carrying out the guru's advice, which means following the holy wishes of the guru with our body, speech and mind. This is the best way to purify negativities and to accumulate merit. Pleasing the guru by fulfilling his wishes is itself the quick path to enlightenment.

As Milarepa said,

I have no material offerings. My offering to my father-guru is my practice.

He also said,

The striving and suffering I bear in my practice is an offering to please my father-guru. I repay my father-guru's kindness with my practice.

Because he was living an ascetic life, Milarepa didn't have anything material to offer; his offering to his guru was his practice. Milarepa's practice was doing everything that Marpa advised him to do after they met, including building the tower, doing retreat and actualizing the whole path to enlightenment.

Here *father* is referring to the spiritual master, who takes care of us completely and upon whom we totally rely, now and in our future lives. The virtuous friend guides us like a parent guides his or her child. Repaying the father-guru with practice means following the guru's advice, practicing the Dharma and attaining realizations of the path to enlightenment.

### **(2) Offering respect and service**

Offering respect and service includes all the respectful behavior described in *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* and *The Essence of Nectar*, such as standing when the teacher

enters the room, prostrating, bathing and offering perfumes and ornaments to the holy body, cleaning, cooking and other services. We must read *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* and then put those teachings into practice.

### **(3) Making material offerings**

We make material offerings if we can. The lam-rim teachings mention that while the guru doesn't seek material offerings, disciples should still make the best offerings that they can. Again, as with all guru devotion practice, making material offerings is done for our own sake, to accumulate merit.

Devoting ourselves to the virtuous friend with action in these three ways quickly purifies extensive obscurations and accumulates extensive merit. We are then able to quickly achieve enlightenment.

In *Six-Session Guru Yoga*, devoting to the guru with action is contained in the following verse, which is the very essence of the samayas of correct devotion to the guru explained in *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*:

Seeing that all general and sublime realizations depend upon correctly  
devoting myself to you, my savior, I give up my body and even my life. Please  
grant me blessings to practice only what pleases you.

This means that from this moment until our enlightenment, we should try only to please our virtuous friend with our body, speech and mind.

Once we have meditated on the eight benefits of correct devotion to the guru, trained our mind in the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha and generated respect by remembering the guru's kindness, each piece of advice given to us by our guru is like a wish-fulfilling gem, because each time we follow our guru's advice we purify inconceivable negative karmas and obscurations. Following the guru's advice brings the most powerful purification, purifying the heavy negative karma we have accumulated in the past. And each time we carry out our guru's advice, we come closer to enlightenment. Everything—all the happiness not only of this life but of future lives, liberation and enlightenment—comes from following each instruction. Sincere practitioners see each piece of their guru's advice as a wish-fulfilling gem that fulfills all their own wishes for happiness and brings success in their wish to benefit all sentient beings.

It is explained in the lam-rim teachings that there is a big difference in the benefit in terms of purification and accumulation of merit between doing a retreat or some other practice because we ourselves have made the decision to do it and doing something on the advice of our guru. Following our guru's advice, no matter how hard we find it, brings much greater purification. Like a puja to eliminate obstacles, it prevents hindrances to the completion of our Dharma practice.

It is also said in the lam-rim teachings that following each instruction we are given by our guru is a cause of achieving the sambhogakaya, the holy body of complete enjoyment, since the guru's holy speech is the expression of the subtle wind.

I often tell the Kopan monks how fortunate they are because the whole monastery program from morning until night has been set up for them by their guru. During their daily life in the monastery, almost every single thing they do is following their guru's advice. Even the simple action of sweeping up a little dirt with a broom becomes a way to purify negative karmas and obscurations and accumulate merit. Once they join the monastery, everything they do—even sweeping the grounds each morning—has been arranged by the guru.

If we know all the benefits, it is a very enjoyable to be in a monastery; it is something to make the mind happy from morning until night. Every day, by following the guru's advice, we create a great many causes for temporary and ultimate happiness in this life and in future lives. There is then nothing we enjoy more than the daily work of following our guru's advice.

We should also think in a similar way if we work in a Dharma center. Doing any work that our guru has advised us to do has great benefit, making our life highly meaningful. Even if we're not doing the actual work of teaching Dharma, by working in a Dharma center we are providing the conditions for many other people to practice the holy teachings and follow the infallible path to enlightenment. If we frequently think about this in our everyday life, our mind will be very happy. We should constantly keep our guru in our heart, day and night. When we practice Lama Tsongkhapa Guru Yoga, Guru Lama Tsongkhapa enters and abides in our heart and we then remember him in our heart for the rest of the day. In the same way, we should constantly remember our guru in our heart and do our work for him. This itself is guru yoga practice. All the work we do from morning until night then becomes Dharma practice. It is also enjoyable and each day we are happy to be working in a Dharma center.

When we are actually living with our guru, serving our guru itself is our guru yoga practice. We don't need to seek the practice of guru yoga separately from that. We don't need to meditate separately on the holy body of the guru as we are with the actual holy body of the guru. Making prostrations and offerings to and serving our guru are the actual guru yoga practice, which we only visualize in pujas. Don't think that guru yoga practice has to do only with sitting and visualizing or reciting some prayers and has nothing to do with actual person-to-person contact.

When we do pujas, we visualize the beings in the merit field—the direct and indirect gurus, buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats, dakas and dakinis and Dharma protectors—as different aspects of the guru, then make offerings of praise, mudras, bath and physically performed offerings. We use a vase to offer water to a reflection of the merit field in a mirror and use a scarf to represent offering robes, but these are substitutes for actually offering a bath and robes to the guru. We do all this to purify our own mind. The guru-buddhas don't need to wash; we do it to purify our own defilements and to collect merit so that we can achieve realizations of the path to enlightenment. When we actually offer a bath to our guru—filling the bath with water, washing the guru and offering robes—we are performing the real guru yoga practice of offering a bath, which we only visualize in Jorchö and other sutra and tantra pujas.

In pujas, we set out various offerings on the altar, then, with mudras, make the eight

types of offerings<sup>1</sup> and the five sense offerings,<sup>2</sup> but offering our guru tea, food, clothes, flowers, sweet sounds and so forth is the actual practice of offering. And with these offerings we accumulate much more merit than when we visualize making the eight offerings, both actually arranged on the altar and mentally transformed, to the deity in pujas or sadhanas.

However, we shouldn't think that since we are serving the guru we don't need to do other practices. We should also try to do the other guru yoga practices as much as we can, as they are methods to quickly finish the work of accumulating merit.

While we are perfectly serving the guru who actually lives with us, all our realizations of the path naturally increase second by second. Offering service to the guru, the highest merit field, is the quickest way to complete the work of accumulating merit.

The sutra *Essence of Earth* says,

All the merit of having made offerings to unimaginable millions of buddhas and also of having made charity and practiced morality are surpassed by one moment of offering service to the guru.

When we are serving our guru by cleaning his house, we should think that the guru is all the buddhas and bodhisattvas and that we are cleaning their abode. When we offer even a glass of water to our guru, we should make the offering by thinking that the guru is all the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions. Since making an offering to even a pore of the guru creates more merit than making offerings to all the buddhas of the three times, there is no doubt about the benefit of making offerings to the actual guru. Even though there is already this benefit, our practice will be more effective if we meditate that the guru is all the buddhas and bodhisattvas when we serve him because it will help us to constantly keep guru devotion in mind and to stop negative thoughts toward the guru.

It is dangerous to practice guru yoga without understanding how to practice correctly and the shortcomings of practicing wrongly. There is also great danger in living with our guru and serving him if we don't know how to practice guru yoga. In a moment we can create the karma to be in the Inexhaustible Suffering hell for eons. Like electricity, the guru can bring incredible benefit but can also be very dangerous.

It is also inspiring to read the verses in *The Essence of Nectar* that extensively describe pleasing the holy mind of the virtuous friend with action. These verses are clear and detailed. Especially effective are the verses that describe how Naropa, Milarepa, Chayulwa and other great yogis did special practice of guru devotion and had incredible attainments. They are mentioned as excellent examples for us to follow.

The section of devoting to the guru with action begins,

Every single benefit of samsara and beyond  
Comes through the kindness of the guru.

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<sup>1</sup> The eight offerings are water for drinking, water for washing the feet, flowers, incense, light, scented water for the heart, food and music.

<sup>2</sup> The five are offerings of forms, sounds, scents, tastes and tangible objects.

Although I can never completely repay this kindness,  
In order to try to repay it, I will try to please him.

This means that all the happiness we experience is due to the kindness of the guru. Even though we can never finish repaying this kindness, we shouldn't give up all together, as we might do with a debt that we couldn't finish paying in this life. We should still attempt to repay the guru's kindness, and to do this we do the practice of pleasing the guru's holy mind.

Just as one plants seeds in a fertile field,  
Even though the guru doesn't depend on offerings and respect,  
To quickly complete my own great accumulation of merit,  
Why don't I attempt to plant seeds in this supreme field  
By making offerings and showing respect?

Although we might work hard—planting seeds, fertilizing and so forth—to grow crops in an ordinary field, there is no expectation from the side of the field. It is similar with the supreme field of the guru. The guru doesn't depend on offerings and respect. All of my gurus are exactly like this.

The guru is the supreme field of merit because, as I've already explained, it is in relation to the guru—through following his advice, respecting and serving him and making offerings—that we collect the most extensive merit. In order to quickly complete our collection of merit we should attempt to make offerings and show respect to the guru. The real meaning of offering is not simply giving something material but pleasing the guru's holy mind. That is the best offering.

*Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* says,

Giving to the guru always becomes an offering to all the buddhas.

Offering to the guru brings a great accumulation of merit, and from such accumulation we accomplish the supreme realization.

It is also said,

If you are wealthy, offer the best of your possessions to your guru, as Lama Dromtönpa and others did.

*Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* also says,

Whoever wishes to have unceasing good fortune and happiness should offer to the guru whatever is rare and extraordinary or even what is a little better than average.

From the holy speech of Lhasowa,

While we have something good to offer, if we offer something bad, we degenerate our samaya. But there is no shortcoming if we have only poor

offerings or if the guru is pleased with poor offerings.

Disciples should offer whatever is the most pleasing, and gurus shouldn't cling even a little to material possessions. As Kadampa Geshe Sharawa said,

A guru is someone who is pleased by the disciples' practice and realization and does not mentally cling in the slightest to material objects.

Whether or not we physically hear or see that the guru is pleased, the guru is someone who is pleased by our practice, not by receiving material offerings. This is how it should be. However, if we see our virtuous friend made happy by receiving material offerings, it's a mistake to think that this is wrong. That is incorrect devotion to the virtuous friend. Many times, to make a disciple happy, high lamas show the aspect of being pleased when receiving material offerings.

The previous incarnation of Pari Rinpoche, Pari Dorje Chang, a high lama of Sera Monastery in Tibet, was once offered a leg of mutton by someone who earned his living by printing Dharma texts. While the person was there in front of him, Rinpoche showed the aspect of being very pleased and said, "Oh, how thoughtful! Now I can make momos." Right after the person left, Rinpoche threw the whole leg of mutton into the toilet because it came from money obtained by printing and selling Dharma scriptures. Eating food bought with money earned by selling statues or Dharma scriptures is regarded as heavy negative karma and brings great pollution. Pari Dorje Chang didn't give the meat to other people because it would have been the same negative karma. He showed pleasure at having received the offering, then immediately threw it away. This is the skillful way that high lamas act in guiding sentient beings. Even if they accept an offering, they take it for the benefit of the disciple, so that the disciple can accumulate merit.

*The Essence of Nectar* continues,

It is said that making offering to one pore of the guru  
Who has revealed to us the unmistakable path  
Collects greater merit than honoring and making offering to the multitudes of  
aryas:  
Hearers, self-conquerors, bodhisattvas and buddhas.

This verse describes the power of the guru. Leave aside making offerings and paying respect to our guru, even making offerings to our guru's disciples collects far greater merit than making offerings to all the numberless buddhas, bodhisattvas and arhats, as well as all the statues, stupas and scriptures of the ten directions. As I've already explained, we collect such merit when, thinking of our guru, we give even a glass of water or a piece of candy to a fellow disciple or a member of our guru's family or even give some food to our guru's dog.

Many holy beings, such as Naropa, Milarepa,  
Dromtönpa, Sakya Pandita and Chayulwa,  
Gave up without a thought their body, life and wealth  
For their gurus and achieved many realizations.

Without hesitation, Naropa immediately did every single thing that his guru Tilopa mentioned he should do. He thus bore twelve great and twelve small hardships. The twelve great hardships almost caused Naropa to die. Each time Naropa was close to death Tilopa would come along and bless him so that he would again recover his health. Milarepa is one of the most inspiring examples of someone who practiced incomparable devotion to the virtuous friend. After making unbelievable sacrifices and bearing hardships to practice Dharma, Milarepa had great success, achieving enlightenment within a number of years. I will describe the stories of Naropa and Milarepa in more detail later (see chapter 18).

In addition, Dromtönpa, Sakya Pandita and Kadampa Geshe Chayulwa are used to illustrate correct devotion to the virtuous friend. I described earlier how these great yogis experienced powerful purification as a result of serving their gurus (see chapter 7).

*The Essence of Nectar* continues,

Therefore, I shall strive to respect and serve with my body and speech,  
Such as by offering all my cherished possessions,  
Prostrating, rising, giving massages and baths,  
And speaking respectfully, praising and so on.

Rising refers to rising to our feet when we see our guru.

In devoting ourselves to our guru, we should be very happy to make offerings to him. We first meditate on our guru as inseparable from our special deity. As His Holiness Song Rinpoche always advised, when we visualize the deity we should think of the guru and when we see the guru we should think of the deity. By thinking of the qualities of the guru, we manifest countless bodies, equal to the number of our past lives and make prostrations. We then offer ourselves as servants to the guru and with beautiful chants, praise him with our speech. In this way, we offer service with our body and speech.

We then offer to the guru actually arranged material offerings as well as mentally transformed ones. For example, we visualize transforming all our merits of the three times into various offerings and then offer them to the guru. This is the way to make miscellaneous offerings, both those materially arranged and those mentally transformed.

With respect to how to devote to the guru with action, the Hinayana teachings explain that in the daytime, one massages or offers perfume to the holy body, as well as robes; at night, one makes the guru's bed, offers robes and so forth. This is body service.

With respect to speech service, when one mentions the holy name of the guru, one uses a particular honorific word as a preliminary, then says the name. That is why when Theravadin monks talk about or to their abbot, they put their palms together and say "Venerable Such-and-such." The ordination text explains, "First say this, then say the holy name." In a gelong ordination, the sangdön lobjön asks those who are to take ordination some questions as to whether or not they have particular obstacles to ordination, then gives them advice as to how to address the abbot and other teachers. When His Holiness Ling Rinpoche or His Holiness Trijang Rinpoche were quoting from a teaching of Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo, they would always say "Kyabgön Pabongka



Dechen Nyingpo.” Kyab means refuge and gön means savior. A particular name that expresses the teacher’s exalted qualities is used.

Speech service also means saying “I will do it” when our guru gives us an instruction. Using respectful words when we talk to virtuous teachers or ask them questions is also speech service.

Each time we offer a glass of water, a cup of tea, food or a bath to our guru, we should do so with the mind of guru yoga, looking at the guru as a buddha. When we serve our guru, if possible we should remember the second merit field in *Guru Puja*, where the guru’s holy body is decorated with the Guhyasamaja mandala. We should try to look at the guru’s five aggregates as the five Dhyani Buddhas and all his pores as the twenty-one thousand arhats. (Here we are not talking about ordinary arhats; they are actually manifestations of buddha.) With awareness of this, we then offer robes to our guru or perform other services. We should also think of the absolute guru, the dharmakaya, the holy mind of all the buddhas, which pervades all existence and has no beginning and no end. This is the most profound guru yoga meditation, and any service we offer our guru with this awareness accumulates unbelievable merit.

Especially, I will attempt day and night without distraction  
To practice the complete, unmistakable graduated path:  
The best way to please my guru with my three doors.  
I will please my guru with the offering of practicing in accord with his advice.  
Please grant me blessings to be able to do this.

The best way to please the guru with body, speech and mind is by attempting day and night without distraction to practice the lam-rim, the complete and unmistakable path to enlightenment. We will then definitely achieve our goal of full enlightenment. On the basis of this, we please the holy mind of the guru by following his advice. If our main goal in life is to subdue our mind and have realizations of the lam-rim and not just to be famous for our understanding of Dharma, attaining our goal depends on correctly devoting ourselves to our virtuous friend, which means following his advice. Following our guru’s advice on the basis of practicing lam-rim is what pleases our guru the most.

We should read the section on respecting and serving the guru in *The Essence of Nectar* again and again and remember it when we serve our guru. ■

**Excerpt from:**

## **Session Four of DBaH course 4: "The Spiritual Teacher"**

*by Ven. Constance Miller*

Discovering BUDDHISM at Home: Awakening the limitless potential of your mind, achieving all peace and happiness; SUBJECT AREA 4, The Spiritual Teacher.

### ***Benefits of relying properly on a spiritual teacher***

According to the graduated path teachings, and specifically according to the presentation in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, which is in harmony with the *Lam-rim Chenmo* or *Great Graduated Path* text by Lama Tsongkhapa, there are eight advantages of relying properly on a spiritual guide. If you've looked at the next meditation, you can actually look at the eight as we go through them, because they are on your meditation sheet.

So, the first benefit is (1) that you will come closer to buddhahood. This is always a good thing! It has two aspects: First, you will come closer to buddhahood by practicing the instructions of your spiritual teacher, and second, you will come closer to buddhahood by making offerings to and serving him or her. Now "serving" can be a loaded term. Some of you may feel perfectly comfortable with it, and some of you may not. I prefer to think of it like helping, being of assistance, being of help in some way. For example, think of Geshe Sherab, our geshe here. At the moment Geshe-la doesn't drive. So if Geshe-la needs a ride some place or needs to run errands, if he needs someone to accompany him and you volunteer, that would be helping your spiritual teacher – just being there, having the willingness to happily be of service.

Second, (2) properly and correctly relying on your spiritual teacher pleases all the buddhas. This is explained by recalling that all of the buddhas of the ten directions, all of those infinite enlightened beings in the universe are totally willing to give us the Dharma. From their own side there's complete 100 percent willingness to teach us the Dharma. The only problem is that our minds are obscured and we can't see them. Our minds are closed to the buddhas and to the teachings. There are many different ways in which the buddhas manifest different buddha-bodies, so that they can be perceived by beings of different levels. The nirmanakaya, or emanation body, is the buddha-body that manifests for ordinary beings. But only certain pure ordinary beings can actually see the nirmanakaya form of the Buddha. The nirmanakaya is the form that, for example, Shakyamuni Buddha himself took, which has the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks. But with our imperfect and impure karma, we're not able to see that level of manifestation of the buddhas. What we *can* see, however, is our spiritual teachers who come to us in completely ordinary form, as human beings with flawed bodies. It is, therefore, through our teachers that the buddhas manifest and teach us. Second, no matter how many offerings we might make to all the buddhas, material offerings, offerings of practice, and so on, the buddhas still won't be pleased with us if we don't rely properly on our spiritual teacher. Our spiritual teacher is, in fact, their emissary, their representative, their conduit to reach us. And from the highest tantric view, our

guru is in essence all the buddhas. So if we don't treat our spiritual teacher with respect, then it's the same as if we are disrespecting all of the buddhas themselves. In this light, we can understand why it would please the buddhas greatly whenever we rely on our gurus correctly and with devotion and reverence.

Next, by relying correctly on our spiritual teacher, (3) we won't be disturbed by non-humans or bad company. Because of our correct reliance on our spiritual teacher, (4) this will automatically diminish and possibly even put a stop to all of our delusions and negative actions. And (5) our insights and realizations of the levels of the path will increase. Clearly, we receive lots of good things from respecting our spiritual teacher properly. (6) We will not be deprived of virtuous spiritual friends, virtuous spiritual teachers in our future rebirths. (7) We won't fall into the lower realms, and (8) we will effortlessly achieve all our short- and long-term aims. You couldn't ask for better! All of these benefits, all of these advantages, come because the entire spiritual path is built on the foundation of our relationship with our spiritual teacher. And so, if we destroy or damage that relationship, we have damaged the foundation of everything else that we're trying to build so that everything else will, in turn, be damaged and will degenerate.

For example, if you chip away at the foundation of a big building, eventually the entire building is going to fall down because we have damaged the foundation, the basis, the root. But our building's not going to fall down if we fortify and strengthen the foundation. Similarly, if you have a beautiful plant but you dig away at and keep harming the root, eventually the plant is going to die. But if we cultivate and fortify the roots so they become strong and healthy, then the entire plant flourishes and grows and blossoms great flowers and leaves and fruit. Just as in these examples, it works in exactly the same way with our practice.

It is important that we think of our relationship with our spiritual teacher, or teachers, in these same terms. Our spiritual teachers are the foundation on which every other aspect of our Dharma practice depends, that enables everything else in our spiritual practice to be healthy and grow and flourish.

### ***Disadvantages of not properly relying on a spiritual teacher***

As we said before, the decision to become a disciple of a particular teacher, to establish a bond with that person as your teacher, is something that happens in your mind. And the decision to break or degenerate that bond is also something that happens in your mind. Let's now look at the disadvantages both of not cultivating or practicing a proper respectful relationship with one's spiritual teachers, or in actually transgressing that relationship. This might mean getting angry with or criticizing our teachers, and so on.

We have been exploring the importance of our spiritual teachers and thus the importance of having a healthy devoted way of relating with them. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche said recently: "The Buddha must appear to us as a normal human being, with all the common human imperfections. It is the only way the Buddha can interact with us, because this is the only way we can perceive a buddha. This is why our guru is, in reality, a true emanation of Buddha, appearing as a common human being." So first of all, (1) if you disparage or criticize your spiritual teachers, whether inadvertently or purposely, then because of who that person is in relationship to all the buddhas, then it's the same as insulting all of the buddhas. This will have a strongly degenerative effect on

your refuge. The basis of our Buddhist practice is taking refuge: taking refuge in the buddhas, in their Dharma teachings, and in the community of practitioners, the Sangha. That's our anchor, that's our home. Our spiritual teacher is the living example and the living guide to that home for us. So if we criticize and disparage and put down all of the buddhas, we lose our home, we lose our spiritual anchor, our spiritual center. We become completely disconnected from the home of our spiritual practice. This is what happens when we criticize or disparage our spiritual teachers.

Second, (2) when we develop angry thoughts toward our spiritual teacher, by doing so, as with any moment of anger, we destroy our roots of virtue, our merits. We destroy an unthinkable quantity of merits, and as a result we will reborn in the hell realms for as many eons as the number of moments that we were angry. In the sutras, the Buddha himself said: "Manjushri, anger destroys virtue accumulated over a hundred eons." The Buddha seems to be talking about anger in general here, not even focusing on anger toward an object as powerful as our spiritual teacher. And elsewhere, the great pandit Chandrakirti wrote: "One moment of hating a child of the buddhas / destroys the virtues arising from giving and ethics / accumulated for a hundred eons. / Thus there can be no [worse] sin than impatience." And finally, in Shantideva's *The Way of a Bodhisattva*, it is said: "And those who harbor evil in their minds / against such lords of generosity, the Buddha's heirs, / will stay in hell, the Buddha has said, / for ages equal to the moments of their malice." In both these scriptural citations, bodhisattvas are referred to: in the first, as "child of the buddhas," and in the second, as "the Buddha's heirs." So if the karmic consequences of generating anger toward the bodhisattvas are so dire, then what must we think that consequences will be of generating anger toward our gurus, whom we regard, in the very highest view, as actual buddhas themselves, or at the very very least, as our personal connection with the buddhas?

The next disadvantages are these: (3) Despite our efforts to practice tantra, which is the rapid path to enlightenment, if we've transgressed or poorly practiced our relationship with our spiritual teacher, very simply, we won't be able to reach enlightenment. Also, (4) even though we seek the benefits of practicing tantra, our practice will only lead us to the lower realms because we have destroyed the roots of our practice: our guru devotion. (5) We won't develop new, fresh, positive qualities that we haven't already developed, and the qualities that we have developed through our hard work and practice will degenerate. Then, (6) we will be plagued with illnesses and other difficulties in this life, (7) we will wander endlessly in the lower realms in our future lives, and (8) we will be deprived of virtuous spiritual teachers in all our future lives. These are the cumulative results of transgressing our practice of devotion and respect toward our spiritual mentors.

This list of disadvantages is meant for someone who has a spiritual guide or is planning on it. It is like the caution or warning that comes with strong medication – if you aren't taking that medication, you needn't worry, but if you are, then you should follow the safety precautions and take the medicine according to the doctor's instructions. Of course, if you aren't taking the medicine, then you won't receive the healing benefits it has to offer either.

When we come to the module on the laws of karma, or cause and effect, then we'll learn more about the actual functioning of karma. In the meantime, one of the characteristics

of karma is that the results have common characteristics with the cause. What does that mean? It means that if I plant seeds of a pepper plant, I'm not going to get an apple tree, I'm going to get a pepper plant, because the resultant plant is going to be of the same nature as the seeds – that is, the cause is going to be similar to the result. In the same way, our actions are causes that ripen in the future in the form of resulting experiences, and those results are going to be similar in nature to the original actions that were their causes. So if we practice positive actions over and over again, then the results that we experience in the future are going to be positive in nature, and they will have some similarities to the actions that we originally engaged in. For example, if we practice a great deal of generosity, if we try to be generous people, then in the future people will be generous with us, and we will again have the resources to be able to practice generosity some more. Those kinds of similarities will take place. How does this apply to our discussion of properly devoting ourselves to our spiritual teacher? If in some way we reject or degenerate that important relationship with our spiritual teacher, then the results that we experience in the future will have similarities with that karmic cause. As stated in the disadvantages, we won't be able to find a spiritual teacher in the future. Having ruined one relationship with a spiritual guide, we won't be able to find another good relationship of that kind in the future. It will be a very long time before that precious opportunity is again within our grasp. ■

***Excerpt from:***

**Session Five of DBaH course 4: "The Spiritual Teacher"**

*by Ven. Constance Miller*

Discovering BUDDHISM at Home: Awakening the limitless potential of your mind, achieving all peace and happiness; SUBJECT AREA 4, The Spiritual Teacher.

***How to practice guru devotion in action***

Now we are going to explore how we demonstrate our respect and devotion for our spiritual guide through our actions. However we decide to show our devotion to our spiritual teacher in our actions, it is important that it's voluntary, that it comes from our heart, from our natural respect and appreciation and our wish to do something. The practice of devotion toward your spiritual teacher isn't some way to get you to pay for Tibetan lamas, or become slaves to your teacher, or anything like that. Whatever you decide to do, whatever expression your respect and devotion takes, it is essential that it sincerely comes from your heart, that it's sincere and not coerced in any way. It should be something that comes from deep inside of you.

So, how do we practice devotion to our spiritual teacher not just in thought but in action? The teachings talk about three different ways to practice. First, with material gifts, which is, however, the least way; second, with service, which is the middling way; and third, with practice, which is the best way. Okay? Let's go over each of these and flesh them out in greater detail.

### **Guru devotion in action 1: Offering material gifts**

So with regard to the first, helping one's teacher through offering gifts, this could be in the form of material help, or financial help. Again, it's important that it is voluntary and that you don't feel pressured into anything. It's important that you think about appropriateness. Just as you want to give something appropriate when you give a birthday present to a friend, the same thing applies when giving gifts to your guru. Appropriateness can be considered in terms of time, place, amount. It's important that you take into account your ability to give.

Remember when we first started this module, in our first talk, we talked about three qualities that are mentioned in the teachings that a disciple should have in order to have the correct basis for relating positively to a spiritual teacher. The first of those qualities was open-mindedness and lack of prejudice, the ability not to be opinionated; the second quality was intelligence and common sense; and the third was strong interest and appreciation for the Dharma.

The second quality, common sense and intelligence, comes into play in every teaching. Especially in our tradition, common sense is a great thing; being intelligent and savvy and practical is quite important. In the same way, when you make an offering to your teacher, it's important to be practical about it. From your side, you may want to give something extravagant, but this isn't always a good idea. Sometimes you shouldn't go beyond your means. On the one hand, it is fine to push your ability to give a little bit, so that your practice isn't lazy, always doing the easy thing. But at the same time, don't give your house away when you can't afford to give your house away. It just doesn't make any sense.

Take into account your teacher's situation, you know, in a practical sense as well. Give something that's going to be useful to your teacher. For example, if your teacher is supported solely by donations and offerings for the teachings and services that he or she provides, then money and financial gifts will most likely be helpful. You might want to take your teacher out to dinner occasionally. It's important to actually look at the reality of the situation.

### **Guru devotion in action 2: Offering service**

The second and next higher level of devotion in action is to offer service. This means help, assistance, and service to your teacher. You can offer help and service in many different ways: by making travel arrangements, by being your teacher's driver, by transcribing his or her teachings, by acting as interpreter, if you're able, by running errands, by working in your teacher's centers, or by supporting your teacher's projects. Showing your respect in the form of offering service also includes your everyday behavior. It is also important that your respect show itself in the form of your everyday behavior, the moment-by-moment little things that we do to show our respect for someone that we deeply revere and admire. When we're on our best behavior, we offer food first, we open the door for someone, we offer them a chair. We don't interrupt, we talk politely. We do all of those things that our mothers taught us as expressions of consideration, assistance, and service.

### **Guru devotion in action 3: Offering our practice**

The third and highest level is offering our practice. This is the best offering that we can make to our gurus. Showing our respect through considerate and thoughtful behavior also flows over into this area. We may show our respect through the practice of offering prostrations. We show our respect by putting our teacher's advice and teachings into practice.

Now, as far as advice is concerned ... As Westerners, so often we want to have individual interviews with Tibetan teachers. We want to have that personal time in which that teacher is focusing exclusively on us. So what do we ask our teacher's advice about? Do we ask what color shirt we should put on this morning? Do we ask about whether we should be with this boyfriend or that one? It's very important to be very clear in our relationship with our teacher. What is the appropriate part that our teacher should play in our life? What role should we rightfully expect them to play, and what role shouldn't we expect of them? Clearly, this is something that will evolve between you and your teacher. But as a general rule, the most appropriate interaction that we should have with our teacher is to ask advice only about important spiritual matters, issues that affect our spiritual development and our practice. This is the most appropriate level of relationship that we can have. We may indeed become really good friends with our teacher; we may have other levels of relationship taking place, and that's just fine. But we may not. In any case, the most important form that our relationship with our spiritual teacher can take is one that is strictly spiritual, one that is related to our spiritual development and our practice.

Thus, when we ask our guru for advice about our practice and when we receive that advice, then we should apply that advice with belief and faith, on the one hand, and with discriminating wisdom, or common sense, on the other. If we don't follow our teacher's advice, having asked for it, we have wasted our teacher's time and are showing a kind of disregard for his time and energy on our behalf and for his wisdom.

### ***Practicing with sincerity***

I just want to mention once again here how important it is that all of these behaviors and actions come out of sincerity, that they are sincerely done rather than being contrived, or artificial. There is no benefit for us to create a kind of outside persona that we put on to make ourselves look good, when in our hearts we don't have much respect at all, or we don't really care, or whatever. Our outside appearance and our inside life need to be in harmony with each other. Otherwise, we will find ourselves in deep psychological trouble sometime in the future.

One of the required readings for this module is the life story of Milarepa. There are so many inspiring stories of great teachers and their disciples: the stories of Tilopa and Naropa, Marpa and Milarepa. Some of those stories may sound pretty outrageous, about the gurus of the past and the outrageous things that they demanded of their disciples and how their disciples reached enlightenment in one lifetime because they followed their guru's wishes and advice. These stories are wonderful and incredibly inspiring. And it depends on where we are in our spiritual development, whether we're able to do that or not. Nobody else can tell you if that level of guru devotion is appropriate for you yet or not, except you. Nobody can tell you what level of guru devotion is appropriate for

you at any given moment in your practice.

For example, there is the story of Marpa and Tilopa. Marpa became a great translator and a great teacher; he was like a rock. When he was young, however, he went searching for his teacher. His teacher was Tilopa, who was a great yogi-practitioner. At the level of mundane appearances, Tilopa seemed like a crazy fisherman, catching fish and killing and eating them. People saw this behavior and thought, This person is a Buddhist? I mean, my goodness! The local people used to criticize Tilopa all the time.

But Tilopa was a very high being, a great bodhisattva and tantric practitioner. His actions may have appeared in one way to ordinary people, but in reality he was benefiting those fish and leading them out of samsara. He was able to blow mantras on the bones of the fish so that they'd come back to life and go swimming off again. It makes you think! Maybe we shouldn't grasp too strongly at appearances but see if we can look beyond them to find the essence.

### ***Practicing realistically***

We may not yet have reached the level in our spiritual practice where we are able to take on enormous or outrageous tasks from a spiritual teacher. We should be realistic in our expectations of ourselves. It's not realistic to expect that a low-level bodhisattva should be able to do the feats of a high-level bodhisattva. And we're not even bodhisattvas yet. So in terms of what we can offer and the way in which we fulfill the advice of our teachers, we have to be realistic. We have to apply our common sense and be practical and do the best we can.

If your teacher gives you advice that you really feel unable to fulfill, then it's important to say so, respectfully, and to give the reasons why. This is certainly permitted. Even at the highest tantric level of guru devotion practice, which is elucidated in the text *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* (the booklet that came with this module), it is perfectly acceptable. If you receive advice or instruction that you're unable to fulfill, it is quite okay to say so. You can, with proper respect, say, "I'm sorry, I can't do that. I'm not able." That's quite okay. So be practical, do the best you can, and use your common sense.

In asking for advice, if you have different spiritual teachers, then it's important to be careful what questions you address to whom. It's disrespectful to ask two different spiritual teachers the same question. It's like you are fishing for the answer that you want. This is not a good practice. So if you have different levels of relationship with different spiritual teachers, then one part of understanding those relationships is understanding what kinds of advice you would like and is appropriate to receive from any given spiritual teacher. But don't go fishing for the answer that you want. This is disrespectful and implies a lack of confidence in both the teachers to whom you addressed your question.

### ***Honoring your spiritual teacher's authority***

Part of respecting the spiritual teacher with practice is honoring your teacher's authority. Of course in our modern times, the term "authority" is a bit of a loaded term. Here, I don't mean authority in the sense of someone having control over you. Here I



mean acknowledging and respecting the authoritativeness of your teacher, acknowledging and recognizing that their knowledge is authentic knowledge, that their expertise and good qualities are all recognizably authentic and authoritative aspects of your guru. From that, we are inspired to emulate our teacher's realizations and behavior.

Now this may need a bit of explanation, and some intelligence in application. It doesn't mean that because your spiritual teacher is Tibetan, for example, and eats momos, that suddenly momos become a major part of your diet. You may like them and that's great, but that's not part of emulating your teacher's behavior and realizations. It doesn't mean taking on your teacher's political views or opinions about the world; it doesn't mean wearing the same kind of shoes your teacher wears. What it means is trying to incorporate the teachings into your life, trying to become a better person in the way that your teacher is a better person, trying to emulate the qualities that your teacher has developed that are beneficial to you and to others. This also doesn't mean imitating your teacher, taking on your teacher's mannerisms, talking like your teacher, any of those things. This may sound very funny, but many people do all of these things, so it's quite interesting.

Everything we've been talking about are all aspects of practicing respect for your teacher through offering your practice. In our wonderful main Lam-rim text, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Pabongkha Rinpoche gives an extensive explanation on the practice of guru devotion in your meditation practice. You visualize the merit field, including the lineage lamas, the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and your spiritual teacher, and you practice all the steps of the seven-limb prayer that we learned about last week. Pabongkha Rinpoche explains very elaborately and in great detail. I would strongly recommend that you study that section thoroughly in order to understand how to combine the practices of guru devotion in thought and in action in the context of your meditation practice. ■

### ***Excerpts from***

## **A Commentary on The Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion**

*by Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey*

The root text was composed by Ashvagosha in the first century BCE, translated into English by Sharpa Tulku, Khamlung Tulku, Alexander Berzin and Jonathan Landaw, and published by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in 1975. Gen Rinpoche Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey gave this commentary at the LTWA in Dharamsala July–August 1976. It was translated by Losang Gyaltzen and edited by Nicholas Ribush from his notes of the class.

Source: <http://www.lamayeshe.com/index.php?sect=article&id=373>, long commentary (PDF file)

## **The way one protects one's three words of honor**

(19)

Always keep your words of honor. Always make offerings to the enlightened ones. And always make offerings to your guru, for he is the same as all the buddhas.

There are several points here so we'll take them one by one.

"Always abide by your words of honor" means that your first word of honor to the guru who gave you the initiation of a certain deity is to always abide in that deity's yoga.

"Always make offerings to the buddhas" means always make offerings to the buddhas, like Vajrasattva and so forth, in order to complete the accumulation of merit. There are four types of offering—external, internal, offering of suchness and secret offering—and you should constantly make these offerings, visualizing them as extensive as space itself, and thereby complete your accumulation of merit. "Always make offerings to your guru..." means always make offerings to your guru because as an object of accumulating merit, he is like all the buddhas.

(20)

Those who wish to (attain) the inexhaustible (state of a buddha's wisdom body) should give to their guru whatever they themselves find pleasing, from the most trifling objects to those of best quality.

Alone, the word "inexhaustible" here is a bit vague, but through his kindness, Lama Tsong Khapa has clarified it. It means that we'll achieve the dharmakaya, which is as inexhaustible as space; infinite. So it's saying that disciples who wish to attain this inexhaustible state should make material offerings—from the smallest to the greatest—to their guru. Furthermore, the guru, in order to help dissipate the disciple's craving desire, should accept these things.

(21)

Giving (to your guru) is the same as making continual offerings to all the buddhas. From such giving much merit is gathered. From such collection comes the supreme powerful attainment (of buddhahood).

Making offerings to your guru fulfills the requirement of making continual offerings to all the buddhas, and by doing so you accumulate the merit that brings the supreme powerful attainment of enlightenment. Since you actualize the highest powerful attainment of enlightenment, what need is there to mention all other ordinary powerful attainments? Obviously, you accomplish these by the way. This and all the other ideas written down by Ashvagoshā have various tantras as their source. So, now we have finished the first of the eight divisions of cultivating respect for the guru, that of making material offerings.

...

## Doing what the guru says

Now we come to the third division of cultivating respect, acting according to his words.

(24)

(Disciples) having great sense should obey the words of their guru joyfully and with enthusiasm. If you lack the knowledge or ability (to do what he says), explain in (polite) words why you cannot (comply).

This verse says that highly intelligent disciples should listen to the words, or orders, of their guru with great pleasure, or bliss; they should hear whatever he has to say with much enthusiasm and perseverance. Whenever your guru speaks, listen with pleasure. If you can do what he asks, if you can act in accordance with his words, you should accept, but if it's too hard, then explain your difficulty politely. Don't ignore what he's asking, but tell him intelligently why you can't do it.

If your guru tells you to do something that you feel goes against your three types of morality, you can avoid doing it, but explain intelligently and unemotionally why.

One of the Jataka Tales is about a previous life of Guru Shakyamuni when he was born as a Brahmin disciple. The Brahmin teacher told his disciples to go out and steal for him. His logic was that since the universe was made by Brahma, if, as sons of Brahma, Brahmins take things, it's no more stealing than if a son takes things belonging to his father—since they are his own possessions, he's not stealing. However, the disciple who was the previous life of Buddha didn't go. His teacher said, "You don't seem to like me." Guru Shakyamuni replied, "Theft is at no time religious," and intelligently explained many ways in which stealing wasn't good. Later he became one of this guru's best disciples. Intelligence is always stressed as one of the very best qualities a disciple can have.

The fine print at the beginning of the *Guru Puja* says that at all times we should look for our guru's qualities, not his faults or shortcomings. By seeing his qualities we will achieve all powerful attainments; by seeing his faults, we won't.

Lama Tsong Khapa said, "The practice of disciples who pretend to listen to teachings and meditate without cultivating pure guru devotion is merely an echo; it's nothing. It has no potential to yield any result."

Also, in his *Abhisamayalankara* commentary, Gyältsab Rinpoche said, "Listening to teachings without cultivating proper guru devotion is like turning medicine into poison; it has no potential to bring a good result."

All this shows that if we cultivate pure guru devotion, we're sure to attain realizations, as illustrated by a story of three of Atisha's disciples—Dromtönpa, his translator and secretary; Amé Jangchub Rinchen, his cook; and Gönpa Wangchug Gyeltsen (the Great Neljorpa, or Mahayogi), who spent all his time in meditation—Atisha was always going to give him teachings and he remained in seclusion. So Mahayogi thought, "I spend all my time in meditation whereas the others don't meditate at all. I must have higher realizations." Atisha was aware of this, so called them all together and examined them. He found that of the three, Dromtönpa had the highest realizations, Amé Jangchub

Rinchen the second highest, and Mahayogi the least. This example emphasizes the importance of guru devotion.

**Question:** So, we don't always have to do what our guru tells us?

**Gen Rinpoche:** Ashvagosha says that we should always try to act in accordance with the words of our guru but are exempt if what we are asked to do is very heavy. In that case we can explain politely why we can't do it. If your guru asks you to do something against the three types of morality—for example, say he asks you to kill a human being—you can decline. Angulimala's guru told him he could attain liberation by killing a thousand human beings in a week and wearing their fingers as a garland. So, you don't need to doubt—these exceptions are mentioned in the Lam-rim Chen-mo and the Jatakamala, and the source of this advice is Vajradhara.

(25)

It is from your guru that powerful attainments, higher rebirth and happiness come. Therefore make a whole-hearted effort never to transgress your guru's advice.

This verse tells us why we should follow our guru's orders—we have to act according to his words because all powerful attainments, both common and supreme, are accomplished only by relying on him. Through proper reliance on our guru we will achieve the prosperity of human beings and gods.

Once again, this statement comes from one of the tantras, the Hevajra Tantra. That text clearly states that if you abide by the words of your guru you will achieve all powerful attainments and even in this life receive all happiness. However, going against what he says will only lead you to the lower realms, which is why Lama Tsong Khapa says that going against your guru's words or disrespecting him is an extremely grave negativity.

According to tantra, the speech of the buddha is the sambhogakaya, so one word of the guru is the equivalent of one sambhogakaya. That's why it's extremely negative to transgress the guru's words.

### **How to treat the guru's belongings and retainers**

(26)

(Guard) your guru's belongings as you would your own life. Treat even your guru's beloved (family) with the same (respect you show) for him. (Have affectionate regard for) those closely around him as if they were your own dearest kin. Single-mindedly think (in this way) at all times.

You should look after your guru's possessions properly—you should cherish them as much as you do your own life. Before Dromtönpa met Atisha, he was studying with another guru. By night he would tend his guru's cattle; by day he would spin yarn with his hands, soften leather with his feet and, as his lama had a wife and many children, always carry his guru's children on his back. When he met Atisha and told him about his previous realizations and merit, Atisha said, "Your greatest merit was created when you

were serving that lama.”

Therefore we, too, should respect and serve those closest to our guru—his family members, his foremost servants and helpers and so forth—learning from the lives of the great practitioners like Jetsun Milarepa and Dromtönpa.

When Gyälwa Dromtönpa was serving his guru in Kham, he used to lie in the mud so that his guru’s wife could sit on his back while she was milking the cows. Milarepa did the same thing; he had Marpa’s wife, Dagmema, sit on him while she milked the cows.

You should also treat your guru’s servants and so forth in the same way that you treat your beloved relatives. “Single-mindedly think (in this way) at all times” means that you must constantly keep this idea in mind so that it becomes very clear.

...

### **Stopping incorrect behavior**

(27)

Never sit on the (same) bed or seat (as your guru), nor walk ahead of him. (At teachings do not) wear your hair in a top-knot, (a hat, shoes or any weapons. Never) touch a seat (before he sits down or if he happens to sit on the ground. Do not) place your hands (proudly) on your hips or wring them (before him).

When he is standing you shouldn’t sit on a cushion or a mattress. If your guru is sitting on the bare ground you shouldn’t sit on a cushion. When traveling or walking on a road together you shouldn’t walk in front of him; he should go first. All these points have their source in the *Ornament of the Vajra Essence Tantra*.

Similarly, you shouldn’t wear your hair in a topknot or in a plait tied around your forehead while in the presence of your guru. If there is a long mattress on which you are going to sit together, you shouldn’t step over it before your guru sits down; if you do, it’s a downfall and you create negative karma. Also, you shouldn’t sit with your hands on your hips or wring your hands in his presence.

(28)

Never sit or recline while your guru is standing (or lie while he is sitting). Always be ready to stand up and serve him skillfully in an excellent manner.

While your lama is standing, don’t sit or lie down. This is not made up but comes from what was said by Vajradhara himself. You should always be very quick to do whatever you can do for your guru. Don’t be lazy or lethargic but very active in performing such tasks.

(29)

In the presence of your guru never do such things as spit, (cough or sneeze without covering your head. Never) stretch out your legs when at your seat, nor walk back and forth (without a reason before him. And never) argue.

You shouldn't spit, expel snot or blow your nose in front of your guru. Nor should you stretch your legs out when sitting before him. Similarly, in his presence, don't stroll about here and there in an arrogant manner, as if out for your morning walk, or quarrel or argue with others.

(30a)

Never massage or rub your limbs. Do not sing, dance or play musical instruments (other than for religious purposes).

As it says here, you shouldn't rub your limbs or your feet in front of your guru, just as you shouldn't wring your hands. Don't sing or dance in front of him or play musical instruments, unless it's during a religious ceremony. These are some of the things that you should not do within your guru's field of vision.

(30b)

And never chatter idly or speak in excess (or too loudly) within range of (your guru's) hearing. The rest of this verse says that you shouldn't gossip within earshot of your guru, where he can hear your frivolous talk and chatter.

These admonitions to curb such wrong behavior and bad habits within your guru's sense perception come from the *Ornament of the Vajra Essence Tantra* and the *Vajramala Guhyasamaja Explanation Tantra*.

### **Resorting to good behavior**

(31)

(When your guru enters the room), get up from your seat and bow your head slightly. Sit (in his presence) respectfully. At night or at rivers or on dangerous paths, with (your guru's) permission you may walk before him.

If you are sitting, stand up when your guru comes into view. When you sit, do so very demurely and not in a slovenly way that reflects your untamed mind. If an apple tree is well laden, all its branches hang down; similarly, if your mind is well tamed, your behavior is very subdued. Try to be on your best behavior in front of your guru and not reveal your unsubdued nature.

Verse 27 said that you should not walk ahead of your guru, but this verse offers an exception. If you are traveling in a dangerous place you can go first; under such circumstances, it's not right for your guru to go ahead. For the same reason you can also walk in front of him at night. Similarly, when crossing a river by foot, you should go first to check the depth or for danger. This advice also comes from the *Ornament of the Vajra Essence Tantra*.

When checking the validity of such teachings, you should be able to trace them back to Vajradhara. If you can do so, there's no need to look for any other source, just as when you trace a river back to its source, you can't find any other origin for it.

...

### **Special verbal acts of devotion**

(34)

Should you need to address (your guru) by name, add the title “Your Presence” after it. To generate respect for him in others, further honorifics may also be used.

Next comes the offering of speech. Whenever you utter your guru’s name, don’t leave it naked. For example, when you quote him, say, “I heard it from his great, holy speech.”

Pabongka Rinpoche said that we use our guru’s bare name too casually, without praise or honorific, but that he felt very uncomfortable whenever he heard his own guru’s name spoken like that. That’s why when we quote our lama we should say something like, “I heard it from his radiant, holy mouth.”

In the commentary, Lama Tsong Khapa says, “For example, if the guru’s name is Rinchen Dorje, you should say, ‘My precious lord Rinchen Dorje spoke of this and said....’ By this, having caught the attention of others, they become reverent to the guru.”

Similarly, in his commentary on the *Vinaya Sutra*, Acharya Gunaprabha said that whenever you take the name of the preceptor who bestowed vows upon you, you should say, “From his great radiant mouth....”

Therefore we should act in accordance with the following short story. Once Lama Tsong Khapa was giving a teaching just above the site where Sera Monastery was later built, when Khädrub Rinpoche came to meet him for the first time. He asked a nun living there where the venerable Tsong Khapa could be found. She didn’t answer immediately but went inside, washed her mouth, lit some incense and replied, “I don’t know anything about the name you just said, but if you mean my Venerable Gracious Guru, His Presence Je Tsong Khapa resides over there.” Khädrub-je was very impressed by this nun’s subdued behavior and said that this is how those who really abide by the vinaya should act.

Thus, when mentioning your guru’s name in front of others, in order to arouse respect in them for your guru, add honorifics before and after his name.

...

### **Physical behavior that is a way of demonstrating immense respect**

(43)

Whenever you make an offering to your guru or whenever your guru presents you with something, a disciple with sense will (present and) receive this using both hands with his or her head slightly bent.

Showing special physical respect means that whatever you offer to or accept from your guru should be done with both hands, not one. This is the type of behavior that a perfect

disciple should cultivate. In an assembly of disciples, offering a khatag with one hand is proof that you haven't heard the *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*.

### **Discussion**

(44)

Be diligent in all your actions, (alert and) mindful never to forget (your word of honor). If fellow disciples transgress (what is proper) in their behavior, correct each other in a friendly manner.

You should keep your vows and words of honor without any transgression, being mindful and alert all the time, and try to abide by the codes of conduct prescribed by Vajradhara. If out of ignorance a vajra brother or sister—a disciple with whom you have taken the same initiation, together or apart—breaks a vow or breaches his or her words of honor, then, with compassion and a feeling of love and fondness, you should try to make that person avoid that wrong action. You should regard your vajra brothers and sisters as more dear and sacred than your own relatives.

### **An exception**

(45)

If because of sickness you are physically (unable) to bow to your guru and must do what normally would be prohibited, even without (his explicit) permission, there will be no unfortunate consequences if you have a virtuous mind.

If we ask if we have to cultivate the behaviors taught in the *Fifty Verses* at all times, if there's any time we don't have to do them, there are certain exceptions. However, belittling the guru and disturbing his mind are not among them. At no time can we do these actions. There are certain exemptions for the sick disciple who is too weak to get up but whose mind is virtuous: it's not required to stand or prostrate or to ask the guru's permission not to do these things. The reverence of standing or prostrating can be done mentally.

### **Summary of the way to be devoted**

(46)

What need is there to say much more? Do whatever pleases your guru and avoid doing anything he would not like. Be diligent in both of these.

To summarize, we should try to do things that makes our guru happy and pleased with us and avoid doing things that make our guru unhappy and displeased with us. ■

See also *Fifty Stanzas on the Spiritual Teacher*, published by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, which includes a different commentary by Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey.



# **Meditation on The Advantages of Proper Reliance and the Disadvantages of Not Properly Relying on a Spiritual Guide**

*by Ven. Constance Miller*

## **Preparation:**

Start by taking just a minute or two to focus on your physical body, finding the most beneficial position with your spine straight and erect, a position in which you can be aware and awake, but not stiff or rigid. Become present in the moment and place where you are.

Continue with a 5-minute breathing meditation. Focus the attention on the sensation of the breath flowing in and out at the opening of the nostrils. Let all thoughts go, like clouds in the sky. If distractions arise, be aware of them without getting involved and without judgment, then gently bring the attention back to the breath until your mind is peaceful and clear.

## **Motivation:**

Create an altruistic motivation for the meditation session. Without a spiritual guide, there is no way at all to escape from the ocean of cyclic existence and thus to reach full enlightenment. A spiritual guide is the foundation of all the paths to liberation from samsara and enlightenment; it is essential to achieving these states. So think that you are meditating not just for your own well-being or peace of mind or good reputation, but you are taking the time now to meditate and accumulate vast stores of merit to be able to find and skillfully maintain a strong and healthy spiritual relationship with a qualified spiritual guide in order to reach the state of enlightenment where you can most skillfully benefit all beings.

## **The main body of the meditation:**

**Contemplate the 8 advantages** of practicing proper reliance on a spiritual guide (from the Lam-rim):

- A. you will come closer to buddhahood
  - a. by practicing his/her instructions
  - b. by making offerings to and serving him/her
- B. it pleases the buddhas
  - a. the buddhas of the ten directions are willing to teach you the Dharma, but you don't have the karma to even see the nirmanakaya, which appear only to ordinary beings with pure karma
  - b. if you do not rely properly on your spiritual teacher, the buddhas will not be pleased no matter how many offerings you make to them
- C. you will not be disturbed by non-humans or bad company

- D. you will automatically put a stop to all delusions and misdeeds
- E. your insights and realizations of the levels of the path will increase
- F. you will not be deprived of virtuous spiritual teachers in all future rebirths
- G. you will not fall into the lower realms
- H. you will effortlessly achieve all short- and long-term aims

**Contemplate the 8 disadvantages** of not practicing proper reliance on a spiritual guide or of transgressing your practice of proper respect (from the lam-rim):

- A. if you inadvertently disparage your spiritual teacher, you insult all the buddhas
- B. when you develop angry thoughts toward your spiritual teacher, you destroy your roots of virtue (merits) and will be reborn in hell (for as many eons as the number of moments of your anger)
- C. you will not achieve enlightenment, despite your practice of tantra
- D. although you seek the benefits of tantra, your practice will achieve only the lower realms
- E. you will not develop fresh qualities not already developed and those you have will degenerate
- F. you will be plagued with illnesses and the like in this life
- G. you will wander endlessly in the lower realms in your future lives
- H. you will be deprived of spiritual teachers in all your future lives

Make a strong determination in your mind that in order to reach enlightenment, in order to achieve the two purposes of self and others, in order to never be separated from the Dharma, the path to freedom, that you will maintain with strong effort and diligence a proper and healthy relationship of respect and reliance on your spiritual teachers, at any cost. Fix this determination strongly in your mind.

**Dedication:**

Because of our merits, may I and all sentient beings find a perfectly qualified spiritual guide, and in all our future lives, may we never be separated from our spiritual guide nor from the pure Dharma teachings. May all our precious teachers have long and healthy lives and may all their compassionate projects for sentient beings succeed perfectly without any obstacles. ■