

Advice Regarding Spiritual Teachers



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Set in Calibri 12.5./15, Century Gothic, Lydian BT, and Tibetan Machine Unicode.

Printed in the USA.

Introduction

In Tibetan Buddhist centers, you often witness a great deal of devotion displayed and communicated with respect to the spiritual teacher (guru). This short text introduces newcomers to this practice and explains why such emphasis is placed on establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with a spiritual teacher.

How do we gain realizations?

It has been the experience of spiritual aspirants throughout the ages, that the quickest way to gain profound spiritual transformation is not only through study and meditation, but to combine these activities with devotion. Devotion renders your heart-mind soft and pure, thereby creating the inner conditions for your study and meditation to be successful.

It is akin to growing a beautiful garden. In order to make it bountiful, not only do you need to plant seeds and water them, but you also have to prepare the soil by removing weeds, stones, and adding fertilizer. You require sunshine as well.

Why in Tibetan Buddhism is devotion directed towards the spiritual teacher?

The qualified spiritual teacher acts as a living embodiment of the inner qualities you seek to develop.

The more you contemplate the qualities of your spiritual teacher – such as his or her compassion, joy, wisdom and skill in imparting the teachings – the more your admiration and respect will grow.

If you devote yourself to a spiritual teacher, while focusing on his or her qualities, great blessing will ensue. The pure mind of devotion will awaken in you all the enlightened qualities that you appreciate in your teacher. The greater the admiration and proper devotion; the quicker your spiritual progress will be.

However, the opposite is true as well. Once you have taken someone as your spiritual teacher, if your mind becomes negative towards him or her, that negative mind will make further spiritual progress difficult; and the qualities that you have already developed will degenerate.

Much of your spiritual progress depends on your attitude towards your teacher, so don't jump in too fast. Although training to correctly devote oneself to a qualified spiritual teacher is said to be a feature of the quickest path to enlightenment, proceed wisely. It takes time to cultivate a stable mind of devotion.

How do spiritual teachers benefit us?

Spiritual teachers share not only their knowledge of the spiritual path and the practices leading to inner growth, but also their inner experiences. They explain how to bring about transformation based on how it worked for them, and based on their particular spiritual tradition.

Why do I require a spiritual teacher?

Although you can learn a lot from books, if you want to become excellent in any field of knowledge, you have the best chance of success if you have a qualified teacher. This is true if you aim to become a ballet dancer, a pianist, a pilot, a craftsman, a scientist, etc. – for just about anything. Likewise, if you aspire for spiritual development, your progress will be safer and faster if you are under the guidance of a qualified spiritual teacher.

Do I need to take a spiritual teacher now?

No. It is perfectly fine to take part in teachings or retreats without regarding the teacher as your spiritual teacher. Simply respect the teacher as you would a professor sharing valuable information about inner development.

Later, when you know more and feel this is the spiritual tradition you wish to follow, you can then look for a suitable spiritual teacher.

This relationship is the most important decision of your life. Once you have taken someone as your spiritual teacher, it is a lifelong commitment of mind with respect to that person. Therefore, take your time, check your prospective teacher well and be sure you are ready to cultivate your mind in this way. There are extensive teachings on how to train yourself in thought and action with respect to your teacher for greatest benefit and in order to avoid obstacles to your spiritual development. A list of helpful resources on this topic can be found below.

How do I establish a spiritual teacher-student relationship?

This can be done by directly asking the teacher to become your spiritual mentor or simply by making the determination: "From

now on, I will relate to this person as my spiritual teacher. I will put into practice whatever he or she teaches and, when needed, I will request personal advice.”

It is important to know that if you take an initiation or vows from a spiritual teacher, you automatically establish a spiritual teacher-student relationship with that person. Therefore, it is advised not to take an initiation or vows from a spiritual teacher unless you feel confident that you can commit to this kind of relationship with that person.

What should I do before choosing a spiritual teacher?

Gain some understanding of the spiritual journey that you are about to undertake, realize the immensity of the task, and become familiar with the teachings on guru devotion according to Tibetan Buddhism, so that you fully understand this aspect of your spiritual training. Then, humbly look for a qualified spiritual teacher.

What qualifications should I look for in a spiritual teacher?

There are many sets of qualities listed in classic Buddhist literature for various levels of spiritual teachers. It is good to study them. You can start with any of the references listed on p. 8.

For a beginner, it is sufficient if your prospective spiritual teacher is endowed with good ethics, compassion, has more spiritual knowledge than yourself, lives by the principles that he or she teaches and is someone with whom you feel there is good communication.



What qualities should you have as a student?

You should be honest, open minded, have great aspiration for inner development and be ready to put the spiritual advice you receive into practice.

How many spiritual teachers can you have?

You can have as many as you feel are beneficial. Still, at the beginning, it is better to have only one main spiritual teacher. If you ask for advice from many teachers, you may get different instructions and end up confused.

How do I appreciate the spiritual teacher's kindness?

We hold as dear the persons that benefit us in our life such as our parents, partners, friends, etc. who only bring us temporary benefit.

The spiritual teacher helps us in a much deeper way. He or she leads us to experience deep inner peace in this life, a good after-life, liberation from all our disturbing emotions forever, and, finally, to the blissful omniscient state of a buddha.

Thus, the benefit that the spiritual teacher bestows on us is incredibly far-reaching. It is in that sense that their kindness is incomparable.

What if my spiritual guide asks me to do something that I don't understand, or am unable to do?

Respectfully, ask for clarification. If you are unable to do what is advised, sincerely explain to your teacher why you cannot do so; avoid getting upset.

What if I am having a problem with my spiritual teacher?

If you find yourself in a difficult situation with your teacher and are unable to work it out, meet with an experienced Dharma friend for help to skillfully understand and respond, according to Dharma. If you find the situation beyond your ability to transform it into the spiritual path, you can seek guidance from the Center Director or Spiritual Program Coordinator at your nearest FPMT Center.

How can I learn more about this topic?

The following resources can be acquired through the Foundation Store on the FPMT website: shop.fpmt.org

Books

Heart of the Path, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand, pp. 251-300,

by Pabongka Rinpoche

Fifty Stanzas on the Spiritual Teacher, by Aryashura with commentary by Geshe Ngawang Dhargey

Courses

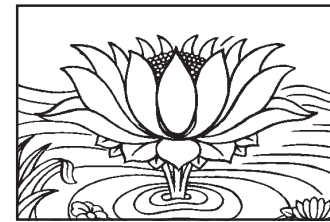
Discovering Buddhism, Module 4: The Spiritual Teacher

Living in the Path, Module 4: Guru is Buddha

Conclusion

Wishing to reach enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings is the most beautiful thing you can do with your life and to have a spiritual teacher on this fantastic inner journey is the most precious thing.

The inner connection with your spiritual teacher will grow naturally over the years; as will your gratitude when you start having realizations. Be well and enjoy your steps on the path!



Colophon & Credits

Written by Ven. Rene Feusi, December 2010. Edited by Kendall Magnussen with input from FPMT International Office staff, January 2011. Line drawings by Robert Beer. Used here with permission.

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