



About Connecting with a Teacher

Featuring Venerable Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche

Venerable Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche is the daughter of His Holiness Mindrolling Trichen who is head of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. She was recognized at the age of two by His Holiness the 16th Karmapa as the re-incarnation of the Great Dakini of Tsurphu, Khandro Ugyen Tsomo. She is Resident Teacher at the Lotus Garden Retreat Center in Virginia, USA. www.vkr.org

Question: Is the gender of a teacher important?

A: Not for the teacher but it is for the students. For those who study the Dharma, every reference, whether the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha or methods of practices, plays a very important role in that they are tools of encouragement and inspiration. The role of the teacher is to inspire the student; the role of Dharma is to provide the means to analyze deeply; and the role of Sangha is to bring about diligence of exertion or putting view into action.

Karma plays a very important role in this issue in that certain things inspire some people and not others. The same teacher does not inspire everyone, just as the same method does not inspire everyone. In Tibetan there is no word for sacrilegious or blasphemous, but we do have a word for truth and respect. Thus in Buddhism we have the freedom to examine freely and objectively. A certain teacher may be great and highly realized, but still not inspire you because of a lack of karmic connection. But do examine this carefully. Do not confuse your own laziness and fear of leaving the comfort zone with a lack of karmic connection with a teacher.

If you are victims of not acknowledging what is far beyond your own arrogance and ego, then you are not giving yourself a chance to appreciate the diversity of this world as well as the vastness and depth of the Buddhadharma. Men teachers may inspire some, women teachers others, but it should be the right kind of inspiration. Check your motives to see if your choice feeds your own ignorance, desire, anger, jealousy, and particularly greed to get things, because of what the teacher looks like, says or uses as methods of training. Those of us on the path need to be very aware of the dangers of falling victim to the tendency of using even the teacher to feed into our own discursive thoughts.

A teacher should be the one who reduces your sense of duality and separation. The right teacher is one who breaks the walls you have built around yourself, and challenges your tendency to box and label everything within samara. As we progress along the path of Buddhadharma, a practitioner must guard against any tendency to pick and choose those aspects and methods of teachings that neatly fit into what one wants to hear.

The gender of the teacher, or how the teacher looks, and whether he or she is a monastic or a householder – such things can play a role in terms of bringing inspiration to practice. Any kick that starts the engine is fine, but it should not continue until you become one of those engines that do not work unless kicked. You need to recognize that eventually you have to leave behind the teacher, and all the methods presented. Like the peel of an orange that protects the fruit, but which you leave behind after eating the fruit, just so the teacher must be left behind.

Today, there are many Western students who have been studying and practicing Buddhadharma for many years. Many of them are already teachers, and more will be the teachers to future students. As teachers you have to encourage students to live the view of Dharma and make sure that the inspiration you express makes Dharma more pure; that simplicity, humility, kindness and the ability to let go of selfishness and self-absorption grows. Look for teachers who encourage you to retain the view of Dharma and help you understand that it is not difficult to do so, so that in turn you can encourage and inspire others to do the same. A teacher must be a source of inspiration and awareness. So gender is essential if it inspires you, but it is also temporary. After a while you have to make sure you are not stuck with the appearance, charisma or gender of the teacher and that you continue to work with and cultivate the teachings. ●