

Guru Devotion: A Brief Introduction for New Students

By Lama Zopa Rinpoche

FPMT



Lama Zopa Rinpoche
Practice Series

Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, Inc.
1632 SE 11th Avenue
Portland, OR 97214 USA
www.fpmt.org

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and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche
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Set in Calibri 12/15 and Lydian BT.

These teachings on the topic of the guru-disciple relationship in Tibetan Buddhism were given by Lama Zopa Rinpoche over the course of many years. For more information on this topic, please see the book *Heart of the Path: Seeing the Guru as Buddha* by Lama Zopa Rinpoche (Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, 2009).

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Guru Devotion as the Root of the Path

Guru devotion is the root not only of ultimate success, achieving full enlightenment and bringing sentient beings to the ultimate happiness of liberation and enlightenment, but also of temporary success and happiness. This practice is the foundation of the development of the whole path to enlightenment, as well as the foundation of all happiness. Since everything comes from the practice of guru devotion, it is called *the root of the path*.

The answer to how quickly we will achieve realizations of the path to enlightenment depends on our finding a qualified virtuous friend, and after having found them, how well we devote ourselves to them. Before devoting ourselves to a guru, we should check them well; then after we have made a Dharma connection, we should correctly devote ourselves to them with thought and with action. Devoting *with thought* means seeing the guru as a buddha, an enlightened being, by looking at them in that way: and devoting *with action* means carrying out the guru's advice, serving them, and making offerings to them.

To be liberated from samsara, we have to generate the path within our mind, and generating the path depends upon receiving the blessings of the guru. Even if we have complete intellectual understanding of the teachings, we won't be able to generate realizations unless we receive the blessings of the guru within our heart. This is why we need to seek and devote ourselves to a guru.

The Need for a Qualified Guru

We shouldn't rely upon just anyone as a guru. In order to achieve the goal of enlightenment for the sake of other sentient beings, we should have a virtuous friend who is able to show us the complete infallible path to enlightenment. As mentioned in *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, the guru should be someone who understand the whole instruction and can lead us in the paths of the Hinayana, Paramitayana, and Vajrayana.

First we have to seek a qualified virtuous friend, one who can reveal the complete unmistakable path, and once we have found one, we then need to correctly devote ourselves to them. Finding a qualified virtuous friend requires past karma, accumulation of merit, and many prayers. But when a virtuous friend who can reveal the whole path to enlightenment and a qualified disciple who can bear hardships meet, full enlightenment can be achieved.

Checking the Guru

The first point in establishing a guru-disciple relationship with someone is that we should examine them well at the very beginning, before making a Dharma connection. Since finding a guru means finding a person we are going to devote our whole life to from now on, we should check carefully to see whether we feel we can devote ourselves to this person as a virtuous teacher. After analyzing well, we then make a Dharma connection. Otherwise, there is danger that we will later criticize or renounce the guru. If we are careful to check well before we establish a Dharma connection, we will make fewer mistakes and thus experience fewer of the shortcomings of incorrect devotion to the virtuous friend. If we are not careful at the beginning, we will experience these shortcomings many times. The degree of this danger is determined by how much merit and how much understanding of guru devotion we have.

Checking carefully before establishing a guru-disciple relationship is for your own safety, like using the seatbelts in a car or airplane. The reason that I'm talking about checking the guru is so that your journey to enlightenment will be safe.

We need to analyze the person at the beginning, before we establish a Dharma connection and form a guru-disciple relationship, because guru devotion involves great dedication and sacrifice from our side. It's not a matter of choosing just anybody who can teach Dharma. We should make a guru-disciple connection only after checking for the qualities mentioned below. We shouldn't make a connection for ordinary reasons, especially not for reasons put forward by our delusions. We should make the choice out of wisdom gained through analysis.

The Qualities of a Mahayana Guru

In *Ornament of Mahayana Sutras* Maitreya Buddha mentions ten qualities that a virtuous friend should have in order to reveal Mahayana teachings:

Rely upon a virtuous friend who is subdued, pacified, and
highly pacified,
Has greater knowledge, has perseverance, is learned in
scripture,
Has realized emptiness, is skillful in teaching,
Has a compassionate nature, and has abandoned
discouragement.

The first three qualities relate to the three higher trainings. *Subdued* means the guru should be living in the higher training in morality, protecting themselves from negative karma. Even a lay teacher should be living in the lay pratimoksha vows. In that way, they will have tamed, or subdued, the actions of their body, speech, and mind. In other words, they should have pure morality.

On top of that, the guru should be *pacified* through the higher training in concentration. They should be able to control their delusions by having realization of shamatha, or calm abiding. With achievement of this, it's very easy to continuously keep the mind in virtue and then very easy to develop any realization. With perfect concentration one can then develop great insight.

Highly pacified relates to the higher training in wisdom, or great insight. The great insight referred to here doesn't have to the view of the Prasangika Madhyamika school; it can be the view of the Mind-Only school or one of the other lower schools. This is why having realized emptiness is listed later as a separate quality, where it refers specifically to the Prasangika's view.

The guru should also have *greater knowledge*, or realizations, than the disciple, otherwise they cannot benefit them. Even if the guru has received the oral transmission of a mantra that you haven't, it means the guru has great knowledge than you.

The guru should also have *perseverance*. *Learned in scripture* means that the virtuous friend should have a mind enriched with quotations and teachings, so that they are able to refer to many teachings by heart. Without *compassion*, even if a teacher has great knowledge, they won't necessarily help the disciple.

Having *abandoned discouragement* means the teacher should have abandoned impatience, exhaustion, and laziness in guiding disciples. They should not get upset or discouraged when teaching Dharma to students. When a guru has compassion, there is no thought of laziness or tiredness in guiding disciples.

Although these ten qualities are mentioned in *Ornament of Mahayana Sutras*, Geshe Potowa said,

Even if the guru doesn't have all these qualities, they should at least have the following five: the realization of emptiness, compassion, greater understanding and qualities than the disciple, pure moral conduct, and no discouragement when teaching disciples. Otherwise, the teacher cannot guide the disciple out of samsara.

With respect to the qualities of the guru, *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* begins by mentioning five bad qualities to avoid when choosing a guru. We shouldn't choose as a guru someone who doesn't have compassion, who has an impatient, angry nature, or who has pride. Also, we shouldn't choose a person who can't control their mind, which basically means their desire. Finally, we shouldn't choose someone who is boastful, who constantly advertises to others some small quality that they have.

The Essential Qualities of a Guru

Although the texts explain all these many different qualities to look for in a guru, the very essence is that our guru should at least be someone who emphasizes cherishing others more than cherishing self, because we then have the opportunity to develop bodhichitta, the root of the Mahayana path, and thus achieve enlightenment. Otherwise, if our guru doesn't emphasize cherishing others, we will have no opportunity to develop bodhichitta. In essence, we should choose as our guru somebody who emphasizes cherishing others through the practice of loving kindness, compassion, and bodhichitta.

Failing that, choose a spiritual teacher who emphasizes liberation from samsara rather than samsaric pleasures. If our virtuous teacher doesn't emphasize cherishing others, they should at least be someone who looks at samsaric perfections as suffering and emphasizes liberation, because in this way we have the opportunity to achieve liberation.

At the very least choose a spiritual master who regards working for the happiness of future lives as more important than working for the happiness of this life. If our spiritual teacher doesn't emphasize this, they can't guide us even in the path to the happiness of future lives, which means to a good rebirth. If aimed only at the happiness of this life, our practice won't even become holy Dharma. Even if we're meditating every day, there's the danger

that what we do will become purely nonvirtue, purely attachment to the happiness of this life. If our teacher doesn't emphasize detachment from this life's pleasures and working for long-term happiness, the happiness of future lives, there's the danger that we'll waste our life completely caught up in meaningless activities for the happiness of this life.

Whether our teacher is ordained or lay, the very essence is that they should emphasize these three things: by emphasizing bodhichitta, they are able to bring us to enlightenment; by emphasizing liberation from samsara, they are able to bring us to liberation; and by emphasizing letting go of clinging to this life and working for the happiness of all the coming future lives, they enable us to achieve the happiness of future lives. Those who know how to practice lamrim regard these as the main qualities to examine before establishing a samaya relationship with a guru. Otherwise, without these qualities, even if a person is very scholarly and has great knowledge, it will be difficult for them to successfully guide disciples to enlightenment.

If the guru has at least the very basic qualities that I have mentioned, it will help us to avoid the danger of later engaging in the heavy negative karma of generating anger, heresy, or other negative thoughts toward the guru, and also of giving up the guru.

The Fundamental Quality of a Guru

Among all the many different qualities to consider in choosing a guru, the fundamental thing to examine is whether the person emphasizes the practice of morality, or ethics, because otherwise there is no basis for realization. Disciples who don't practice morality, which means protecting karma, can't achieve even the happiness of a good rebirth in their next life, let alone liberation from samsara. Just as you can't hold liquid without a container, you can't receive the body of a happy migratory being—a human

or deva—in your next life without living in morality. Without the practice of morality, you can't even be protected from the lower realms. If the guru is someone who emphasizes morality, they are able to protect the disciple from negative karma, the obstacle to the achievement of enlightenment, liberation, and the happiness of future lives. The disciple is then able to achieve temporary and ultimate happiness.

The Qualities of a Disciple

Basically, a disciple's achievement of enlightenment depends upon both the guru and the disciple. The guru should be someone who is perfectly qualified to lead the disciple in the complete path to enlightenment, but if the disciple doesn't have the fortune to be led in this path, they won't become enlightened. If the guru is perfectly qualified and the disciple also has the fortune to be led in the complete path, enlightenment comes very easily.

A perfectly qualified guru is one with all the necessary qualities to guide a disciple in the complete path to enlightenment. A disciple who is a fit receptacle is one who is able to bear hardships in order to practice the advice given by the guru.

In *Ornament of Mahayana Sutras* Maitreya Buddha describes the qualities of a disciple in the following way:

The disciple should be impartial and intelligent and yearn for teachings. A disciple who is a fit receptacle is also one who is able to bear hardships to accomplish the Dharma taught by the guru. One who is lazy and cannot bear even small hardships cannot accomplish the Dharma taught by the guru. When a disciple who has great will to achieve enlightenment in one brief lifetime, like the great Milarepa, and whose mind and body are both strong and able to bear hardships of hunger, thirst, heat, and cold meets a perfect guru, such a disciple can achieve enlightenment in one brief lifetime.

In *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Phabongkha Dechen Nyingpo mentions five qualities that a disciple should have. A good disciple is: impartial, intelligent, hard-working, has great respect for their guru, and listens carefully to their guru's instructions.

If we're impartial, we're able to examine and understand other views. If we're willing to check both sides of an argument, we have the opportunity to learn through clarifying what is right and what is wrong. If we're biased toward our own wrong beliefs, on the other hand, we never even allow ourselves to examine other views and thus have no opportunity to learn. We don't listen to what is said and don't allow ourselves to examine and understand the teachings. For example, if we take reincarnation to be complete nonsense, no matter how much it is explained using logic and quotations, we won't even take the time to understand the teachings on reincarnation. We will stubbornly hold to our own wrong view. If we don't have an impartial mind, the teachings won't benefit us because we won't take them to heart. Stuck in our own philosophical view, we won't practice the teachings taught by the virtuous friend, so it will be difficult for the virtuous teacher to guide us.

A disciple who is intelligent means one who is able to discriminate right from wrong.

Also, the tantric text *Net of Illusion* mentions that a disciple should like meditation and virtue, have devotion to the spiritual master, and like to perform the daily practice of making offerings.

What Establishes a Guru-Disciple Relationship?

We establish a Dharma connection with someone when, on the basis of the recognition that that person is our guru and we are their disciple, we then receive even a single verse for teaching from them. Making the very first Dharma connection depends on our merit and past karma.

It is said in the teachings that simply hearing Dharma from somebody doesn't establish a Dharma connection and make that person your guru. You can hear Dharma from someone and study with them without necessarily regarding them as a guru; you make a connection with them, but not a guru-disciple connection. However, once you have taken a teaching by thinking of yourself as a disciple and the other person as your guru, even if it is only a teaching on one verse of Dharma or the oral transmission of one mantra, a Dharma connection is established which means you have formed a guru-disciple relationship, even if you didn't find the teaching effective for your mind.

Do We Need to Formally Request Someone to Be Our Guru?

You don't normally need to request someone to be your guru. Forming a guru-disciple relationship depends more on your making the decision in your mind than on your personally asking that person's permission to attend an initiation or teaching. After the initiation or teaching has happened and the connection has already been made, there is no need to ask the person to be your guru. This would be like requesting your mother to be your mother or your father to be your father after you have already been born.

Colophon:

Guru Devotion: A Brief Introduction for New Students, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, is excerpted from *The Heart of the Path: Seeing the Guru as Buddha* by Lama Zopa Rinpoche (Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, 2009).



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