

justgetonwithit

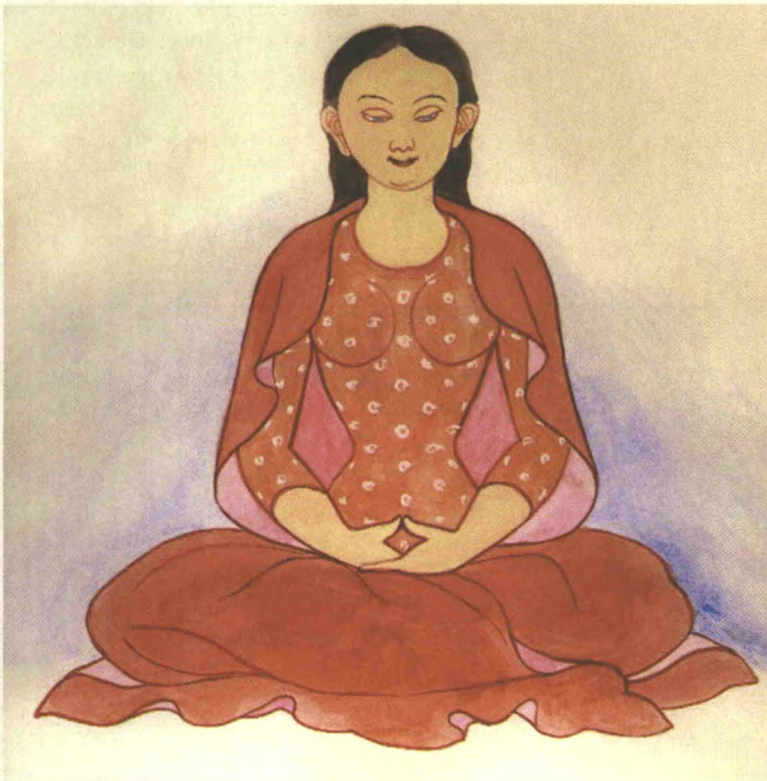


Illustration David Brooks

Meditator, teacher, and founder of DONGYU GATSAL LING, a nunnery in the Drukpa Kagyu lineage, VEN. TENZIN PALMO found her perfect teacher, His Eminence the eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche in India, 1964. In *Reflections on a Mountain Lake: Teachings on Practical Buddhism* (Snow Lion Publications, July 2002) she reflects on the role of the spiritual master with particular reference to the Vajrayana path. This is an extract.

In the Vajrayana, or Tantric, school, the guru plays an extremely pivotal role. I think there are two principal reasons for this. Firstly, a genuine teacher, or guru, is the one who reveals to us the empty, aware, clear nature of the primordial mind, our inherent wisdom and compassion. This, the mind's unconditioned nature, is always with us [and] is the most fundamental aspect of our being. However, it is very difficult for us to gain access to this without help. We need a teacher who can create the psychological circumstances for us to glimpse this inherent nature. So a true guru is the one who

shows us the nature of the mind. He or she is therefore an extremely important person in our lives.

The second thing a guru can give us is guidance. If we are traveling through unknown territory (and what is more unknown than our own inner psychological landscape?) on our own, it is very likely we will go astray, even with the aid of a map. Sometimes we may be walking along and suddenly the path divides. Do we go to the left or to the right? When we consult the map, it's not always clear what to do. The map gives the broad outlines, but these little sidetracks are not included.

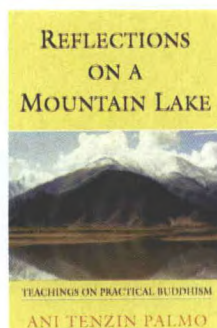
...We should shift our focus from this idea of finding a heart guru and instead start seeking spiritual friends. If we think of teachers as spiritual friends, that makes everything much vaster because we can have many spiritual friends.

We might choose the right path, but we might also choose the wrong one and end up in quicksand or a swamp!

Everybody dreams of meeting the perfect master who is going to take them under his wing. From now on, no more problems! There are movies in which people go through tremendous difficulties looking for their teacher, and when they finally find the right cave, there is an old yogi sitting there. He looks at them and says, "Ah, I have been waiting for you. What took you so long?" Trying to meet the perfect master who is going to set it all up for you is a common fantasy, where all you have to do is follow his instructions and enlightenment is guaranteed. I even know people who refuse to make any kind of effort on their own behalf, because they are waiting for the perfect guru to turn up and say the perfect sentence.

You might ask what is wrong with this scenario. It sounds good! Well, first of all, even if we did meet the perfect master, as long as our minds remain completely deluded, would he be able to help us? Maybe his only advice to us would be to "go and sit." Maybe we wouldn't be ready for him. We might need to practice a lot more. Even the greatest masters can help only when the disciples are ready. In the meantime, we need to prepare ourselves. In doing so, perhaps we will discover that everybody we meet is actually our master. This area of guru-disciple relationships is very tricky.

The next question is, "How do we know if someone is genuinely realized and qualified?" ... The Dalai Lama says we should investigate the teacher. I know it's difficult, but Westerners really tend to be too trusting and too gullible. Asians are much more exacting. They have standards by which they judge because they've been around the spiritual scene for a long time. ... In the tantric texts it is said that one should test the guru for up to twelve years before deciding to accept him. The Dalai Lama even says we should spy on the gurus! How do they act when they're not in the spotlight? Are they kind and compassionate, or are they basically just rolling along, having a good time, and enjoying taking people in? ...What is happening to their older disciples? Would we want to be like them? What is the scene around the guru like? Is it psychologically healthy? Are the disciples being manipulated? Are they unable to make decisions for themselves without running to the guru all the time? Are they psychologically dependent on their teacher?



The Tibetan word "Lama" actually means "a high mother," and ma of course is female. ... So the guru is like a mother. When a mother has small children, she cares for them, nurtures them and is there to cherish them, discipline them, and train them. ... A good mother brings up her child to become increasingly independent and to be able to leave home when it comes of age. The child will always love the mother, but it doesn't have to be with her forever ... Likewise, a true guru trains his disciples to discover their own inner wisdom and their inner guru. He trains them to make decisions for themselves.

There are two main questions I am asked everywhere I go. One is how to deal with anger, and the other is how to find a teacher. Both questions are very complex. There are teachers and then there are teachers. There is the heart teacher, who has vowed and committed to take the disciple to enlightenment in this or future lifetimes. That is a heart commitment on behalf of both the teacher and the disciple ... which requires total surrender on the part of the disciple. This is why we have to be extremely careful. If you find a true guru, that is the greatest blessing this life could give you as far as traveling on the path is concerned. If you find a false guru, then, as the Tibetans say, teacher and disciple jump hand-in-hand into the chasm.

There are many who can help us on our way. ... It doesn't always have to be the ultimate guru. ... Anyone from whom we learn becomes a teacher, a spiritual friend. So I personally think we should shift our focus from this idea of finding a heart guru and instead start seeking spiritual friends. If we think of teachers as spiritual friends, that makes everything much vaster because we can have many spiritual friends. The Buddha once said that the Dharma was to be our teacher, and the teachings are here. The techniques are here. The practice is here. There are those who have been practicing for many years and who have devoted their lives to the practice. ... Help is available. It may not come in the form of high spiritual masters radiating lights or sending out brochures ahead of time to tell us they're enlightened. Teachers may come in very simple forms. But if they have had the practice, and if they themselves have had valid teachers, belong to a pure and genuine lineage, and have received the fruits of their practice, they are valid teachers.

There are many Zen stories in which there's some hermit living somewhere, and some monk wanders by. The hermit

utters some enigmatic sentence, and the monk "gets" it! But what they don't talk about, because it's taken for granted in the Asian mind, is that this monk spent thirty years sitting on his carpet before somebody came along and gave him the enigmatic sentence. It wasn't only the sentence. Because we can read that sentence and we might think, "So?" It doesn't trigger a major insight for us. It was the preparation – all those endless hours and hours and months and years of sitting, of bringing awareness into every activity, of really learning how to prepare and train the mind to be present. Do you understand? It cannot all come from the guru. A great deal of it has to come from the disciple.

In the end, the practice is our refuge. This is not perhaps what I should be saying as a Tibetan Buddhist, but honestly, merely being in the circle surrounding a guru, spending all of our time jockeying for position and making sure he notices us, has little to do with Dharma. It would be better to go home and just sit on our cushion, try to be kind to our family and learn to use them as our Dharma practice. It would be better for us to learn how to be loving, compassionate, kind, and patient to everyone we meet.

Palden Atisha, the great Bengali saint who lived in Tibet during the eleventh century, said that the test for whether a practice is successful is whether our negative emotions have declined or not. If they have not, then it is of no use. If they have, we know we're on the right path. We can all test this for ourselves. We don't need anyone else to tell us. The path is

here. We don't have to give everything up and rush off to India. Right here, right now, this is our place to practice. With our family, our work, our social obligations. If we cannot practice here, where can we practice? We carry our mind with us everywhere. Why go to the Himalayas? Why not resolve it here and now? No master can do that for us. No master can remove our ego. Each of us must do it for himself. ☸



Photo Angus McDonald

* *Reflections on a Mountain Lake* is the first book authored by Tenzin Palmo and proceeds from its sale will help to raise money for Dongyu Gatsal Ling nunnery. The book will be published in Australia by Allen & Unwin in July 2002 and will be available in all good bookshops, AUD\$29.95. www.allenandunwin.com

* Vicki Mackenzie's 1998 biography of Tenzin Palmo, *Cave in the Snow*, is available from Snow Lion: www.snowlionpub.com or telephone 1-800-950-0313.

* For more about Ven. Tenzin Palmo, her 2002 teaching tours and her projects go to www.tenzinpalmo.com

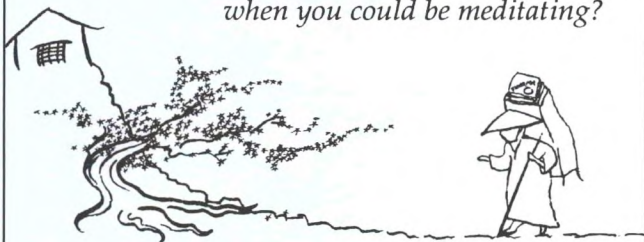
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