

By Alexander Berzin

a healthy relationship

A deep relationship with a spiritual teacher can be the most uplifting and significant bonding in one's lifetime. It can also be a source of self-deception, pain, and spiritual despair. All depends on actively making the relationship a healthy one. This, in turn, depends on having a realistic attitude about our own and our teacher's qualifications, about the aim of the bonding, and about the dynamics and boundaries of the relationship.

I wrote *Relating to a Spiritual Teacher: Building a Healthy Relationship* (Snow Lion, 2000) primarily because I had benefited so significantly from my relationships with my main teachers – Tsenzhab Serkong Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey – and because I was saddened that so many sincere spiritual seekers I had met on my world teaching tours had had less optimal experiences. Many, having encountered sexual, financial, or power abuse, identified themselves as innocent victims. Having placed the blame solely on the abusive teachers, they distanced themselves from all spiritual mentors and, occasionally, even from the spiritual path. Others lived in denial of their unhealthy relationships and felt that proper “Guru-devotion” not only justified, but even sanctified all behavior from a teacher, no matter how damaging it might seem by conventional standards. Both extremes prevented the students from receiving the full benefit to be gained from a healthy relationship.

In cases where the students are Western and the teachers Tibetan, one source of the problem is cultural misunderstanding, compounded by unrealistic expectations that the other party will act according to one's own cultural norms. Further sources of confusion are taking the standard textual presenta-

tions of the student-teacher relationship out of their original contexts, interpreting them literally, and mistaking the meaning of the technical terms, often due to misleading translations.

The lam-rim (graded path) texts, for example, present the relationship as the “root of the path” and discuss it as their first major topic. The point of the metaphor, however, is that a tree derives its sustenance from its roots, not that it begins from a root. A tree starts from a seed, and Tsong Khapa did not call the relationship the “seed of the path.” After all, the original lam-rim audience was not beginners. It consisted of monks and nuns, gathered to receive a tantric empowerment and who, as preparation, needed a review of the sutra teachings. For such persons, already committed to the Buddhist path from previous study and practice, a healthy relationship with a spiritual teacher is the root from which to gain inspiration to sustain the complete path to enlightenment. The intention was never that newcomers to Western Dharma centers needed to begin by seeing the spiritual teachers there as buddhas.

In my own case, the deepest relationship I have with a spiritual teacher spans two lifetimes of that teacher. I spent nine years as disciple, interpreter, English secretary, and foreign tour manager of Tsenzhab Serkong Rinpoche, the late Master Debate Partner and Assistant Tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Rinpoche passed away in 1983, was reborn exactly nine months later, and was identified and returned to Dharamsala at the age of four. Both he and I reconfirmed our deep bond the moment we met a few months later. When asked by an

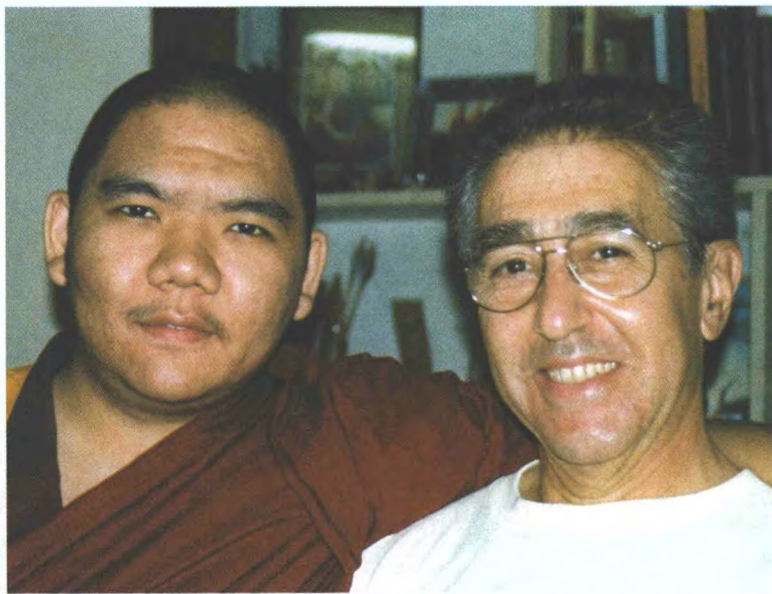


Photo Alan Turner

Serkong Rinpoche with his disciple Alex Berzin

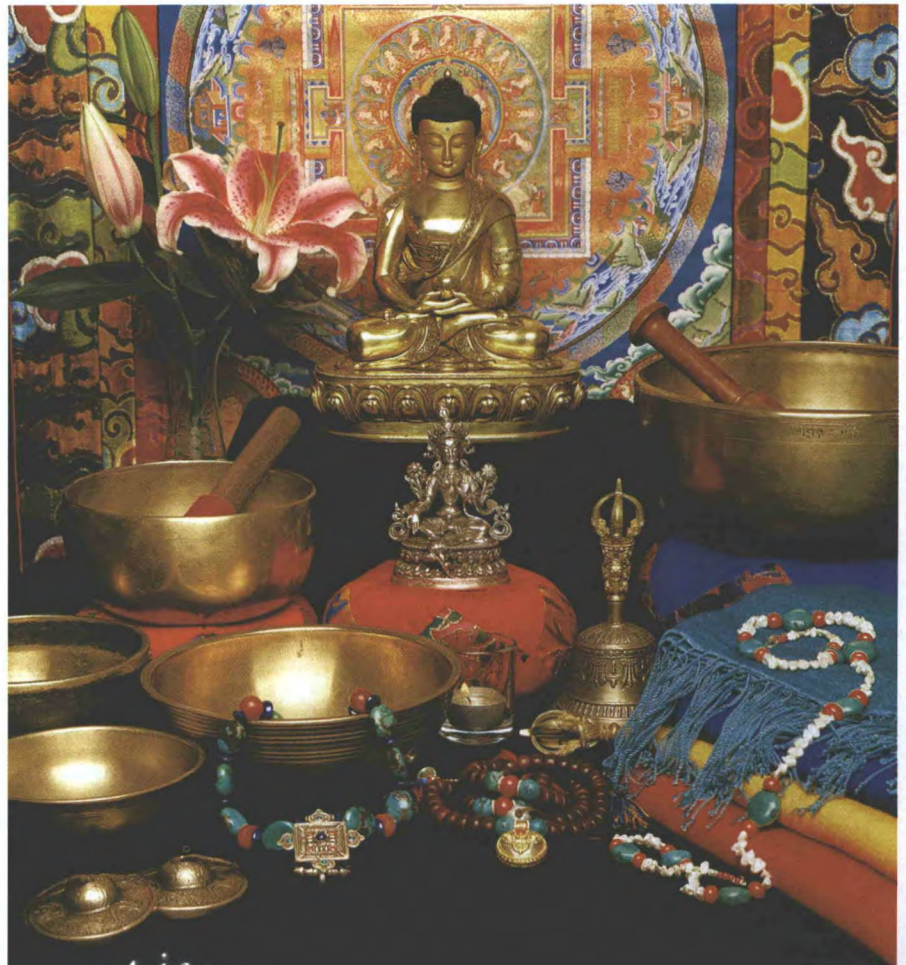
attendant if he knew who I was, the young tulku replied, "Don't be stupid. Of course I know who he is." Ever since, Rinpoche has treated me as a close member of his spiritual household – something that a four-year-old cannot fake. I, in turn, have had no doubts about our deep connection.

In the summer of 2001, I spent a month with Rinpoche in South India at his monastery, Ganden Jangtse, where, at the age of seventeen, he debated before the assembled monks in a ceremony to mark his official entrance into the ranks of scholars. During the month, I received teachings from him on what he was studying in his geshe training, and translated an oral transmission and explanation of a text that he gave to another close Western disciple of his predecessor. When I remarked to Rinpoche how wonderful it was to be translating for him once more, he replied, "Of course, that's your karma." I also continued the informal process of giving back to him many pieces of Dharma and worldly advice he had given me in his previous life.

My personal relationship with Serkong Rinpoche over two lifetimes has given me more confidence in the Dharma and in rebirth than I could possibly have gained from study and meditation alone. It is truly a source of continuing inspiration along the path. Neither he nor I deceive ourselves about our roles toward each other in each of his lives. We are neither totally the same nor totally different from who we were then. Each of us is a continuity. With deep respect for each other, based on a realistic attitude about our different stages in life now and then, each of us both teaches and learns comfortably from the other now. It feels totally natural.

As a fan of *Star Trek*, I view the experience as if I were part of the crew in both the original series and in *Next Generation*, under Captain Kirk then and now under his reincarnation as Captain Picard still in training as a young cadet. The main challenge I face is to continue building the karma to serve on the crews of all future Enterprises. ☸

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