

mos and other conundrums

Young adults spend most of their energy in searching for a compatible partner with whom they can share their life. In this exquisitely painful process, they learn that youthful fantasies of the perfect partner are unrealistic. For any hope of a happy relationship, they must learn the even more important lesson that they themselves are not perfect. Once these two realities are understood, they need the flexibility to free their minds from preconceptions and adjust their own attitude to be more compatible with their prospective partner. As my lama, my refuge and protector, Lama Thubten Yeshe once said, “This

By Ven. Thubten Gyatso

is possible, but difficult; instead of one crazy mind you have two.”

The lama-student relationship is vastly more important than our samsaric partner, and must not be entered into hastily, like a dog eating meat. Prior to requesting a lama to be our teacher, we need to undergo a similar process of understanding our faults, as well as investigating the qualities of the teacher. During the '70s, when many Westerners were first becoming involved in Tibetan Buddhism, all Tibetan monks were viewed through rose-colored glasses as paragons of virtue, compassion, and wisdom. Without checking the qualities of the lama, or their own capacity to participate in a lama-student relationship, in a rash burst of emotion, some threw themselves at the feet of Tibetan monks and requested advice on every aspect of their life. Aware of the danger of this attitude, Lama Thubten Yeshe said, “Do not think that every person wearing red robes is a bodhisattva.”

From their side also, the lamas must assess the capacity of people to be their students, and act accordingly. I heard that in the early '70s, a Westerner became fascinated with the Kalachakra Tantra. He went to many lamas for teachings but they all declined. Finally he met one lama who told him to return in six weeks. Excited at the prospect of at last receiving the precious instruction, this man turned up at the right time, only to be told the lama had just started a three-year retreat.



Photo: Kiole Picot

As much as we may be inspired, we are simply unable to emulate the acts of devotion shown to their teachers by the great yogis Naropa and Milarepa. During a *puja* at Kopan Monastery, Lama Yeshe once beat a sleeping monk across the back with his big wooden *mala* (prayer beads). After the *puja*, Ven. Roger Kunsang asked Lama Yeshe, “Why don’t you treat us (Westerners) like that?”

Lama turned to Roger with a terrifying look, and said, “Because you can’t take it.”

Then there is the Tibetan institution of the *mo* – prophetic intuition with the aid of dice, a *mala*, or one of several other methods. From the very beginning, my scientific mind was highly skeptical about the *mo*, even more so when I saw many Westerners running from one lama to another requesting observations about every possible activity in their life. If they did not like one lama’s advice, they would go to someone else until they eventually received the answer they wanted. Standing on the steps of Kopan *gompa*, Lama Yeshe was heard saying to a Westerner, “Next thing is you’ll ask me where to pee. Use your own wisdom, dear.”

We should follow this advice of Lama Yeshe and, as much as possible, use our own wisdom to decide what to do in our lives. By depending upon *mos*, we shirk our responsibility to put Dharma into practice, and become dependent upon rituals that do nothing to mature our wisdom. As my most precious teacher, Geshe Jampa Tegchok, said, “When you have to decide between several courses of action, choose the direction that is of greatest benefit to others.”

According to Geshe Nyima Dorje, the mo tradition came from China and India, and is not a specifically Buddhist practice. As much as I enjoy heaping scorn upon mos and mo seekers, I know this does not negate their validity. When my skeptical mind questioned *feng shui*, Lama Zopa Rinpoche said to me, "Something does not need to have been taught by Buddha to be true."

On another occasion, Lama Zopa Rinpoche told me, "You can have the karma to receive a wrong mo." So it comes down to a percentage game, and that is why I never request a mo unless I am completely happy about following either of the two possible results.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche's percentages are pretty good. I was once telling him about one of his students who had received chemotherapy and radiation treatment for cancer. Unexpectedly, she had become pregnant, and the doctors insisted she have an abortion, which she did. Lama Zopa Rinpoche threw his dice for almost twenty minutes, then asked me, "Is it possible for a baby to be dead in the womb and the doctors not know?"

"Yes," I replied, "for a while anyway."

"Because the observation keeps coming out that the baby is dead." Rinpoche had not understood when I told him the abortion had already happened.

I have none of Maitreya's ten qualifications for a Mahayana lama, and refer on to Lama Zopa Rinpoche all those who ask me to be their teacher: "I am merely the university tutor, he is the professor."

In Taiwan and Mongolia, however, there is no way out. Wearing the robes of a Buddhist monk is a clear indication that you possess clairvoyant powers. In desperation, unable to answer the myriad questions about business investments and life problems, I once swallowed my pride and asked Lama Zopa Rinpoche if it were possible for me to learn a mo practice.

Rinpoche replied, "In the past I never made observations. Then, one night at Kopan, I had a dream in which several *dakinis* were talking amongst themselves. They were saying, 'If Thubten Zopa makes mo observations, they will be accurate.' Later, I had another similar dream, and so I decided to do the practice."

I am still waiting for the dream.

There are many stories of Tibetan lamas in the West behaving in a questionable fashion, criticizing other lamas, and giving advice that seems to bring an unfortunate result. All I can say is that people must think extremely carefully before entering into a proper lama-student relationship. If you do not

have a personal lama, you should gain deep understanding of the Three Jewels of Refuge (see page 78), and see all Buddhist teachers as manifestations of the Universal Lama – the reality

of wisdom and compassion. Then, if their teaching or behavior is unacceptable to you, just leave it. Do not get involved either by following what you cannot accept or by criticizing with a negative mind. There are many ways of teaching Dharma, and it is entirely possible that what we see as contradictory is, in fact, pure Dharma coming from a mind of compassion. It is heavy karma to criticize a bodhisattva, and it is also very heavy to turn somebody against their teacher. Disapproval should only be expressed in a constructive fashion.

Let us imagine the not-so-hypothetical situation of a teacher usurping a Buddhist center after poisoning the minds of the students against their original lama. How do you react? One method is to see this event as con-

trived by a great bodhisattva to warn us Westerners of the dangers of sectarianism. Buddha himself said that his Dharma would be destroyed from within, and even thickheaded communists recognize the danger of "splittists." Unfortunately, the current dispute over protector practices that has divided the Geluggas goes against that interpretation. However we react, it must be without anger, in accordance with the friend-enemy-stranger meditation on equanimity. Lama Thubten Yeshe once said to me, "Don't bother learning to speak Tibetan; if you do, you will discover Tibetan politics, and then you will abandon Dharma."

Until I met Geshe Michael Roach, I was doubtful that a Westerner would ever approach the necessary qualifications of a Mahayana lama. I admire Geshe Michael's courage in taking on this vast responsibility, and now have fresh hope that many others will follow and deeply establish the Mahayana tradition wherever there are fertile minds open to the Mahayana teachings and practice. ❁

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Photo Vivian Nesbitt

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