

# students speak

We asked FPMT students of Tibetan Buddhism around the world how they personally see guru devotion. Here are some of their responses:



Sylvia Wetzel Photo Marlies Bosch

"**a** guru is not a teacher sitting on a throne. A guru is an arrow into your heart." (Lama Yeshe, Kopan, 1978.) I met Lama in 1977 in Dharamsala and when he died in 1984 I was director of his German center, Aryatara Institute. I never blissed out when I saw Lama Yeshe, but I loved and still love him more than any other human being. I never could think of him as an enlightened being but he made the idea of enlightenment accessible for me. When he opened his mouth he said things that made sense – more sense than I ever thought someone else could think and talk. Lama touched my heart so deeply just because he was – for my mind – so utterly normal and ordinary and grounded: Commonsense at a high level speaking through a Tibetan body. Very interesting. His effect on me was always similar. I felt empowered and saner than before the encounter. This could be at a teaching during a Kopan course, a public talk in Germany or Italy, a discussion group on the veranda of his Kopan residence, or a private interview. To sum up what I learned about guru devotion from Lama Yeshe: Gurus are human beings who inspire us through their humanness. Their function is to be a mirror of awakening, which touches and supports our inner wisdom. They nourish our self-confidence that we can be practitioners ourselves. A word of warning: The relationship with a teacher can inspire us immensely but can damage us as well. If it makes us feel insignificant and powerless, seeing the teacher as a wonderful demigod, something is definitely going wrong. And a wonderful last thing: The inspiration of a good teacher lasts longer than they live on this earth. Thank you Lama. Forever.

- SYLVIA WETZEL, GERMANY

**I**n my experience, the relation between disciple and teacher is one of total confidence. I feel fortunate to have met authentic Vajrayana masters and even though I make many mistakes,

I know that I can ask them for inspiration and to correct me wherever they are. They give me the opportunity to change by not identifying myself solely with the appearances of karma and delusions, through means such as performing pujas, leading retreats, translating, teaching yoga, massage, etc. I may feel apprehension and fear due to my inner faults, and yet I take whatever they say through teachings, or not, as a direct personal message. Due to my thick blanket of self-cherishing thoughts, fears and desires, I don't always act in accord with their wishes and yet I make efforts to listen to them and follow their advice without contention. I also understand that a 'bad' experience can become a strong blessing, that what appears as difficult for me will reveal my inner qualities when I face it and will save me from greater difficulties later on. I also think that my teachers send me these difficulties in order that I watch my mind and understand that I need to put Buddhism into practice and not follow my egotistic mind. - MARIE HENRY, FRANCE



Marie Henry Photo Michel Henry

**W**e have learned that guru devotion is the base of the path to enlightenment, but we do not realize clearly why it is so important and sometimes this understanding only comes when we are going through difficult times! Establishing the Dharma in Mexico meets with many obstacles. At this time Jangchub Ling in Mexico City still does not have its own place. Personally I feel that without guru devotion I would have given up a long time ago. Guru devotion gives us courage to serve our guru, just by remembering his great kindness in showing us the path of liberation. My challenge is to increase my guru devotion to go on doing my best to serve my teacher. - MAYRA ROCHA, MEXICO





Phillipa Rutherford

**T**he first verse of the *Foundation of Good Qualities* by Lama Tsong Khapa says: “*The foundation of all good qualities is the kind and venerable guru/ Correctly devoting to him is the root of the path/ By clearly seeing this and applying great effort/ Please bless me to rely on him with great respect.*”

And this is how I view the guru, which in my case I take especially to mean Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Who else knows better than Rinpoche? If I do not do as Rinpoche instructs, whom else have I got to turn to? I certainly don’t know the way by myself and could not possibly dream up the profound yet simple practices that Rinpoche recommends. I look around to remind myself of how lucky it is to even have a guru; so many people are wishing they knew what they were supposed to be doing to make their life meaningful, yet they have no one they can truly trust and confide in to guide them. All we have to do is to engage in the practices that we have been advised to do and all else will reveal itself. We have to do the inner work, and practice the discipline, patience and perseverance it takes to follow the guru’s instructions to realize the gift we have been given. However, this is not to say I follow all my guru’s instructions to the letter because I have lots of obscurations and some things I just can’t seem to manage. Every day I practice what I can, rejoice that I am doing the best I can, and pray that I can complete the instructions before I die. Certainly my life has become much happier and more fulfilling as a result. - PHILLIPA RUTHERFORD, NEW ZEALAND

**T**he guru is like a lifeguard at the beach, an experienced swimmer who deeply understands the ocean’s laws, seated on a high chair, paying attention and taking care of the many distracted people playing in the sea. He is always ready to jump into the cold water, sacrificing himself to rescue someone. Only once does one need to be rescued in order to see the importance

of the lifeguard and to gain trust in him. It’s important to realize that there are many people playing and only a few lifeguards taking care of them, so it’s an extremely rare opportunity to be touched and rescued by one. Recognizing this makes a feeling of gratitude grow, and a desire to fulfill their wishes as well. The best way to express this gratitude is by trying to learn the ocean’s laws, learning how to swim in the ocean, instead of reading books about it. When I met Lama Zopa Rinpoche in 1992, nothing special happened to me, no marvelous feeling. I did not even talk personally with him. And yet, since then, I never feel myself alone, and my sense of gratitude is permanent. But I’m not as dedicated a student as I would like to be, being distracted with lesser concerns, sleeping too much, eating too much and doing irregular practice. - SERGIO GOUVÊAS, BRAZIL

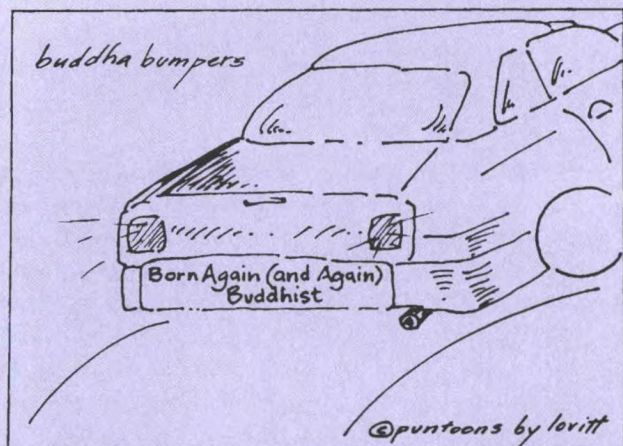
**F**rom the time I met Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Kopan Monastery in 1982, I knew he was my root guru. I love him more deeply and differently than I love anyone else because of his qualities and because of his commitment to me and mine to him. For me, guru devotion is based on the belief and awareness that my guru is someone who is perfectly qualified and will guide me, no matter how long it takes – lifetime after lifetime – to enlightenment. It means seeing both the good things that happen to me, and the misfortunes, as manifestations of his wisdom and his blessings. It means striving to bring my actions in line with the Dharma, and to do my best to follow whatever he advises for me. In short, guru devotion means making my life as meaningful as I can, and not wasting time, in the service of the enlightenment of all sentient beings. The biggest challenge to this is my ordinary mind that believes I might find real satisfaction in the pursuit of my personal happiness. - JANE SEIDLITZ, USA



Jane Seidlitz

**A guru is not a teacher sitting on a throne. A guru is an arrow into your heart . . . The inspiration of a good teacher lasts longer than they live on this earth. Thank you Lama. Forever.**





One of the reasons why awareness of death and impermanence is so crucial in the Buddhist religious practice is that it is considered that your state of mind at the time of death has a very great effect on determining what form of rebirth you might take. Whether it is a positive state of mind or a negative one will have a great effect. Therefore, Buddhist religious practice greatly emphasizes the importance of the awareness of death and impermanence.

- HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

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When I met my root guru it was like everything I'd read, studied and meditated about had materialized in front me in a living form. He was the living example of the qualities (morality, compassion, humility, patience) that I wanted to develop myself. His personal advice for my practice helped me enormously and gave me enthusiasm for the practice. The last teaching he gave me was his own death (he left the body in 1997), seeing impermanence on the grand scale that the Dharma gives us on these special occasions. It doesn't matter if your teacher is alive or dead. For me the most important thing is to remember that he or she personifies the qualities of the body, speech and mind of the buddhas, which we can all potentially become, and which some day we will realize.

- VEN. FABIO POZA, SPAIN



Tom Waggoner being teased by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

guru devotion to me is:

Keeping them as my ultimate example as I move through the day

Moving worms and potato bugs off the dog-walking trail  
Canceling the cleaning lady because ants are all over the kitchen

Patiently freeing flies entangled in spider webs  
Staying up "too" late in order to keep my commitments  
Reading and re-reading his long life prayer (because of my mental scattering)

Trying to memorize what even a beginner should know  
Trying to own what I have read and understood  
Changing my plans because his plans have changed  
Using my skills and resources to actualize his wishes  
Challenging my complacency with the status quo  
Turning off the TV in the middle of "my" favorite show  
Supporting the projects that he holds so dear  
Doing good Dharma business on multiplying days  
Trying to adjust my motivation and enhance my dedication  
In those too rare moments, praying with sincere heartfelt wishes

Finding inspiration in the reverence that our teachers have for one another

This is a taste of the effect of what my most esteemed teachers have had on my life

And this is what gives me purpose and hope in this cycle of existence. - TOM WAGGONER, USA