

Who to Regard as a Guru

By Lama Zopa Rinpoche



WE ESTABLISH A DHARMA connection with someone when, on the basis of the recognition that that person is our guru and we are his disciple, we then receive even a single verse of teaching from him. Making the very first Dharma contact depends on our merit and our past karma.

It is said in the teachings that simply hearing Dharma from somebody doesn't establish Dharma contact and make that person your guru. You can hear Dharma from someone and study with him without necessarily regarding him as your guru; you make a connection with him, 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, Dharma contact is established, which means you have formed a guru-disciple relationship, even if you didn't find the teaching effective for your mind.

With respect to accepting someone as a guru, if from the very beginning you don't have any wish to make a guru-

disciple connection, you can listen to that person's teaching as if you're learning from a professor in a university. Generally, you can learn Dharma, especially sutra teachings and explanations, from someone just out of educational interest, to acquire knowledge, like studying with a professor or learning Buddhist history at school. Simply hearing the Dharma from someone doesn't mean you have established a guru-disciple relationship with that person because you do this all the time in Dharma discussions with your friends. When you discuss points with a friend who knows how to explain them, you don't regard that person as your guru. You are just helping each other.

While you can listen to Dharma teachings for educational purposes, you need to make the distinction clear from the very beginning as to whether or not you are going to devote yourself to the person as a virtuous friend. However, after some time, if you feel strong devotion in your heart or you see that you have benefited a lot from someone's teachings and want to establish a guru-disciple relationship, you can then devote yourself to that person as your guru. At that

time you can make the decision. *Devote* means devoting your life to your guru by following his guidance in accordance with the explanations of Guru Shakyamuni Buddha in the sutra and tantra teachings, which is also the way that Lama Tsongkhapa and all the lineage lamas of the four traditions explained and practiced guru devotion. Whether or not you can devote yourself to someone mainly depends on your own attitude, your own way of thinking.

What do you do if in the past you have heard teachings from various people but don't remember making a particular decision to recognize them as your guru? If you don't remember any particular benefit to your mind from those teachings and didn't take them with a determination to establish Dharma contact, you can leave those teachers in equanimity. This means that you don't need to regard them as your guru but you also don't need to criticize them. Also, if somebody tells you that you don't need to devote yourself to him as a virtuous friend you can leave the matter in equanimity. But if listening to someone's teaching has benefited your mind, if you can, it is better to regard that person as your guru.

THIS IS THE ADVICE the great bodhisattva Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen gave me when I checked with him about how to regard two of the teachers I had when I was young. When I was a child in Solu Khumbu, I lived part of the time with my mother and the rest of my family in Thangme, the village where I was born, and the rest of the time in Thangme Monastery with my first alphabet teacher, Ngawang Lekshe, who was also one of my uncles. The monastery was about a fifteen-minute walk up the hill from my home.

My uncle and many other monks and lay people were disciples of Lama Döndrub, a Nyingma tantric practitioner, or *ngakpa*, the head of the monastery, from whom they received many initiations and teachings. Like a puppy, I went along with my uncle and the other monks to whatever was happening. It was a little like going to the movies or to a party. I went along because something was happening and everybody else was going.

At that time I was a small child, perhaps four or five years old, and not yet a monk. During the many teachings, initiations and oral transmissions, I sat on someone's lap and, of course, slept most of time. I could hear the words but I had no understanding of their meaning. I didn't even know the names of the initiations. I remember only certain physical

activities, such as circumambulating and blowing a conch shell – I blew it but it didn't make any noise.

I just sat on someone's lap and watched the faces of the lama, seated on a high throne, and of the monk who read the text. Though I don't remember a single word of any teaching, I remember very well the lama's face. Simply seeing the lama benefited my mind. We used to call him "Gaga Lama" – *gaga* means grandfather in the Sherpa language. I enjoyed looking at the old lama, who looked like the long-life man, with white hair and a long white beard. (He has since passed away and reincarnated.) He was a lay lama, a married tantric practitioner, not a monk. He was a very good lama, with an incredibly kind heart, and I liked him very much. When he did pujas in the morning he would use a drum, and when I heard the drum I used to go to see him. I would open the curtain at the door and wait. The lama would then come down with popcorn or some other present. We would get presents like that again and again.

When the lama himself gave a teaching, he would sit very straight and never moved – not like me! He would speak, then always look at a particular spot on the ceiling. Sitting in the lap of one of the monks, I stared at the lama's face and looked wherever he was looking. I looked at the spot on the ceiling, wondering why he always looked at the same place, but there was nothing there – just the painted wood of the ceiling. At other times a senior monk, one of the lama's closest disciples, would read the oral transmission from the text, with the lama sitting on the throne, sometimes in the aspect of sleeping. I don't know why the oral transmission was given in this particular way; it seemed to be the custom.

Sometimes the lama would drink some *chang*, or barley beer, from a nice glass jar that had probably been offered to him by a Western trekker. The glass would be full of *chang*, with the barley grains at the bottom, and the lama would use a glass tube to drink from it. While his disciple was reading the text, the lama would sit there, sipping the beer from time to time, and sometimes showing the aspect of sleeping. Because I was in the front row looking at the lama as he drank the *chang*, he used to pass the jar down to me and I would drink a little.

In Solu Khumbu, Bhutan and other parts of the Himalayas, some of the monasteries had a mixture of monks and married lay practitioners. There was corruption in some of the monasteries, where it had become the custom for monks to drink beer. The lama himself was a lay tantric practitioner and drinking alcohol is not harmful to a highly

realized tantric practitioner; it only helps him or her to have quick attainment of the tantric path. Alcohol and other intoxicants cannot harm yogis who have realizations of clear light and the illusory body because they have control over their chakras, winds and drops. They are beyond danger from alcohol and beyond non-virtuous actions.

I REMEMBER the part of drinking the beer very clearly but I don't remember a single word that the lama said, even though I was there during many initiations when the lama spoke a lot about Dharma. It was like receiving an initiation in a dream and not remembering anything when you wake up. Nothing stayed in my mind. Of course, imprints may have been left, but I remember nothing in particular that benefited my mind.

Even though, because I was a child, I had made no particular decision to form a guru-disciple relationship with Lama Döndrub and I hadn't understood a single word of his teachings, I visualized this lama in the merit field for some years. Later, when Khunu Lama Rinpoche came to Nepal, I went to ask him several questions about guru yoga practice. Even though I had been visualizing this lama as my guru for some years, I asked Rinpoche whether or not I should regard him as my guru. Rinpoche said, "If you remember that the teaching benefited your mind, it is better to regard him as your virtuous friend." But Rinpoche also said that since I didn't remember anything at all, I didn't need to recognize him as my virtuous friend. Rinpoche added that there was no need for me to criticize the lama – I could just leave the matter in equanimity. After that, I didn't visualize this particular lama in the merit field any more.

Khunu Lama Rinpoche's advice was that if we have received teachings from somebody, we should check whether or not the teachings have benefited our mind. Even if we didn't listen to a teaching with the idea of forming a guru-disciple relationship, if the teaching benefited our mind, it is better to regard that person as a virtuous friend, if we can. If we can't find any benefit to our mind, we can leave the matter in equanimity; we don't need to criticize that person.

This advice is practical, because it is good to be careful in any case. Even if someone is not our guru, he could still be a holy being, a buddha or a bodhisattva. If the person is a holy being, we create heavy negative karma if we have negative thoughts toward him or harm him. Just to be careful, to protect our own happiness, it is better to leave the matter in equanimity.

In *Collection of Advice from Here and There*, Langri Thangpa advises, "Since you don't know other people's level of mind, you shouldn't criticize them."¹ Just because someone doesn't appear to us to have great attainments, it doesn't mean that this is actually the case. What appears to us and what actually exists are not the same.

The text later says, "If you have generated bodhicitta, it is shameful to criticize others." As we have taken bodhisattva vows, we shouldn't criticize others. Also, if, out of anger or another negative mind we criticize someone who has received an initiation from the same vajra guru, we incur the tantric root fall of criticizing a vajra brother. If we aren't careful, we receive this root fall of the third tantric vow.

It is also mentioned in *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* and other lam-rim teachings that your realizations degenerate if you criticize a fully ordained monk, even if you don't have a guru-disciple relationship with him.

Generally, in the teachings of Kadampa thought training we are advised to practice looking at anybody who mistreats us as our guru. This is done to control our anger and thoughts to retaliate so that we don't create more negative karma. Any harmful action done to us by others appears as a teaching if we look at them as our guru. The thought-transformation teachings even advise us to look at all sentient beings as our guru or as Guru Shakyamuni Buddha. This is mainly to control our own mind, not so much because the sentient beings themselves are in fact buddhas. If we train our mind in this way, we naturally respect other sentient beings, and since anger and other negative thoughts won't arise, it protects us from creating negative karma. We train ourselves to think of sentient beings as precious and the source of all happiness, just like the guru. It is similar to practicing pure view in tantra, where we see all sentient beings as the deity.

It is excellent to look at everyone as our guru. But if we can't manage that, we still have no need to criticize anyone. We shouldn't criticize anyone, unless it somehow benefits that person. ☸

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¹ Page 594, *The Book of Kadam*. Translated by Thupten Jinpa. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008.