

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Key Practices of the Path:

A Condensed Lam Rim Overview for Western Students and Practitioners

**I. The Guru-Student Relationship
Relying on the Teacher**

This meditation is based on teachings given by Ven. Thubten Chodron at Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle, Washington, as well as teachings by the Tibetan master Tsongkhapa from Lam Rim Chen Mo and the renowned Tibetan teacher Kyabje Pabongka Rinpoche from Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand.

“The foundation of all good qualities is the kind and venerable guru. Correct devotion to the guru is the root of the path. By clearly seeing this and applying great effort, please bless me to rely upon the guru with great respect.”

—Lama Tsongkhapa, from “The Foundation of All Good Qualities”

Reliance on a Guru

Our progress on the path to enlightenment depends on how we relate to the teacher, so it’s very important to cultivate a good relationship. Every important skill we learn in our life—whether it’s medicine, music, mathematics, basketball, cooking, or carpentry—comes through studying with someone who is more developed in that skill than we are, and who is willing to teach us.

Books and videos are great, but they can’t set an example for you. A book can’t look you in right the eye. A video isn’t a living conscious being that can size you up and help you according to your current capacity and level. Learning is much more powerful, deep, and lasting when we learn directly from someone who is a master—a guru—at what we’re trying to learn.

Progressing spiritually is not something we can do on our own, by making up our own path. We definitely need the guidance and example of people who know more than we do. If you want to successfully pilot a spacecraft to the moon yourself, you’d better learn from an expert who is experienced in making the trip. The same goes for spiritual training.

The great 14th-century Tibetan Master Tsongkhapa composed a condensed Lam Rim outline called “The Foundation of All Good Qualities” which opens with the topic of the Guru-Student relationship. Tsongkhapa set up the Lam Rim with the idea that those who follow it will eventually enter the practice of Tantra, a.k.a. Vajrayana. So this very first meditation topic has the Tantra/Vajrayana emphasis and understanding as part of it.

Reasons for Relying on a Guru

People can get confused about what it means to have a spiritual teacher and how to have a proper relationship with him or her, and it can become the cause for a lot of unfortunate things to happen. Having a spiritual teacher is often translated as “guru devotion”. In English, the word “devotion” can give us the connotation that we should be completely subservient, with blind faith to a god-like guru. This is a mistaken conception.

In the Tibetan language, *lama tenpa* describes the teacher: *lama* means guru or spiritual master, who is someone with more spiritual qualities than you currently have and who regards you with the kind of love a mother has for her children. *Tenpa* means to depend and rely upon, and to associate with. This has a different English connotation than devotion often has for us.

We learn to have a good relationship with our teacher so that we will benefit from it. This relationship is an important one in our life and that’s why it is the first *Lam Rim* topic. It is the foundation for the entire

spiritual path and the benefit we can gain from it.

Choosing a Qualified Teacher

In order to benefit from properly relying on a teacher, we must first check their qualifications. This means *you've* checked their qualifications, *you've* checked to ensure you have a good feeling toward them, *you've* checked your ability to maintain a good relationship with this person, and then *you've* deliberately made the decision that this person is going to be your spiritual teacher.

We're talking about how to cultivate a good relationship with *that* person, not just anybody who is giving a spiritual teaching that you happen to hear. This is very important. We shouldn't think that just because anyone is giving a Dharma teaching we should see them as our guru or an omniscient buddha. We need to be very clear in our thinking about this and what is going on in our own mind.

There are ten qualifications we should be looking for in a guru who is a representative of the Mahayana, or "Great Vehicle" tradition of Buddhism. (1) The guru's mind-stream should be *subdued* by ethics. (2) Their mental distractions should be *pacified* by meditative concentration. (3) Their grasping at an inherently existing self should be *most pacified* by wisdom. (4) The guru should have *more good qualities than you*, because over time you will acquire your guru's faults and good qualities. (5) Gurus should have *perseverance*, and (6) possess the knowledge of *a wealth of Buddhist scripture*. (7) They should have a *realization into emptiness*, meaning they have discovered the correct and highest view of the nature of reality by means of wisdom gained through their studies. This is referring to the highest view of the Prasangika school of Buddhist tenets. (8) Gurus should be *skilled speakers*, (9) they should have *loving compassion*, and (10) they should have *given up disappointment in the disciple's performance*.

Gurus should have all these qualifications, and must definitely have at least these five: (1) a mind-stream *subdued* by ethics, (2) be *pacified* by meditative concentration, (3) be *most pacified* by wisdom, (4) have *loving compassion*, and (5) a *realization into emptiness*. So, first thoroughly investigate the guru, and rely on that guru only if you find she or he is worthy of it.

As students, we should also have five qualifications: (1) We should be honestly not attached to our own group and hostile to other groups. Tsongkhapa says this means we should be nonpartisan and unbiased. If we are biased toward our own side, whether it's regarding religion, race, politics, gender, sexual orientation, or even species, we'll put ourselves in a most unfavorable condition for generating the altruistic intention of bodhicitta—the intention to become enlightened for the benefit of all living, sentient beings; (2) We should have the wisdom to know right from wrong; (3) We should yearn for the teachings; (4) We should have great respect for our guru; and (5) We should listen to our guru with our minds properly motivated by bodhicitta, the wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings. If we have these five qualifications, we will progress in the path of Dharma. If these five are incomplete, we must make an effort to obtain the causes that will complete them, otherwise we will hinder our progress.

The advantages of a proper Guru-Student relationship are:

1. *We become closer to enlightenment*

This is because:

a. We practice what the teacher teaches

b. By making offerings to the teacher and helping them, we accumulate a lot of positive potential.

We benefit from the guru-student relationship by putting the teachings into practice. If we cultivate a good relationship with the teacher we'll have a lot of respect for them, and we'll practice what they teach. If we don't have that respect, then we won't value what they say and we won't practice. If we have a good relationship with them and a lot of respect, then when we help them by offering our time or resources, it creates very positive imprints on our mind-stream, and generates a lot of positive potential in us.

2. *We please all the Buddhas*

This is because the teacher is an emissary or representative of the Buddhas to us, who acts as a direct link of connection and communication between them and ourselves. A Buddha is never *displeased*

with us. A Buddha's purpose is not to judge and punish. Our own karma takes care of that! An enlightened being only has love, compassion, wisdom, and the wish to help us.

3. *All harmful forces and misleading friends can't affect us*
This is because we're practicing well. Most friends aren't intentionally trying to mislead us, but if our interactions and activities with our friends pull us away from our practice of the Dharma, we need to be mindful of that. If we're practicing well, we'll be able to bring our awareness of the Dharma into all of our interactions and activities, whether with friends or those forces that are harmful.
4. *Our afflictive emotions and faulty behaviors will decrease*
because we're learning from our teacher what to practice and what to stop doing. The teacher also sets a good example for us of how to behave, so our own bad behavior decreases.
5. *Our experience of meditation will grow and our realizations become more stable*
Again this is because we put the teachings into practice.
6. *We won't lack qualified spiritual teachers in future lifetimes.*
It's important to have a good relationship with a teacher who we have selected as being a qualified teacher so we can make a karmic link now and in the future, so in future lives we can continue to practice.
7. *We won't take a lower rebirth.*
Again, this is because we practice.
8. *All our temporary and ultimate goals will be realized.*
This is a summation of the previous seven advantages.

If we don't have a spiritual teacher, or we don't cultivate a good relationship with a teacher and don't put energy into developing a good way to rely on them, we won't get these eight benefits.

Now we move on to the question:

What is an improper Guru-Student relationship?

The disadvantages of not relying properly on a Guru

The disadvantages of not relying properly on a guru are the opposites of the above eight advantages: that is, *you will not become closer to enlightenment* because you're not practicing and not accumulating positive potential or merit; *you won't please all the Buddhas* because you won't see your guru as a representative of them to you; *all harmful forces and misleading friends can affect you* because you are not practicing well, nor are you following your teacher's good example of how to behave; *your afflictive emotions and faulty behaviors will increase* because you're not learning what to practice and what to stop doing, nor do you see your teacher as setting a good example for you of how to behave; *your experience of meditation will decrease and your realizations become more unstable*, again from not putting the teachings into practice; *you will lack qualified spiritual teachers in future lifetimes* because you have not made a positive karmic link with your teacher; *you could take a lower rebirth*, again because you don't practice; and *all your temporary and ultimate goals will not be realized*. If we have a bad relationship with our teacher—if we have contempt for them, defame them, get angry and walk out on them, yell and scream and renounce them, we will experience these disadvantages.

This can happen. Somebody initially falls madly in love with the teacher, but as soon as the teacher tells them something their ego doesn't want to hear, they get angry at the teacher and stomp away. A person studies with someone, takes them as their teacher, learns from them, and then in the end discards them with an attitude of contempt and disrespect. Not only that, they then go around and tell bad stories about them and criticize them.

So here are some additional disadvantages that come from doing this kind of thing:

1. *We show contempt for all the Buddhas*
As was said before, the teacher is like a representative of the Buddha to us, putting us in contact with

the teachings. If we throw away the teacher, it's like we're throwing away the Buddha.

2. *We generate negative karma for ourselves in the future*

Because our spiritual teacher shows us the path to happiness and enlightenment, teaches us about our ego self-grasping, how to make sense of our life, what to do and what to look out for, and how to understand the actual nature of our self and reality, we're able to make some preparations for our future and eventually get somewhere along the path. In that way, they are kinder to us than any other person in the world. They are kinder than our parents or our best friend, because nobody else in the world benefits us in the same way as our spiritual teacher does. So if given all that benefit we've received, we turn our back on them, diss them, and say they're full of garbage, it's like throwing the person who's the kindest to us in the whole world into a dumpster.

Because of our own ignorance, our own ego, we turn our back and walk away with disgust and contempt from the person who has benefited us more than anyone possibly could. What does that say about the state of our mind, and what we're doing to our own mind when we think like that? We are turning our back on the person who teaches us the path to happiness and enlightenment. We are turning our back *on* happiness and enlightenment. Seen from that point of view, we can understand the negative karmic imprints we're putting into our mind and the consequences that can arise from this.

Questions that can arise and some answers that may be helpful

Q: Does this mean that as much as we appreciate our Guru, we get that much benefit, and as much as we don't appreciate our Guru, we generate that much negative karma?

A: No. As much as we don't appreciate our Guru, we just don't get that benefit. But as much as we depreciate, criticize, and have contempt for our Guru, we generate negative karma. The difference in attitude is whether we're just being ignorant, or if we're being actively hostile.

Q: What do we do when our teacher engages in what seems to us to be unethical behavior?

A: This can come up, and H.H. the Dalai Lama has commented on it because it's important. First, he says it's very important to select our teachers well, to take our time in selecting them before making the decision that "This person is my teacher."

Secondly, he says that if a teacher does something that to you seems very unethical, you have to look at it. You have to say to yourself, "This doesn't correspond with Buddhist ethics." And if you feel that continuing to be in this person's presence is going to lead you in the wrong direction because somehow they're not setting a good example in accordance with the teachings, then His Holiness says, instead of criticizing that person, just keep your distance.

This is good training for us in general, because usually when people do things we don't approve of, we get very judgmental and critical. This is a call for us to not get judgmental and critical when we don't approve of someone's behavior, but rather, just keep our distance. His Holiness says to still try and keep your respect for that person for the kindness they have shown you and for how much they have helped you. And for the rest of it, just keep your distance. We don't need to criticize and renounce and gossip and get hostile and belligerent. All of that is ego.

Q: Rather than ignore the person or get hostile, could we actually confront them and speak to them about it?

A: That's very possible. His Holiness has said that if the teacher is acting improperly, the student can go to the teacher and with respect say, "I don't understand what you're doing. Please explain this to me. This is not helping my mind." The key is first you have to make sure your own mind isn't angry. Going to the teacher with respect and confronting them about it is very different than getting angry and belligerent and gossiping and yelling and screaming. We need to communicate with the teachers and let them know what our boundaries are—what's acceptable and what isn't—but to do that with respect for them, not with a harmful, critical mind.

Q: If a teacher meets up with students who don't have many ethical boundaries, can that give the teacher the feeling that they can do whatever they want as long as it's not countercultural to that student's values and mores?

A: If someone is coming on to a teacher like that, that's that person's problem. It's also the teacher's responsibility to keep their own ethical vows. It's a two-way thing. Especially when it comes to sexual abuse or power abuse in different religious groups, there are always two things at play—the behavior of both people. It's the teacher's responsibility to keep their ethics, and it's the student's responsibility to keep theirs.

If a teacher seems to be acting in a way that is not ethically responsible to you, you need to decide if that teacher's external behavior sets the wrong example for *you*. You don't need to criticize that person or blame them—because who knows, maybe they're a Buddha—but you are saying to yourself, "I need a teacher that acts in a different way."

Q: Is it okay to have multiple teachers?

A: It's fine to have multiple teachers. You have one teacher who is what is called your root teacher, or root guru. That's like your principal teacher. And you have other teachers with whom you study. It's not contradictory at all. If you move to another city or place and meet another teacher, you don't have to abandon your teachers who live in other parts of the world. You're adding on to your relationships. You may not see some of your teachers for years and years—or they may have passed on—but they're still your teachers. They are still benefiting you.

Q: When the teacher is teaching, it's easier to see them as a Buddha, but when they're living their daily life, that's quite difficult. And so is it really required that we do that?

A: It's not a matter of requirement, but what we can do is ask ourselves, "Would it be beneficial to me to see the teacher as a Buddha, even in the times they're not teaching? If your teacher behaves in a way that doesn't correspond with what you would like to see in a teacher, try and transform that situation to see it in another way so that you can still have regard for the teacher. For example, what do we do if we see our teacher speaking quite harshly and insultingly to someone, or to ourselves? We could get all critical like we usually do, or we could say, "They're showing me my own mind. They're showing me what I look like when I act like that." In that way, you're taking the situation and using it as something that you can learn from. In that way it helps your mind. That's a lot more productive than getting into our usual judgmental attitude. This is something we can do with everybody—it doesn't have to be just with our teacher. When you see anybody doing something that you think is bad behavior, think, "This is what I look like when I behave like this." Everything we perceive has the potential to show us our own mind or consciousness, because it is our own mind and consciousness that is doing the perceiving. We are *always* the one who is responsible for our reactions and responses, not our teacher or anyone else. We can't blame them for our reactions and responses, as much as we'd like to. This is how we learn to tame and train our mind.

If we can focus on somebody's good qualities, especially our teacher's, that makes us so much more receptive to learning from them. When we focus on their good qualities, we appreciate what they do, and we're open to learning from them. But the minute we focus on even one negative quality, then it becomes difficult to be open to them. Because our minds right now are so judgmental due to our own ego self-grasping, we might see ten good qualities in someone, but we fixate on the one negative one—we just criticize and criticize. By doing this, we completely block ourselves off from being open to all the benefit we could receive. This goes for everybody, but you can clearly see it in relationship to your teacher. When your teacher does something that upsets you, then the next time your teacher and sits down to teach, you can't even listen, because you're sitting there focusing on the thing that they did that made you get so upset. This is when we can benefit the most by observing our own ego, our own mind, and our own responses. If we have the proper relationship and attitude

toward our teacher, we'll derive so much benefit because, the teacher will show us our own mind—both the good and the bad.

Q: Can devotion to our Guru lead to blind faith in them and glorifying them?

A: This can be a difficult thing, because we want to have confidence and openheartedness toward our teacher, but not blindly. We can get so devoted to the personality of our teacher—"this teacher is the Buddha; this teacher is so kind; this is *my* guru"—that we ignore the teachings that the teacher is giving. We're so busy being enamored with this wonderful, charismatic personality that we disregard what the teacher is actually teaching. It's a very fine line. The whole purpose of having this incredible feeling of confidence and faith is so that we put into practice what they're teaching—practicing is the whole purpose! It's not just to adore somebody because it makes us feel good when we adore them. That's exactly what our egos do when we "fall in love."

This is a tricky, and common, pitfall for western practitioners. Some of us just glorify our teachers because it makes us feel good. And this is how we get into all these possessive and jealous obsessions about the teacher. "This person is so holy—*my* guru is amazing and wonderful, so I'm going to cook for them and wash their dishes. Don't ask me to wash anybody else's dishes; I don't want to do it for these regular people! But the guru's dishes—they're holy, they're blessed!" We get into that kind of mindset because it makes *us* feel good. But that's not what relying on a teacher is about. It's about recognizing the teacher's qualities so that we try to follow their example and we try to put into *practice* what they're teaching us. If you have devotion to your teacher, it's okay to wash their dishes or cook for them, but it's also okay to wash someone else's dishes or cook a meal for them, because that's what the teachings are about. What is the Buddha's Dharma about? It's about being humble and grateful and loving and compassionate *because* we recognize our interdependence with everything and recognize our interconnectedness with all phenomena. This is a very fine—and very important—line.

Q: Should the root Guru be the teacher who first got us into the Dharma, or can they be a teacher we meet later on the path?

A: It could be either. It could be the person who introduced the Dharma to you, because very often that person is the one you feel a very strong connection with since they got you into it. Or you could feel a stronger connection with somebody you meet later, and that person can be your root guru. But even when you have many teachers, the idea is to see them all in some way as being manifestations or representatives of the Buddha to you. In other words, they're not being contradictory in their effort to guide you. They're all cooperating in their effort to guide you.

In closing, we would be wise to take this advice of Tsongkhapa from his *Lam Rim Chenmo*:

After you have understood the advantages and disadvantages as previously explained, reflect on them repeatedly. Exert yourself in the practice of those teachings for which you are suited as a recipient, and repeatedly contemplate the complete qualifications of your teacher. Make many aspirational prayers and accumulate the collections of merit and wisdom as causes for having such a teacher to look after you until you attain enlightenment.