

Teachers and the Vajrayana

By Kathy Wesley. From a letter to Michael Gibbs.

Since the idea of having a guru or a teacher is new to people in the West, it's good for us to have a lively discussion on the role of teachers and their place in Vajrayana Buddhism.

All I can speak from is my own experience in the dharma; others will have their own experiences to draw from. I will do my best to be a helpful voice in the discussion.

Among Tibetan Buddhists, the following verse is often repeated, under the title, "The Four Reliances:"

Do not rely on the individual, rely on the Dharma.

Do not rely on the words, rely on the meaning.

**Do not rely on the apparent meaning,
rely on the definitive meaning.**

**Do not rely on consciousness,
rely on primordial wisdom.**

These four verses give advice on how to avoid confusion as we dharma practitioners proceed to ever more subtle levels of understanding of our practice.

In essence, they tell us to look beyond surface concerns to the heart of dharma understanding.

Often, we get confused as we learn about the dharma; we think such thoughts as, "well, if I'm supposed to get rid of all attachment, shouldn't I get rid of attachment to dharma, as well?"

But if we read the second statement of this verse, we will see that the meaning of the words, not the words themselves, are what we should consider in this instance. Indeed, we have to hold fast to the dharma like a person holding onto a life raft, until we are liberated and no longer need it.

In response to the discussion about turning dharma teachers into "idols," I think it is important to remember that we must rely on the Dharma, and not on the individual.

However, I think it is also important to "not rely on consciousness, [but to] rely on primordial wisdom."

Until we reach Buddhahood ourselves, we must rely on individuals for our information and our training. As one Tibetan teacher once said, "A book will not tell you whether your meditation is correct or in error." A book also will not tell you whether your attitudes and motivations are correct or incorrect.

Any of us who have worked with a teacher over a period of time will know how important it is for us to have our egos deflated and our negative attitudes pointed out by our kamalamitra, or "spiritual friend," as teachers are often called.

If we take ourselves alone to be a teacher before we reach enlightenment, there is a danger we could go astray into what one teacher calls, "complete ego-hood, instead of Buddhahood."

This is true because, as is said, until the moment of Buddhahood we will still be subject to the arising of klesha, or conflicting emotion. Therefore, until the moment of Buddhahood, direction in our practice will be appreciated!

That being said, it's important to note that not every person who teaches is worthy of our attention and devotion.

Gampopa, the father of the Kagyu tradition as we know it today, talks about this in his book, "The Jewel Ornament of Liberation." In his chapter on the spiritual friend, he talks about three types of teacher: the fully-awakened Buddha, the partially awakened bodhisattva, and the unawakened ordinary person.

(It's important to note here that while Shakyamuni was the fourth of the 1,000 Buddhas of our era, he is not the only Buddha. There will be 1,000 beings who will "live the demonstration life" of being born in India, being enlightened at Bodhgaya, etc. but because buddhahood is the potential of every individual, any

being with the proper motivation, training and diligence can become a fully awakened Buddha.)

While not all of us have the pure karma to receive teachings from a fully awakened Buddha or even a partially awakened bodhisattva, many of us have the merit to meet an ordinary person. So, for us, Gampopa says, the ordinary person is more important than the fully awakened Buddha or partially awakened bodhisattva we have not met.

As a dharma student once said, we may start out our practice of Buddhism with an incomplete and imperfect understanding of devotion, but as time goes along, we will interact with more and more teachers and students and gain a more complete and better understanding of devotion.

In the matter of devotion, as is usual in all matters Buddhist, the middle path is preferred.

The word for devotion in Tibetan is “mu gu.” Mu has the connotation of “respect,” and “gu” is enthusiasm. Having respect for our teacher’s spiritual accomplishment, we enthusiastically practice what the teacher teaches us.

This does not mean we blindly idolize or deify our teacher and totally mistrust ourselves; we do not turn off our common sense when we become Buddhist

practitioners. But it also does not mean we take the attitude that we should not trust our teacher because we alone know what’s best for us. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche says that is like gluing a water tap shut, and then holding our cup under the sealed-up spigot, hoping to get a drink of water.

In my own experience, what’s preferable is to find a balance between these two positions, which, as H.E.Penor Rinpoche once pointed out, comes with time and practice.

We have Buddha nature, which urges us toward dharma in the first place. Then, we have respect for, and are inspired by, our many teachers, and practice enthusiastically what they have taught.

Eventually, through time and practice, we might find a teacher we trust enough to teach us the Vajrayana in all of its depth. Until then, we can work on our bodhisattva motivation and practice to the best of our ability under the ordinary people who come our way.

I don’t know if any of this has been of help, but I hope folks will go to their copies of The Jewel Ornament and read the chapter on the spiritual friend and see how they relate to Gampopa’s ideas.

May all beings be benefited by our discussion.

