

# Finding the Spiritual Master

A Teaching by His Holiness the Sakya Trizin



**T**wo kinds of beings inhabit this universe: inanimate and animate beings. ‘Inanimate’ refers to beings that have no mental feelings, such as rivers and mountains and so forth, while ‘animate’ refers to humans and all other beings that have mental feelings.

We humans belong to the animate class of beings, and our mental feelings are very powerful. There are many different kinds of human beings, numerous races and various cultures, each with their own views and beliefs, but there is one thing that is common to all - the wish to be free from suffering and to experience happiness.

Further, there is no disagreement to be found with this; everyone agrees on the same goal. Whatever

race we belong to, no matter what we believe in, whether we are believers or non-believers, everyone strives to become free from suffering and to attain happiness. Every individual, society, government, and country aims for this goal. For the sake of happiness, humankind has made enormous progress in the field of science and technology and, through this, has gained great benefit.

Simultaneously, it is quite clear that material progress alone cannot secure the true peace and happiness that we are seeking. In order to attain true happiness, it is very important that we achieve internal, spiritual development. To attain happiness, we need to make both material and spiritual progress.

Here the pertinent question is: how can we progress in the spiritual field?

The base for our spiritual development is our Buddha Nature. The Buddha said that every sentient being possesses Buddha Nature, which means that the true nature of our mind is pure, naturally pure, right from the beginning. However, at the moment, we do not see the true nature of our mind. It is covered by our illusions and obscurations.

These obscurations are not in the nature of the mind. They are only temporary, and so we can free ourselves of them. If they were in the nature of the mind, then we could not eliminate them. For example, no matter how much we try to wash coal, it will never become white. If one uses the right remedies, we can remove our obscurations. Like a white cloth that is covered with dirt won't reveal that it is white, but with the proper methods of applying soap and water, all the dirt will be washed away and then we can then see the actual colour of the cloth.

In the same way, our mind is naturally pure and obscurations are only temporary, and there are right methods to eliminate defilements permanently. Therefore, as ordinary persons, if we apply the correct methods and efforts, we can eliminate our obscurations and realise the true nature of our mind, and thus attain the absolute goal, which is real peace and happiness.

Even if we don't reach ultimate realisation, our efforts to progress spiritually will bring us many benefits, and can give us experiences of deep peace and happiness.

The very first condition that will allow us to grow spiritually is faith, faith in the teachings. By faith we do not mean blind faith. Here faith means that through our own careful investigation, we come to the irrefutable conclusion that the teachings are genuine.

Without this first condition being in place, it is impossible for us to develop any virtuous qualities or

to accomplish any virtuous deeds. Like a seed that is roasted cannot grow in soil, we cannot develop any virtuous qualities without faith.

According to the teachings, there are three kinds of faith.

The first faith is called "clear faith". When we perceive the great qualities of the Buddha, His teachings and community, all our confusion is cleared and our mind is refreshed. Clear faith is similar to the state of mind of a person suffering from the heat being refreshed by remembering snow mountains or any cold landscape.

The second faith is called "aspiration". This refers to the aspiration to achieve spiritual attainment and to acquire virtuous qualities for one's own sake as well as that of others. Much like the only goal of a thirsty elephant in a hot climate is to find water, so our only aspiration is to attain spiritual realisation.

Finally, the third kind of faith is called "trust". Trust in the teachings of the Buddha, particularly in the law of cause and effect and the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. This is like a mother and child who meet after a long separation, and still instinctively trust each other.

A human being who is endowed with these three kinds of faith is one who has, by thorough investigation and analysis, developed unshakable faith in the teachings and will not be tempted to forsake the teachings of the Buddha due to the usual causes of abandoning the spiritual path mentioned earlier.

There are four of these usual causes and the first one is desire. Desire for worldly attainments such as wealth or fame is something that can lead us to leave the spiritual path.

The second cause is hatred. The rise of anger in one's mind toward someone can move us to abandon the path.

Fear is the third cause of leaving the spiritual path. For example, if our staying on the spiritual path

can give rise to undesirable circumstances, even the loss of our life, this could bring us to abandon the path.

Lastly, the fourth cause is ignorance. By this we mean the ignorance of not knowing what to adopt and what to abandon. This lack of clarity could also take us away from the spiritual path.

In order to eliminate these four causes of abandoning the spiritual path; we need to fully realise their futility and the harm that they cause us. In the case of the first cause, desire, we need to remember that no matter how much we attain in our worldly life, how high a position we reach, this is only temporary and not really beneficial. There is no comparison to be made between material benefit and spiritual benefit.

As for the second cause, hatred, this is the worst defilement that we can harbour. Even the merits that have been accumulated over thousands of eons can be lost by giving way to anger even for a single moment. By always remembering the terrible harm that anger can cause, we can eliminate it.

Fear, the third cause, can be eradicated by realising that no matter what harm we face by remaining on the spiritual path, even the loss of our life, this can never be as dire as falling into the lower realms by abandoning the path.

To eliminate the fourth cause, ignorance, we need to always be conscious of what keeps us on the path, and what takes us away from it, and to abide by these criteria.

Therefore, the very first thing that we must do on the spiritual path is to establish faith, unshakable faith that will utterly subdue these four causes. This immovable faith will become the base for all our virtuous qualities. Equally, if we are to embark on the spiritual path, it is crucial that we find a teacher, a spiritual master, who can guide us along the way.

Even when we undertake an ordinary task, such as acquiring a new skill or going on a journey, the

assistance of an experienced guide or teacher is essential. Without this, one can easily learn wrong methods and even go astray. Hence, even on a worldly level, the guide or teacher is essential.

This is particularly relevant in the spiritual field. Knowledge of the spiritual path is not within the reach of ordinary people, it is beyond our comprehension. Therefore it is imperative that we find the right kind of spiritual guidance when we embark on the spiritual path.

There are different classes of spiritual masters, endowed with varying characteristics and qualifications. We can qualify the masters according to the level of vows that they have taken. There are three such levels of vows.

The Pratimoksha vow, according to which we pledge to abstain from negative deeds. This vow is taken with a view to our own personal liberation.

The Bodhisattva vow, which entails not only abstaining from negative deeds, but also striving toward liberation for the sake of other beings.

Finally the Vajrayana or Tantric vow, which is the highest level of vow, and this is where the supreme methods are used to gain liberation for the sake of others.

The master who has taken all three of these vows is the highest kind of master that one can find. Finding the spiritual master is the source of all qualities, but it is not enough to find this master. We also need to follow his instructions, much like we would a doctor's. In order to recover from an illness, we need to find a good doctor. Not only this, but we need to follow his advice. Otherwise, even if we have the best doctor possible, if we don't follow his advice, we'll never recover from our illness. So not only is it vital to find the right spiritual master, but it is equally important that we follow his instructions.

When we choose a spiritual master, it is essential that we be very careful. We need to evaluate him or

her thoroughly before we take him or her as our guide.

Even in worldly life, when we undertake something new, we need to evaluate the different ways of proceeding. If we're thinking about buying a house, we have to compare different houses, look at each one's positive and negative attributes, see which one is more advantageous financially, and so forth. Only after such careful investigation can we decide which house to buy. We must utilise these same evaluation tools when finding a spiritual master.

Compared to this, of course, decisions regarding our spiritual life are far more important. Buying a new house, or a new anything is something that will be part of our life for a hundred years at best. So if we make a mistake, it won't be harmful for too long a time. But in the spiritual path, if we make a mistake, then not only are we hampered during this lifetime, but also for many subsequent lives. Hence, finding the right spiritual path and the right spiritual guide is the most important thing that we can do.

In ancient times, there were many teachings in place to guide disciples on ways to evaluate teachers and for teachers to evaluate disciples. Only once both teacher and disciple were satisfied with each other's qualities did they establish a teacher-disciple relationship. This preliminary evaluation is essential, and it can be very dangerous for a teacher and a disciple to establish a relationship before a proper evaluation has been carried out. This is especially important for the disciple, for whom falling into the wrong hands can be greatly detrimental. As illustrated, finding the right spiritual master is extremely important.

The teachings state that there are several levels of spiritual masters – superior, inferior, mediocre, and so forth - and they classify these levels according to their qualifications. But whatever level a master belongs to; the minimum requirement that he or she should satisfy is that of good discipline or right moral

conduct, because moral conduct is the foundation of all qualities. This moral conduct should not limit itself to appearances, but must be genuine.

The second requirement that a teacher should fulfill is that of wisdom -wisdom acquired from knowledge and from meditation. If a teacher is not endowed with deep-rooted knowledge and understanding of the sutras and tantras, then he cannot pass them on to his or her disciples.

The third requirement is compassion. The teacher must be motivated by compassion for his disciples. He or she must feel genuine desire for them to become free from ignorance, to abstain from negative deeds, and to practise virtuous deeds.

In this Dark Age, it is difficult to find the perfect teacher, but one who actualises these three requirements, whose moral qualities are highly developed and whose faults are minimal, then he or she qualifies as a suitable teacher.

Especially in the Vajrayana teachings, the teacher is absolutely essential. If we try to learn Tantra on our own, or through books, this can actually cause more harm than benefit. Vajrayana is the most advanced teaching of the Buddha, and can only be received through the direct transmission of an unbroken lineage that originated with Buddha Vajradhara and has been passed on from one master to another until the present.

It is not only the words and their meaning that are conveyed in the teachings. More importantly, it is the blessing that is transmitted from one person to another. Without this blessing, it is impossible to practise any of the tantric teachings or to attain any of its results; it can, in fact, be very harmful. This is why the Vajrayana teachings place so much importance on the spiritual master.

The sun shines brightly in the sky every day, but if we want to channel and maximise its energy, we need certain instruments. Similarly, the blessings of the Buddha shower on sentient beings all the time, but

without proper instruments, we cannot receive these blessings. Due to our lack of merit brought about by our negative deeds, we cannot see the Buddha in person. The guru is the instrument that helps channel and maximise the Buddha's blessings. The guru appears to us in ordinary form, and through him or her, we can hear the teachings of the Buddha and thereby receive His blessings.

Again, it is extremely important in Vajrayana to find a teacher and to thoroughly investigate his qualities. Once we are convinced that he is a genuine spiritual master, then we can take him as our teacher and receive Vajrayana teachings and initiations from him. Once we have established a master-disciple relationship with this teacher - whatever circumstances may arise - we should never break our bond with our teacher and never abandon our faith in him.

Even if we see faults in our master, we should never see these as faults. Whatever faults we see in the guru, we should see as our own faults. Much like the moon's reflection on water: if the water is clear, the reflection of the moon is also clear; and if the water is muddy, then the moon's reflection is blurred. If, due to our obscurations, we find fault with the master, we should always remember to look at this as our own shortcomings, our own faults, not those of the guru.

There are many wonderful stories about ancient Indian masters. These great mahasiddhas often displayed outlandish behaviour and did weird things, very weird things. The disciples who lost faith in their master didn't progress on the spiritual path, while those who didn't lose their faith in their master experienced spiritual attainment.

There is much talk about the 'root lamas'. According to the Vajrayana teachings, a root lama or guru is someone who bestows the major initiations on us, as well as the tantric teachings and pit instructions. This is our root guru.

In actuality, we can have several root gurus.

Then, among these, we can also have a very special root guru, for instance our karmic link guru. This is our most important guru, one with whom we have a karmic connection, who has been our guide through the course of many lifetimes.

If we have such a guru, then it is essential that we never cease to feel intense devotion for him and that we never lose faith in him, whatever happens.

Even if our root guru is just an ordinary person and not a realised being, if we as a disciple see him as the Buddha, then we can receive the blessings of the Buddha, because both he and we are endowed with Buddha nature.

As explained, it is very important in the Vajrayana or Tantric teachings, to find the right guru and, after finding him or her, to establish a strong karmic connection. Without this, it is impossible to make any spiritual progress. It is clearly mentioned in the teachings that if one wants to practise tantra on one's own, without depending on a spiritual master who can bestow upon us the unbroken transmission of blessings, this can be very dangerous and can lead us to fall into the lower realms.

In every tradition, Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana, finding the spiritual master and following him in the right way is the source of all qualities. This is particularly true in the Vajrayana path, where the unbroken lineage of transmission from the Buddha Vajradhara to us is an essential practice.

The spiritual master who gives us this transmission is the one who clears all our obscurations and confusion and who leads us on the path to liberation.

I pray that everyone may find the right spiritual master and successfully establish the karmic links with him or her that will allow them to receive all the blessings of the Buddha.