

Ringu Tulku Rinpoche

Vajrayana Guru Yoga and Devotion

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Edited by Shenpen Thaye 2006

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It seems like I am always teaching Vajrayana at Kamalashila. I was asked to teach the Guru Yoga of Karmapa by Francois. If you don't like it, it is his fault! (Laughs) This is an important yoga from the Kagyu School. Most monks do the Vajrayana Guru Yoga like this. It is very much a practice of devotion.

Sometimes people misunderstand. Someone recently gave his opinion saying that he thinks this practice is feudalistic, making people obey whatever the guru says. Maybe there was a feudalistic system in Tibet. This is difficult to say because the social orders or structures were different from place to place and you categorize them in a way that does not fit completely.

The main thing which I consider important is that the Buddhist dharma is very different from most of the great religions of the world. Most of the great religions of the world have something to do with a kind of history or origin, an authority, a creator - very much connected with a people and their history. So, it is connected with a social order.

Buddhism is a religion which doesn't discuss social structures. It does not promote or denounce any social order. Nor is it related to the history of a community, class, or section of people. It is a kind of self-development, something that you work on yourself; it's working on self development with compassion, of course, but not in an organizational way. So, from that point of view, it is fundamentally different. If there is anything to do with social order, it is not from the dharma point, but from a different perspective.

Guru Yoga works on devotion, but not from the social aspect. It is not that the lama becomes the head of a clan or gives orders for society – it's not like that. Most lamas or teachers are basically monks or hermits.

I was speaking to an older practitioner teacher about Guru Yoga. He asked Kalu Rinpoche about it and was told that we should practice on Gampopa. If we do Guru Yoga on a living being, however perfect or highly attained that person may be, we could see that person's faults and, therefore, could have doubts - even if there are no faults in that lama. We are not pure, we are samsaric beings. If we do the yoga on a dead lama, like Gampopa, we cannot see the faults because he is already dead. That's why many people do the practice based on yogis of the past like, Padmasambhava, Milarepa, or Vajradhara who was the first Buddha. Therefore, it is quite a different thing than a lama giving us orders. The practice is based on devotion.

In India, a guru is considered very special and given great respect. The word Guru means *teacher* in Sanskrit. It also means *heavy*, not heavy on your head,

but heavy with wisdom and knowledge; it means *full of* or *endowed with*. In the Indian system, if you learn something from someone, you respect that person and feel grateful for the rest of your life. There is no concept of *former* student or former teacher. Once a teacher, always a teacher: Once a student, always a student. What you learned, you learned and you can't unlearn it. So therefore, there is no former teacher. The guru is respected as much as the knowledge. In Indian culture - even now - you touch the feet of the teacher and put them on your head. It would be like what we call today a copyright system – and the guru had the copyright; if the guru had not given his permission for the transmission, then you would not benefit from his blessing and it would not be useful. I don't understand why it would not be useful; but this was the thinking.

There are stories of the exploitation of that theory. There is the popular and controversial story of Ekalavya from the Mahabharata, which is one of India's famous epics. The Ramayana is the story of Ram, the god king, and it is a very long story. It was televised a few years ago. It was on for five years, every Sunday, and when it was on, everything stopped. And Sunday is not like Sunday here. In India, it is the busiest day because all the shops are open. The Mahabharata is said to be one of the world's longest epics.

The Tibetans say "Ling Kesar" is the longest epic. There are people who can recite 200 volumes from memory; but it is not learned. It comes from a medium. I have seen a recent video of a person in their late 20's. He was sleeping in the hills and had vision of Ling Kesar, of the horse, and he was asked what he wished. He said he wished to tell Kesar stories. Later when he was on a pilgrimage to Lhasa he met a storyteller bard who was singing the stories in verse. When he heard this man, he said, "I can also do it!" And it just came out, and he could tell anything. He speaks so fast that his mouth cannot manage it! He doesn't have time to breathe and he is foaming at the mouth. There is not a single repetition spoken and sung in beautiful poetry. So fast that I could not read it that fast! When he sings, each song is different. Very impressive! But that is not the point.

In the Mahabharata, there is the guru who teaches the martial art of archery. He was supposed to be the best teacher and he taught the princess. One man from the lower cast wanted to learn it, but he was not admitted in the class. However, he secretly observed how they were doing it from the forest; and then he practiced on his own. Then the man went to the master of archery guru and asked if he could be his student.

"Shoot and let me see how you do!" said the guru.

So, the man shot and it was fantastic, right on the spot.

"You know quite a lot. From whom did you learn?"

"From you!"

How did you learn from me? I didn't teach you," said the guru.

"Oh, I saw you teaching and I made an image of yourself and then trained.

"If you have learned from me then you should give me the *guru darshana* (the guru's fee) for having learned it." That was the guru system: The child would be taken to the guru and then at the end, when the entire education was finished, there was a reward.

The man said, "I will give you whatever you want."
"Really? You will give me whatever I want?"
"Yes, if I have it."
The guru said, "Give me your right thumb!"
The thumb was cut off, and he could not shoot any arrows.
There are some gurus like that.

It is warned that you don't accept just anyone as your guru; and that you don't follow a guru blindly. This is true in all disciplines, Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana, as well. This is the first thing.

Buddha said that there are 4 ways to rely:

Don't rely on personalities; rely on the dharma.
Don't rely on words; rely on the meaning.
Not on the relative truth; but rely on the absolute truth.
Not on conceptual understanding; but rely on wisdom.

Buddha said:

"Don't believe because someone said it, or because it was written in a book, or because I have said it, or because everyone says it is right and follows it and it is popular. Only examine for yourself like a gold smith examines gold by rubbing, cutting and melting. Only then, when you find it is true, accept it."

This means you don't follow anything blindly. If you follow a teaching or a teacher, do it only when you have no doubt.

It is like this: It is not possible for us that there is absolutely no doubt. To have no doubt would be either blind, or a very highly realized understanding. So, with our maximum intelligence and reasoning, we investigate the teachings first. Then, if we see that there is depth, something of use and we can see the truth, then through the teachings we investigate the teacher. That teacher should teach in an appropriate way and should be living by what he or she teaches. If I have a certain trust – nothing is absolute or without doubt in this moment – then we might follow it as according to the dharma. That's why Buddha said that at the first level, the teaching is the most important; because for the beginner, of the three refuges, the dharma is the main refuge, telling us what to do; and we will get on the right path. Later, when we are more developed, Buddha and the ultimate become important.

We receive the dharma from the dharma teacher. The more we practice the dharma, the more our confidence in dharma grows, and the more we get the deeper understanding, the experience. Our confidence and trust grows not only in the dharma, but also in the teacher. It is sometimes said that the amount of realization and benefit you have received from the dharma is reflected in the amount of devotion you have towards your teacher. This is related in the story of Milarepa and Gampopa. Milarepa gave all the teachings to Gampopa, his best

student. Milarepa had lots of students, many yogis including Rechungpa who was with him for the longest period of time. But Gampopa arrived, and he was so good because he knew how to practice and to ask questions so well. So, Gampopa's receiving of the teaching was like passing the teaching from one cup to another. He received every teaching that Milarepa had and then he was told to return to his homeland in central Tibet, Gampodar. The name of the place he came from was Tagpo; and there was a mountain called Gampo. So he was called both Tagpopa and Gampopa, in particular, because he lived so long on that mountain.

Milarepa said, "Go to Gampo and practice – no teaching and getting distracted – just practice until you see me, your old teacher, your old father, completely as a real Buddha! When you see me as the real Buddha, then you can start teaching."

What he meant was, when you practice what you have received from your teacher, and you have benefited by the teachings, and are transformed by the teachings you have practiced, then there is no way but to recognize the teacher's kindness and see him as the Buddha himself: Who is the Buddha but the one who gave the teachings? There is nothing more that Buddha could do.

And that happened. Gampopa got the realization and saw Milarepa as the real Buddha; and then he started teaching. That is devotion.

This is important to understand: When you talk of devotion to the guru, the greater the devotion, the better it is. Of course, that is because of the realizations you are having.

There is a point which is often misunderstood. I was talking about anger. "Why are you not allowing me to have some anger?" some people said. Of course, I can't block that. It is not a question of allowing or not allowing. You need to see the problems that anger can cause. No one is without anger *just like that*.

It's the same with devotion.

When we talk about the greatness of devotion, some people think, "I must have it! There is something wrong with me if I don't have it!" It has to slowly develop. If you naturally have it, that's fine, too. Naropa knew that Tilopa understood and that his devotion was beyond doubt. That's good. The more devotion you have, the quicker the way. But we don't all have that. Devotion should not be forced as an obligation. It has to come from within. This has to be understood. It is not a demand. If you don't have complete devotion, you don't have to pretend to have it. If you can't trust, you don't need to. You should only trust if you have understood deeply. If you really have trust completely, then of course you will do naturally what the teacher tells you to do. But if you don't have that, and the teacher tells you something, and you have the feeling that it is heavy, then it is useless. There is a lot of misunderstanding on this point. Trust is something which has to develop with understanding and experience. If you don't have much trust in a teacher, but you think you must see the teacher as Buddha, and you think he is wrong anyway – then it doesn't work. That's not the idea.

This is why we have to go step by step and understand devotion and trust from this perspective. In practicing Guru Yoga – I see this clearly, especially in modern times – it is very difficult for a person to trust, even to trust yourself.

It is good to learn how to trust. It is an important quality among human beings. Without it, you cannot relax and be at ease, or have any feeling of security. The less trust we have, the more afraid we are. Guru Yoga is also an exercise in generating an experience or environment of trust. This is a very important aspect of Guru Yoga, to generate an environment, an atmosphere, a training of feeling trusting and trustful. I see this as the most important thing, especially for beginners, developing this trusting atmosphere, creating the atmosphere, the visualization, the trust. It's like putting ourselves in the mother's lap of security. In the same way, we create this atmosphere, the guru, the mandala, full of compassion, wisdom and power, and seeing yourself as a dear child, daughter, or son; and seeing the spiritual friend who is completely loving and compassionate – to everybody and especially to you - with all the power of enlightenment and wisdom. This is different to our other friends who may wish us well but do not have the power and qualities to give us the right protection and guidance.

So, you put yourself in that situation; and this is - in one way or another - the practice of many religions, especially in religions with a creator, God, the divine being as the protector who is loving, compassionate, powerful and wise. You put yourself in the care of that being or force, or whatever you call it, and rest and relax there. When you can do that, then you feel at ease. You are not threatened, insecure, or afraid. That kind of situation is being created here.

About Silence and the Three Solitudes

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I think silence is good because there is less distraction. If you keep silent, you see how much time is spent without doing something purposeful and you will see you have more time. It can be a good way of resting and is a way of making solitude.

Normally a retreat is supposed to be three solitudes: the solitudes of body, speech and mind.

In the solitude of body, you place yourself where there are no disturbances or hustle and bustle.

Solitude of speech is silence, that you are not engaged in talking or listening. Then you can listen to yourself more. You are less distracted. Silence - it is said by Buddha and Guru Rinpoche - if you do a retreat without talking, it is more than a thousand times better than doing it with talking because you are concentrated on the practice.

Solitude of the mind is of course the most difficult, that your thoughts are on the practice and not going everywhere.

So if you have these three together, you have the elements of retreat no matter where you are.

Silence is difficult because we are not used to it.

You can fast one day and not speak the next. It is not easy to keep the silence. If you keep a little silence for a while, it may give an atmosphere of retreat and practice. It is up to you.

Trust Trust

The more trust you have, the more confidence you have. Trusting yourself is having confidence. Don't you think so?

I think trust is an understanding. The more you clearly see it, the more you understand it, so you know what is what.

Clarity has to do with trust.

When you trust yourself, you understand yourself. You know 'I am like this.' Trust has to come from an understanding. The more I am clear about myself, the more I trust myself and I don't have to doubt all the time. This is similar to the trust we have in others. It has to do with understanding. I trust this person because I know this person. You *know*, so you can trust. If you don't *know*, you can't trust.

Yes or no? You can think about it.

There also is a kind of habit or tendency. Some people have a tendency to trust and others not. Some people feel happier and joyful and outgoing, and others are more shy, internal, sad and fearful. It is a habit or tendency. If we develop the habit, then that is the main thing that we are practicing.

People who have had good parents are more trusting. Other people have not had that experience.