

THE FIFTY VERSES OF GURU DEVOTION

Lama Nga-chu-pa

The great Indian pandit Naropa said, “Before the existence of the lama there was neither buddha nor deity.” He said this because buddhas and meditation deities are emanations, or embodiments, of the guru; that’s why there was neither buddha nor meditation deity before the guru.

The great siddha Tilopa said to the great siddha Naropa, “The great results, blessings and inspiration you get from having fervent respect for your guru is due to your guru, therefore you should have fervent respect for him.”

Jetsun Milarepa said, “Try to see your guru in his actual aspect of dharmakaya. If you can, you will receive all blessings and inspiration effortlessly.”

Vajradhara himself also spoke often about the importance of guru devotion. Since all these great beings have said these things, there’s not much need for me to comment further.

However, at the beginning of his commentary to the *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*, Je Tsong Khapa said, “The only door for disciples who want to experience great bliss and gain the highest attainments without much effort is the proper cultivation of guru devotion. In order to open this door, I am going to explain the *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*.”

Thus, in all the commentaries by Je Tsong Khapa, everywhere—at the beginning and the end, in the dedication as well as in the introductory verses—he prays to cultivate pure and proper guru devotion.

Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang often says, “Although the sutras and tantras all have the two types of meaning—definitive and interpretive—with respect to guru devotion, they’re unanimous on the importance of guru devotion; there’s no controversy on that point.”

To show the pure lineage of whatever teaching we’re studying—if it’s tantra its source should be Vajradhara and if sutra, Guru Shakyamuni Buddha—the great gurus are quoted in this way.

Atisha, for example, cultivated 157 gurus and his deeds in both India and Tibet were very extensive and he became extremely famous as a result. This was because of his guru devotion. Although he had 157 gurus, he said that he didn’t displease even one of them for even a single moment—that’s why he was able to do such extensive deeds.

Dromtönpa, too, although a layman [Skt: *upasaka*], became one of the most famous of the Kadampa geshes—most of whom were monks—because of his guru devotion. He cultivated such pure, stainless guru devotion that even Atisha praised it. As a result, he, too, was able to perform extensive deeds to greatly benefit sentient beings.

Then there’s Jetsun Milarepa. From the point of view of realization and insight, many other siddhas were equal to or comparable with him, but because of his extraordinary devotion to his guru, Marpa, he became much more famous and widely renowned than any of them.

A story from the life of Sakya Pandita gives us a different look at guru devotion. He once requested his uncle, Dragpa Gyaltsen, to teach him guru yoga but he rejected the request, saying, “You regard me only as your uncle, not as a buddha, so it’s useless giving you such profound teachings.” However, later on, Dragpa Gyaltsen pretended to be sick just for the sake of Sakya Pandita, who nursed him so single-pointedly that he forgot to eat during the day or sleep at night—his mind was completely focused on taking care of his uncle. Because of his great guru devotion, Sakya Pandita was able to see his guru as Manjushri and achieve the ten kinds of knowledge. He became very famous and was invited to give teachings in Mongolia.

These examples of Dharma practice are not for your amusement but to show you that if you want to attain the levels of realization that these great beings did and become as renowned as they were, you should cultivate the kind of guru devotion that they did.

Lama Tsong Khapa's relationship with his first teacher, Chöje Döndrub Rinchen, who cared for him from the ages of three to seventeen like a mother and gave him all the teachings, is also an excellent example of guru devotion. Whenever Lama Tsong Khapa mentioned this great teacher's name, tears would come to his eyes as he remembered his great kindness, and in his lam-rim teachings he praised the great teachers under whom he studied.

Now we come to the topic of guru devotion. There are two ways of cultivating guru devotion: mentally and physically.

The mental cultivation of guru devotion is elaborately explained in the lam-rim. The guru devotion expounded in the *Fifty Verses* is mainly the physical type.

In Tibetan, the title of this text, *Lama Nga-chu-pa*, literally means "Fifty Lamas" because it is composed of fifty verses on how to cultivate guru devotion. However, the meaning behind each verse is extremely profound because it contains words spoken in the tantras by Vajradhara himself. This makes it a most unfathomable teaching.

There's no Indian commentary on the *Fifty Verses* but we have the Tibetan one by Lama Tsong Khapa, which is widely renowned and the most famous commentary on this important text.

The teaching I am giving here accords to the root verses without the commentary. In order to properly give this profound transmission to his disciples, the guru should also have received the perfect transmission. If he hasn't, his teachings will be of little use to his disciples. If he tells them, "I haven't received it completely but since you have, you're very fortunate," that's also incorrect.

However, I received the complete teaching of the *Fifty Verses* from Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang—who heard it from Kyabje Pabongka—several times in Tibet and also here in Dharamsala at the Tibetan Library, with a commentary by Khenchen Losang Thubgyen, root guru of the first Trijang Rinpoche. The direct lineage of this teaching can be traced all the way back to Buddha Vajradhara himself, and since I have received the transmission and listened to the teaching a number of times, you can definitely receive the blessings and inspiration of this lineage.

Homage to the Bhagavan Vajrasattva

1. Introduction to the explanation

Homage & commitment to the undertaking

(1)

Bowing in the proper way to the lotus feet of my guru, who is the cause for me to attain the state of a glorious Vajrasattva, I shall condense and explain in brief what has been said in many stainless tantric texts about guru devotion. (Therefore) listen with respect.

The best way to gain the high realizations or pure abodes of Vajrasattva or Vajradhara, the doorway to these, is to cultivate the guru who can lead us there. Therefore, he makes obeisance to his guru's lotus feet; he touches his forehead to the lowest part of his guru's body.

Ashvagosha then says that, having made obeisance in this way, he will now tell us about the fifty verses of guru devotion, the fifty verses that show us how to cultivate proper guru devotion, which is the root of all insights. He also says that what he is about to write is not his own fabrication but is in accord with the tantric scriptures written by Vajradhara; by taking the essence of these scriptures, he will now write these verses.

With respect to cultivating proper guru devotion, as it is said in the lam-rim, the disciple who wants to attain liberation or enlightenment has to cultivate proper guru devotion. As we all desire advantage and none of us wants disadvantage or loss, there's only one thing to do—we have to cultivate proper guru devotion.

2. Presentation of the explanation

The way to be devoted to a guru

How to be devoted in general

Actual subject matter

BRIEF EXPLANATION

Correctness of being reverent toward a guru

(2)

All the buddhas of the past, present and future, residing in every land in the ten directions, have paid homage to the tantric masters from whom they have received the highest initiations. (Is there need to mention that you should too?)

Just as the buddhas of the three times have revered the gurus from whom they received initiations, oral transmissions and tantric vows and teachings, so should we revere and respect them and cultivate proper guru devotion. It's a mistake to regard only the guru who confers initiations as a vajra guru; we should also regard the guru who gives tantric teachings in the same way. Lama Je Tsong Khapa clarified this point.

So, it mentions here receiving the highest initiations from a guru. Just because a vase is put on our head doesn't necessarily mean we have received the initiation. An initiation should be given as the tantric scriptures state, by having its meaning explained: the initiations we have achieved and the paths that we have the karma to follow. When we have gained all this knowledge we have received a proper initiation.

Initiations are of three types: causal, to ripen our mind stream; pathway, through which we progress towards enlightenment; and resultant, into the fully enlightened state. The initiation referred to here is the causal one, which is a bit different to the four initiations: vase, secret, wisdom and word.

The importance of cultivating proper guru devotion is stated in the seventeenth chapter of the *Guhyasaṃaja Root Tantra*, [Sangdū Tsa Gyū], which has 18 chapters.

How one goes about being reverent

General teaching on how to be devoted

(3)

Three times each day with supreme faith you must show the respect you have for your guru who teaches you (the tantric path) by pressing your palms together, offering a mandala as well as flowers and prostrating (touching) your head to his feet.

The buddhas of the three times prostrate to the vajra guru three times a day—morning, noon and evening. This shows that we, too, should cultivate proper guru devotion. That's the actual meaning of this verse.

This verse also describes in a general way how we should make offerings to our gurus: we should fold our hands in reverence, offer mandalas and flowers, and prostrate to the feet of our guru three times a day.

Once we have received an initiation, we have pledged, or given our word of honor [Skt: *samaya*; Tib: *dam-tsig*], to offer a mandala to our guru three times a day, and it's a great transgression if we forget. (*Samaya* means not to be transgressed.) However, this pledge is fulfilled by reciting the six-session yoga daily.

An exception

(4)

If you hold ordination vows and (your guru) is a layman or your junior, (in public) prostrate while facing such things as his scriptural texts in order to avoid worldly scorn but in your mind (prostrate to your guru).

So now there is an exception. It's not appropriate for a fully ordained monk [Skt: *bhikshu*; Tib: *ge-long*] to prostrate to a novice monk or a layman in public, because it can cause ordinary people to criticize and disparage the Dharma. So what should you do in a gathering if you, the vajra disciple, is a bhikshu and your vajra guru is a novice or a layman? On such occasions, you should prostrate physically to a statue, stupa or scripture on your guru's altar but mentally prostrate to your guru. By physically offering prostrations to scriptures or other holy objects you avoid causing the laypeople to

generate bad feelings in their mind, but since mentally you are prostrating to your guru, you're fulfilling your commitment in that regard.

This is illustrated by an incident from the lives of the great masters Chandrakirti and Chandragomin, who often used to debate with each other. One day Chandrakirti, a monk, invited Chandragomin, a layman, to Nalanda Monastery, telling him he'd organize a grand procession of monks to greet him. But Chandragomin objected, saying that that would give the local lay-people a bad impression. However, Chandrakirti said he had a way around this: he was going to put a statue of Manjushri on a throne on a chariot just in front of Chandragomin, and in that way the people would think that the procession was for Manjushri.

So this is the kind of situation that this verse is talking about, but in a secluded area where there are no laypeople to generate a negative mind, you should prostrate directly to your lay guru, as is your commitment.

(5)

As for serving (your guru) and showing him respect, such as obeying what he says, standing up (when he comes in) and showing him to his seat—these should be done even by those with ordination vows (whose gurus are laymen or their juniors). But (in public) avoid prostrating and unorthodox actions (such as washing his feet).

This next verse shows the limits of the exception mentioned in the previous one, where it explains what a fully ordained vajra disciple should do in relation to a lay vajra master, even in public. You can make material offerings, show general reverence, offer him a cushion, stand up whether he's nearby or even far away, do things to help him accomplish his plans or projects and so forth. What you should avoid is offering physical prostrations directly or washing his feet and so forth in the presence of lay people, as to do so might give laypeople the wrong impression and cause them to criticize.

THE REASON A MUTUAL INVESTIGATION IS NECESSARY

(6)

In order for the words of honor of neither guru nor disciple to degenerate, there must be a mutual examination beforehand (to determine if each can) brave a guru-disciple relationship.

We should try to examine a spiritual teacher before beginning a guru-disciple relationship with him. Similarly, a guru should examine a student before accepting him or her as a disciple. This is very important, right from the start. Before cultivating such an intimate relationship both should check each other very carefully because if, once established, this relationship is broken, it is a transgression of samaya—bad for both guru and disciple. However, once we have accepted a teacher as our vajra guru, we shouldn't continue examining him. That is to be done before accepting him as guru, and once we have done so we should only regard our guru as an enlightened being. Further examination can only lead us to the vajra hell.

Jetsun Milarepa said that when we are with our vajra guru we shouldn't seek out his faults; we should cultivate a proper outlook and regard him as a perfect being. If we are successful in this we will be successful in our practice. If we want to practice properly we must cultivate proper guru devotion. Without it, despite diligent practice, we won't achieve anything worthwhile.

One great practitioner said: “No matter how much you try to seclude yourself in an isolated area, if you regard the buddhas and your gurus as enemies, your practice will be of no value because it will lack the root of substantial achievements.” Guru devotion is essential for success in practice. Certain sutras recommend that examination go on for as long as twelve years, if necessary. It is very important that such examination be done properly. When both guru and disciple are satisfied, the relationship can be established. If the guru-disciple relationship is established without proper examination from either side, the sacred words of honor are in danger of degeneration. Therefore, we have to be very careful in this.

The guru who is to be relied upon or avoided

The character of one to be avoided

(7)

A disciple with sense should not accept as a guru someone who lacks compassion or is prone to anger, vicious, arrogant, possessive, undisciplined or boastful of his knowledge.

This verse explains the kind of guru we should not cultivate; it mentions some disqualifications. An intelligent disciple should not cultivate such a guru.

- He should possess great compassion—the wish that sentient beings be free from suffering and its cause. This is the most important qualification. If our guru is not compassionate there's the danger that he'll give up on us at the first sign of bad behavior. If he has great compassion, then no matter how offensive our actions, he won't forsake or neglect us. Therefore it's very important that our guru have great compassion. As stated in the great commentary on *Lama Chöpa* by Kachen Yeshe Gyaltsen, “However the mischievous child offends his parents and misbehaves and worries them, they won't lose love and compassion and will continue to value him. Although I, a vulgar rascal, don't deserve your compassion, please don't forsake me and guide me as parents guide their child.”
- He shouldn't be prone to anger.
- He shouldn't be sadistic or hold a grudge.
- He shouldn't be arrogant.
- He shouldn't have a strong desire for possessions or wealth or cling strongly to material things.
- He should not be loose of character of body, speech and mind or careless in his practice of morality. If the guru gambles and takes intoxicants, his disciples will follow the same path. We should try not to fall under the influence of such a guru. If possible, our guru should be like Nagtso Lotsawa's: he lived with Atisha for nineteen years during which time he couldn't see the tiniest stain or fault in him. We should try to cultivate a guru like that—one in whom we can't find even a single shortcoming. Similarly, Khädrub Rinpoche offered praise to Lama Tsong Khapa: “No matter how the buddhas, with all their wisdom, try to see if you have breached any of your vows, even a minor downfall, they won't be able to find a single one.” This emphasizes that we should choose a guru who keeps his vows properly.
- He should not boast of his abilities or be fond of revealing his qualifications all the time.

The character of one to be devoted to

(8)

(A guru should be) stable (in his actions), cultivated (in his speech), wise, patient and honest. He should neither conceal his shortcomings nor pretend to possess qualities he lacks. He should be an expert in the meanings (of the tantra) and in its ritual procedures (of medicine and turning back obstacles). He should also have loving compassion and a complete knowledge of the scriptures.

This verse explains the kind of guru we should cultivate; it mentions some of the qualifications we should look for in a guru, the characteristics of the kind of guru who should be cultivated by an intelligent disciple.

- Stable means that he should have very subdued actions of body; he should abstain from non-virtuous actions of body, keep his bodily actions proper and moral; immutable.
- Cultivated refers to his speech; he should abstain from non-virtuous actions of speech, keep proper morality of speech, not hurt others by means of speech, sharp words, etc.
- Mentally, he should abstain from the three non-virtuous actions of mind as well as from pretentiousness; his mental attitude should be very pure. He should possess intelligence and discretion; if he doesn't, he can't lead us on the path to liberation.
- He should possess the three types of forbearance, or patience:
 - forbearance of harm received from others;
 - the ability to endure hardship; and
 - the ability to hear profound teachings without being terrified.
- He should be true and unbiased, or impartial; not biased towards near relatives or repulsed by enemies; he should be even-minded towards all sentient beings.
- He shouldn't be pretentious or conceal his shortcomings. Pretentious means pretending to have supernatural knowledge that he doesn't have and concealing his shortcomings means always trying to hide his faults from others, especially with the intention of getting offerings.
- He should have the power to drive out interferences by means of mantras and tantric practice.
- He should be able to practice medicine, which actually means to help and benefit others by means of his teachings; to really pacify them.
- He should possess great compassion, the wish that all sentient beings' suffering be alleviated.
- He should have profound knowledge of the scriptures, especially the Tripitaka.

(9)

He should have full expertise in both ten fields, skill in the drawing of mandalas, full knowledge of how to explain the tantra, supreme pure faith and his senses fully under control.

He should possess the two sets of ten qualifications, as mentioned in the *Guru Puja*. These twenty things are the ten externals and the ten internals that a Highest Yoga Tantra guru should possess. A vajra guru of the lower tantras needs only the external ten; the internal ten are not necessary,

although if he does possess them it's all well and good. It's important to be familiar with these various qualities.

The ten inner qualities are:

- The ability to visualize protection wheels and can eliminate interferences. Protection wheels are visualized just outside the mandala and the mere sight of it is enough to terrify negative forces.
- The ability to tie protection knots.
- Skill in conferring the vase and secret initiations, that is, the first and second initiations, which plant the seed to receive the buddha's form bodies.
- Skill in conferring the transcendent wisdom and word initiations, that is, the third and fourth initiation, which plant the seed to receive the buddha's wisdom bodies. In the fourth—the word—initiation, the disciples are made to understand the meaning of *yuganatha*, or great union.
- Skill in separating enemies of Dharma from their protectors, after which those enemies are eliminated.
- Skill in making sculpted tormas and the offering ceremonies.
- Skill in reciting mantras both verbally and without uttering words, that is, mental recitation, such as found in the Vajrayogini practice. Mental recitation is very profound and usually taught only during the giving of a tantric commentary.
- Skill in the wrathful rituals. In order to be able to do this, the initiation must be taken properly, the words of honor kept purely and the deity actualized correctly.
- Skilled in consecrating holy objects.
- Skill in self initiation, offering mandalas and so forth.

The ten external qualities are:

- Skill in visualizing, drawing and constructing mandalas of deities.
- Skill in single-pointed concentration on meditation deities.
- Knowing how to do mudras correctly.
- Skill in performing ritual dances.
- Skill in sitting in the vajra posture and the half lotus as well.
- Skill in mantra recitation.
- Skill in making fire offerings [Tib: *jin-segl*].
- Skill in all the other offering ceremonies.
- Skill in the rituals for subduing enemies of the Dharma, the teacher and sentient beings; who always harm sentient beings.
- Skill in concluding ceremonies. The buddhas and deities invoked in front at the beginning of a practice should be made to return to their former place from where they were invoked, although some may be made to dissolve into the images.

Question: How can we know if the guru has these qualities and qualifications?

Gen Rinpoche: Actually, if the guru is really an authentic teacher, most of the qualifications would be known because of his reputation as a learned lama and great practitioner, but you yourself can understand after you have examined him properly. As I mentioned before, you should cultivate a

guru about whom you can confidently think, “If I take this teacher as my guru my faith won’t degenerate later.” When your faith in him is resolute you can cultivate that teacher as your guru.

In the next session the qualifications a disciple should possess will be taught. If you lack some of the qualifications of a perfect disciple, you should purify your mind and accumulate merit. You have to create your enlightenment by yourself; nobody will bestow it upon you.

Vajradhara said, “Enlightenment cannot be found anywhere. Only by practicing the methods taught by the guru, purifying your mind and accumulating merit can you find enlightenment.”

We have finished enumerating the two sets of ten qualifications that the vajra guru should possess. Just as when we go to an unknown place we have to cultivate friendship with somebody who knows the way and can lead us to it, in the same way, when heading for enlightenment we have to cultivate a guru who possesses the necessary qualifications to lead us there.

As Sakya Pandita said, “Even when buying a cow or a buffalo we check very carefully and throw dice to see if we should do so, how much more so, when seeking enlightenment, should we check carefully and cultivate the right guru?”

Now we come to the qualities a disciple should possess. It is important that the right teaching be given to the right disciple, a disciple with the right qualities, otherwise it’s uncertain whether the teaching will benefit or not.

The qualities a disciple needs are given in two parts: the qualities of the disciple in general—the disciple of the graduated path to enlightenment—and the qualities of the advanced, extraordinary disciple, that is, a disciple of tantric practice.

The qualities in general:

- The disciple should be impartial and not have a biased attitude. This is most important.
- The disciple should have discretion or intelligence, a good faculty of discernment. If the disciple is dull and doesn’t understand the subject even though it’s taught a hundred times, there’s little value in teaching that student. For disciples with sharp intelligence, or discriminating awareness, everything becomes a teacher because they know what to cultivate and what to abandon. For dull, deluded or closed-minded students, making a guru-disciple relationship is like purposely seeking the lower realms because can’t observe it properly. There’s an illustration to clarify this point.

In Lord Buddha’s time, the great benefactors would invite the Buddha and his *shravakas* for lunch and it was customary that a discourse would be given after lunch. The eldest monk would sit on a cushion and give a discourse. Once the eldest was a monk who didn’t know anything and he sat on the cushion saying repeatedly, “Knowing nothing is suffering,” referring to himself. The others thought that he meant that ignorance is the cause of suffering and contemplated the thought that all suffering comes from ignorance. As a result of this, they achieved liberation. This shows how important intelligence is.

- Not only should the disciple have an impartial, unbiased attitude and intelligence but also keen interest. This is probably the most important quality, because if the student isn’t enthusiastic, it’s like giving a discourse to a scarecrow; the teachings won’t be kept in mind. As a great Kadampa geshe said, “It’s no use giving teachings to those without keen interest. No matter how many you give, they’re of little value. You can lead a horse to water but you

can't make it drink. Even if you push its head into the water, it'll just shake off the little water that does stick."

So these are the three general qualities that a disciple should possess.

The qualities of the tantric disciple:

The *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* contains the essential teaching of Vajradhara himself as summarized by Ashvagosha. In other words, these teachings were actually given by Vajradhara in the same way that the *Guru Puja* also has its source in the tantras. Every verse comes from the tantras and contains their essential meaning.

- The disciple should be fond of doing virtuous actions and practicing the meditations.
- The disciple should always show respect to the guru. This has great significance. It says "always," that is, all the time. It doesn't mean that when your guru is telling you some story you respect him and when he's rebuking you, you don't. You must always respect him, all the time, just as Jetsun Milarepa always showed respect to Marpa, no matter what.
- The disciple should always have strong devotion and make offerings to the meditation deity and always practice the yoga method of that deity. Whatever initiations we have taken, we should continue that practice for the rest of our life. Geshe Potowa said that when we engage in our tantric practices we shouldn't be like a dog eating. If you give a dog a piece of meat he'll swallow it whole without tasting or enjoying it and then look around for the next bit. We shouldn't be like that. Having taken an initiation, we should practice it with care and enjoyment.

Disciples possessing these qualities are the really good ones.

The qualities that make a disciple a bad one are similar to those of the guru we shouldn't seek. A disciple should not lack compassion, be prone to anger, have sadistic views or lack faith in the guru or meditation deities.

This concludes the discussion of the qualities of the guru to be cultivated and the disciple who cultivates the guru. Next comes how to avoid disrespect for the guru and how to cultivate respect. This has two parts: how to abandon disrespect and how to cultivate respect.

EXTENSIVE EXPLANATION OF HOW TO BE DEVOTED TO A GURU

Giving up irreverence

Abandoning disrespect has four divisions: (a) abandoning belittling or deriding your guru; (b) abandoning disturbing your guru's mind; (c) the invisible consequences of disrespecting your guru; and (d) the summary of the meaning of all these verses.

Giving up despising and disparaging

(a) Abandoning belittling the guru is discussed in two divisions: general (Verse 10) and specific (Verses 11 and 12).

General teaching

(10)

Having become the disciple of such a protecting (guru), should you then despise him from your heart, you will reap continual suffering as if you had disparaged all the buddhas.

If, having become a vajra disciple, you intentionally belittle your vajra guru—the guru who has given you initiations, taught you tantric practices and conferred tantric vows upon you—you will have to undergo immense and constant suffering. Why? Because belittling your guru is the same as belittling all the buddhas. In the same way that making offerings to just one pore of your guru creates the inconceivable amount of merit of making offerings to the three time buddhas, so too does any negativity created with your guru become extremely heavy.

How do we belittle our guru? When we say things like “He doesn’t have good morality,” “He has no enthusiastic perseverance,” “He’s stingy,” or “He’s so short-tempered,” we’re creating that kind of negative karma—belittling means deriding, disparaging and so forth.

Geshe Potowa said, “In degenerate times disciples will belittle their guru in an honorific way,” that is, they’ll do it politely. This might seem not so bad, but it’s still belittling.

When Atisha came to Tibet he told the Tibetans, “All the major and minor realizations are developed by relying on the guru but since you Tibetans regard your guru as simply an ordinary man, there’s no way you can develop any realizations.”

Geshe Potowa also said that we should carefully examine a potential guru before establishing a guru-disciple relationship, but once we have taken him as our guru, we should cultivate proper guru devotion. Even though he might pretend to be poorly educated, we still shouldn’t belittle him but instead cultivate pure guru devotion. Since the law of cause and effect is inevitable, if we behave in this way, in future we will meet with gurus such as Manjushri or Maitreya Buddha. The benefits are infinite.

Vajrapani once asked Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, “What are the negative consequences of belittling the guru?” Taken aback, Guru Shakyamuni replied, “Oh, Vajrapani, please don’t ask me that! If I were to enumerate those consequences, humans, gods and even dauntless bodhisattvas would be terrified and die of shock. However, if you steel yourself by developing great courage before listening, although the negative consequences of belittling the guru are limitless, I’ll summarize a few for you.” The consequences of belittling the guru are so unbearable that spelling them out would terrify even Vajrapani.

Specific explanation

(11)

If you are foolish enough to despise your guru, you will contract contagious diseases and those caused by harmful spirits and will die (a horrible death) caused by demons, plagues or poison.

The invisible consequence is rebirth in hell. Here, the visible consequences are enumerated. If you belittle your guru you will suffer from infectious diseases and die from harm inflicted by other sentient beings, such as snake bite or tiger attack. Other ways you can die as a result of despising your guru are demonic interference, incurable disease and poison. As has been said, “The greatly

deluded and extremely ignorant belittlers of their guru will die from such diseases.” As this implies, even those who have a little knowledge will not belittle their guru; only the extremely ignorant will do so.

(12)

You will be killed by (wicked) kings or fire, by poisonous snakes, water, witches or bandits, by harmful spirits or savages, and then be reborn in a hell.

As a consequence of belittling your guru you can also be executed by the king or die from snake bite, drowning or bandit attack. Having been deprived of life by such interferences, you will be born in the great hell. The source of these consequences is the *Great Hevajra Tantra*.

Refraining from seriously upsetting one's guru

(b) Abandoning disturbing your guru’s mind.

(13)

Never disturb your guru’s mind. Should you be foolish enough to do so, you will surely boil in hell.

At no time, by neither body, speech nor mind, should you disturb your guru’s holy mind. But if, out of deep ignorance or closed-mindedness, you do, you’ll be born in the great hells and from all sides be burned by fire. The source of this statement is the *Secret Ornamental Moon Spot Tantra*, one of the great tantric scriptures.

It is also very clear in many sutras that you shouldn’t cultivate friendship with those who have belittled their guru; you shouldn’t even drink water with them. If you do associate with them, your sacred words of honor will degenerate and, no matter how hard you try, you won’t be able to achieve any powerful attainments.

Explanation of the unobserved bad consequences

(c) The invisible consequences of disrespecting your guru

(14)

Whatever fearful hells have been taught, such as Avici, the Hell of Uninterrupted Pain, it is clearly explained that those who disparage their guru will have to remain there (for a very long time).

Visible consequences are those bad results that you can see in your lifetime; invisible ones are those that you have to experience in future lifetimes. This verse refers to the latter.

The great hell—Avici, the Hell of Uninterrupted Suffering [Tib: *rab-tsor*, immense heat], the Hell Without Respite—the worst hell, as described in the sutra teachings. Disciples who belittle their guru will be reborn in that hell and will have to remain there for a very long time.

One of the great tantras, the *Ornament of Vajra Essence Tantra*, says that no matter how hard they try—abandoning sleep by night and food by day, even for eons—disciples who belittle their guru

will not only be unable to achieve any powerful attainments, they won't even have auspicious dreams, and all their practices will become causes for rebirth in hell. These are some of the invisible consequences of belittling the guru.

The *Heruka Root Tantra* [*Demchog Tsa Gyü*], says that no matter how hard they try to receive initiations, enter the mandala and engage in tantric practices, disciples who have a very weak relationship with their guru—that is, who have belittled their guru—won't be able to achieve any powerful attainments.

The *Guhyasamaja Root Tantra*, says that—if they properly cultivate a vajra guru, receive initiations and practice correctly—even disciples who have committed the five immediate negativities, the most serious of non-virtues, can attain enlightenment in the one lifetime, whereas those who have not created any such negativities but have belittled their guru from the depths of their heart will never be able to attain anything, no matter how they practice.

Lama Tsong Khapa said that the *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* was written especially for disciples who take profound teachings from any gurus who just happen to be around but don't cultivate devotion to any of them. Out of his great compassion, Acharya Ashvagosha summarized what such disciples should do in order to help them understand their commitments properly.

Another scripture says that if you don't regard the teacher from whom you hear even one verse of teaching as a guru, you'll be reborn as a dog a hundred times or as a being that feeds on the flesh of its own mother.

Thus, the great Tilopa told Naropa, “For all these reasons you should be skilled in cultivating proper guru devotion.”

A great Kagyu lama once said that if you allow the sunshine of your fervent regard to fall on the holy physical form of your guru, the vajra river of inspiration and blessings will flow. Another said that if you try to meditate on emptiness without supplicating your guru, you're like a cave facing away from the sun—it's impossible for the light to shine in. In other words, if you meditate on emptiness without making requests to your guru, your practice won't bring realizations and you won't be able to strike at the heart of your ego-grasping ignorance.

In his *Uttaratana*, Maitreya Buddha said that you can realize emptiness only when you have fervent regard, or great respect, for your guru.

Gampopa's disciples once asked him how he had achieved the realization of mahamudra. He replied, “When I was able to keep my guru, Milarepa, in mind all the time, that's when I realized mahamudra.”

Similarly, Jetsun Milarepa said that since the guru is the quintessence of all the buddhas, if you can see him in his real form of dharmakaya, you will spontaneously and effortlessly receive all the inspiration and blessings of all the buddhas.

So, I think that's enough citations clarifying these points; now please contemplate them properly.

Summary

(d) Summarizing the meaning of all these verses

(15)

Therefore exert yourself whole-heartedly never to belittle your tantric master, who makes no display of his great wisdom and virtues.

It's now clear that at no time should we belittle the vajra guru. The consequences of doing so are obvious. As mentioned above, Lama Tsong Khapa said, “The *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* is made up

of quotations of Buddha Vajradhara himself, summarized in book form for those disciples who seek out many gurus but don't cultivate proper guru devotion with any of them. In order to help such disciples, warn them, and save them from the worst consequences of belittling their guru and transgressing their guru-disciple relationship, Ashvagosha wrote this book."

When Sadaprarudita first generated guru devotion for Dharmodgata he was on the highest path of accumulation, but as he cultivated proper guru devotion, he was able to attain the seventh bodhisattva stage within seven years—which, according to sutra, is impossible. However, his great guru devotion enabled him to do so.

As Vajradhara said, we should pray not even to see—even in our dreams—or hear of those disciples who have violated their guru-disciple relationship.

This completes our discussion of the verses dealing with abandoning disrespect for the guru. Those on how to cultivate respect are next.

How to go about being reverent

Cultivating respect for the guru has eight divisions:

- (a) Offering material
- (b) Perceiving him as buddha
- (c) Acting according to his word
- (d) Looking after his materials and entourage
- (e) Purifying temporal behavior
- (f) Offering body, speech and mind
- (g) Abandoning pride
- (h) Not acting according to your own wishes

Arranging teachings in outline, or summarized, form helps us understand them properly. Those with sharp intelligence can understand the essence of an entire text just from its table of contents.

(a) Making material offerings has four divisions:

- (i) Making offerings to purify disrespect
- (ii) Offering ourselves and all our possessions
- (iii) The validity of making such offerings
- (iv) How to cultivate pure words of honor every day

Giving presents

Giving presents in order to stop irreverence

(i) Making offerings to purify disrespect

(16)

(If, out of lack of awareness, you have shown disrespect) to your guru, reverently present an offering to him and seek his forgiveness. Then in the future such harm as plagues will not befall you.

If, because of our overabundant delusions and recklessness, we have generated or shown disrespect for our guru, we should make offerings to our guru with both respectful mind and respectful gesture—whatever we present we should offer with both hands. In this, we should copy the great masters who were learned and well-skilled in this field. We can learn a great deal from the way they behaved. When observing great masters, we shouldn't be so concerned with the way they recite mantras and so forth as with how they behave purely in front of their gurus.

Also, the offerings we make to purify disrespect and ask for forgiveness should be charming, attractive things—good quality things that we like, not things we don't. If we do this properly and ask forgiveness, then in future we won't be afflicted by infectious diseases or the other consequences mentioned above.

To show that he's not just making this up, in his commentary, Lama Tsong Khapa quotes the *Long Paramadaya Commentary* as the source of this method of counteracting the effects of disrespectful behavior.

The way one gives absolutely everything one has

(ii) Offering everything we own

(17)

It has been taught that for the guru to whom you have pledged your word of honor (to visualize as one with your meditation deity), you should willingly sacrifice your wife, children and even your life, although these are not easy to give away. Is there need to mention your fleeting wealth?

There's a Tibetan term in this verse, *dam-tsig lobpön*, samaya guru—the guru to whom you have pledged your word of honor—the guru you regard or visualize as inseparable from your deity. For example, if you practice Yamantaka, the guru you regard as inseparable from the body, speech and mind of Yamantaka. That is your samaya guru. Of course, it's the same with any deity that you practice, such as Avalokiteshvara.

We should offer our samaya guru our wife, our children, our life itself. Therefore, if we're supposed to offer things like that, which are so difficult to give away, to practice generosity with, what need is there to talk about our fluctuating wealth?

The source of this statement is the *Samputa Tantra*.

The correctness of such offering

(iii) The validity of making such offerings

Now we go into the details of the validity of this second offering, to prove that it is not meaningless, carries a profound meaning and was propounded by Vajradhara.

(18)

(Such practice of offering) can confer even buddhahood on a zealous (disciple) in his or her very lifetime, which otherwise might be difficult to attain even in countless millions of eons.

The validity of making such offerings is that the pure abode of enlightenment, which is very difficult to actualize no matter how many eons we try, can be achieved within the hundred-year lifespan of this degenerate age by the pure cultivation of a vajra guru.

The *Kalachakra Root Tantra* clearly states that no matter how many offerings you make to the Three Jewels in a million eons or how much charity to sentient beings you practice over the same period, you still can't actualize enlightenment in a single lifetime, but if you cultivate pure guru devotion without transgression you can actualize enlightenment in a single lifetime of this degenerate age.

The way one protects one's three words of honor

(iv) How to cultivate pure words of honor every day

(19)

Always keep your words of honor. Always make offerings to the enlightened ones. And always make offerings to your guru, for he is the same as all the buddhas.

There are several points here so we'll take them one by one.

“Always abide by your words of honor” means that your first word of honor to the guru who gave you the initiation of a certain deity is to always abide in that deity’s yoga.

“Always make offerings to the buddhas” means always make offerings to the buddhas, like Vajrasattva and so forth, in order to complete the accumulation of merit. There are four types of offering—external, internal, offering of suchness and secret offering—and you should constantly make these offerings, visualizing them as extensive as space itself, and thereby complete your accumulation of merit.

“Always make offerings to your guru...” means always make offerings to your guru because as an object of accumulating merit, he is like all the buddhas.

(20)

Those who wish to (attain) the inexhaustible (state of a buddha’s wisdom body) should give to their guru whatever they themselves find pleasing, from the most trifling objects to those of best quality.

Alone, the word “inexhaustible” here is a bit vague, but through his kindness, Lama Tsong Khapa has clarified it. It means that we'll achieve the dharmakaya, which is as inexhaustible as space; infinite. So it's saying that disciples who wish to attain this inexhaustible state should make material offerings—from the smallest to the greatest—to their guru. Furthermore, the guru, in order to help dissipate the disciple's craving desire, should accept these things.

(21)

Giving (to your guru) is the same as making continual offerings to all the buddhas. From such giving much merit is gathered. From such collection comes the supreme powerful attainment (of buddhahood).

Making offerings to your guru fulfills the requirement of making continual offerings to all the buddhas, and by doing so you accumulate the merit that brings the supreme powerful attainment of enlightenment. Since you actualize the highest powerful attainment of enlightenment, what need is there to mention all other ordinary powerful attainments? Obviously, you accomplish these by the way. This and all the other ideas written down by Ashvagosha have various tantras as their source.

So, now we have finished the first of the eight divisions of cultivating respect for the guru, that of making material offerings.

Looking on the guru as an enlightened one

(b) Perceiving your guru as buddha

This has two subsections: (i) regarding him as buddha and (ii) not stepping over his shadow

The actual topic

(i) Regarding him as buddha

(22)

Therefore, a disciple with the good qualities of compassion, generosity, moral self-control and patience should never regard the guru and Buddha Vajradhara as different.

First comes a description of the good disciple, one who has developed the qualities of great compassion—the root of the Mahayana path—who abides by the cultivation of pure morality, and has dedicated his or her body, speech and mind to the welfare of other sentient beings. The disciple who is preoccupied by working for other sentient beings, abides by the three types of Mahayana morality and can endure all the hardships of the path should regard the guru as inseparable, not separate, from Vajradhara himself.

As Geshe Potowa said, “Disciples who regard Vajradhara as better than their own guru have no possibility of gaining powerful attainments.”

This makes it clear that if, while practicing any meditation deity and doing the visualization, you regard the meditation deity and your guru as separate—the deity as very high and your guru as very low, separate—because of that great mistake, you won’t be able to actualize any powerful attainments, even if you meditate for a hundred years. On the other hand, if you meditate on the inseparability of the meditation deity and your guru, it’s impossible that you *won’t* actualize any powerful attainments.

Furthermore, Vajradhara assured us that the guru is an emanation of himself. He said that in degenerate times such as this, we shouldn’t worry that we haven’t met Vajradhara because at such

times he would manifest as the vajra guru. Therefore, we should develop the skill of recognizing Vajradhara as our vajra guru, because that's how he manifests at times like this.

So that's the actual meaning of this subject, regarding the vajra guru as inseparable from Vajradhara.

Stopping irreverence even to his shadow

(ii) Not stepping over your guru's shadow

(23)

If you should never step on even (your guru's) shadow because the fearsome consequences are the same as destroying a stupa, is there need to mention never stepping on or over his shoes or seat, (sitting in his place, or riding) his mount?

The text says that the negativity of doing so is the same as demolishing a stupa, which is one of the five near immediate negativities.¹ And if the negativity of stepping over the shadow of the vajra guru is so grave, it's obvious that stepping over his shoes, mattress or cushions or riding his conveyance, such as his horse, must be much worse than that.

The instruction not to step over the guru's shadow was given by Vajradhara in the tantras. Lama Tsong Khapa's elaborate commentary on the *Fifty Verses*, the *Fulfillment of All Hopes*, contains many quotations substantiating such advice. This commentary can be found in the first volume of the eighteen that make up Je Tsong Khapa's collected works [Tib: *Sung-bum*].

Doing what the guru says

(c) Now we come to the third division of cultivating respect, acting according to his words.

(24)

(Disciples) having great sense should obey the words of their guru joyfully and with enthusiasm. If you lack the knowledge or ability (to do what he says), explain in (polite) words why you cannot (comply).

This verse says that highly intelligent disciples should listen to the words, or orders, of their guru with great pleasure, or bliss; they should hear whatever he has to say with much enthusiasm and perseverance. Whenever your guru speaks, listen with pleasure. If you can do what he asks, if you can act in accordance with his words, you should accept, but if it's too hard, then explain your difficulty politely. Don't ignore what he's asking, but tell him intelligently why you can't do it.

If your guru tells you to do something that you feel goes against your three types of morality, you can avoid doing it, but explain intelligently and unemotionally why.

One of the *Jataka Tales* is about a previous life of Guru Shakyamuni when he was born as a Brahmin disciple. The Brahmin teacher told his disciples to go out and steal for him. His logic was that since the universe was made by Brahma, if, as sons of Brahma, Brahmins take things, it's no more stealing than if a son takes things belonging to his father—since they are his own possessions, he's not stealing. However, the disciple who was the previous life of Buddha didn't go. His teacher said, "You don't seem to like me." Guru Shakyamuni replied, "Theft is at no time religious," and

intelligently explained many ways in which stealing wasn't good. Later he became one of this guru's best disciples. Intelligence is always stressed as one of the very best qualities a disciple can have.

The fine print at the beginning of the *Guru Puja* says that at all times we should look for our guru's qualities, not his faults or shortcomings. By seeing his qualities we will achieve all powerful attainments; by seeing his faults, we won't.

Lama Tsong Khapa said, "The practice of disciples who pretend to listen to teachings and meditate without cultivating pure guru devotion is merely an echo; it's nothing. It has no potential to yield any result."

Also, in his *Abhisamayalankara* commentary, Gyältsab Rinpoche said, "Listening to teachings without cultivating proper guru devotion is like turning medicine into poison; it has no potential to bring a good result."

All this shows that if we cultivate pure guru devotion, we're sure to attain realizations, as illustrated by a story of three of Atisha's disciples—Dromtönpa, his translator and secretary; Amé Jangchub Rinchen, his cook; and Gönpa Wangchug Gyełtsen (the Great Neljorpa, or Mahayogi), who spent all his time in meditation—Atisha was always going to give him teachings and he remained in seclusion. So Mahayogi thought, "I spend all my time in meditation whereas the others don't meditate at all. I must have higher realizations." Atisha was aware of this, so called them all together and examined them. He found that of the three, Dromtönpa had the highest realizations, Amé Jangchub Rinchen the second highest, and Mahayogi the least. This example emphasizes the importance of guru devotion.

Question: So, we don't always have to do what our guru tells us?

Gen Rinpoche: Ashvagosha says that we should always try to act in accordance with the words of our guru but are exempt if what we are asked to do is very heavy. In that case we can explain politely why we can't do it. If your guru asks you to do something against the three types of morality—for example, say he asks you to kill a human being—you can decline. Angulimala's guru told him he could attain liberation by killing a thousand human beings in a week and wearing their fingers as a garland. So, you don't need to doubt—these exceptions are mentioned in the *Lam-rim Chen-mo* and the *Jatakamala*, and the source of this advice is Vajradhara.

(25)

It is from your guru that powerful attainments, higher rebirth and happiness come.
Therefore make a whole-hearted effort never to transgress your guru's advice.

This verse tells us why we should follow our guru's orders—we have to act according to his words because all powerful attainments, both common and supreme, are accomplished only by relying on him. Through proper reliance on our guru we will achieve the prosperity of human beings and gods.

Once again, this statement comes from one of the tantras, the *Hevajra Tantra*. That text clearly states that if you abide by the words of your guru you will achieve all powerful attainments and even in this life receive all happiness. However, going against what he says will only lead you to the lower realms, which is why Lama Tsong Khapa says that going against your guru's words or disrespecting him is an extremely grave negativity.

According to tantra, the speech of the buddha is the sambhogakaya, so one word of the guru is the equivalent of one sambhogakaya. That's why it's extremely negative to transgress the guru's words.

How to treat the guru's belongings and retainers

(d) Looking after your guru's materials and entourage

(26)

(Guard) your guru's belongings as you would your own life. Treat even your guru's beloved (family) with the same (respect you show) for him. (Have affectionate regard for) those closely around him as if they were your own dearest kin. Single-mindedly think (in this way) at all times.

You should look after your guru's possessions properly—you should cherish them as much as you do your own life. Before Dromtönpa met Atisha, he was studying with another guru. By night he would tend his guru's cattle; by day he would spin yarn with his hands, soften leather with his feet and, as his lama had a wife and many children, always carry his guru's children on his back. When he met Atisha and told him about his previous realizations and merit, Atisha said, "Your greatest merit was created when you were serving that lama."

Therefore we, too, should respect and serve those closest to our guru—his family members, his foremost servants and helpers and so forth—learning from the lives of the great practitioners like Jetsun Milarepa and Dromtönpa.

When Gyälwa Dromtönpa was serving his guru in Kham, he used to lie in the mud so that his guru's wife could sit on his back while she was milking the cows. Milarepa did the same thing; he had Marpa's wife, Dagmema, sit on him while she milked the cows.

You should also treat your guru's servants and so forth in the same way that you treat your beloved relatives. "Single-mindedly think (in this way) at all times" means that you must constantly keep this idea in mind so that it becomes very clear.

From the above you can now understand what Geshe Tölungpa meant when he said, "I get greater merit by giving food to my guru Loba's dog than by inviting all the monks of Western Tibet and offering them a feast." [He was called Tölungpa because he lived in Tölung; his ordination name was Rinchen Nyingpo. Similarly, Loba means a person from Lo; he was referring to Kadampa Geshe Chengawa.]

This is not a fabrication. The *Guhyasamaja Root Tantra* clearly states that it is much more meritorious to make offerings to one pore of your vajra guru than to the buddhas of the three times. As your guru is the representative of all buddhas, this merit far exceeds all others.

If you make very clear, unmisplaced notes during these discourses and keep them properly, they will form a commentary to the *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*. This commentary is very rare; the most famous is Lama Tsong Khapa's. So if you preserve your notes, you'll have a second commentary.

Purifying present behavior

(e) Purifying temporal behavior

This fifth section of cultivating respect for your guru has three subsections: (i) a voiding bad behavior; (ii) cultivating good behavior; (iii) avoiding other bad behavior in general.

(i) Avoiding bad behavior has two parts: what to avoid in his field of vision and what to avoid in his range of hearing.

Stopping incorrect behavior

Advice about what to do when in the guru's field of sight

(27)

Never sit on the (same) bed or seat (as your guru), nor walk ahead of him. (At teachings do not) wear your hair in a top-knot, (a hat, shoes or any weapons. Never) touch a seat (before he sits down or if he happens to sit on the ground. Do not) place your hands (proudly) on your hips or wring them (before him).

When he is standing you shouldn't sit on a cushion or a mattress. If your guru is sitting on the bare ground you shouldn't sit on a cushion. When traveling or walking on a road together you shouldn't walk in front of him; he should go first. All these points have their source in the *Ornament of the Vajra Essence Tantra*.

Similarly, you shouldn't wear your hair in a topknot or in a plait tied around your forehead while in the presence of your guru. If there is a long mattress on which you are going to sit together, you shouldn't step over it before your guru sits down; if you do, it's a downfall and you create negative karma. Also, you shouldn't sit with your hands on your hips or wring your hands in his presence.

(28)

Never sit or recline while your guru is standing (or lie while he is sitting). Always be ready to stand up and serve him skillfully in an excellent manner.

While your lama is standing, don't sit or lie down. This is not made up but comes from what was said by Vajradhara himself. You should always be very quick to do whatever you can do for your guru. Don't be lazy or lethargic but very active in performing such tasks.

(29)

In the presence of your guru never do such things as spit, (cough or sneeze without covering your head. Never) stretch out your legs when at your seat, nor walk back and forth (without a reason before him. And never) argue.

You shouldn't spit, expel snot or blow your nose in front of your guru. Nor should you stretch your legs out when sitting before him. Similarly, in his presence, don't stroll about here and there in an arrogant manner, as if out for your morning walk, or quarrel or argue with others.

(30a)

Never massage or rub your limbs. Do not sing, dance or play musical instruments (other than for religious purposes).

As it says here, you shouldn't rub your limbs or your feet in front of your guru, just as you shouldn't wring your hands. Don't sing or dance in front of him or play musical instruments, unless it's during a religious ceremony. These are some of the things that you should not do within your guru's field of vision.

Advice about what to do when in the guru's range of hearing

(30b)

And never chatter idly or speak in excess (or too loudly) within range of (your guru's) hearing.

The rest of this verse says that you shouldn't gossip within earshot of your guru, where he can hear your frivolous talk and chatter.

These admonitions to curb such wrong behavior and bad habits within your guru's sense perception come from the *Ornament of the Vajra Essence Tantra* and the *Vajramala Guhyasamaja Explanation Tantra*.

Resorting to good behavior

(ii) Cultivating good behavior

(31)

(When your guru enters the room), get up from your seat and bow your head slightly. Sit (in his presence) respectfully. At night or at rivers or on dangerous paths, with (your guru's) permission you may walk before him.

If you are sitting, stand up when your guru comes into view. When you sit, do so very demurely and not in a slovenly way that reflects your untamed mind. If an apple tree is well laden, all its branches hang down; similarly, if your mind is well tamed, your behavior is very subdued. Try to be on your best behavior in front of your guru and not reveal your unsubdued nature.

Verse 27 said that you should not walk ahead of your guru, but this verse offers an exception. If you are traveling in a dangerous place you can go first; under such circumstances, it's not right for your guru to go ahead. For the same reason you can also walk in front of him at night. Similarly, when crossing a river by foot, you should go first to check the depth or for danger. This advice also comes from the *Ornament of the Vajra Essence Tantra*.

When checking the validity of such teachings, you should be able to trace them back to Vajradhara. If you can do so, there's no need to look for any other source, just as when you trace a river back to its source, you can't find any other origin for it.

Teaching another way to stop incorrect behavior

(iii) Avoiding other bad behavior in general

(32)

In the direct sight of the guru, (a disciple) with sense should not (sit) with his or her body twisted around or lean (casually) against a pillar and so forth. Never crack your knuckles, (play with your fingers or clean your nails).

When in front of their guru, intelligent disciples endowed with discretion sit correctly, not in a slovenly or arrogant fashion. Nor should they lean on pillars or walls for support.

Furthermore, don't crack your knuckles etc. The sublime being who said this was Ashvagosha, who cited Vajradhara in the *Ornament of the Vajra Essence Tantra* in support of this statement.

Special physical and verbal acts of devotion

Special physical acts of devotion

(f) Offering body, speech and mind

(33)

When washing (your guru's) feet or body, drying, massaging or (shaving) him, precede such actions with (three) prostrations and at their conclusion do the same. Then attend (to yourself) as much as you like.

Before you wash your guru's feet, bathe his body or cut his hair, offer three prostrations. When you have finished, offer three more. After that, you can attend to your own needs.

Special verbal acts of devotion

(34)

Should you need to address (your guru) by name, add the title "Your Presence" after it. To generate respect for him in others, further honorifics may also be used.

Next comes the offering of speech. Whenever you utter your guru's name, don't leave it naked. For example, when you quote him, say, "I heard it from his great, holy speech."

Pabongka Rinpoche said that we use our guru's bare name too casually, without praise or honorific, but that he felt very uncomfortable whenever he heard his own guru's name spoken like that. That's why when we quote our lama we should say something like, "I heard it from his radiant, holy mouth."

In the commentary, Lama Tsong Khapa says, "For example, if the guru's name is Rinchen Dorje, you should say, 'My precious lord Rinchen Dorje spoke of this and said....' By this, having caught the attention of others, they become reverent to the guru."

Similarly, in his commentary on the *Vinaya Sutra*, Acharya Gunaprabha said that whenever you take the name of the preceptor who bestowed vows upon you, you should say, "From his great radiant mouth...."

Therefore we should act in accordance with the following short story. Once Lama Tsong Khapa was giving a teaching just above the site where Sera Monastery was later built, when Khädrub Rinpoche came to meet him for the first time. He asked a nun living there where the venerable Tsong Khapa could be found. She didn't answer immediately but went inside, washed her mouth, lit some incense and replied, "I don't know anything about the name you just said, but if you mean my Venerable Gracious Guru, His Presence Je Tsong Khapa resides over there." Khädrub-je was very impressed by this nun's subdued behavior and said that this is how those who really abide by the vinaya should act.

Thus, when mentioning your guru's name in front of others, in order to arouse respect in them for your guru, add honorifics before and after his name.

g) Abandoning pride

Now the seventh division of cultivating respect for your guru, the elimination of arrogance in front of him. This has three subsections: (i) a bandoning arrogance when taking orders from your guru; (ii) abandoning arrogance when listening to discourses and so forth; and (iii) eliminating arrogance in all actions.

Abandoning pride through following commands

i) Abandoning arrogance when taking orders from your guru

(35)

When asking for your guru's advice, (first announce why you have come). With palms pressed together at your heart, listen to what he tells you without (letting your mind) wander about. Then (when he has spoken) you should reply, "I shall do exactly as you have said."

First check the sincerity of your wish to work for your guru and your ability to do so. Go to him with folded hands and ask reverently, "Can I be of any help to you?" When he does ask you to do something, listen to what he says without arrogance and with folded hands. When he has finished speaking, say, "I will do as you have said."

(36)

After doing (what your guru has told you), report (what has happened) in polite, gentle words. Should you yawn or cough, (clear your throat or laugh in his presence), cover your mouth with your hand.

Whenever you smile or laugh in front of your guru, cover your mouth with your handkerchief or hand. If you have to spit, you should take your handkerchief out slowly.

When you have finished doing the work he asked you to do, with reverence, fold your hands and tell him, "I have finished that work." This, too, has as its source the *Ornament of the Vajra Essence Tantra*.

Abandoning pride through listening to religious teaching

ii) Abandoning arrogance when listening to discourses and so forth

(37)

If you wish to receive a certain teaching, request three times with your palms pressed together while kneeling before him with your (right) knee. (Then at his discourse) sit humbly with respect, wearing appropriate clothing that is neat (and clean, without ornaments, jewelry or cosmetics).

When listening to teachings you should pay attention mindfully, dress properly, sit in a very subdued, well-composed way and keep your behavior in check. When asking for a special teaching, kneel on your right knee and, with folded hands, make the request three times.

All the great, sublime beings attained realizations by cultivating perfect guru devotion; since we, too, want to attain realizations, we should also know these things.

Just as the great sublime beings of the past—Milarepa, Dromtönpa, Khädrub Rinpoche, Geshe Chengawa and so many others—cultivated proper guru devotion, served their gurus all their life and attained high realizations, so should we emulate these great beings and cultivate proper guru devotion as explained by Vajradhara.

In the *Lam-rim Chen-mo*, Je Rinpoche explained how to practice guru yoga. First we prove to ourselves that the guru is buddha through logical reasoning and various quotations, thus becoming fully convinced that our guru is, indeed, buddha. Then, seeing that our guru is buddha but in the aspect of the deity we practice, our guru yoga practice will be effective. If we try to practice without this recognition, we won't achieve anything.

So, since we all cherish ourselves and none of us wishes the slightest of sufferings, we should really try to do the right thing. And as we do have high regard for Milarepa, we should try to emulate him and the way he cultivated guru devotion. Milarepa cultivated proper guru devotion with Marpa, and Marpa with his gurus, especially Naropa, and Naropa with Tilopa, and Dromtönpa with Atisha. To really appreciate all this, we should read the scriptures that explain about guru devotion. Then when we practice meditation in the context of proper guru devotion, interdependently, our realizations will increase like a waxing moon.

Ra Lotsawa said, "During the final decline of the doctrine, although there'll be many practitioners, few will actualize the end because they'll lack the necessary skills. Only those who cultivate the perfect guru, deity and Dharma protector will be able to actualize."

Therefore, when we request teachings from our guru we should approach him in a composed manner, kneel on our right knee, fold our hands and request three times. Also, in his presence, we should wear proper, clean clothing and not wear jewelry or try to make ourselves beautiful.

Abandoning pride through one's general behavior

(38)

Whatever you do to serve (your guru) or show him respect should never be done with an arrogant mind. Instead you should be like a newly-wed bride, timid, bashful and very subdued.

However properly we have revered our guru and made offerings, it should not be sullied by arrogance. In his presence we should try to maintain subdued behavior all the time, without arrogance. We should act with decency and not always be looking around here and there. The text says we should act like a newlywed bride, who shyly bows her head and acts very quietly.

(39)

In the presence of (the guru) who teaches you (the path), stop acting in a conceited, coquettish manner. As for boasting to others what you have done (for your guru), examine (your conscience) and discard all such acts.

You should check with your own intelligence and try to avoid doing acting in these ways. Also, when walking with your guru, if you walk right behind him you run the risk of stepping on his shadow, which is very bad. Also, if you walk alongside him you might walk too fast and get ahead. Therefore, walk to his side, just behind him, in a very skillful way.

Not independently involving oneself in work

h) Not acting according to your own wishes

This is the eighth and final section of cultivating respect for the guru. There are four things here that we should not do by ourselves but instead get our guru's consent:(i) when working for the benefit of others—for example, when you are going to give an initiation or teaching—get your guru's consent; (ii) offer back to your guru any offerings that you receive from that action; (iii) avoid taking offerings or receiving others' respect, such as prostrations or hand blessings, in front of your guru—from your point of view as guru, you must avoid such things but from your disciples' point of view, they should do it; and (iv) showing special physical respect.

Receiving permission when involving oneself in altruistic activity

(40)

If you are (requested) to perform a consecration, (an initiation into) a mandala or a fire offering ceremony or to gather disciples and deliver a discourse, you may not do so if your guru resides in that area, unless you receive his prior permission.

If your guru is in that locality, you should not do consecrations or fire pujas for others or give initiations and so forth without his prior consent.

Delivering up what has been obtained from the involvement

(41)

Whatever offerings you receive from performing such rites as (the consecration known as) "opening the eyes," you should present all these to your guru. Once he has taken a token portion, you may use the rest for whatever you like.

You should give your guru whatever offerings you receive from doing consecrations, giving initiations and so forth. He'll take a small portion and give you the rest, which you can then use for whatever you want.

In contemporary Tibet there was no greater lama than Pabongka Rinpoche. He received all the Nyingma teachings Öser Tretog Dorje. The lineage of whatever teachings we hear today from the two tutors [Kyabje Ling Rinpoche and Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche] comes from Pabongka Rinpoche. He is like both father and monarch. There's no lama or aristocrat who hasn't cultivated him as his or her guru. When people talk about Lama Dorje Chang, they're referring to Pabongka Rinpoche.

Not accepting devotion from others in the guru's presence

(42)

In the presence of his guru a disciple should not act (as a guru) to his own disciples and they should not act towards him as their guru. Therefore (before your own guru) stop (your disciples) from showing you respect, such as rising (when you come) and making prostrations.

Avoid receiving offerings in front of your guru. You shouldn't make disciples of your guru's disciples or give them an initiation without his consent. If, in your guru's presence, your disciples stand up for you, offer you prostrations or come to take hand blessings, try to stop them and make them sit down.

Physical behavior that is a way of demonstrating immense respect

(43)

Whenever you make an offering to your guru or whenever your guru presents you with something, a disciple with sense will (present and) receive this using both hands with his or her head slightly bent.

Showing special physical respect means that whatever you offer to or accept from your guru should be done with both hands, not one. This is the type of behavior that a perfect disciple should cultivate. In an assembly of disciples, offering a *khatag*with one hand is proof that you haven't heard the *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*.

Discussion

(44)

Be diligent in all your actions, (alert and) mindful never to forget (your word of honor). If fellow disciples transgress (what is proper) in their behavior, correct each other in a friendly manner.

You should keep your vows and words of honor without any transgression, being mindful and alert all the time, and try to abide by the codes of conduct prescribed by Vajradhara.

If out of ignorance a vajra brother or sister—a disciple with whom you have taken the same initiation, together or apart—breaks a vow or breaches his or her words of honor, then, with compassion and a feeling of love and fondness, you should try to make that person avoid that wrong action. You should regard your vajra brothers and sisters as more dear and sacred than your own relatives.

An exception

(45)

If because of sickness you are physically (unable) to bow to your guru and must do what normally would be prohibited, even without (his explicit) permission, there will be no unfortunate consequences if you have a virtuous mind.

If we ask if we have to cultivate the behaviors taught in the *Fifty Verses* at all times, if there's any time we don't have to do them, there are certain exceptions. However, belittling the guru and disturbing his mind are not among them. At no time can we do these actions.

There are certain exemptions for the sick disciple who is too weak to get up but whose mind is virtuous: it's not required to stand or prostrate or to ask the guru's permission not to do these things. The reverence of standing or prostrating can be done mentally.

Summary of the way to be devoted

(46)

What need is there to say much more? Do whatever pleases your guru and avoid doing anything he would not like. Be diligent in both of these.

To summarize, we should try to do things that makes our guru happy and pleased with us and avoid doing things that make our guru unhappy and displeased with us.

(47)

“Powerful attainments follow from (doing what) your guru (likes).” This has been said by (the Buddha) Vajradhara himself. Knowing this, try to please your guru fully with all the actions (of your body, speech and mind).

Why is guru devotion stressed from the very beginning? Because all common and extraordinary powerful attainments follow your cultivation of a proper guru, that is, by making your guru pleased. This was said by Vajradhara. By knowing this fact, then by all means—that is, by body, speech and mind—cultivate pure guru devotion and make your guru pleased with you.

Time for explaining how to be devoted

(48)

After disciples have taken refuge in the Triple Gem and developed a pure enlightened motive, they should be given this (text) to take to heart (how to abandon their own arrogant self-will and) follow in their guru's footsteps (along the graded path to enlightenment).

If perfect disciples—those with pure mind and intention—having taken refuge then follow their guru correctly, he will lead them to enlightenment. This *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* has been written in the form of a prayer so that we can recite it again and again and thus know what to cultivate and what to eliminate in order to correctly follow our guru.

How to be a suitable receptacle after the explanation has been given

(49)

(By studying the prerequisite trainings of guru-devotion and the graded path common to both sutra and tantra,) you will become a (suitable) vessel (to hold) the pure Dharma. You may then be given such teachings as tantra. (After receiving the proper initiations,) recite out loud the fourteen root vows and take them sincerely to heart.

As it says in verse 48, this text has been written especially for disciples distinguished by the two good qualities of having taken refuge and the vows of wishing and engaging bodhicitta and who really abide by the commitments of both these practices of refuge and bodhicitta.

After that, disciples who have studied the lam-rim and the *Fifty Verses* and acted accordingly become disciples ripened for tantric practice. Therefore, they should obtain initiations, study the stages and paths of tantra, know the fourteen major tantric downfalls perfectly, remain aware of them by memorizing them and ask their guru for teachings on them.

In short, we should cultivate the sort of behavior that makes our guru pleased and happy and avoid that which makes him displeased and unhappy.

Lama Tsong Khapa said that the practice of guru yoga is regarding the guru as buddha and seeing the deity as the guru in the form of the deity. That's the actual practice of guru yoga; if we practice it in that way it will be effective.

The only way we can achieve all the major and minor good qualities is to depend on our guru and regard him as buddha. Lama Tsong Khapa said that if we don't respect our guru, then no matter how much we declare that we are listening to teachings, meditating and so forth, we won't get anything worthwhile from whatever we do.

One of the root tantras says, "I make obeisance to my gurus, who are the quintessence of all the buddhas, Vajradhara in nature—Vajradhara in the form of an ordinary being—and the root of all three objects of refuge."

Similarly, from the same text comes the prayer we often say:

The guru is Buddha, the guru is Dharma,
The guru is the quintessence of all Sangha, too.
The guru is the creator of all happiness.
To all gurus, I prostrate (or, go for refuge, or, make offerings).

At present, what we want is enlightenment, the state that has all good qualities and not a trace of fault, shortcoming or disadvantage. To accomplish this, we have to follow the guidance of a proper guru, and even if Buddha Vajradhara were to manifest in front of us right now, he wouldn't say anything different from what our guru has told us.

The *Hevajra Root Tantra* says that no matter how hard we try to find the great bliss of enlightenment, we won't be able to find it unless we follow the guidance of the right guru.

All these quotations come from the tantras; I'm not making anything up.

But it's not only in the tantras that we find many quotations that prove that the guru is buddha. The Buddha said that this is so in the sutras as well. For example, just before he entered parinirvana, Lord Buddha went to a mountaintop in south India, where he met a bodhisattva called Tongwa Dönden, who was crying and saying, "We are so lucky that the Buddha manifested on Earth, but

after your parinirvana we'll have no Buddha." Lord Buddha said, "Don't worry. After that I'll manifest as gurus and abbots and at those times you should be smart enough to recognize me as such."

So these are not fabrications but authentic sayings of the Buddha.

Thus, as verse 49 implies, we should memorize the fourteen major downfalls of tantra and imprint them in our mind so that we don't forget them. If you can't abstain from breaking these root vows, taking initiations becomes like purposely creating the cause to be reborn in hell. Lamas are not supposed to give initiations or tantric teachings to disciples who can't keep these vows.

Vajradhara himself said, "You can't keep lion's milk in an earthen pot—the milk will sour and the pot will fall apart; both will be ruined. Similarly, Highest Yoga Tantra teachings should not be given to immature disciples lest they be reborn in miserable circumstances."

If you listen to the *Fifty Verses* attentively, you'll make yourself a mature disciple for tantra if you're not one already, and you'll recognize the importance of knowing the fourteen major downfalls and protecting yourself from them.

3. Bringing the explanation to a conclusion

(50)

As I have not made the mistake (of adding my personal interpretation) when writing this work, may this be of infinite benefit to all disciples who would follow their guru. By the limitless merit that I have gathered in this way, may all sentient beings quickly attain the state of Buddha.

Lama Tsong Khapa's concluding remarks

Verses of dedication

This is the conclusion of the text. The great Ashvagosha said that he wrote this commentary with the intention of benefiting all mature disciples and dedicated the merit of doing so to the quick enlightenment of all sentient beings.

This shows he is a great bodhisattva—he dedicates the virtuous actions he creates to the welfare of all sentient beings. Actually, concluding by dedicating the merit of giving a commentary or doing other virtuous actions to the welfare of all sentient beings is a unique feature of the Buddhist doctrine; an exclusive feature not found in non-Buddhist texts.

In a text called *Praise to You, the Outstanding* [*Khye-par-phag-tö*], the author writes, "In your doctrine, whatever merit you create you dedicate to the welfare of sentient beings. Such is not found in outsiders' teachings. Therefore, I regard it as one of the best features of your doctrine."

It would be good for you to study this text on the distinctions between the Buddha and other teachers to strengthen your faith in the Buddhadharma.

Colophon

This *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion* was rendered into Tibetan by the great translator Rinchen Zangpo and the great Indian Pandit, Padmakaravarma.

There's no Indian commentary but, as mentioned before, the great Tsong Khapa wrote an elaborate one, *The Fulfillment of All Hopes*, which he did at the request of two great Kagyu lamas. He also wrote a commentary on the Six Yogas of Naropa at the request of Kagyu lamas and a very elaborate commentary on *dzog-chen* at the request of the great Nyingma lama, Tashi Palden.

Lama Tsong Khapa wrote his *Fifty Verses* commentary at Reting, where he also wrote the *Lamrim Chen-mo*.

I received the transmission and teaching on the *Fifty Verses* from Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang, who received it from Kyabje Pabongka, who received it from his root guru, and its direct lineage goes all the way back to Vajradhara.

If you want to have insights and realizations, guru devotion is essential. If you listen to teachings just for knowledge, guru devotion is not necessary, but it's the gateway for practice and achievement.

During the meditation session, meditate on guru devotion. In between sessions read texts such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, which describes Sadaprarudita's cultivation of Dharmodgata, or the *Flower Ornament Sutra* [Skt: *Avatamsaka Sutra*], which describes the Youth Sudhana's cultivation of many gurus including Manjushri and Maitreya and his subsequent attainment of enlightenment.

You should also read other inspiring examples of the practice of guru devotion, such as Naropa's with Tilopa, Marpa's with Naropa and Maitripa, Milarepa's with Marpa Lotsawa, Dromtönpa's with Atisha, Geshe Chakawa's with Geshe Chengawa, Khädrub Rinpoche's with Lama Tsong Khapa and Sakya Pandita's with Dragpa Gyaltsen, which I detailed before. And, of course, there's the original example of guru devotion in Ananda's relationship with Guru Shakyamuni Buddha.

The insights they received through cultivating guru devotion is all in print and their names are still renowned. You should develop the attitude: "As those great beings cultivated guru devotion and received realizations, may I emulate their achievements in this practice."

And to think of a more contemporary example, there's the way Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang cultivated his root guru Kyabje Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo, and also his teacher when he was younger, Geshe Losang Tsultim, which is described in his autobiography.

Colophon to this commentary

The root text was composed by Ashvagosha in the first century BCE, translated into English by Sharpa Tulkus, Khamlung Tulkus, Alexander Berzin and Jonathan Landaw, and published by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in 1975. Gen Rinpoche Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey gave this commentary at the LTWA in Dharamsala July–August 1976. It was translated by Losang Gyaltsen and edited by Nicholas Ribush from his notes of the class.

OUTLINE OF LAMA TSONG KHAPA'S *FIFTY VERSES COMMENTARY*

1. Introduction to the explanation

- 1.1. Homage (v. 1a)
- 1.2. Commitment to the undertaking (v. 1b)

2. Presentation of the explanation

- 2.1. The way to be devoted to a guru
 - 2.1.1. How to be devoted in general
 - 2.1.1.1. Actual subject matter
 - 2.1.1.1.1. BRIEF EXPLANATION
 - 2.1.1.1.1.1. Correctness of being reverent toward a guru (v. 2)
 - 2.1.1.1.1.2. How one goes about being reverent
 - 2.1.1.1.1.2.1. General teaching on how to be devoted (v. 3)
 - 2.1.1.1.1.2.2. An exception (v. 4, 5)
 - 2.1.1.1.2.1. THE REASON A MUTUAL INVESTIGATION IS NECESSARY (V. 6)
 - 2.1.1.1.2.2. The guru who is to be relied upon or avoided
 - 2.1.1.1.2.2.1. The character of one to be avoided (v. 7)
 - 2.1.1.1.2.2.2. The character of one to be devoted to (v. 8, 9)
 - 2.1.1.1.3. EXTENSIVE EXPLANATION OF HOW TO BE DEVOTED TO A GURU
 - 2.1.1.1.3.1. Giving up irreverence
 - 2.1.1.1.3.1.1. Giving up despising and disparaging
 - 2.1.1.1.3.1.1.1. General teaching (v. 10)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.1.1.2. Specific explanation (v. 11, 12)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.1.2. Refraining from seriously upsetting one's guru (v. 13)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.1.3. Explanation of the unobserved bad consequence (v. 14)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.1.4. Summary (v. 15)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2. How to go about being reverent
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.1. Giving presents
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.1.1. Giving presents in order to stop irreverence (v. 16)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.1.2. The way one gives absolutely everything one has (v. 17)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.1.3. The correctness of such offering (v. 18)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.1.4. The way one protects one's three words of honor (v. 19, 20, 21)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2. Looking on the guru as an enlightened one
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.1. The actual topic (v. 22)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.2. Stopping irreverence even to his shadow (v. 23)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.3. Doing what the guru says (v. 24, 25)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.4. How to treat the guru's belongings and retainers (v. 26)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.5. Purifying present behavior
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.5.1. Advice about what to do when in the guru's field of sight (v., 27, 28, 29, 30a)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.5.1.2. Advice about what to do when in the guru's range of hearing (v. 30b)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.5.2. Resorting to correct behavior (v. 31)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.5.3. Teaching another way to stop incorrect behavior (v. 32)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.6. Special physical and verbal acts of devotion
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.6.1. Special physical acts of devotion (v. 33)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.6.2. Special verbal acts of devotion (v. 34)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.7. Abandoning pride through following commands (v. 35, 36)
 - 2.1.1.1.3.2.2.7.2. Abandoning pride through listening to religious teaching (v. 37)

- 2.1.1.3.2.7.3. Abandoning pride through one's general behavior (v. 38, 39)
- 2.1.1.3.2.8. Not independently involving oneself in work
- 2.1.1.3.2.8.1. Receiving permission when involving oneself in altruistic activity (v. 40)
- 2.1.1.3.2.8.2. Delivering up what has been obtained from the involvement (v. 41)
- 2.1.1.3.2.8.3. Not accepting devotion from others in the guru's presence (v. 42)
- 2.1.1.3.2.8.4. Physical behavior that is a way of demonstrating immense respect (v. 43)
- 2.1.1.2. Discussion (v. 44)
- 2.1.2. An exception (v. 45)
- 2.1.3. Summary of the way to be devoted (v. 46, 47)
- 2.2. Time for explaining how to be devoted (v. 48)
- 2.3. How to be a suitable receptacle after the explanation has been given (v. 49)
- 3. Bringing the explanation to a conclusion (v. 50)**
- 3.1. Lama Tsong Khapa's concluding remarks
- 3.1.1. Verses of dedication
- 3.1.2. Colophon

This outline comes from Lama Tsong Khapa's *The Fulfillment of All Hopes*, translated by Gareth Sparham. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999.

¹ five near immediate negativities (Skt: *anantaryasabhagah*; Tib: *nye-wa'i-tsam-med*) The five actions that are similar to the five immediate negativities in that they cause rebirth in hell, but not necessarily in the immediately following life. They are (1) sexually violating one's mother who is also an *arhati*; (2) killing a *bodhisattva* who is destined to be a *buddha*; (3) killing an *arya* who has not yet reached the *arhat* stage; (4) Stealing the property of the *Sangha*; and (5) destroying a *stupa*.