

CULTIVATING FAITH

by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

24 August 2001, Canada
edited June 2008

"Dharma talk" 02 January 2010
11th Sakyadhita Conference, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

The subject of this evening's talk is on Cultivating Faith and Devotion. I didn't choose this title and I was actually rather stunned when I saw it. Being by nature very sceptical, I'm not sure if I'm the right person to start talking about faith and devotion and how to cultivate them. However, we will do our best here.

The Lord Buddha himself actually put faith at the forefront of the five powers needed in order to attain Buddhahood. He described faith as leaping forward. He talked about a river without a bridge over it. People who were on one side of this river wanted to proceed to the other side but they held back thinking, "No, the river is too wide, it's too deep, it's flowing too fast, we can't make it." So they hesitated. And then one man who had more courage said, "We can do it. I believe that it's possible to cross." He then crossed the river with that sense of determination and faith. And because he got across, others were encouraged to cross too. In other words, it's a kind of confidence. It's not blind faith or a belief in something just because one is credulous.

In Buddhism, faith means a kind of inner confidence in something that is worthy of our trust. For example, we have faith in the Dharma, but that doesn't mean that we have to blindly swallow everything we read. Just because it's written in the holy books or if a Lama says it, doesn't mean we have to believe it. In the Buddhadharma, that kind of credulous, unquestioning, naïve belief is not necessarily considered to be a virtue at all. The quality of questioning in an intelligent manner and really investigating and seeing for ourselves whether something is worthy of our belief or not, is very much encouraged. It's not only in the Dharma where we are encouraged to question, but also in the whole attitude about teachers.

Sometimes I would go to my Lama, Khamtrul Rinpoche, and show him a passage I just could not swallow. He would laugh and say, "Oh, come on! You don't have to believe everything that's written in the books or said in the Sutras -- it may not be true." At one time he said that a lot of what was written in the books and in the Sutras was a result of the particular cultural accretions and superstitions of that time. It's not eternal truth. It's just what they happened to believe at that time, and the Buddha couldn't be bothered to negate it because it wasn't very important.

For example, some westerners grapple desperately with the whole question of Mount Sumeru and the Four Continents in order to keep complete and unquestioning faith in their Lama's teachings. I once gave a talk to our little monks about the Sun and the

Moon. I had an apple and an orange and was explaining the sun is here and the moon is there, and here's the earth and the moon goes round the earth, and they both go round the sun and so forth. There was an old monk at the back of the room who said, "Where is Mt Sumeru and the Four Continents? Because the earth is flat on the back of a turtle." I said, "Well, as far as we can tell, there is no Mt Sumeru and the Four Continents. The earth is not flat, it's round." The old monk just nodded and said something like "Oh well." Maybe in medieval Europe I would have been burnt at the stake for less. But in the world of delusory appearances, flat or round -- who cares?

We're talking about not having to swallow everything we're told. Being Incredulous is actually not a virtue. We have to bring our intelligence to everything. In the Buddhadharma, there are three aspects. First, we hear or study the Dharma. We read about it, we hear about it, and then we think about it. We really think about what we've read or heard; we turn it over in our mind. And if there are any doubts, we go and ask about them. When our doubts are settled, then we go away to contemplate it until we become that teaching.

But we don't just bite off the Dharma and swallow it as an undigested lump. We really have to chew it well until we can swallow it and become nourished, instead of it sitting like a heavy ball in our stomach.

One of the beautiful things about the Buddhadharma is its essential truth. As soon as we hear it, we think, "Oh yes, right!" We recognize the truth of issues like impermanence, the unsatisfactory nature of general existence, the fact that our clinging to an ego is what is causing our problems in the first place. The fact that these negative qualities of mind, like our delusion, our greed and clinging, our aggression and anger, our pride and our jealousy and envy afflict the mind and create great pain in our mind.

That isn't a belief, it's not a matter of faith. That's a matter of just looking at the situation and thinking, "Yes, that's right!" Whenever our mind is unhappy, if we really look into it, the problem is always these very poisonous emotions in our mind. Our depression is mostly caused by the aggression in the mind. Even if that aggression is turned toward ourselves as it very often is, it's usually based on this root of hatred.

I'm not going into a talk on the fundamentals of the Buddhadharma, but when one looks into them there's something inside us which quickly realizes, "Yes, that's how it is". So we have a sense of confidence, because we think, "If these very basic teachings are so clear and so true, then maybe there are more advanced teachings which my deluded mind cannot yet completely comprehend at the moment." Then if we don't understand them, instead of saying, "No, this is all wrong because I don't understand it and it doesn't agree with my preconceptions," we can say, "Right now I don't understand this. This doesn't accord with how I see things. For now, I'll put it to one side and later when I have studied and practiced and experienced more, I'll go back and look at it again." Do you understand?

So we're not heretics if we don't have blind faith and a belief in dogmas. It's not like that. Every step of the way, we have to know where we are putting our foot down. We

have to understand what it means, we have to question, we have to really investigate and use our intelligence.

In the traditional form of studying philosophy in Tibet, every part of the text is debated. You must have seen those pictures of people standing up and doing these very ritualistic debates. But what they are doing is taking each section and dissecting it while questioning the opponent, trying to trip them up. They have to defend their position with quotations from sutras and the masters, and also through logic and clear exposition of that position. In other words, we really have to understand what we believe and what we don't believe, and why we believe it or not.

This is very important. We should really think about that with everything we read, and apply it to our lives and see if it's true or not. During our day, we can look for and see examples of this. If we don't believe it, then why we don't we believe it? We can go and discuss it with someone who is more learned and more realized than ourselves, and see if they can explain it to us clearly. If they can't, then we put it aside for now. And then from time to time, we bring it back out and maybe we say, "Well, it makes more sense now, why wasn't it clear before?"

In that sense, in Buddhism, faith is not a blind faith. That's not encouraged. What is encouraged is the kind of confidence that enlightened masters really are enlightened, that they really understand and can make the whole thing very clear for us. And what we have to do is trust that when we study, analyse and look, it will all become very clear. As we practise and integrate the Dharma into our everyday life, again and again, we suddenly say, "Yes, right, that's what he meant when he said that." The whole thing suddenly comes alive and becomes real. It comes from the head down into the heart and is confirmed, "Right, that is what they meant, yes, yes."

Now, on to the other point which is much more tricky. As I go around the world, both in the West and in the East, one of the main questions asked is 'how do I find the perfect master?' I have a friend in Italy who's convinced that somewhere there is the perfect master waiting for him and that at a certain point, he's somehow going to meet Him. And this master is going to say the Word or just gaze at him in the eyes and say, "You are the one," or something like that, and then this man is going to be enlightened! Because if He can't immediately give him enlightenment, obviously He's not a perfect master. Therefore, this man does nothing. He doesn't practice. Why bother? The master will do it and therefore to practice and try to make any effort on our own side is counter-productive! We just wait until the karma is right and the master appears, and that's it.

Now, you'd be surprised, even though that's an extreme case, how many people secretly believe this. Many people have this fantasy of somehow coming across some yogi or lama sitting on a mountain-top who looks up and says, "Ah, I've been waiting for you. What took you so long?" People think that if they could only find the perfect master who's just right for them, all their problems would be solved. Sometimes I say to people, "Look, even if you meet your master, that's when your problems begin!" In fact, even if the Buddha himself was sitting in front of us right now, what could he do to our untamed and uncontrolled minds?

Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes the Lama a lot-- lama, lama, lama... There is particular emphasis on what is called the *Tsawi* Lama or the root guru. It should be understood first of all, that the teachers or lamas from whom we receive ordinations, initiations, teachings, or have any contact with, are not by any means necessarily our root guru.

There are many levels of teachers. There are teachers who bestow the precepts on us. Those are our preceptors. There are lamas who grant us initiations, and those are our initiatory masters. There are lamas who teach us philosophy and the intellectual side of the Dharma, and those are our professors. There are many kinds of lamas. There are lamas we go to for advice and help. Those are our spiritual friends, a *Kalyanamitra*.

It's actually quite rare to meet with the lama who is our root or heart guru. Traditionally, at least in the Kagyu and Nyingma Schools, the root guru is the lama who points out to us the true nature of the mind. The one who points out to us the essential naked awareness behind the conceptual coming and going of the thoughts and who reveals to us our innate Buddha nature. That is the root guru.

I was very fortunate in meeting my own lama, Khamtrul Rinpoche, on my 21st birthday. Although he passed away in 1980 at the age of forty-eight, he was very quickly reborn and is now in his twenties. He is the spiritual head of the nunnery which we have founded. In all these years he has always been my lama, and he is always still sitting in my heart.

So in that way, it could be said that I have devotion. In this I am constant, but that was because Rinpoche was for me what is called a *Tserab gyi Lama*, which means the Lama through all our lifetimes. In each lifetime, when we meet with our teacher again, there is instant recognition from both sides. That is very fortunate because then there's no need to doubt; there's an immediate acceptance. The important thing is that we have to really trust the lama, we have to trust that he understands us better than we understand ourselves. Because otherwise, how can he guide us if he doesn't know and see us more clearly than we see ourselves?

But in the general logistics of things, now that we are reborn in the West, the likelihood of actually having the good fortune to meet someone with whom we were very strongly spiritually connected in the past is maybe 50/50. For one thing, maybe the Lama has not been reborn or he was reborn but is in Tibet or somewhere else and we can't meet him, or he's been reborn but may be only two years old.

Therefore, it can be that we'll meet with teachers with whom we may not have that sense of instant acceptance and recognition, but we like them. We feel a sense of, "This is a good person." Sometimes people meet with lamas and think, "I don't know what he believes, but whatever it is, I'll go for it," because there's this sense of instant trust.

But we don't know, and this is where it gets tricky. In our culture, we are very much drawn by charisma. It is a culture of worshipping film stars and rock stars and sportsmen. Even our Presidents sometimes end up being the ones who have the most glamour, and we can get very caught up in taking this charisma for genuine inner qualities. Do you understand? Sometimes, the most charismatic teachers are not the ones who have the most genuine inner realizations. Some of the most genuinely inwardly realized beings are outwardly uncharismatic, totally unassuming and ordinary.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that according to the Tantric texts, we should examine the lama for at least three years and at most twelve years. We should examine him, or as His Holiness puts it, we should spy on the lama. Because it's not just how they appear when they are on the throne giving teachings and initiations, but also what they're like behind the scenes. How do they treat their attendants; how do they treat people who are of no particular importance to them? Not how do they treat their big sponsors, but how do they treat ordinary people? Look, watch, don't be beguiled by the glamour, don't be over impressed by their reputation, don't be seduced by the fact that they have thousands of students and big organisations. Look, ask around, not just their disciples but also other people. Investigate, because after taking a lama as our heart guru, we are putting our life on the line to that person. And as they say, if it is not a true guru, then hand-in-hand, teacher and disciple will jump over the chasm.

At a teachers' conference, one very famous western teacher asked His Holiness the Dalai Lama, "How do we deal with the issue of sitting on a high seat and giving teachings and then how we act in our everyday life as an ordinary person? How do we bridge that gap between the spiritual persona we are giving out to people and who we are behind the scenes?" His Holiness looked blank and said, "What?" So the teacher asked the question in a different way, and His Holiness glanced at the translator again in puzzlement, asking, "What?" He tried it again, rephrasing it, and then His Holiness said, "If there is any difference between who you are sitting on your throne, and who you are behind the scenes, then you should not be sitting on that throne." He explained that that does not mean we can't relax but, essentially it has to be one continuity. If we change and become a different person behind the scenes from what we are presenting as the teacher, then we should not be the teacher.

So we have to look at our teachers carefully. Are they the same, are they compassionate under all circumstances? That's a very important one. Are they always kind even to the people who are of no importance? Do they get angry? What is their reputation? Are they ethical? If the teacher is a male, what is his relationship with his female disciples? Are there male disciples? Are people who have studied with these teachers after many years, better people? What are the people around the teacher like? There was a controversial lama who lived in America whom I knew and who was a good friend of my Lama, Khamtrul Rinpoche. I asked Khamtrul Rinpoche about him because he was so very notorious. Rinpoche said, "Well, at that level, it's very difficult to know. We have to wait for twenty years and then look at his students. Not two years but twenty years. Give them time to mature, then look."

In the meantime, there are, as I said, many levels of teachers. We have gratitude to every teacher, not just lamas, but anyone who teaches us anything. Even if they are a little lacking in some aspects, still we remember and we feel gratitude for what we've learned from them. Every teacher we receive teachings from, every teacher who gives us initiations although one is very grateful to them and has them on one's Refuge Tree, but they don't have to be our heart Lama.

Two of the dalai Lama's teachers were the Regents of Tibet during His Holiness' infancy. They were quite special but on certain levels, they were failing. One of them had a mistress and children although he was supposed to be a monk. Now, those regents were trying to kill each other and one of them succeeded! That is a very heavy thing. Most of our gurus don't go around killing people! And these are some of the Dalai Lama's teachers. But he said, "I know they did these things, but I still have them in my Refuge Tree because I remember their kindness to me. I remember the teachings they gave me, and I remember how they helped me. But nonetheless I don't close my eyes or condone all the things they did wrong." Again, there's no blind faith here. If something's wrong, we don't have to shut our eyes or try to sweep things under the carpet. I keep quoting His Holiness so that you won't think it's just me saying this!

His Holiness also said that if there are any problems concerning the teacher, if students have doubts, then they should voice them to the teacher. There might be, for example, sexual misconduct or any kind of manipulation or some doubts about the financial situation. Maybe the teacher is misusing the offerings to support his family or to support himself. The student should confront the teacher politely but firmly and say, "Look, why is this happening? I don't understand why you're doing this. Maybe this is not how things should be done."

Then it's up to the teacher. Either the teacher says, "Yes, I'm sorry, this is a weakness of mine. I apologize, I'll try to get things together better from now on", or they say, "Oh no, this is high Tantric practice, you don't understand. This is beyond your level of realization." In which case, His Holiness says, "You get out." His Holiness also says, although I'm not sure if I agree with this, "You let everybody know, you don't keep it secret."

The Tibetans, like most Asians, tend to sweep things under the carpet, then replace the carpet as if dirt is no longer there. As if we could close our eyes, close our mouth, and the problem will go away. Perhaps this is a difficulty with religious organisations everywhere - not just Asia. His Holiness is very unusual in being so out-spoken, but he's very concerned that the reputation of Tibetan Buddhism is in jeopardy because of the conduct of some of the Lamas and because he himself often doesn't hear about it. People don't like to tell him. Sometimes when he goes to the centres, he is shown smiling with these Lamas, because he doesn't know they are controversial. Nobody tells him.

I was at a conference where he said, "Look, if you know anything about any Lama that isn't right, please tell me. Tell me right now or if you don't want to stand up and talk

about it, send me a letter. I promise you it will only be kept between me and my secretary, and we'll deal with it, but I have to know." Because there are abuses, and people whitewash and pretend, "It's all part of the Tantric practice."

Once I asked my Lama, Khamtrul Rinpoche, "Seeing that sexual yoga is the quick path, how come you're all monks?" He replied, "Yes, it's true, it's a special quick way, but you have to be practically a Buddha in order to practice it. It's extremely difficult, extremely precarious and very few are able to practice " Another Kargyu Lama also said to me that he thought nowadays there was nobody who actually could practice sexual Tantra any more.

I am just telling you this because I think we shouldn't be naive. Faith and devotion do not mean being credulous. We need a lama whom we really connect with, whom we feel is the kind of being who it is worthy to inspire us. This being embodies the Dharma in his every action -- how he acts, how he speaks, how he thinks. We watch, we look and we see. If there is perfect integrity then we trust. We connect from the heart, and after that, then whatever he does, we accept. That's why we have to be so careful.

So, devotion to the Guru means that at a certain point, we become completely open. The role of the true Guru is to show to us the nature of our mind. The nature of our mind is our innate Buddha nature, which is the same as the Guru's mind. You see, we don't go to the Guru for his body, or his personality, or even his learning. We go for refuge to his Dharmakaya Mind, and the fact that he embodies that Dharmakaya, that he himself has realized this and is capable of revealing this to us and guiding us after that.

So the first thing the Guru reveals to us is the true nature, our naked awareness behind the coming and going of the thoughts, our Buddha nature. In order to do that, the Guru himself must have the realization and the ability to transmit it. The student from his/her side must have that openness. It has been described like a corridor with two doors. The Guru opens one door, but the student has to open the other door for there to be space for the wind blowing through. So even though the Guru could be the greatest Guru in the world, if from our side we are closed, then nothing is transmitted. In order to open, there has to be total trust and devotion. That's why devotion is so stressed.

Devotion can come from something very simple. I knew an older English nun who came to my Lama's monastery in Tashi Jong at the time of the annual Lama dances. This was during the time of the previous 8th Khamtrul Rinpoche. She was just sitting there watching him dance, and obviously her mind was very open. As he turned, he looked straight at her and when he did this it was as if her whole conceptual mind fell apart and she spontaneously realized the nature of the mind. And this, even though he was not her Lama, and she'd just gone along to watch the dances! But because at that moment her mind was open and obviously she was feeling this very relaxed, open spaciousness while she watched him, he was able to transmit something even while he was dancing.

But that is just the beginning. Once we've seen the nature of our mind, as my Lama said, then we can start to meditate. It's not the end, it is the beginning. We need the teacher, the Guru, to guide us because each one of us is very unique, coming from a different part of the circle, and each one of us has very different needs. When I was younger, in my Lama's community at Tashi Jong, there were three western nuns. One was from America, one was from Holland and there was myself. We'd often take initiations and oral transmissions together. We would decide on certain practices and ask for the empowerments together with oral transmissions of the text. The lamas would wait and give it to all three of us at the same time.

But then the actual teaching on the text, we each took separately, even from the same person. We never took teachings together. Each one of us got a slightly different teaching. Just an example, there was one teaching where you had to visualize a mandala of hundred and twenty different deities. One set outside yourself, one set throughout the body and one set in the heart. It turned out there are about six hundred different deities we were visualizing, and all of them had three heads and six arms plus a consort, and the colours didn't coordinate... My other sisters were told just to visualize it sort of roughly, to just get the feel of it. So when I went to get my teaching, I asked, "Just see it sort of roughly and vaguely?" But the Lama said, "No, no, see it very precisely, really visualise each deity very clearly. Then if you can really keep the whole thing in your mind, your mind will very quickly get up very high and become very vast." Each one of us was taught in a very different way with a different emphasis, because we were very different, and had different needs. A true teacher understands that.

At first, we all got the same kind of teaching on the same things. We did Ngöndro, we did certain other practices which everybody does. But after that, I was sent off in one direction to do this while another one was doing that, and somebody else was doing something else. I would ask Khamtrul Rinpoche, "What shall I do?" And he'd say, "Well, how about such and such a practice?" And I'd reply, "Yes right! Fantastic! Let's do that." Then I'd go back to my Dharma sisters and they would say, "Oh, I hope he doesn't tell us to do that!" So I said, "Well, if that's your reaction, of course he won't." And he didn't. Do you understand? Because we are all different. What one person needs is not what another person needs, and the glory of the Tibetan path is that there is so much, it's like a Dharma supermarket. The true guru will guide you, he'll find the products which you need to make your body and your mind healthy, because each of us is different. It is a very person-to-person relationship.

In the meantime, we practice, we practice and we practice. There are so many wonderful teachers, there are so many books. We are very lucky -- we are educated, and we can read books. Most Tibetans, even those who are educated, never just sit down and read a book. They wait until someone gives them teachings on that book, then they can read it. If someone goes through it sentence by sentence and explains it, they read it. If we give the average Tibetan, even an educated Tibetan, a book and ask, "Can you explain this?" they'll look at it and say, "Oh no, sorry, I've never been given the teachings on this." So if we insist, "No, no, just these words." "No, I can't, I was never taught it."

But we can pick up and read almost any book, because we've been educated to do so. How lucky this is. We can go to many teachers, and many teachers come through and give teachings. How extraordinarily fortunate it is. We can practice. There are practices which everyone can do. But first, we have to clear our mind. It's like we are vessels which are filled to the brim with dirty water. Now, even if the most perfect Buddha came with nectar, how could he pour it into a glass which was already filled with dirty water? First, we have to empty out the glass, we have to clean the glass to make it ready to receive the nectar. Otherwise, whatever is poured in will become contaminated. So as long as our minds are full of the poisons of the negative emotions, garbage, junk and worn-out opinions and memories and judgements, where is there room?

If any of you have been to Tibet, you know it's very empty. Once we get outside of Lhasa, the emptiness is very noticeable. We can go days and days and hardly see a tree or a building and almost never a person. Very, very empty. So when the Tibetans come to do their decorations or when they come to make thangkas, look at them -- no space! No space because outside there is so much space. Likewise, the Tibetans' mind was traditionally quite empty. No television, no magazines, no novels, no movies -- nothing, lots of empty space. And so they fill up that vast space with extremely complex visualizations and extremely complex philosophy, because there is lots of room.

But our minds are mostly crammed full, mostly with garbage. So where could we put those precious seeds of the Dharma, how could we plant them in the garbage bin? We have to prepare the garden of our mind. Throw out some of the rubbish, dig in there, pull out the weeds, toss out the stones, and get the land ready so that when someone comes along with the perfect bodhi seeds and plants them, provided that we water them, fertilise them and give them the sunshine of the blessings, they will grow. First, we have to really work at preparing the soil so that when we meet with a master, when our masters are there and giving teachings, we can absorb them and use them. Otherwise, even with the greatest teachers, what can they do? It is just more junk in the mind, that's what happens! We absorb more and more of the Dharma and turn it into junk.

Each one of us has to look into our mind and see clearly what is there and what needs to be done in order to prepare ourselves to accept and practice and become one with the perfect Dharma. It's a challenge, it is not easy. But the Lamas are here, they are very compassionate, they come again and again to the West. They sow their Dharma seeds everywhere in the hope that some of them will flourish. But to make it worthwhile, we have to prepare the soil, we have to be worthy vessels. No one else can do it for us. Even the most perfect Guru can't tread the path for us. Each one of us has to tread it for ourselves.