

Latest - revised Guidelines for the Dharma Students of the Venerable Zasep Tulku Rinpoche

Canada, 2021

In these times of rampant consumerism and rapid technological change, with the rise of the Internet and social media, more and more people are searching for a spiritual path that will help them live more meaningful lives and find inner peace. Many seekers are turning to Buddhist meditation as a way to address and overcome the problems of everyday life in this degeneration age. The idea of living life in a more meaningful way, has profound appeal. Some people, moving beyond the idea of simply living more mindfully, espouse the *Mahayana* Buddhist path, which gives detailed instructions on how to transform their ordinary troubled minds into the serene mind of Enlightenment.

I have been teaching the Buddhadharma in the west for more than four decades. In 1976, the Venerable Geshe Thubten Loden and I were the very first Tibetan Lamas to become temporary-resident teachers in Australia. I have been told that today Buddhism is the one of the fast-growing spiritual traditions in Australia. In 1980, after living in Australia for three years, I decided to emigrate permanently to Canada. The cooler climate is like my homeland of Tibet, with beautiful mountains and rivers. Some dear family members had become permanent citizens of Canada and it was good to be close to them.

In my 43 years in the West, I have learned so much about the Western way of life. I think that, generally speaking, people in the West are kind, sensitive, caring, honest, generous and helpful. Western education provides ample opportunities to study philosophy and human psychology. Outside of formal education, bookstores have shelves upon shelves of self-help books; for those who cannot help themselves. Yet in spite of the availability of so much material about controlling our thoughts, and emotional well-being, many Westerners seem confused, lacking in self-confidence, and full of self-blame and

even self-loathing. In the midst of crowds, they feel loneliness; in the midst of plenty, they feel hunger. This is not to say that people in the East don't have similar problems: they do, especially since the breaking down of the old social order in many parts of the East. But in these guidelines I am talking particularly to my Western students.

I have found that many people in the West spend a great deal of time either thinking about the past or dreaming about the future, with the result that they are never in the present. When they look back, they are often full of regret and when they look forward, they are full of expectations that seldom come to fruition, leading to more regret. Buddhist meditation teaches how to be in the present. Some people think that a meditation practice is an escape from everyday life, but in truth, a meditation practice teaches us to be present in the world with a peaceful and compassionate mind. Some people also think that only ordained people or *yogis* can be good practitioners and only ordained Sangha will achieve realizations. Certain Dharma organizations in the west give them impression that in order to become good Dharma teacher or even a good Dharma practitioner you must become ordained, and they look down on lay Sangha members. But we have a saying, 'a robe does not make you become a good monk or nun; you have to practise hard and you have to earn respect. Looking down on lay sangha is discrimination, and a sad situation

The Buddha taught the Dharma for everyone, and for the benefit of all people: whether you are an ordained or lay person, with the right motivation, right effort, right meditation and right mindfulness, everyone can be a good Dharma practitioner. According to Tibetan Buddhist history we have highly realized great lay yoginis like Machig Labdron and Ache Chokyi Dolma. Yogis like Marpa, Milarepa and Gyalwa Dromtonpa were lay people. Dromtonpa was a lay Upsaka, the chief disciple of Atisha Dipamkara. The first three great masters of the Sakyapa tradition, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, Sonam Tsemo and Drakpa Gyaltzen, were lay men.

Why do we need a Dharma teacher?

Many people in the West ask why a spiritual teacher or guide is necessary. Sometimes when Westerners turn to spirituality as a way to deal with their malaise, they think they can get all the guidance they need from the self-help section of a bookstore or from the Internet. Some people think studying Dharma online and receive teachings on Zoom and Youtube is good enough. While it is of course convenient to glue yourself to the computer, this approach is impersonal, you lose human contact, human warmth, and the benefit of face-to-face blessings.

A spiritual teacher can reveal to you a true spiritual path, and give spiritual support when you are struggling, and comfort when you are suffering, experiencing *Dukkha*. This spiritual teacher may exemplify for the seeker what it means to be a spiritually realized person. The knowledge and wisdom that this person has, his or her Dharma realizations, become the seeker's Refuge and protection from *Dukkha*.

In the East, the idea of a spiritual teacher-student relationship is an ancient one, having been established for millennia. According to the Theravadin tradition, the future Buddha, Prince Siddhartha, after he renounced the royal life, went looking everywhere for a possible teacher. He placed himself under the spiritual guidance of two renowned Brahmin teachers, Master Alara Kalama and Addaka Ramaputta. He decided to become an ascetic and practised severe austerities for years before realizing that self-mortification was not the way to achieve his goal. Great Buddhist scholars like Nagarjuna and Asanga had teachers, as did Mahasiddhas such as Tilopa. Atisha was so eager to meet his teacher, Dharmakirti, that he embarked upon a dangerous 13-month sea voyage to Sumatra in Indonesia to meet him. The great Tibetan master, Marpa, travelled to India to study under Naropa. And the founder of our tradition, Lama Je Tsongkhapa, studied under many great masters in central Tibet. In the Tibetan Buddhist view, the spiritual teacher is the root of all spiritual realizations and attainments. According to *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* teaching, we should consider our

teacher as a Buddha for our own spiritual benefit. A Dharma teacher is a spiritual guide who can show us how to meditate correctly so that we can make progress on our spiritual path and gain Dharma realizations. In the Theravadin tradition, the teacher is known as Kalyana Mitra our spiritual friend.

Lam Rim and the teacher/student relationship

I suggest to my students they should first study Lam Rim texts like Lama Je Tsongkhapa's *Lamrim Chenmo* and Je Pabongka's text, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*. The Lam Rim texts outline the clear path to spiritual enlightenment. The Lam Rim texts begin by clearly defining the qualities of good Dharma teachers and students. Some people have the fortunate Karma to recognize a good Dharma teacher immediately upon meeting one, but others are full of indecision and doubt, and cannot make up their minds to commit to a particular teacher. They may spend their whole life searching for the perfect teacher and yet never find him or her.

When we are searching around for a teacher, we will find teachers with widely different personalities. Teachers come in many shapes and sizes because each of us is different, with different attitudes and aptitudes. With Dharma teachers, there is no 'one size fits all'. Most Buddhist teachers are calm, gentle and very kind towards their students; they are usually highly-disciplined because this is how they were trained. Some teachers may have very strong personalities, and can seem very stern or possibly even wrathful. A handful of teachers are real yogis or yoginis who are eccentric, spontaneous, and unpretentious.

You can choose whomever you want be your teacher, but the most important thing is that you find a teacher who is compassionate and wise, has integrity, and is well-respected as a teacher. He or she should not be prejudiced. In truth, I think it is hard to choose a Dharma teacher wisely. Some people use logic and reason to select a teacher, others use intuition and faith. A lot of it comes down to personality. Some

people are attracted to a teacher because he or she is celebrated for being charismatic and inspiring or has composed many helpful texts and books. Others are attracted to a teacher's appearance, to the warmth of his or her smile, and to his or her teachings on topics like love and compassion. Still others are attracted to teachers who can do magic tricks, by causing a rain of holy objects, flowers or rings to fall from their fingers. Still others may choose a teacher who gives people big hugs as his or her way of teaching. Some extremely naive people will blindly follow a teacher who claims to be perfect, but it is very important to study the teacher's speech and habits. Make sure the teacher is not biased or hypocritical; his or her conduct should not contradict the very teachings he or she is giving.

Some teachers may disparage or even denounce other teachers because they don't agree with their positions on various doctrinal issues or because they do not approve of their lifestyle. It is useful to remember what Buddha said in the well-known *Kalama Sutra*, which advises seekers on how to choose the right teacher. The Kalamas were a clan who were confused by many teachers who passed through their territory, criticizing and contradicting each other. Buddha told the Kalamas not to believe something simply because it is often repeated, because it is a scripture, or because it is stated by an authority. The Buddha told them to test everything that was said to them with their own experience: only if it proves conducive to goodness and happiness should it be accepted as true.

One of the most important things in a teacher-student relationship is for the student to be able to communicate directly with the teacher so that he or she can ask questions and have an honest discussion if one is needed. It is always good to have a teacher who encourages questioning; you don't have to accept anything on blind faith. There is an old Tibetan saying, "A guru is like fire, if you stay too close you get burned; if you stay too far away, you don't get enough heat." I think some people actually prefer a teacher who is very remote and personally inaccessible so that they can only relate to him or

her at a distance; without direct contact they feel safe, knowing they won't ever be close enough to get 'burned'. Other people would like to have constant easy access to a teacher so that they can ask questions all the time, without having ever having to figure out the answers for themselves. Some people look upon a Dharma teacher as a family doctor, one who will give them a new prescription for happiness whenever they think they need one. Teacher-student relationships are nuanced, with both teacher and student bringing their dispositions and their histories into their interaction. In my own case, different people see my relationship with my students in different lights. A few people have told me my students treat me with too much reverence while others have told me I am too casual and relaxed with my students and should demand more reverence! I cannot please everyone; indeed I doubt there is any teacher who can.

If someone is fortunate enough to have good Karma, he or she will eventually find a good teacher who is willing to commit to being the student's teacher and spiritual guide. On his or her side, a Dharma student must be sincere and willing to commit to and trust the Dharma teacher. A healthy teacher-student relationship makes for a healthy Dharma practice. The Dharma teacher will guide the student step by step and assist him or her in everyday Dharma practice. The Dharma teacher and student must have mutual respect and appreciation. The student should take the teachings and instructions into his or her heart and learn the correct protocols of teacher and student relationships.

It is important to understand that you have the right to respectfully decline if your teacher is demanding you do or don't do something that has been part of your spiritual beliefs or part of your practice. If the Guru or teacher's demand contradicts Dharma principles, or simply without good reason, and you feel it is incorrect according principal of Dharma, or violates freedom of religious practice —you have right to decline. It is always important to do this with respect and politeness.

oneself politely as above and not engage in it. Manjushrikirti says this in the Garbhalamkara.

Becoming a Dharma student

To become a student of a particular Dharma teacher, a person should go to the teacher to make a formal request to be accepted as a student. The Dharma teacher may test the student's sincerity by asking him or her to wait for a period of time, to study Dharma texts, or do retreats and other training in order to be qualified as a student. Once a Dharma teacher is happy with the student's enthusiasm, sincerity and willingness to study and practise Dharma, then the teacher will accept the person as student.

How to study Dharma

In this materialistic age, it is a fortunate person indeed who opts for a spiritual path and is able to study Dharma. On the must-study list are Buddhist *Sutras* and *Shastras*, philosophical texts written by great teachers like Nagarjuna, Asanga, Chandrakirti, Vasubhandu and Shantideva, and commentaries written by great masters like Lama Je Tsongkhapa and his lineage holders. We should study Dharma, no matter our age. Sakya Pandita said, "*Rigpa Nangpar Che Yang Lhob*," which translates as "You should study Dharma today even if you are going to die tomorrow." What this means is that if you are going to die tomorrow, after death our body is diminished but our consciousness continues through life after life. We carry a seed of wisdom and virtue that moves along with us. So whatever you have truly learned in this life, the seed of that knowledge will remain and ripen either in this life or the next.

Dharma teaching and Dharma practice is both a temporary and ultimate Refuge. As I have mentioned, I especially advise my students to study the Lam Rim, gradual path to enlightenment. As mentioned, it is important to study texts like Lama Je Tsongkhapa's

Lamrim Chenmo, as well as texts written by the first and second Panchen Lamas, and the fifth Dalai Lama, and Kyabje Pabongka Rinpoche's *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand*. It is very important to study and practise Lam Rim always, no matter how advanced you are: this practice is the very heart of Dharma practice and it gives your practice a solid foundation.

I would also like to advise my students to study and practise Samatha Mahamudra and Vipassana Mahamudra. Mahamudra practice is effective and helpful for our day to day life. It is a method for cultivation of mindfulness and realization of calmness and clarity of the mind. I would like you to study my book on Mahamudra called *Gelug Mahamudra - Eloquent speech of Manjushri* with beautiful Illustrations of Gurus, Chakras and *Tul Kor* exercises. if you wish to obtain original copy of Mahamudra book you could contact Irina Safonova in Toronto, Canada (email: sirina27@gamil.com) or Amanda Buckley in Melbourne, Australia (email: amanda.buckley.melb@gmail.com)

Also i would like to advise my students study and practise Lo Jong thought transformation. There are number of Lo Jong texts, but i advise you study the seven point thought transformation by Geshe Chikawa and the Wheel of Sharpe weapon by Dharmarakshita, with the commentary by Geshe Nawang Dhargye. If you practise Lam Rim, Mahamudra and Lo Jong your Dharma practice will grow, and your commitment to Dharma will become strong. Your faith in the Three Jewels will continue to grow steadily, and your realizations increase accordingly.

The Preciousness of Dharma traditions and lineages

In Tibetan Buddhism, there four principal schools or traditions: Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug. Lama Je Tsongkhapa's tradition is known as the Gaden Tradition, which is another way of saying Gelug. Lama Je Tsongkhapa is the emanation and embodiment of the Buddhas Manjushiri, Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezig) and Vajrapani; he is known as second Buddha of this age. The four Tibetan Buddhist traditions each have their

precious teachings; each of the four traditions is perfect in its own way and has its own beauty, power and glory. Each of the traditions must retain their original method and style of teaching as this preserves the uniqueness of its lineages.

When you practise according to the lineage of your teacher, your practice becomes part of that lineage. Practising the way of your teacher and his or her lineage teachers prevents you from going off the track and your practice becomes solid and strong.

My students follow my golden Gelug tradition of Lama Je Tsongkhapa, which is the sutra lineage of the *Bodhichitta* of Maitreya Buddha and Asanga, and the *Shunyata* lineage of Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti. We practise the secret Tantra lineages of Mahasiddhas such as Lalita Vajra, Vajra Ganthapa, Nagarjuna, Methub Dawa, Tilopa, Naropa among others.

Non-sectarianism and non-confusion

Throughout history, Lama Je Tsongkhapa's Gelug tradition has been remarkably non-sectarian. Lama Je Tsongkhapa, a reincarnation of Buddha Manjushri, Avaloketishvara and Vajrapani, was a great practitioner, yogi, scholar and composer, was known as the second Buddha on earth. Lama Je Tsongkhapa, born in Amdo, Tibet, in 1357 CE, himself studied under great masters and received many initiations from masters of different traditions. All Tibetan Buddhists have great admiration and respect for him, and in our tradition we do daily prayers to him for guidance.

I encourage my students to respect all traditions and lineages of Tibetan Buddhism and all other Buddhist paths. In addition to studying Tibetan Buddhism according to the Gelug tradition, I have studied Mahamudra according to the Karma Kagyu tradition. I have received empowerments of Chod according to the Kagyu tradition and I have

received empowerment of Dharma protectress Ache Chokyi Dolma from Palden Garchen Rinpoche from the Drikung Kagyu tradition.

I have personally studied in the Theravadin Buddhist tradition which is different from Tibetan Buddhism, historically and practice-wise. In 1975, after having been a monk from childhood in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, I entered for a time into a Thai monastery and was ordained as a Theravadin *Bikkhu*. I also practised *Vipassana* meditation under the most renowned Theravadin master Achaan Buddhadasa at Wat Suan Mok in southern Thailand.

There is a Tibetan word, *Rimé*, which literally translates as "not taking sides, being non-sectarian," but it really means open-minded and respecting other sects and lineages. (It does not mean mixing up different practices.) In actuality, we Gelugpas are more *Rimé* than many other traditions of Tibetan Buddhism because Lama Je Tsongkhapa received teachings and empowerments from Sakyapa as well as Kagyu masters. When we practise Sadhanas of Heruka and Vajrayogini we make supplication to Sakya masters like Sachen Kunga Nyingpo and Sakya Pandita, and when we practise the Six Yogas of Naropa we make supplication to Marpa, Milarepa. Gampopa and Phagmo Drupa of the Kagyu tradition. We Gelugpas have been *Rimé* for the past five hundred years.

I think *Rimé* is a nice idea, like sharing Dharma with your friends. My grandmother was a devotee of the Kagyu tradition and many of my family members were also Kagyu; some were Sakya and a few were Nyingma. My family members were very respectful of each other's traditions, lineages and practices. They accommodated and supported each other. My great-uncle Sachu Tulku Rinpoche was a revered Guru of the Karma Kagyu tradition; he was a master of the Six Yogas of Naropa. My great-uncle Taruk Tulku Rinpoche was a revered Guru of the Sakya tradition; he was a Tantric master and a Tibetan *Amchi* doctor. My own previous incarnation, Lama Karma Kunchog Tenzing,

was a scholar, astrologer and yogi of the Karma Kagyu lineage and abbot of Zuru monastery in Tibet. As a young boy, I was recognized as the true incarnation of Lama Karma Kunchog Tenzing by Jetrung Rinpoche of the Nyingma tradition, who was head of the Jetrung Gompa in Zadoh district, Tibet. I was also recognised as this reincarnation by the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje of the Karma Kagyu tradition, and by Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche of the Gelug tradition. Because my previous incarnations were as Karma Kagyu Lamas, I have deep feeling and love for the Karma Kagyu lineage. In fact, I have raised funds to rebuild Zuru Monastery in Tibet.

However, unless you are an advanced practitioner, you should not mix different traditions, lineages, and teachings because you do not know how to make sense of them in a deeply meaningful way. It is unwise and unnecessary to mix practices, taking from here, taking from there; to do so is to create confusion within your own practice. Generally, people in the West, even people who have studied the Dharma for years, are a bit skeptical about the importance of Dharma traditions and lineages. Nonetheless, I strongly believe it is important to practise within a tradition, to follow the lineages of that tradition, and to practise in accordance with them. An eclectic mix of teachings and practices is a recipe for confusion that will in all probability impede progress on the spiritual path. I think some Western people develop a rebellious attitude when Dharma teachers like me say this; they think we are trying to control their minds by persuading them that the only worthwhile tradition is our own personal tradition. But we say it out of concern for the student: we don't want them drowning in a sea of confusion. I am certainly not interested in controlling the mind of anyone else; I am only interested in controlling and subduing my own mind so that I can become a good vehicle for following the path of Buddha.

Organizing your Dharma practice

Ask yourself questions about the state of your Dharma practice and where it is at this point in your life. Ultimately you have to take responsibility for your own Dharma practice. The teacher is not going to practise for you. If you do not practise Dharma, no teacher anywhere can transform you into a Buddha. According to the Buddhist teaching of *Tathagatagarba*, we all have Buddha nature naturally, and we are all destined to become a Buddha sometime in the future, but there is no Enlightenment without Dharma practice. Buddha said life is like a dream. It is as transient as a flash of lightning; twenty, forty, sixty, eighty years pass as quickly as clouds moving across the sky. We think there is always more time, but this is misguided. We will all die one day. We have to be serious Dharma practitioners now. Organizing our own Dharma practice means being aware of time: what practices do we have the time and energy to do before death comes?

Annual retreats

I request that my students practise Dharma and meditation on a regular basis, and practise every day as much as possible. I encourage my students if possible to undertake a month-long retreat each year: retreats of two weeks or ten days at a minimum. If you keep waiting for the right time to be able to do a retreat, the time will never come. You should make plans for a retreat and do it sooner rather than later.

I personally have been very fortunate when it comes to retreats. I did my first retreat when I was fifteen, a Vajra Bhairava Yamantaka retreat with my teachers, Geshe Thubten Wangyal and Jhampa Kelsang Rinpoche. We did the retreat at Kailash Kuti house, named after holy Mt. Kailash in Tibet. It is located in the mountains above the hill station town of Dalhousie in the foothills of the Himalayas. I have two ways of looking back at this retreat. On the one hand, it was very powerful — amazing, actually. On the other hand, it was mentally and physically exhausting, difficult beyond words. Indeed, my teachers advised me not to talk about my experience. My teacher Geshe Thupten

Wangyal was very strict and highly-disciplined; we would start our first session at 4:30 a.m.; we practised four sessions a day, with our last session ending around 9:00 P.M. – not much sleep for a young boy Lama! We ate very simple food, such as rotis, rice and potatoes. It was very cold in the winter, with lots of snow: the only source of heat was a little wood stove. I was really afraid that we would be attacked by jungle leopards in the night; one female would come very close to our retreat house, and when it was a full moon, she would roar through the night. I was nervous about going out for walks at nighttime, but my teacher told us that a roaring leopard was a good omen! After that, I was excited whenever the leopard came near our retreat house. My second retreat was Vajrayogini. It, too, was very powerful; a good experience overall. I had wonderful dreams. It is always very inspiring when one has an opportunity to do a retreat with one's teacher.

Guidance for your practice

Whenever you have important questions regarding your Dharma practice, you should not hesitate to contact me. As I would like to do more retreats in the near future, I may be unavailable to answer your questions directly. In this case, please contact one of my senior students at one of my centres, (see our website Gadenforthewest.org).

Initiating into Tantra

If you wish to receive Tantric initiations there are different ways of receiving these. One could take the initiation as a blessing for protection, or for healing purposes to make some connection to the Buddhas and so on. However, in order to receive a Tantric initiation as an actual empowerment, and not just as a blessing, you are required to take Refuge and Bodhisattva vows before the initiation.

When you take a higher Tantric initiation, you are additionally required to take Tantric vows. Traditionally in Tibet, students completed the five foundation practices before

taking a higher Tantric initiation, but this tradition has been relaxed somewhat in the West. I advise my students to do the foundation practices whenever they are ready. The five foundation practices are: Refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha; Guru Yoga; Vajrasattva practice; Prostration practice; and Mandala Offerings.

If you feel you are not ready to take Tantric initiations, then you should not feel under pressure to do so. In truth, the practices of *Sutrayana*, Lam Rim, and the Three Principal Aspects of the Path (Renunciation, *Bodhichitta*, and *Shunyata*) are more important practices. Practise Mahamudra and Lo Jong. When you are ready to take initiations, you could opt to take one or two initiations, as you wish; if you are not sure which initiations you should take, ask your teacher.

Here is list of *Kriya Tantra* and *Yoga Tantra* initiations that I offer. I am only suggesting these for whenever you are ready to receive Tantric initiations, but it is important not to take this simply because many other people are taking initiations. You need to do what is right for you, at your stage of practice.

- Green Tara, for overcoming fear, removing obstacles, gaining great protection and liberation
- Four armed Chenrezig, the compassion of all the Buddhas, emanated as a deity
- Black Manjushri, for the cultivation of wisdom, healing, and good health
- Hayagriva, the emanation of Chenrezig and Buddha Amitabha, for healing sickness, gaining protection, and generating Great Compassion
- Maha Vairochana, for the purification of negative Karma and the development of luminosity and clear light towards Enlightenment
- Manjushri, the wisdom of all the Buddhas, emanated as a deity
- Medicine Buddha, for healing the body and mind; potentially one could become a healer
- Sarasvati, Buddha of wisdom and creative arts such as music, writing, and painting

- Singhamukha, for healing and exorcism, overcoming negative forces, and becoming fearless
- Vajrasattva, for the purification of Karmic obscurations to realizations
- Chöd initiation, for cutting attachment and self-grasping, experiencing the two truths, and cultivating *Bodhicitta* and *Shunyata*
- White Mahakala, the Buddha of Great Compassion for all living beings, for generating wealth and prosperity and fulfilling all your wishes and dreams

Here is a list of the Annuttara highest yoga Tantra initiations that I offer. Again, one deity practice will suffice:

- Chittamani Tara, the highest form of Tara practice, with generation and completion stages to Enlightenment
- Yamantaka, the wrathful aspect of Manjushri, and the opponent power to death and the *maras*. Some prominent commentaries say this practice is the most powerful practice for Enlightenment
- Guhyasamaja, for the cultivation of the illusory body
- Heruka Five Deities according to the Mahasiddhi Vajra Ghantapa tradition, for the cultivation of clear light and bliss, and Enlightenment within this life
- Heruka Body Mandala according to the Mahasiddhi Vajra Ghantapa tradition – the same as the Heruka Five Deity practice
- Vajrayogini (Naro Khachod) according to Mahasiddhi Naropa. Some commentaries say this is the most sacred *Yidam* (*Yidam* = heart bound) practice according to the Gelugpa and Sakyapa lineages

Instead of taking additional initiations, I suggest you focus on the deity practice you have already received. If you are a first timer and fairly new to Tantric practice, you could take one or two *Kriya Tantra* initiations for the deities of your choice. There is a Tibetan Buddhist tradition of choosing a personal deity, a *Yidam*. If you are not sure

how to choose a personal deity or *Yidam*, consider which deity you feel most connected to, and seek advice from your teacher.

When you decide to take an initiation, you should find out what are the daily commitments and vows (refuge vow, Bodhisattva vow, Tantric vow and daily commitment of recitation on number of mantra). Some teachers do not explain the commitments at the time of the initiation. Later, you hear commitments were given but you are not sure what they were; should this happen, you need to find out and then keep them as best you can.

Keeping your Dharma practice pure and not giving up when you face a spiritual crisis

We try to keep our physical body health by exercising regularly, eating nutritious food and drinking pure water. Likewise, we should keep our Dharma practice healthy without contaminating it with our own mental defilements. As human practitioners of Dharma, we make mistakes; from time to time we may break our vows and commitments. When we do so, we feel that in some way we have let down our Gurus, and the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We may have faced many obstacles due to unfavourable conditions and lack of time and energy, but at the same we also know that we have made lifetime commitments. It is not easy to keep the vows perfectly pure. We try to practise every day, but sometimes we feel that the practices have become routine recitations, an obligation, and so on. This can happen especially when our lives are too busy and we are very tired. When this happens, we need to make time for a retreat to renew our commitments and refresh our practice. When we break our vows and commitments, we should do purifications such as Vajrasattva mantras, prostrations, and reciting the Sutra of the Three Heaps by chanting the names of the thirty-five Buddhas.

Those of us who have done retreats on Vajrayogini, Yamantaka or other *Anuttarayogatantra* practices could do self-initiation as a method of purification for broken *Samaya* and commitments. Do not think your practice is no longer worth the effort just because you have broken your commitments; do not abandon your commitments and daily practice; just pick up where you left off. My kind teacher, the most holy Tara Tulku Rinpoche said, "If you forget to eat breakfast, you don't give up there and then. The next day, you go ahead and eat breakfast. Simple."

Our Dharma practice and Dharma communities become weakened for a number of reasons. One contributing factor is the state of our mind. If your commitment and devotion are not well grounded, not solid, you could be influenced by others who are fearful and confused about their own Dharma practice. These days it is easy to get confused about Dharma practice and the teacher-student relationship. Some of the confusion has arisen from inexperienced Dharma teachers who lack skill in how to teach and guide Dharma students. Unfortunately some of the confusion has been caused by certain teachers, who have imported their sectarian views to Western Dharma communities. Certain teachers condemn other teachers and certain groups condemn other groups. Not only do they condemn each other's practices, but they even condemn and blame Dharma protectors as scapegoats. This is unwholesome Karma and an obscuration for growth of Dharma: it causes confusions and is such a waste of time.

Khedrub Khyungpo Naljor was a lineage holder of Six-armed Mahakala, and a fully enlightened master of the Shangpa Kagyu tradition. I admire his dedication and auspicious prayers to all Dharma Protector practitioners; he inspires us all to practise equilibrium mind. He said that people who worship certain Dharma Protectors, or people who deprecate certain Dharma Protectors, should relax and take it easy. Why not practise equilibrium mind, practise greater tolerance, and cultivate *Bodhicitta* since we

(Tseg la ma tan don la tan) means one should not rely merely on words of others, because words are unreliable and easily misinterpreted; one should instead contemplate on the deep meaning of what is being said;

དྲང་དོན་ལ་མ་འདྲི་བའི་དོན་ལ་འདྲི་བའི་ལྟ་བུ་ནི། །

(Drang don la ma tan ney don la tan) means do not rely on relative truths, but contemplate absolute teachings and absolute truth.

Dharma study online

In many ways the computer and the Internet have made our lives simultaneously easier and busier. If we are forever Googling, emailing, scrolling through social media and playing online games, there is always the danger that we could become online junkies. We can even become addicted to visiting Dharma sites. There is a lot of Dharma information on the Internet, some of it excellent, some of it not so good. It could be helpful to study Dharma online, but when we do so, we risk losing our connection to the living, breathing human beings around us. Computers lack the human touch. From time to time, we all need to sit down with our Guru and our Sangha friends to share our Dharma practice, do pujas and have a cup of tea together. This does not happen when we are glued to a computer; cyberspace can be lonely and isolating.

Children and the Dharma

Children are our future. We must think how to educate our children in the Dharma. Buddhist parents must not neglect their children's Dharma education; I have seen too many Western Dharma parents who don't give enough Dharma education to their children; they are too soft and too concerned that their children may become rebellious if they are strict with them. They take a laissez-faire attitude, hoping that one day their children will magically take up a Dharma practice just because they were given a good impression of Buddhism when they were young. If this happens, great, but in my view it is important that children have some formal instruction about the Dharma when they are

young. Early Dharma education will remain in their mind stream for the rest of their life. I am so thankful to my grandfather, who always took such good care for me and who gave me a good opportunity to study and practise Dharma, even when we had to go through so much suffering, escaping from Tibet and then struggling in India as poor refugees.

Nowadays we have many worries about children. There is so much violence passing as entertainment. In my opinion, children should not watch destructive and violent movies, play violent video games or visit unsuitable websites on the Internet. Parents need to put limits on what sort of things their children watch. I think a lot of the sites on the Internet are a kind of drug, just as addictive as the ones that are swallowed, injected, or smoked.

Right livelihood and Dharma finances

Right livelihood is one of the aspects of the eightfold noble path; it is a Buddhist principle that it is important that we as Dharma practitioners practise right livelihood. We must not hurt other people and animals, and we must make the best use of the earth's resources, in ways that do not do social and environmental damage. (The Venerable Walpola Rahula, a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk, clearly explains the eightfold path and other fundamental tenets of Buddhism in his excellent introductory text, *What the Buddha Taught*; I highly recommend it.) Buddha was so kind: he gave detailed advice in the *Sutras* on how to organize our Dharma life and Dharma finances. The Buddha said lay people should think about their finances, earmarking funds for their family, putting something aside for emergencies, and saving a little for their old age. We should also put money aside to study the Dharma and do retreats as well. It is not a requirement of Dharma practice that practitioners be poor: being poor does not make you a better Dharma person. The point is without attached to the material things you have, but to just enjoy them. When you are facing poverty, you can't help yourself, you can't help your family, and you can't help others. However, when a Dharma practitioner has ample

material resources, he or she is in a position to practise generosity by using discretionary income to help others.

Supporting Dharma Centres and Gaden Relief Projects

I would like to suggest that you, as my Dharma students, support our Dharma centres with voluntary work and donations. This will bring much merit and good Karma to you. I request that you support Gaden Relief Projects which has been active for 30 years, providing medical treatments, health clinics, shelters (yurts) for single homeless mothers in Mongolia, and installations for solar energy. Gaden Relief Project supports Shar Gaden Monastery in South India with 700 monks, and has helped impoverished nuns in isolated parts of the Himalayas. This NGO, run entirely by volunteers, makes a wonderful contribution to poor and needy communities in this world of suffering. In these pandemic times we need support more than ever. See the website (www.gadenrelief.org). I would like to see my students become more socially engaged, and reading about these communities and sending support is a very good way of doing that.

Conclusion

In the above pages, I have given advice to and set up guidelines for my students and for Dharma students in general. I do not claim for a moment that what I have said is absolutely correct, but I have said it with sincerity and the best of intentions. I am not trying to judge who is and who is not qualified as a Dharma teacher or student. I am trying to help students who wish to find the right Dharma teacher, improve their student-teacher relationship, and deepen their Dharma practice. I hope these guidelines will be useful for other Dharma teachers and students. I have no desire to promote myself as a great teacher and gather more students. I have wonderful Dharma students and amazing Dharma friends in Canada, Australia, the USA and Mongolia. I am very proud of them for practising Dharma for many years; many are great practitioners. They

do so much humanitarian work through their generosity. I have appointed half a dozen of my senior students as Dharma teachers, and they are good teachers.

Zasep Tulku Rinpoche, updated 9th January 2021, Canada