

1. Why Do We Need a Guru?



The root of the path

IN THE LAM-RIM, or graduated path to enlightenment, the first meditation outline is *the root of the path: how to devote to the virtuous friend*. Why is guru devotion the root of the path to enlightenment? Enlightenment is like a ripe fruit, the path to enlightenment is like the trunk of a tree, and guru devotion is like the root of the tree. From the root of guru devotion, the trunk of the path grows in our mind and bears the fruit of enlightenment. Whether or not we can start to develop the path to enlightenment in our mind in this life is determined by our practice of guru devotion.

Proper devotion to the guru, or virtuous friend, is the root of all success, from success in this life up to enlightenment, just as the trunk, branches, leaves and fruit of a tree depend upon its root. Or we can think that guru devotion is like the fuel in a car or a plane, without which the vehicle cannot take us where we want to go. Without guru devotion, nothing happens—no realizations, no liberation, no enlightenment—just as without the root of a tree there can be no trunk, branches, leaves, or fruit. Everything, up to enlightenment, depends on guru devotion.

Guru devotion is the root not only of ultimate success, achieving full enlightenment and bringing sentient beings to the ultimate happiness of liberation and enlightenment, but also of temporary success and happiness. This practice is the foundation of the development of the whole path to enlightenment, as well as the foundation of all happiness. Since everything comes from the practice of guru devotion, it is called *the root of the path*.

Wise practitioners, those who know how to practice Dharma skillfully, give their full attention day and night to this point of correctly devoting to the virtuous friend. His Holiness Serkong Dorje Chang, who lived at

Swayambhunath in Nepal, once told his monks, “If you do the practice of devoting yourself to the virtuous friend well, everything will be fine, even if you don’t study. You can relax and have a good time, just eating and sleeping. You can enjoy life.” Rinpoche expressed the very heart of Dharma practice. If we practice guru devotion well, we can enjoy life in the best way, because our practice brings all success and stops all obstacles.

The answer to how quickly and easily we will achieve realizations of the path to enlightenment depends on our finding a qualified virtuous friend, and after having found him,⁹ how well we devote ourselves to him. Before devoting ourselves to a guru, we should check him well; then after we have made the Dharma connection, we correctly devote ourselves to him with thought and with action. Devoting *with thought* means seeing the guru as a buddha, an enlightened being, by looking at him in that way; and devoting *with action* means carrying out the guru’s advice, serving and making offerings to him.

The main meditation subject of guru devotion is actually contained in devoting to the guru with thought. Using scriptural quotations, logic and our personal experiences of the guru, we look at the guru as a buddha, as having ceased all faults and possessing all good qualities. At the beginning we use analytical meditation with quotations and logic to prove to the mind that doesn’t see the guru as a buddha that he is a buddha, thus transforming this mind into the pure thought of devotion.

At first, when we are not actually doing analytical meditation on guru devotion, that feeling of devotion quickly disappears. However, through meditation, after some time the experience becomes stable. When we have some experience, some feeling in our heart that our guru is a buddha, even if it lasts just a short time, it is a sign of having received the blessings of the guru. When we then come to spontaneously and constantly see the guru as a buddha, we have developed the realization of guru devotion.

Devotion brings blessings. From guru devotion, we receive the blessings of the guru in our heart, and from those blessings, realizations of the path to

⁹ Or her. Unfortunately, the only impersonal third person pronoun the English language offers us is “it,” and that doesn’t seem appropriate for a human being, much less a guru. It’s too cumbersome to write “him or her” every time and alternating the two seems overly PC. Using “them” is just grammatically incorrect although becoming increasingly popular. Since most gurus are male, we’ve settled on “him”; if you have a female guru you’re thinking of, read “her.” However, in non-guru instances of him or her throughout this book we have in fact alternated the two. [Publisher’s note.]

enlightenment manifest from within our mind. Our devotion makes it possible for us to achieve enlightenment, to cease all the faults of our mind and to complete all the realizations. This then enables us to do perfect work for the numberless other sentient beings, freeing them from the oceans of samsaric sufferings and bringing them to liberation and enlightenment. This is why guru devotion, this experience of seeing the guru as a buddha, is the root of the path to enlightenment.

Through the practice of guru devotion, looking at our guru as inseparable from a buddha or our own special deity, the blessings of the guru enter our heart. Devotion is the opening through which the nectar of the guru's blessings enters us. Without guru devotion practice, the nectar of the guru's blessings doesn't enter our mind and this makes it very difficult for us to generate realizations of the path to enlightenment. Just as a seed cannot grow without water, our mind cannot develop without blessings. Without blessings, our mind is like a hot desert where nothing grows. No matter how much we meditate on the path, no matter how much we squeeze, nothing will grow.

The guru's blessings transform our mind from being hard and unsubdued into being soft and subdued. Even from our own experiences, we can tell that what the teachings say about the blessings of the guru is true and have complete faith in it. When we have strong guru devotion in our heart, if we meditate on perfect human rebirth, we feel its preciousness very easily; if we meditate on impermanence and death, we feel the transitory nature of life very strongly and easily; and the same thing happens if we meditate on compassion, emptiness or any other lam-rim topic. In a state of strong devotion, our mind is also calmer, more subdued. Our delusions arise only with difficulty and are easy to control.

When our devotion degenerates or disappears, our delusions arise very strongly and are more difficult to control; it is also more difficult to have any feeling for impermanence and death, compassion or bodhicitta. We can check this from our own experiences. At times when our mind is very hard and skeptical, with no devotion, do we find it easy or difficult to meditate on lam-rim? And at times when we feel strong devotion, how do we feel when we meditate on the path?

When we have strong meditation experiences, ones that change our mind, we feel even more deeply the kindness of the virtuous friend and develop more devotion toward him. That developing realizations depends on guru devotion is not simply something made up so that gurus receive

more respect, service and offerings. We can clearly see the truth of this from our own experiences.

Without the foundation of the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha, there is no basis for Dharma practice. It is like trying to taste artificial fruit. The blessings of the guru enable us to achieve the realizations of the graduated path to enlightenment. On the basis of the three principal paths, we then practice tantra and achieve the generation and completion stages of Highest Yoga Tantra. We are then able to achieve enlightenment in this life, or within three or sixteen lifetimes.

Achieving tantric realizations especially depends on guru devotion. By practicing the lower tantras—Action, Performance and Yoga tantras—we can achieve enlightenment in one lifetime, but only by obtaining the “immortality” *siddhi*, which enables us to live for thousands of years and thus achieve enlightenment. However, without needing to prolong our life in this way, by practicing Highest Yoga Tantra we can achieve enlightenment in the brief lifetime of a degenerate time,¹⁰ even within a few years. (The term *brief lifetime* is used because life is much shorter in a degenerate time.) It was mainly by doing special guru yoga practice that the great yogi Milarepa, as well as many other Tibetan yogis and Indian *pandits*, were able to achieve tantric realizations within a few years and thus achieve enlightenment in one brief lifetime.

In Highest Yoga Tantra, guru yoga is practiced as the heart of the path. To achieve enlightenment in this brief lifetime, we have to cherish guru yoga practice like our own life. It is only then that practicing the Six Yogas of Naropa and other tantric techniques becomes the quick path to enlightenment. Otherwise, if we don't cherish guru yoga as more precious than our own life, no matter how many years we meditate on the Six Yogas of Naropa, nothing will happen. With strong guru yoga practice, however, we can succeed in the Highest Yoga Tantra path and achieve the unified state of Vajradhara in this life, just as those past great yogis did.

Guru yoga is the fuel that makes Highest Yoga Tantra the quick path to enlightenment. If there is no fuel in a plane, the people in the plane can't reach the place they want to go; if there is fuel, they can. The guru yoga practice in Highest Yoga Tantra is special fuel, more special than that of the Hinayana, Paramitayana and even the lower tantras.

¹⁰ A degenerate time, or age, [Skt: *kaliyuga*] has five characteristics: short lifespans, scarce means of subsistence, mental afflictions, strong wrong views and weak sentient beings.

Why do we need a guru?

In order to do the practice of guru devotion, we first have to have clear in our mind why this practice is important. Why do we need a guru? We might think, “Achieving liberation and enlightenment is fine, but why do I need a guru to do it? As long as books on the subject are available, I can read them, then practice. Why do I need a guru?”

You might think that to generate the path to enlightenment, it’s enough to read Dharma books and study by yourself. However, generally speaking, you can’t clearly understand the meaning of Dharma teachings, especially the hidden meanings that need clarification through commentary, without the explanations of a guru. There is a big difference between learning something from a teacher and just reading about it in a book. Listening to a teacher has a much greater effect on your mind. Being able to parrot the words written in books doesn’t mean that you really understand a subject.

Even to gain just an intellectual understanding of a subject we have to depend on a teacher. And our goal is to have not just an intellectual understanding of the path to enlightenment but experience of it. Without experience of the path we can’t have a clear, complete understanding of any of its points. Having experiences or realizations of the path to enlightenment depends on receiving the blessings of the guru within our own mental continuum. The clear, strong feeling in our heart and deep benefit to our mind are what are meant by the blessings of the guru. Without a guru, we can’t achieve realizations. This is why it’s not sufficient to have just intellectual knowledge, like that gained from studying with professors in a university.

In *Collection of Advice from Here and There*, when someone asked which was more important, the lama’s advice or the major scriptures, Lama Atisha answered,

Even if you can recite the whole *Tripitaka* by heart, even if you know the entire Dharma, if you don’t have the guru’s advice, there will be a gap between you and the Dharma when you practice.¹¹

¹¹ The first piece of advice in “Collection of Advice from Here and There,” or *Kadam Thorbu*, compiled by Chegom Sherap Dorje. For the complete text, see “Sayings of the Kadam Masters,” *The Book of Kadam*, pp. 559–610 or *The Door of Liberation*, pp. 83–122.

Even if we can recite by heart all the sutras and tantras or have studied them at university and can explain them all intellectually, it doesn't mean much in terms of realization because generating within our mind the paths revealed by the teachings has to depend on receiving the blessings of the guru. Receiving the nectar of the guru's blessings depends on our having the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha. Without the blessings of the guru, there is no way we can have realizations, no way we can actualize the three principal paths and the two stages of tantra. For this reason, we need a guru.

Just to gain an intellectual understanding of Dharma from a teacher in order to write a book or get a degree, we don't need to do the guru yoga practice of regarding him as an enlightened being. However, if our aim is not simply to obtain a degree in order to get a job but to benefit our own mind—to transform it through subduing our delusions and develop it in the path to liberation and enlightenment—it's different. This is a specific, special aim.

The point to understand is that the purpose of having a guru is not just to gain an intellectual understanding of Dharma. We need a guru for a special reason, to receive the blessings that enable us to develop our mind in the path to enlightenment. If we miss the point of having a guru, we can make many mistakes and many problems can arise. Just as we can run off the road if we don't concentrate when driving a car, if we don't concentrate on the main aim of having a guru when trying to practice Dharma, we can create many problems for ourselves.

In America and other countries in the West, people involved in teaching meditation have held meetings to discuss whether guru devotion is necessary in meditating on the path to enlightenment. Some people think that while the subject of guru devotion might have been practiced in olden times in Tibet, it is not necessary nowadays. (This discussion might also have come about because of problems happening in relation to gurus in the West in recent years.) The people who say these things have missed the real purpose and importance of the practice of guru devotion; they have missed the usefulness and richness of it in life and the benefit, as infinite as space, that is gained from it. They have missed the very point of guru devotion. Guru devotion appears to them to be something cultural, without much value or importance. They think that it's not necessary to practice guru devotion, that you can meditate on the path without it. People who say these things don't understand the real purpose of guru devotion and how it is essential for realization of the path to enlightenment.

We can't do the practices of listening to or reflecting and meditating on

teachings on the path to enlightenment on our own. If we didn't need a teacher to study and actualize the whole path to enlightenment by ourselves we wouldn't need to rely upon a teacher even to learn such things as languages and handicrafts. We would be able to learn everything by ourselves without anybody else's help.

Kadampa Geshe Potowa, a lineage lama of the lam-rim, said,

Even to learn worldly crafts, things we can understand by seeing them with our eyes, we need a teacher to show us. So how is it possible that we, who have just come from the lower realms and are entering a path where we have never been before, could travel it without a guide?

We need a teacher to learn even the ordinary activities of this life, such as learning the alphabet, fixing a bicycle or baking a cake. We even need somebody to teach us how to clean a room professionally. Even for simple things that we can learn how to do by watching somebody else, we need a teacher, somebody who knows how to do them.

Even to go to a place we haven't been before, we need a guide, someone to explain to us how to get there. So, how is it possible for us to follow the path to enlightenment without a guide? We have just come from the lower realms and are trying to go along a new path, the path to liberation and enlightenment, where we have never been during beginningless lifetimes, so of course we need someone to guide us. We can't do it alone. Since the path to liberation and enlightenment is totally unknown to us, we need to rely upon a guru, somebody who knows the whole path. There is no way we can go to the state of enlightenment without a guru.

That is why Geshe Potowa also said,

In order to achieve enlightenment, there is nothing more important than the guru.

In explaining why we need a guru, the highly attained yogi Khedrub Sangye Yeshe said,

Without a helmsman, a boat cannot take you across the ocean. Like that, without a guru, you cannot be liberated from samsara, even if you have complete knowledge of Dharma.

Just as a boat on its own cannot reach the other side of an ocean, we cannot be liberated from samsara without a guru, even if we have memorized and intellectually understood all of the sutra and tantra root texts and commentaries. Even if we have acquired all possible intellectual knowledge of Dharma, even if we have a whole library of texts in our mind and can recite them all by heart, without a guru, we cannot be liberated from samsara, let alone achieve enlightenment.

To be liberated from samsara, we have to generate the path within our mind, and generating the path depends upon receiving the blessings of the guru. Even if we have complete intellectual understanding of the teachings, we won't be able to generate realizations unless we receive the blessings of the guru within our heart. This is why we need to seek and devote ourselves to a guru.

In the Hinayana, the fundamental practice to achieve liberation is to live in moral conduct—but there's no way to receive the lineage of ordination without a teacher. Also, without a virtuous friend, we can't receive the blessings in our own mind that enable us to perfectly understand the teachings.

Specifically, in tantra, there is no way we can achieve enlightenment without a perfectly qualified vajra guru planting the seeds of the four *kayas* in our mind through granting the blessings of the four complete initiations of Highest Yoga Tantra. Each initiation leaves a potential, or seed, in the mind of the vajra disciple. It is through the kindness of the vajra guru that these four initiations are given, thus planting the seeds of the four kayas and enabling us to meditate on the paths of secret mantra. If we try to practice Highest Yoga Tantra without a guru, we won't achieve enlightenment.

With respect to tantra, and even sutra, without a teacher, we can't have infallible understanding of the profound meanings of the teachings. Even if we have complete intellectual understanding of the scriptures, how can we reach enlightenment without a guru? We can't even be liberated from samsara.

Padmasambhava, the second Buddha, explained why we need a guru in the following way:

If you don't recognize the guru as a buddha, your mind cannot be liberated by the blessings. Therefore, reflect on the qualities of the guru and then make requests to him.

In the first part of this verse Padmasambhava explains why we need a guru and in the second part how to develop the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha once we have found one.

Padmasambhava is saying that if we don't recognize, or realize, that our guru is a buddha, we don't have devotion, and without guru devotion, no blessings will enter our heart. If we don't have the root of the path to enlightenment, the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha, the door of the blessings is closed and there is no way for us to receive blessings from the guru. Guru devotion opens the door of the blessings.

It is guru devotion that enables us to receive blessings in our mental continuum, which then makes it possible for us to develop our mind, to generate the realizations of the path by listening, reflecting and meditating. The blessings that enable us to liberate our mind come from our devotion. This guru devotion is not just some external pretence of devotion; it is the heart-felt devotion that comes through recognizing that the guru is a buddha. This realization comes by purifying obstacles and accumulating extensive merit, then meditating on the guru devotion section of the lam-rim teachings.

What we want is to liberate our mind from all our delusions and obscurations and to achieve enlightenment. To do this, we need to liberate our mind from all our wrong conceptions, which prevent achievement of liberation and enlightenment, and to generate all the realizations of the path. Actualizing the whole path and thus completely liberating our mind depend solely on receiving the blessings of the guru within our mental continuum. The guru's blessings enable us to generate the path to enlightenment and that path liberates our mind from all delusions and obscurations, even the subtle obscurations that prevent our mental continuum from becoming omniscient mind. If we don't receive the blessings of the guru, our mind can't be liberated from all our delusions and obscurations.

Our mind is liberated from obscurations through actualizing the remedy of the whole path to enlightenment, which depends on receiving the blessings of the guru within our mind, which in turn depends on having the cause of blessings, the devotion that sees the guru as an enlightened being. The more we are able to see the guru as a buddha, the more blessings we receive.

Just as a seed cannot produce a sprout without water, there is no way for us to generate the path to enlightenment within our mind without blessings.

To experience the path within our mind, we have to receive the blessings of the guru. Unless we receive the blessings of the guru, our mind cannot be liberated from wrong conceptions. And if our mind is not liberated from wrong conceptions, we cannot achieve the state of enlightenment or fulfill all the wishes of sentient beings, freeing them from all their sufferings and obscurations and leading them to the peerless happiness of the state of enlightenment. Without the blessings of the guru, we cannot accomplish this extensive benefit for other sentient beings.

How do we receive the blessings of the guru? We have to train our mind in the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha and then make this devotion stable. Our own devotion makes it possible for us to receive the blessings of the guru in our heart. To do this, as Padmasambhava says, we need to *reflect on the qualities of the guru*. We should think of the qualities that we can now see and also of all the other qualities of a buddha, even those that we can't see with our present obscured mind. We should think that our own virtuous friend, the one with whom we have made actual Dharma contact, has all the qualities that a buddha has, which means looking at our guru as a buddha. We should also think about the relevant quotations and lines of reasoning in the sutra and tantra teachings, but especially in the lam-rim.

We should look at our guru only from the side of his good qualities and not from the side of his faults. Looking only at the guru's good qualities means seeing the guru as a buddha, as having ceased all faults and possessing all good qualities. (It doesn't matter whether or not the guru actually is a buddha.) In this way, we will see only qualities and no faults, because reflecting on the guru's qualities helps to stop thoughts of the guru's faults. Devotion will then develop and this devotion will cause us to receive the blessings of the guru. With the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha, we receive the actual blessings of buddha within our heart. In this way the root of all the good things up to enlightenment is established within us. This is the psychological method that enables us, as disciples, to succeed in all our wishes for happiness.

With that guru devotion, we then make requests to the guru to grant us blessings to pacify all our obscurations and to generate all the realizations of the path. We make requests to develop our own mind in the path to enlightenment. The ultimate request is, recalling the qualities of the guru, praying for our own body, speech and mind to become one with the guru's holy body, holy speech and holy mind. The main way to receive blessings is to request to receive all the qualities that the guru has.

Receiving blessings from the guru depends not on our physically being with the guru but on how much devotion toward the guru we have. Even if we spend our whole life physically living with our guru, it's not certain that we will be receiving his blessings. If our mind is empty of devotion, we won't receive any blessings, just as a flower hidden under a rock won't grow because it can't receive the rays of the sun. On the other hand, even if we are physically distant from our guru, if we have great devotion we will be mentally close to him and receive his blessings—like a flower in open sunlight.

His Holiness Trijang Rinpoche gave this advice to a nun who was a student of Lama Yeshe but said that she felt very distant from Lama. I don't know whether she understood or benefited from this advice, but it was very effective for my mind.

Manjushri's advice to Lama Tsongkhapa

How can we quickly achieve realizations of the whole path to enlightenment? When Lama Tsongkhapa asked Manjushri this question, Manjushri advised,

To train your mind in the actual body of the graduated path to enlightenment, you should attempt to purify your obstacles and accumulate merit, which are the necessary conditions. Then, you should make single-pointed requests to the guru inseparable from the deity in order to receive blessings within your heart. If you attempt to strongly and continuously practice in this way every day, realizations will come without any difficulty.

Purifying the obstacles that interfere with achieving realizations of the path is normally explained in terms of Vajrasattva recitation and meditation, but there are also many other purification practices.¹² The necessary condition of accumulating merit is normally explained in terms of the seven-limb practice, mandala offerings and so forth; there are also many other means to accumulate merit.¹³

¹² Other purification practices include prostrations to the Thirty-five Buddhas of Confession, Dorje Khadro fire pujas, Samayavajra meditation and recitation and making tsa-tsas. See also note 52.

¹³ Other means to accumulate merit include waterbowl offerings, refuge practice, tsog offerings and guru yoga.

The practice of guru devotion itself brings great purification, purifying all our past negative karmas created in relation to sentient beings and to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Devoting ourselves to the virtuous friend in thought and action is the most powerful way to purify all our past negative karmas. Many eons of negative karma can be purified in one day, one hour or even one minute.

To grow crops in a field, in addition to planting seeds in the ground we need the essential conditions of water and minerals; seeds cannot grow on their own. And if they are burned by fire, eaten by insects or taken away by birds, again they cannot grow. Similarly, without the essential conditions of purification and accumulation of merit, our realizations cannot grow.

In *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo advises that purifying negative karma and collecting merit is more important than meditating on the path to enlightenment. I think that this is true. When we do many prostrations with strong visualization, our mind usually starts to change and powerful devotion, compassion or renunciation can begin to arise. Of course, it all depends on the heaviness of our negative karma and obscurations. Some people need to do a lot of preliminary practices to really have a strong experience of the path. For others, simply starting the preliminary practices can change their mind.

The guru is the supreme merit field. Why is the term *field* used? Because a field is something we depend upon for our survival and our enjoyment. We plant seeds in a field, the seeds grow and we then receive crops. It is similar with the guru. Like planting seeds in a field, through doing prostrations, making offerings, making requests and so forth, we accumulate merit, from which we receive all happiness: the happiness of this and future lives, liberation from samsara and great liberation, or full enlightenment. We receive all our past, present and future happiness and success in dependence upon the holy object of the guru.

Making single-pointed requests to the guru means transforming our ordinary impure mind, which sees faults in the guru, into the pure mind of guru devotion, which sees the guru as a buddha, whether or not he actually is an enlightened being. By looking at him as a buddha, we will then see him as a buddha.

While we are training our mind in the meditations of the steps of the path to enlightenment, we need to make strong single-pointed requests to the guru out of guru devotion. Single-pointedly praying with guru devotion causes us to receive the blessings of the guru. Just as a seed needs to

receive water in order to grow, we need to receive the blessings of the guru for the realizations of the path to grow within our mind. The potential for these realizations, including omniscient mind, has been in our mind for beginningless rebirths. Receiving blessings is the condition that causes this potential to manifest in realizations of the path, from guru devotion up to enlightenment.

We need to do strong practice of purification and collection of merit and put effort into guru devotion. Even if in the beginning our mind is stubborn and we find it hard to feel devotion, with strong, sustained practice of the preliminaries and of guru devotion, our heart will open and we will start to feel devotion.

Unless our mind is ripened by purifying obscurations and accumulating merit and by receiving blessings through making requests to the guru, no matter how hard we attempt to meditate on the path, we will be extremely slow to generate realizations. If our mind is ripened, however, realizations will come quickly and easily.

The actual body of the practice is training our mind in the steps of the path to enlightenment, but it is only with all these necessary conditions that we can succeed in actualizing the path. This is how the Dharma has been practiced by all the lineage lamas of the path to enlightenment, by all the past yogis and pandits, including Guru Shakyamuni Buddha himself. All the lineage lamas, down to my present gurus, have practiced the path and actualized realizations in this way

Take Milarepa, for example. It was by correctly devoting himself to his guru Marpa that Milarepa achieved enlightenment not just in one life but in the brief lifetime of a degenerate time. Milarepa actually achieved enlightenment within a number of years, as did Gyalwa Ensapa, Chökyi Dorje and many other Indian and Tibetan yogis. There are many similar stories about the guru devotion practice of the Kadampa geshe and past yogis and lineage lamas, as well as about present practitioners.¹⁴

From Manjushri's advice to Lama Tsongkhapa, we can understand that realizations don't come simply from listening to teachings on a subject. Of course, disciples whose minds are ripe are able to realize impermanence and death, emptiness or other subjects even the first time they hear teachings on them—in past lives such disciples left many imprints of the lam-rim on their mind, purified many obscurations and accumulated much merit. The minds

¹⁴ See *Enlightened Beings: Life Stories from the Ganden Oral Tradition*.

of such disciples have already been prepared, as advised by Manjushri; they have purified much obscuration and accumulated extensive merit, which are the necessary conditions, and have generated guru devotion, the cause that enables them to receive blessings and realizations. Those whose minds are qualified by having gathered all the necessary causes and conditions are able to gain realizations simply by hearing the Dharma.

For the rest of us, however, from Manjushri's reply to Lama Tsongkhapa we can understand that we can't expect to understand everything simply from listening to teachings; we can't expect to feel in our heart what we hear. We can see that reading a Dharma book or listening to Dharma teachings alone is not sufficient to understand Dharma. We need all the necessary causes and conditions of purification, accumulation of merit and guru devotion.

The four general benefits of guru devotion

1. Receiving the blessings of the guru We now understand the general reason that we need to practice guru devotion. If we have guru devotion, which means seeing the guru as a buddha, we receive the blessings of the guru, and those blessings then become the cause to achieve realizations of the path to enlightenment. In this way, we are able to achieve full enlightenment. We are then able to do perfect work for all the numberless sentient beings, liberating them from all their suffering and its causes and bringing them to enlightenment. That is the ultimate goal of our life. Because that is our ultimate goal, guru devotion, the root of the path to enlightenment, becomes an essential practice in our life.

Just as rain moistens the ground so that seeds planted in a field can grow, the rain of the guru's blessings moistens the field of our mind so that realizations can grow. If we have no devotion, we have no cause to receive the blessings of the guru, and without blessings we have no cause for realizations of the path to enlightenment. This means that we can't achieve enlightenment and accomplish the ultimate goal of our life.

Receiving the guru's blessings is the first benefit of practicing guru devotion; there are three other benefits, as well.

2. Guru devotion protects our mind from delusions The second benefit is that guru devotion protects our mind such that delusions and negative thoughts don't arise, especially negative thoughts toward the guru. Having the stable devotion that sees the guru as a buddha protects us from generat-

ing anger or heresy toward the guru, which are the greatest obstacles to all happiness, from that of this life up to the bliss of enlightenment. The best protection comes from guru devotion. Guru devotion protects us from suffering and from the obstacles to achieving realizations of the path to enlightenment. Since our devotion prevents us from creating obstacles, it allows us to receive all the realizations. The main reason to eliminate obstacles is to develop realizations—without obstacles, we can develop our mind; if we are creating obstacles, we can't develop our mind. Without the protection of guru devotion, life becomes difficult.

Anger and heresy can arise when our guru does something or tells us to do something that we don't like (which means that our self-cherishing or attachment doesn't like) or that we aren't interested in. Allowing anger, heresy or other negative thoughts to arise for even a moment is very dangerous because the virtuous friend is the most powerful object in our life. Generating negative thoughts of anger or heresy toward our guru creates very heavy negative karma, the greatest obstacle to developing our mind in the path to enlightenment, to developing our potential. Generating anger or heresy toward the guru creates the greatest of all obstacles and results in the heaviest suffering, causing us to be reborn in hell and to experience unimaginable suffering there for an incredible length of time. We have to suffer in hell for eons equal in number to the moments of our anger.

Anger, heresy and other negative minds often arise, as well as the thought that the guru is an ordinary person. In *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Lama Tsongkhapa explains that simply thinking that our guru is an ordinary person becomes causes our experiences or realizations to degenerate.¹⁵ This means it is an obstacle to the development of our mind in the path. This quotation alone is reason enough to practice guru devotion, to see the guru as a buddha.

3. Guru devotion protects our merit The third benefit of practicing guru devotion is that, by stopping the arising of negative thoughts toward the guru, guru devotion also protects us from destroying many eons of merit, the cause of happiness and realizations.

4. Guru devotion protects us from delayed realizations The fourth benefit is that guru devotion protects us from the delay of realizations. When we

¹⁵ *The Great Treatise*, Volume One, p. 90.

generate anger or heresy for even a moment we postpone realizations of the path to enlightenment for many eons. This is the damage we cause to our own mental continuum if we generate anger or heresy toward our guru.

In summary, by helping us prevent negative thoughts toward the virtuous friend, the practice of guru devotion protects us from creating the heavy negative karmas that would cause us to spend many eons suffering in the lower realms, destroy the merit accumulated over many eons and delay our realizations. On top of that, by practicing guru devotion, we receive the blessings of the guru, the cause of realizations of the path to enlightenment.

If we don't have guru devotion to protect our mind, if we don't know the meditations on how to look at the guru as a buddha, negative thoughts will constantly arise, and we will constantly create the heaviest obstacles in relation to the virtuous friend. We will constantly create obstacles to our achieving enlightenment, liberation and the happiness of future lives. Also, we will constantly create causes to be reborn in the lower realms. Besides this, we won't receive the blessings of the guru, because when negative thoughts toward the guru are there, there's no space for devotion, just as two people can't sit in the same seat on a plane.

In a plane, just before you take off, flight attendants introduce the safety features of the aircraft. They start with how to put the seat-belt on and then show you where the life-jacket is stored and how to put it on. They also explain about the oxygen, the lights and the exits through which to escape. (This is all in case the plane lands very nicely in the water and stays afloat; then you can do all these things.) It's all for your safety, in case something dangerous happens. Here, for safety in traveling along the lam-rim to enlightenment, guru devotion practice is the life-jacket and all the other safety devices as well.

We can now see that guru devotion is the essential practice in terms of protecting our mind and attaining full enlightenment. Whether we will achieve realizations of the path and enlightenment and how quickly this will happen depend on our guru devotion practice, on our generating stable devotion and correctly devoting ourselves to the guru. Once we understand why guru devotion is crucial, we can't wait even a second to have this realization, this transformation of mind.

From this basic introduction, you can understand the importance of guru devotion practice and why all the lam-rim texts describe guru devotion as

the root of the path to enlightenment. Because of Lama Tsongkhapa's skill in guiding sentient beings, he put guru devotion as the very first subject of meditation in his lam-rim teachings, before the initial lam-rim path, perfect human rebirth.

When we study lam-rim in the Lama Tsongkhapa tradition, because guru devotion is the first subject, we understand from the very beginning what brings success in attaining the whole path to enlightenment and what creates obstacles to success in achieving realizations. After first explaining what makes our practice successful and what creates the greatest obstacle to our success, Lama Tsongkhapa then explains the complete path, from perfect human rebirth up to enlightenment.

In other traditions the first meditation subject is perfect human rebirth or impermanence and death, with guru devotion coming after refuge or the faults of samsara. Of course, in some ways this makes sense, especially for people in the West. After an introduction to the four noble truths—true suffering, true cause of suffering, true cessation of suffering and true path—you understand that to achieve ultimate happiness you need to actualize the path, so of course you need somebody to teach you the path. There then comes the need of a guru. For people in the West, I think the subject of guru devotion fits very well there, after an introduction to the nature of samsara and the four noble truths, because the need of a guru, of someone who can show you the path, has been made very clear. You then feel the need to look for a teacher, a guru, and to rely on him.

Lama Tsongkhapa, however, put the subject of guru devotion first. Everything is clearly explained at the very beginning: the advantages of having a guru; the disadvantages of not having a guru; the shortcomings if, having found a guru and made a connection, you make mistakes in your relationship with him; and how to devote to the guru with thought and with action. By being introduced to guru devotion practice first, you become careful from the very beginning not to make mistakes. You then start your Dharma practice, your spiritual life, without mistakes because you have full understanding of the subject of devoting yourself to the virtuous friend. You understand that this is the root that enables you to successfully actualize the rest of the path. By being educated in this practice from the very beginning, you don't make mistakes. I think this is why Lama Tsongkhapa put this subject at the very beginning.

Unless you know the importance of correct devotion to the virtuous friend, no matter how much the rest of the path is explained to you, you

won't be successful in actualizing it because, without guru devotion, you will have no way to stop obstacles and no way to receive blessings. With the practice of guru devotion, all your wishes, including your wish to quickly achieve enlightenment, will be fulfilled. Therefore, the teaching on how to devote to the virtuous friend is the most important one, more important than any other teaching. It is the root of all happiness, from now up to enlightenment.

It is very important to study lam-rim from beginning to end, and to study and learn the whole teaching on guru devotion. In the guru devotion outlines, the first outline is the eight benefits of correctly devoting to a guru. Next comes the eight shortcomings of making mistakes in your devotion. Then comes how to devote to the guru with thought, which includes meditating on the kindness of the guru, and how to devote to the guru with action. (See appendix 1.) It is very important not only to understand all these outlines, but to meditate on them and achieve the realizations. The way to do effective meditation on each of the four basic outlines is to establish a pure thought of guru devotion, seeing the guru as a buddha, after each outline.

In his lam-rim teachings, Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo mentions,

If we are able to look at the guru only from the side of his qualities and never allow the thought of faults in the guru to arise, we will achieve enlightenment in one lifetime.

Here Pabongka Rinpoche gives the heart advice. The answer to whether we can achieve enlightenment and how quickly we can achieve it lies in our guru devotion practice.