



The mahasiddhas Tilopa and Naropa; Central Tibet, 16th century, pigment on cloth | Courtesy Rubin Museum of Art

“If I had a disciple worthy of the name,” said the 11th-century Indian tantric adept Tilopa to his student Naropa, “he would jump off the roof of this building.” Naropa immediately jumped and ended up in agony on the ground. Tilopa then explained to Naropa how his suffering was due to attachment to conceptual thought. This well-known story is cited as an example

of how students of Vajrayana Buddhism should practice devotion to their guru. Now imagine a contemporary teacher—let’s call him “Rinpoche”—asking the same of his disciple Mary today. As a result Mary jumps off the roof of a dharma center in San Francisco and fractures her spine. Fortunately for Naropa, Tilopa was able to heal him through his magical powers. Mary is hospitalized and may not walk again.

How are we to understand such accounts of guru devotion? Am I to believe that the story of Tilopa and Naropa actually took place? Can I imagine Buddhist societies in India or Tibet that did not object to religious teachers behaving in this way? Or should it be read as an inspiring fable to strengthen one’s faith? Is it any different from the biblical account of Abraham being told by God to sacrifice his son Isaac? Like Naropa, Abraham obeys the command. Yet just as he is about to cut his son’s throat, Isaac too is spared by magic, in this case the intervention of an angel and the appearance of an unlucky ram. Did this event happen in a historical time and place? Or is it too just an allegory?

Both stories emphasize how the kind of faith needed to embark on the path to enlightenment or salvation must be as unwavering as that of Naropa and Abraham. Yet the point is not to imitate the outward behavior of Naropa or Abraham but to emulate their heartfelt inner commitment to the dharma or God. The stories graphically illustrate how remaining true to one’s deepest values is the most important consideration. This is what makes the difference between a person who practices mindfulness in order to realize her ultimate goals in life and someone else for whom it is a means to improve his golf handicap.

### **Related: Dropping the Bodhisattva Gods**

After eight years as a student of Tibetan Buddhism, I chose to leave that tradition and pursue my training elsewhere. One of the main reasons for this decision was that I could not accept the doctrine of guru devotion. From the outset, I was uncomfortable with the practice of taking refuge in the lama (the Tibetan equivalent of Sanskrit “guru”) in addition to the conventional triple gem of the Buddha, dharma, and sangha, for it raised one’s teacher to the same status as the three traditional jewels. Tsongkhapa, the 14th-century founder of the Gelug tradition, opened one of his best-known poems, *The Ground of All Excellence*, with this praise of the guru:

You, kind Lord, are the ground of all excellence, Right devotion to you is the root of the path.

His magnum opus, *The Great Exposition of the Stages on the Path*, likewise places guru devotion at the very beginning. The late Nyingma teacher Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche affirmed that “devotion is the essence of the path, and if we have in mind nothing but the guru and feel nothing but fervent devotion, whatever occurs is perceived as his blessing.” As much as I loved my own teacher Geshe Rabten, no matter how hard I tried, I could not surrender my

will to him in these terms.

My difficulties were exacerbated by having already received higher tantric initiations from Serkong Tsenshap Rinpoche before I began studying with Geshe Rabten. As a condition for receiving those initiations I had to accept Serkong Rinpoche as my Vajrayana guru, promise to recite the *sadhanas* (prayers) of certain deities every day for the rest of my life, and take vows of allegiance (*samaya*) to him, the first of which is “never to disrespect the Vajra master.” To break any of these vows, I was told, would result in my being reborn in Vajra hell.

I was encouraged to take these initiations at the age of 21, at the height of my youthful enthusiasm for everything Tibetan. I greatly admired Serkong Rinpoche but did not know him well. I was reassured that even if I were unable to practice such advanced teachings in this life, the initiations would plant seeds in my consciousness that would result in a fortunate rebirth in the next. In retrospect, at that point in my life I had insufficient experience in dharma practice, was spiritually idealistic and immature, and was quite unprepared psychologically to take such a step. The traditional requirement that the student first thoroughly investigate the qualities of the guru before receiving an initiation was ignored.

Because I knew about the centrality of guru yoga in the Tibetan tradition, my inability to practice it in a heartfelt way made me feel fraudulent, burdened by negative karma, and effectively barred from making much progress in this life. I recognized that my resistance to this practice stemmed from an upbringing in a secular, democratic culture that privileged independence of mind, reason, and personal responsibility. I also recalled the injunction of the Buddha, often cited by Tibetan lamas, to “examine my teachings as carefully as a goldsmith would assay gold, and not to accept them just out of faith in me,” which had inspired me to pursue my training in philosophy and dialectics with Geshe Rabten. I had likewise memorized the Tibetan text of the *Four Reliances*, a pithy four-line verse from the sutras about what to rely upon in one’s practice. The first line says: “Rely not on the person, rely on the teaching.” I was equally aware that in Shantideva’s *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, which I was translating from Tibetan at the time, guru devotion played no significant role at all. What I was being taught seemed to be pulling me in two opposing directions.

Eventually, these tensions inside me reached a point where something snapped. I clearly recall the moment when I was rapidly chanting the various tantric *sadhanas* and mantras I was obliged to recite daily and it struck me with irrefutable force: this is ridiculous. At that moment I stopped. I never again spent an hour or more of my day intoning my “commitments.” I was relieved to have recovered my own authority for living my life. I realized that I had been intimidated by a culture of fear. I no longer needed to ask my teachers’ permission for what I could and couldn’t do with my mind. If this means that I will go to Vajra hell, then so be it.

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I then spent four years as a monk in Songgwang Sa, a Son (Zen) monastery in South Korea, under the guidance of my teacher Kusan Sunim. Compared to Tibetan Buddhism, Korean Son had an entirely different feel to it that I found difficult to put my finger on. On the surface there were many obvious differences: the form of meditation practice, the philosophy that underpinned it, the Chinese-Taoist flavor of much of the teaching, the organization of monastic life, and so on. Affectively, though, what made the crucial difference for me was the way in which students related to the teacher.

I found it curious that everyone at the monastery related to each other as though they were members of an extended family. This was quite explicit. My teacher was my “father,” his “brothers” were my “uncles,” and so on. Once I was accepted into the monastery I became part of this family and was warmly received and cared for. But I also found myself tied by a strong sense of familial allegiance to which my individual preferences and desires had to be subordinated. My first duty was neither to myself nor my teacher but to the family. I was once told in all seriousness: “If the assembly of monks decides to go to hell, then you must go to hell too.”

It was never once suggested that I had to devote myself to Kusan Sunim as if he were a buddha. At no point did I have to make an oath of allegiance to him in order to receive instruction. Everyone in Songgwang Sa nonetheless held him in high esteem. The monks acknowledged the depth of his insight, respected his authority as the “grandfather” of the monastery, and accepted his guidance as a Son master. I slowly came to realize that what made the affective difference for me was that Korean Son had evolved and was embedded in a Confucian rather than a feudal matrix of values.

Confucianism is an ethical and political philosophy based on the principle of maintaining harmony within five core social relationships: between ruler and subject, father and son, brothers, husband and wife, and friends. For harmony to prevail, each person must understand their place in the social order and behave accordingly. In this way, authority and responsibility are more widely distributed throughout society rather than being concentrated in a single figure or elite group. The Tibetan (and Japanese) traditions, by contrast, evolved and were embedded in a feudal society, where unquestioning loyalty and obedience to the feudal lord were of paramount importance in maintaining social order.

As Buddhism has moved from one culture to another in the course of its history, it has come to adopt the social frameworks of its new hosts. Neither a feudal nor a Confucian model is thus intrinsically more suited to the practice of the dharma. If we go back to the time of the Buddha in 5th-century BCE India, we can see how Gotama sought to found his community

on the republican model of society that still prevailed in the Vajjian confederacy of clans rather than adopt the new form of imperial monarchy that was emerging throughout the Eastern Gangetic basin. The history of Buddhism in India, however, shows that over time it adopted increasingly monarchic and feudal models of organization, particularly as Mahayana and Vajrayana forms of the dharma became more widespread.

Before he died, Gotama told his followers: “After I am gone, do not think you will have no teacher; the dharma will be your teacher.” Unlike a king, he did not expect any one person to be his successor. Instead, he envisaged a community that would be governed by the impersonal law of the teachings he had delivered, just as a republic is ultimately governed by a rule of law rather than any individual ruler. In the *Discourse to the Kalamas*, he explicitly warns against believing something “because my guru said it.” The validity of a teaching has nothing to do with the qualities of the teacher. All that matters is whether, when put into practice, it can effect a real change in the way you live.

While the concept of the guru was present in the Upanishads that predated the advent of Buddhism, Gotama rejected it in favor of finding a good friend (*kalyanamitta*), whose role was to help you enter the eightfold path and thereby become independent of others in your practice of the dharma. Yet for Vajrayana Buddhists, these teachings belong to an “inferior vehicle” (*hinayana*) for people of middling capacity.

The student is still required to pass through these Hinayana stages of practice, but for the sole purpose of advancing to the superior Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings that can lead those of great capacity to complete enlightenment in a single lifetime. And for that, devotion to the guru is indispensable.

By the time Buddhism made its way to Tibet in the 8th century CE, it had fully incorporated the guru model of spiritual authority that prevailed in the Indian tradition. As Buddhism further evolved in Tibet, the doctrines and practices of the Vajrayana were merged with feudal structures of power, which together produced the distinctive teachings and institutions of Tibetan Buddhism that we know today. This resulted in the emergence of a Buddhocracy (initially called “Lamaism” by scholars), where, for the first time in Buddhist history, dharma and politics were fused and a monk became head of state. Coupled with the system of reincarnating *tulkus*, a spiritual aristocracy emerged whose autocratic rule extended into every valley, village, and town of the land.

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In 1993, I was invited with 21 other Western Buddhist teachers to a conference in Dharamshala with the Dalai Lama. By this time I had disrobed, was married, and lived in an

experimental Buddhist community in Britain. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss how to address issues of ethical misconduct among Buddhist teachers. The Dalai Lama was concerned about the number of letters he had received from Western students who claimed to have been mistreated by Tibetan lamas. In most cases, this had to do with alleged sexual abuse. One of the teachers mentioned in this regard was Sogyal Rinpoche, who in August 2017 was forced to resign as the head of the Rigpa community because of these and other allegations. Although Sogyal had been invited to attend, neither he nor any representatives of Rigpa came to the gathering. Only three other Tibetan lamas were present, none of whom was prominent in the West.

### **Related: How to Heal After Your Teacher Crosses the Line**

At the beginning of our three days together, the Dalai Lama made the point that it is meaningless to consider anyone a teacher unless they have students. He emphasized how it is thus the student who invests the teacher with authority. For the teacher then to use that authority to take advantage of the student for his own personal ends constitutes a profound betrayal of the trust invested in him. In the Vajrayana, where you are required to devote yourself completely to the guru, the degree of vulnerability (on the part of the student) and potential for abuse (on the part of the teacher) are ratcheted up considerably. Since you have vowed not to criticize the guru and have been instructed to regard whatever he says or does as the enlightened activity of a buddha, there is nothing, in principle, that he could not ask of you. Were he to tell you to jump off the roof of a building, you should jump.

In reality, however, this kind of thing rarely if ever happens. As long as student and teacher treat each other with mutual care, trust, and respect, which is generally the case, the guru-disciple relationship in Vajrayana works well enough. The problem is systemic. It lies in the synergy of tantric doctrines and feudal structures that allow a teacher to legitimate abusive behavior to himself and his students. The lamas can thus behave like princes or kings who expect unquestioning loyalty from their subjects. Old Tibet was a society that tolerated serfdom and cruel and unusual punishments; there was little if any freedom of religious or political expression; and the authority of the lay and clerical aristocracy was absolute and largely unaccountable. The Dalai Lama has condemned these features of pre-1959 Tibet. I can imagine that few Tibetans today would seek to restore them as they once were.

Inevitably, the *raison d'être* of any culture forced into exile from its homeland is the safeguarding of its threatened traditions, which in the case of Tibet includes its unique form of Buddhism. Since preservation has become the priority, loss of self-determination as a nation-state has constrained the freedom of Tibetans to adapt their religion to the changing conditions of modernity. The Dalai Lama speaks passionately about the need to reform elements of Tibetan religious culture, but in practice he has little power to enforce much change. And when he does try to impose his views—as in the case of condemning the Gelug protector deity Dorje Shugden—he risks unleashing a conservative backlash that

arguably makes the situation worse.

At the conclusion of our meeting in Dharamshala, an open letter was drafted to address the issue of misconduct among teachers. “Each student must be encouraged,” it says, “to take responsible measures to confront teachers with unethical aspects of their conduct. If the teacher shows no sign of reform, students should not hesitate to publicize any unethical behavior of which there is irrefutable evidence. This should be done irrespective of other beneficial aspects of his or her work and of one’s spiritual commitment to that teacher. . . . No matter what level of spiritual attainment a teacher has, or claims to have reached, no person can stand above the norms of ethical conduct.”

The publication of this letter had little effect at the time. Neither the Dalai Lama nor any of the other Tibetans present at the meeting signed it. Now, nearly a quarter of a century later, it is being cited to support the eight students who in July 2017 published a detailed account of the “crazy wisdom” of their teacher Sogyal Rinpoche. In the interim, however, many senior Tibetan lamas, including the Dalai Lama himself, appeared in public with Sogyal Rinpoche and taught at his centers. For many Western students, the ongoing presence of these teachers was taken as an endorsement of Sogyal’s behavior and lifestyle and thus as a slap in the face for those who had complained of abuse. Among the responses to the students’ allegations, both Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche and Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche appeared to be more concerned about the students breaking their oath of allegiance (*samaya*) to their teacher than about the suffering of those who said they had been mistreated. Khenchen Namdrol Rinpoche has denounced them as agents of demonic forces, accusing them of the heinous sin of causing schism in the sangha, which is morally equivalent to killing one’s parents, killing an arahant, or drawing the blood of a buddha.

If I were a Tibetan lama I would not appreciate being lectured to on these topics by an apostate like me. It is not my responsibility to reform Tibetan Buddhism; that belongs to the lamas and their students alone. In his own response to these allegations, the Dalai Lama has said: “I feel some of these lama institutions have some sort of influence of the feudal system. That is outdated and must end—that feudal influence.” It is encouraging that the Dalai Lama identifies feudalism as one of the roots of the problem, but he offers no suggestions as to how it might be ended. In practice, can the “outdated” influence of feudalism be removed without a fundamental restructuring of Tibetan Buddhism itself?

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche’s response to the crisis suggests one way forward. He explains that the only reason for seeing one’s teacher as a buddha is in order to recognize how the same awakened qualities permeate oneself, other human beings, and the very world in which we live. The guru, in this sense, ceases to be exclusively identified with one’s flesh and blood teacher. The teacher’s role becomes that of helping his or her students see every single life situation as their true teacher. Such a perspective, Mingyur argues, is the “life-blood” of the Vajrayana tradition and the “very highest ethical standard” to which practitioners

can aspire.

The eight students who wrote to Sogyal concluded their statement with these words: “Our deepest wish is to see Buddhism flourish in the West. We no longer want to indulge in the stupidity of seeing the Guru as perfect at any cost. The path does not require us to sacrifice our wisdom to discern, our ethics and morality, or our integrity, on the altar of ‘Guru Yoga.’” In the light of these concerns, it may be helpful to reconsider the *Four Reliances*:

Rely not on the person, rely on the teaching.  
Rely not on the words, rely on the meaning.  
Rely not on what’s cryptic, rely on what’s clear.  
Rely not on opinion, rely on wisdom.



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