

# *Ethics in the Teacher-Student Relationship: The Responsibilities of Teachers and Students*

Interview with HH the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso<sup>1</sup>

**Western Buddhist Teacher:** What are the qualities of a good teacher?

**His Holiness the Dalai Lama:** There are specific requirements for each kind of teacher. These are described in the Vinaya, in Mahayana texts such as *Mahayanasutralamkara*, and in the tantras.<sup>2</sup>

In the past teachers were not appointed. Rather, through diligent training a person became a good practitioner. If others came and asked that person to teach, he or she taught those few students. As those students practiced and developed good qualities, others gained respect for their teacher, and gradually that person became known as a great teacher. Because this is a natural process, there is less danger of a corrupted person becoming a well-known teacher. In the monastic system, the process of becoming a teacher was organized to some extent. But in modern times the word “teacher” reminds us of someone in an academic field who, after completing certain requirements, is appointed as a teacher by an organization, whether or not that person has any students. In the future, perhaps Buddhists could form an

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<sup>1</sup> From notes taken during the meeting of H.H. the Dalai Lama and Western Buddhist Teachers in Dharamsala, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Tibetan Buddhism speaks of three types of practice: the Vinaya, the Mahayana, and the Vajrayana (Tantrayana). In Vinaya practice (here the word “Vinaya” is used in its more general sense as explained in a previous note), one seeks liberation from cyclic existence. To bring this about, one takes refuge in the Three Jewels, tries to avoid the ten destructive actions, and takes precepts as a lay or monastic follower of the Buddha. The lay precepts include the five precepts, and the monastic precepts include those of the novice and the fully ordained monastic. In Mahayana or Paramitayana practice, one seeks full enlightenment in order to benefit others most effectively. To actualize this, one takes the bodhisattva precepts and practices the six paramitas (the six perfections or far-reaching attitudes)—generosity, ethics, patience, joyous effort, concentration, and wisdom. Vajrayana is a branch of the Mahayana, and thus the motivation is the same: to be able to benefit others most effectively and thus to become a fully enlightened Buddha. There are various classes of tantra, all of which involve initiation into the practices of meditation deities. In the higher classes of tantra, one takes the tantric precepts. The Vajrayana has special meditation techniques such as visualizing oneself as a Buddha figure and working with the subtle energies of the body and subtle levels of mind. Practicing Vajrayana is based on practicing Mahayana, and that in turn is based on practicing Vinaya. Because there are these three types of practice, there are three types of teachers, with different qualities to look for in each and different ways of relating to each. Although the above may not be the structural perspective of all Buddhist traditions, His Holiness here is speaking from the viewpoint of the Vajrayana as practiced in Tibet.

organization to certify people as teachers after examining their Dharma understanding as well as their conduct.

Each Buddhist center could make available the requirements for the various levels of teachers and instruct people how to select teachers. As I always emphasize, in the beginning one should consider the person explaining the Dharma not as a guru, but as a Dharma friend. After a year or two, when both people know each other well, the student may develop the conviction that this person is reliable and entrust this teacher to be their guru. Then their relationship becomes one of guru-disciple.

Many of the problems Buddhism is currently facing in the West have arisen because this is an early stage of the transmission of the Dharma to Western countries, and there is the opportunity for charlatans and unqualified people to teach. However, as Buddhism becomes more rooted in the culture and people understand it better, they will know how to judge teachers' qualities and will protect themselves. This is part of a natural process as Dharma takes root.

Tibet in the last thirty years has seen the extensive destruction of Buddhism. Now, with comparatively more freedom, there is a revival, but here too some people are taking advantage of the situation. In Lhasa there are some men who in the morning dress like monks and do puja for those who pay, but in the afternoon they get drunk and even steal. People are so eager to learn the Dharma and to meet religious people that they are easily deceived. In Tibet before 1959 and in India now, there are many lamas and many monastics, so people can choose, and there is less danger that they will be deceived or abused. In time, more people in the West will have a better knowledge of Buddhadharma and of the qualities to look for in a good teacher, and problems arising from unskillful teachers will decrease. Still, at this moment, we are facing problems, and we have to find ways to minimize the harm.

There are cases of lamas or monks who would never be in a position to give teachings or initiations to the Tibetan community, but in the West they suddenly become great lamas. This is admirable if it is someone who did not have the opportunity to show their great qualities yet remained humble in the Tibetan community. But if someone is merely taking advantage of the situation in the West to promote themselves, it is sad.

**WBT:** Some Asian teachers say that if you are a student, you need to follow the precepts, but once you have become an enlightened teacher, you do not. Some teachers' unconventional behavior is explained as a display of that person's skill, realization and compassion which those of us of lesser attainment cannot understand. Claiming this, some Buddhist teachers have misused money, power, sex, drugs, and alcohol. This is disconcerting to many people and makes some lose faith in the Dharma. Are such behavior and the explanation for it valid?

**HHDL:** Historically, although some Buddhist saints have acted with strange modes of ethical conduct, they were fully realized beings and knew what was of long-term benefit to others. But nowadays, such conduct is harmful to the Dharma and must be stopped. Even though one's realizations may be equal to those of divine beings, one's behavior must conform to convention. If someone says that since everyone has Buddha mind, any kind of conduct is acceptable, or that teachers do not need to follow ethical precepts, it indicates that they do not correctly understand emptiness or cause and effect.

Everyone is accountable for his or her behavior. For someone with full realization, ingesting urine, feces, alcohol, and human flesh are all the same.<sup>3</sup> But if those Buddhist teachers who ethically misbehave were to eat feces or drink urine, I doubt they would enjoy it!

The practice of tantra is never an excuse for unethical behavior. If one understands Vajrayana well, there are no grounds to excuse bad behavior. One of the tantras states that the ideal lay tantric practitioner should follow all the of the Vinaya (monastic discipline), but without wearing robes or engaging in monastic ceremonies. On a very advanced level of highest tantric practice, the joining of the male and female organs is a technique used to manifest the subtlest mind and gain the deepest wisdom of reality. This is using the physical body as a mechanical device for furthering insight, but there is no desire, emission, or orgasm. In fact, this is a method for overcoming desire. In the past, in Tibet, a practitioner had to be able to demonstrate supernatural powers, such as flying through the air, to qualify for such practice. If someone could not do that, they were not permitted to use these techniques. At present, there are very few Tibetan masters at that level—in fact, I do not know of any. Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche, whom I respect, commented that there are a few highly realized practitioners nowadays who can practice like this. I do know that some meditators in the mountains who keep the Vinaya strictly have attained extraordinary realizations.

If one presents the teachings clearly, others benefit. But if someone is supposed to propagate the Dharma and their behavior is harmful, it is our responsibility to criticize this with a good motivation. This is constructive criticism, and you do not need to feel uncomfortable doing it. In “The Twenty Verses on the Bodhisattvas’ Vows,” it says that there is no fault in whatever action you engage in with pure motivation. Buddhist teachers who abuse sex, power, money, alcohol, or drugs, and who, when faced with legitimate complaints from their own students, do not correct their behavior, should be criticized openly and by name. This may embarrass them and cause them to regret and stop their abusive behavior. Exposing the negative allows

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<sup>3</sup> At very high levels of the path, when a person has direct, non-conceptual realization of emptiness and has subdued all conceptions of inherent existence, they do not view phenomena in the same ordinary, dualistic ways that we ordinary people do. Thus, if they take urine, alcohol, and so forth, they do not react as we do, but see these things with a pure view.

space for the positive side to increase. When publicizing such misconduct, it should be made clear that such teachers have disregarded the Buddha's advice. However, when making public the ethical misconduct of a Buddhist teacher, it is only fair to mention their good qualities as well.

Buddhist teachers at Dharma centers should have nothing to do with the finances of the center. They should concentrate on teaching while the members manage the center's finances. Also, alcohol is often at the root of ethical misconduct. In Tibetan society, most laypeople drink alcohol although they consider themselves Buddhist. But the Buddha said clearly that anyone who calls him their teacher should not drink even a drop of alcohol.<sup>4</sup>

**WBT:** Some scriptures advise us to see the guru as the Buddha, but this seems inappropriate if a teacher is acting unethically. How do we relate to such teachers? Must we follow all instructions that a teacher gives even if they seem unethical or unwise to us?

**HHDL:** It is not skillful to teach beginners to see the guru as the Buddha. By studying the Vinaya, Mahayana, and tantric texts, we see a progression in how to regard and relate to one's teacher. On the first level, the Vinaya, Buddha Shakyamuni is accepted as the only enlightened teacher during this period of the flourishing of the Dharma. There is no mention of seeing your teacher as a Buddha. You see your teacher simply as a teacher, your abbot as an abbot, and relate to them on a human level. You see them as a wise elder, a sincere practitioner from whom you can learn. On the second stage, the guru is seen as equal to, or like a Buddha in the sense that the karma accumulated in relation to your teacher is similar to that accumulated in relation to the Buddha. In other words, by offering to or harming your teacher, the karma accumulated is equal to acting in the same way toward the Buddha himself.

Only when you are sufficiently mature should you be taught the tantric view of regarding the guru who gives you initiation as a Buddha. In tantric practice, we try to see all beings as Buddhas and the environment as a pure land, so it would be absurd not to see our teacher as a Buddha. However, this view should not be taught to beginners. If it is misunderstood, and thus gives the guru free license, it is like poison, destroying the teachings, the guru, and the disciple.

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<sup>4</sup> His Holiness is speaking here from the general view of the sutra path. In the tantra path, there are times where alcohol is used in certain rituals. Because tantric meditation deals with overcoming and transforming ordinary appearance and grasping at the ordinary, the alcohol is transformed by the power of one's meditation into a pure substance, and with that awareness it may be tasted. It is recommended that people who lack tantric realizations only taste a small amount during the ritual. However, those people with high realizations may take alcohol and it disturbs neither their mindfulness nor the clarity of their minds.

Just as there are three ways of relating to a guru, there are three ways of responding to his or her instructions if they contradict the Dharma. According to Vinaya, if a teacher tells you to do a non-Dharmic action, you should reject that advice. According to Paramitayana (the bodhisattva vehicle), if an instruction conforms with the Buddhist path, follow it. Otherwise, do not. According to Vajrayana (or Tantrayana), if a guru gives an instruction that is not in accord with the Dharma, the student should not follow it and should go to the teacher to clarify and explain why they cannot. This advice comes directly from the Buddha and is found in the scriptures. The same applies if you think the advice of your teacher is unskillful or unwise, even though it may be ethical. The purity of the teacher's motivation is not enough: the instruction must be appropriate for the situation and the culture of the place.

If the guru refuses to accept your reservations about following their non-Dharmic or unskillful instructions and kicks you out, pack your bags and leave. Your guru can tell you to leave physically, but they cannot make your mind leave the Dharma.

On the level of our personal spiritual practice, it is important to have faith in and reverence for our guru and to see that person in a positive light in order to make spiritual progress. But on the level of general Buddhism in society, seeing all actions of our teacher as perfect is like poison and can be misused. This attitude spoils our entire teachings by giving teachers a free hand to take undue advantage. If faith were sufficient to gain realizations, there would be no need for qualified teachers. Then the Buddha would not have needed to list the qualifications of a Vinaya, Paramitayana, or tantric guru.

Since I began to teach others, I have worked hard, so I do not have to depend on such license by telling others to see all my actions as pure. If I make a mistake, people should see it as a mistake and openly say so. Some people may say this attitude is rebellious, but if we all acted in accordance with it, we would be facing fewer problems today.

The Buddha was always humble, and he is our guru. He worked very hard on the path—living simply and practicing continuously. Many people nowadays think they are more privileged than the Buddha himself and do not need to do as he did. In fact, no one is above the Buddha, and we should follow the Buddha's example.

I have had many teachers, and I cannot accept seeing all their actions as pure. My two regents, who were among my sixteen teachers, fought one another in a power struggle that even involved the Tibetan army. When I sit on my meditation seat, I feel both were kind to me, and I have profound respect for both of them. Their fights do not matter. But when I had to deal with what was going on in the society, I said to them, "What you're doing is wrong!" We should not feel a conflict in loyalties by acting in this way. In our practice, we can view the guru's behavior as that of

a mahasiddha,<sup>5</sup> and in dealings with society, follow the general Buddhist approach and say that that behavior is wrong.

What is in the best interest of the Buddhadharma is much more important than anything concerning an individual guru. Therefore, if it is necessary to criticize a guru to save the Buddhadharma or to benefit several hundred of their disciples, do not hesitate. Afterwards you can go to that teacher and explain that you acted as you did with a pure motivation. If the guru gets angry, this is another indication of their shortcomings.

The scriptures say that because we cannot be sure who is a bodhisattva and who is not, we should not criticize anyone. In that context, Mao can be seen as a bodhisattva and we do not criticize him. That is on a private level, how we see it in our own mind. But in terms of Tibetan independence, I cannot say Mao was good because he destroyed our religion and our country! I must speak out! There is no conflict between these two views.

If you have not yet taken someone as your guru and you find out about their misconduct, then you can stop the relationship. If you have already taken tantric initiations from them, you should not develop disrespect or antipathy. In such cases, the Kalachakra Tantra advises us to maintain a neutral attitude and not pursue the relationship any further. You can keep your distance, while still considering that person as your guru because they have benefited you Dharmically in the past.

If someone is a student of an abusive teacher and you see that their relationship with that teacher is harmful, you should warn that student. But if that relationship is not harmful, I think you should leave it alone. The key to whether you create the negative karma of separating a disciple and teacher is your motivation. Actions motivated by an angry, judgmental attitude are to be avoided, while those based on compassion and tolerance are fine.

When Asian teachers pressure Westerners to raise or give money for their monasteries, you must use discrimination. In some cases where there is a legitimate need and the funds will benefit people and not just go towards constructing a lavish, empty building, it is good to help if you can. But when such funds will be used for other purposes, such as buying jewelry for members of the teacher's family, this is corruption and to cooperate with it is merely spoiling the teacher.

**WBT:** There are some teachers who seem to have deep realization of emptiness and yet their ethical behavior leaves a lot to be desired. How can someone have such realization and yet still conduct themselves in this way?

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<sup>5</sup> A mahasiddha is a highly realized tantric practitioner who may at times act unconventionally. Although the behavior may not fit in with that of social norms, the person's motivation, realization, and actions are pure.

**HHDL:** Problems arise due to lack of inner strength. Even though a person teaches the Dharma, there can still be a gap between the Dharma and their lives. When there is contradiction between someone's apparently high realization and their ethical conduct, that realization may not be as high as it seemed. Although the ability to remain in single-pointed concentration or in a non-conceptual state is a realization, it is not a very deep one. It is not a realization of emptiness, the ultimate nature.

People can err in their way of meditating on emptiness. Some mistakenly go to the extreme of negating cause and effect, in which case their "realization" of emptiness is incorrect. Others meditate on a non-conceptual state and mistake it for emptiness. Or, their meditation is influenced by subtle dullness, and that is mistaken for realization. This happens due to lack of study of potential pitfalls in meditation and their antidotes.

Emptiness is not nothingness. On one side, a thing is empty; on the other it arises dependently. Emptiness is not empty of existence; it is empty of independent existence. So it must depend on other things. It is important to make sure one has the correct understanding of emptiness. Those who understand emptiness correctly as meaning dependent arising see that if they misbehave, they will have to face the consequences. Thus they will refrain from acting in an unethical manner.

We have a positive and a negative sense of self. The realization of emptiness destroys the negative, not the positive one. Without strong will, bodhisattvas are unable to confront and fight their self-centered attitude. To develop such will requires tremendous self-confidence, and this is the sphere of the positive sense of self. The negative sense of self works without sound reason, just on the grounds of "I want this or that," and this is to be eliminated. The positive sense of self, on the other hand, operates on the basis of reason, and with it we can develop the confidence and will necessary to overcome negativities. Therefore do not misunderstand and think that the realization of selflessness makes you weak.

An actual realization should bring about a change in your life. The sign of having truly listened to teachings is that your outward behavior becomes calm. The sign of having experientially realized the teachings is that your disturbing attitudes are eliminated. If you meditate properly on emptiness, your compassion and ethical self-discipline will grow naturally. Although you may have meditated for thirty or forty years, if you do not obtain these results, something is wrong with your practice and the time has been wasted. This is due to a lack of proper study at the beginning. Before engaging in extensive meditation, it is essential to learn how to meditate properly: what are the obstacles to perfect concentration? What are their antidotes? What is meant by "emptiness" and how do we go about perceiving it in meditation? What are the broader implications of emptiness in our daily life? When we have learned about these from qualified teachers, then our meditation practice will go more smoothly and will bear good results.

Disturbing attitudes are overcome in stages, not all at once. The first time you actually eliminate a portion of them is at the path of seeing, when you have direct, non-conceptual perception of emptiness. Before that stage, when you encounter circumstances that give rise to disturbing attitudes, you must use ethical self-discipline to prevent these attitudes from manifesting as negative behavior. To develop such self-control, two factors are crucial—a sense of personal integrity and a consideration for others. Since those Buddhist teachers who misbehave lack these two factors and do not care about the consequences of their actions for themselves or others, it is helpful, as a Dharma friend, to speak up and voice your disapproval. This may help them develop a sense of personal integrity and consideration for others, which will curb their destructive conduct.

The mind is so complex and disturbing emotions so sophisticated and powerful that one single practice alone cannot eliminate all negative states completely. Therefore, the Buddha devised a complex strategy for overcoming destructive emotions. In battle, if we underestimate the power of our enemy, we are in big trouble. Similarly, in Dharma practice we must not underestimate the power of our disturbing attitudes.

Some traditions or people speak of high practice and a direct path. Although this may be sufficient for some special people, for most it is not. Some people talk very high, but if something upsetting happens in ordinary life, they are unprepared and cannot handle it. Therefore, in general, I prefer a gradual path.

**WBT:** Many students are afraid of breaking *samaya*—the commitment and bond with their guru—if they speak openly about what they perceive to be abuse. Does a teacher's abusive behavior destroy the *samaya* and release the student?

**HHDL:** I don't know. Although the guru has in a sense broken the *samaya*, that does not allow the student to break it as well. If the guru kills, that does not mean I can too! We shouldn't emulate bad examples! We should respect the common perspective of the world in terms of what is right and wrong. Earlier I spoke of the situation with my two regents. Even though I have deep faith and respect for my teachers and consider them high spiritual beings, I did not hesitate to criticize their behavior because those actions were wrong no matter who did them. I didn't speak out of hatred or disrespect, but because I love the Buddhadharma and their actions went against it.

It is essential to distinguish between two things: the person and their action. We criticize the action, not the person. The person is neutral: he or she has the wish to be happy and overcome suffering, and once their negative action stops, they will become a friend. The troublemaker is the disturbing attitudes and actions. Speaking out against the action does not mean that we hate the person. For example, we Tibetans fight Chinese injustice, but it doesn't mean we are against the Chinese as human beings, even those who are ruthless. In meditation, I try to develop genuine

compassion for these people while still opposing their actions. Thus, we may criticize a teacher's abusive actions or negative qualities while we respect them as a person at the same time. There are still some beneficial aspects of the guru. A mistaken action doesn't destroy their good qualities. If you criticize in this way, there is no danger of hellish rebirth as a result. Motivation is the key: speaking out of hatred or desire for revenge is wrong. However, if we know that by not speaking out, their negative behavior will continue and will harm the Buddhadharma, and we still remain silent, that is wrong.

**WBT:** There is much discussion in the West about the appropriateness of sexual contact when the two partners do not have equal power or status in the relationship. What is your opinion: are there times when sexual relationships between a Buddhist teacher and their student could be appropriate?

**HHDL:** It may happen that an unmarried teacher meets an unmarried student while teaching. If the relationship develops in a normal way with mutual agreement and mutual respect and they decide to marry, then it is fine. When two people in a relationship treat each other equally, there is no difference in power or status during sexual intercourse. The teacher is not on a throne then! However, if the teacher is with one student one month and another the next, that is not right. Also, imposing or forcing sexual contact is wrong. So is misusing the idea of dakinis by saying things such as "You have signs of being a qualified dakini," or flattering the student, "You have very great Dharma potential."

**WBT:** In the West many professionals are thinking deeply about methods to use in cases of abuse. Are there Asian methods for dealing with abuse and for helping the involved parties?

**HHDL:** In the case of monastics, if any of the four root vows—to abandon killing a human being, stealing an object of value, sexual intercourse (heterosexual or homosexual), and lying about one's spiritual attainments—is fully transgressed, then that person must leave the monastery and is no longer a monastic. Aside from that, I do not know of any institutional methods for dealing with other cases.

All forms of abuse are against the general Buddhist rule. If an individual does not listen to the Buddha's instructions, it is doubtful that they will listen to ordinary people like us. Earlier I suggested that when a teacher is clearly acting unethically and students have tried to discuss it with them but without result, then the only recourse is to publicize it in the community. I assume the teacher would feel ashamed and embarrassed and would decide to alter their behavior. I welcome your ideas on this topic.

Some people nearly give up their faith and respect for the Buddha if they are sexually abused by a Buddhist teacher. This makes me very sad. When it is explained that such actions are against the general Buddhist rule, then their doubts in the

Buddha and the Dharma decrease. As explained before, if a teacher gives instructions that contradict the path, you should not follow them. If anyone wishes to see scriptural sources to substantiate this or other points, we can show them.

**WBT:** The reaction of the Buddhist community to our first conference (in 1993) has generally been positive and supportive. However, some people were concerned that codes of rules were being imposed on them, and we would like to calm their apprehension.

**HHDL:** As Buddhists, our motivation must be clear and sincere. Because there is a moral crisis in developed countries, we must explain what is proper behavior according to the Dharma and live that way ourselves. We are not inventing ethical conduct and imposing it on others: the Buddha himself described this and established the various sets of vows. As sincere followers of the Buddha, we are simply reminding ourselves and others of what the Buddha said. If someone does not want to follow this, that is their right. But if someone considers the Buddha their teacher, it is important to respect the ethical principals set out by the Buddha.

This problem was aired during the first conference, and it has had an effect. We should continue this process and include representatives from diverse groups. In that way, people will be convinced that our concern is with the Buddhadharmā, nothing else. If people doubt this, misunderstandings arise. However, even if people discuss things properly, sometimes suspicion or misunderstanding occur due to a lack of clarity or contact with others. To overcome that, we should continue to have this kind of meeting and invite Western and Asian teachers from all traditions. Everyone must be allowed to speak openly and air their thoughts. In that way we can discuss and dispel misunderstandings.

*Edited by Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron  
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