

## How to rely on a spiritual mentor as the root for developing the path - Part 2 of 4

(lightly edited transcript)

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### Review

Since everything we learn and our progress on the path is going to depend on how we relate to the teacher, it's very important to cultivate a good relationship. The reason I say this is because whatever we learn, it comes through studying with somebody. Of course we can read books. We love to read but I think you've all probably had the experience that reading a book and listening to an oral teaching are very different experiences. When you read a book, the book can't answer your questions, the book doesn't set an example for you, the book doesn't look you straight in the eye. Whereas when we have an actual relationship with a teacher, it becomes completely different. You get a sense of what an oral transmission means. Things become much more powerful when you're actually getting them directly from a person. And so, in that way, what we learn comes from the teacher and if we want to gain realizations, we have to learn. So having a teacher is quite important.

We started last week talking about the advantages of properly relying on a teacher. I will just review those and then continue on. The advantages are:

- a) We become closer to enlightenment, firstly because we practice what the teacher teaches and secondly, by making offerings to the teacher, we accumulate a lot of positive potential. And this is like summarizing the whole point to the whole thing; the reason we rely on and cultivate a good relationship with the teacher is that if we have a lot of respect for the teacher, we are going to put what they teach into practice. If we don't have respect and we're just like Joe Blow, then, like with anything else, we won't value it and we won't put it into practice. So the whole point is for us to gain benefit from the relationship by putting the teachings into practice.
- b) We please all the Buddhas, because the teacher is like a representative of the Buddhas to us.
- c) All harmful forces and misleading friends can't affect us, because we're practicing well.
- d) Our afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'] and faulty behavior decrease because we are learning from our teacher what to practice and what to abandon. We are also seeing a good example of how to act from our teacher so our own bad behavior decreases.
- e) We gain meditative experiences and stable realizations, again from putting the teachings into practice.
- f) We won't lack spiritual teachers in future lifetimes. This is a very important one – making preparation for future lifetimes – because if we do a lot of work now but then in future lifetimes, we meet a guru like Jim Jones, we are in big trouble. Then it's like everything we spent our time doing now is going out of the window. If we meet a bad teacher, we've had it. We can't say, "Oh, I would never follow a teacher that's off the wall," because look, there are many intelligent people following teachers that are off the wall. How can we say we wouldn't do that? If we have that kind of karma and our mind is thinking in that way, we could do it. So that's why it's very important to have a good relationship with a teacher whom we've selected as being a qualified teacher so that we make that karmic link now and in the future, so that in future lives we can continue practicing.

g) We won't take a lower rebirth, again, because we practice.

h) And then to sum it all up, all our temporary and ultimate goals will be realized.

Now if we don't cultivate a good relationship with a teacher, in other words, if we just don't have a teacher or if we don't put energy into developing a good way to rely on them, we don't get those eight benefits. It's interesting to think, 'Well, if I have those eight benefits, is that something desirable? And if I don't have those eight benefits, then what would my life be like?' That gives you some way to see how important it is.

### Disadvantages of improper reliance or abandoning the teacher

Now we go on to the second section here, the disadvantages of improper reliance or abandoning the teacher. I said previously that if we don't have a good relationship with a spiritual teacher, we don't get those eight benefits. This section is saying on top of that, if we have a bad relationship with our teacher, we will experience the eight disadvantages. By bad relationship, I mean people who have contempt for their teacher, who defame their teacher, who get angry and stomp away, who yell and scream and renounce their teacher. You see this very often. Somebody may fall madly in love with the teacher, but as soon as the teacher tells them something they don't want to hear, that their ego does not want to hear, they get angry at the teacher and stomp away.

I have seen this happen in many instances. People study with somebody, take them as their teacher, learn from them and then in the end discard them like we discard our garbage—with an attitude of contempt and disrespect. Then they go around and tell bad stories, criticize and everything like that. So these are eight disadvantages that come if we do that kind of thing:

#### **a. It is like showing contempt for all the Buddhas**

First of all it's like showing contempt for all the Buddhas because, as we've discussed before, the teacher is like a representative of the Buddha to us, allowing us to contact the teachings. So if we throw the teacher away, it's like we're throwing the Buddha away.

#### **b. We will be reborn in lower realms for the same number of eons as the number of moments we were angry with our teacher**

This is one of these 'lovely' ones that we 'love' to hear. There are times when we get angry with our teacher anyway although we still respect them very much. So I asked my teacher about that, and he said that this point isn't talking about those kinds of situations. This point is referring to situations where you are really fed up and you're throwing away the relationship. "I've had it with this teacher. This person is full of garbage! Enough!" And you just leave in a lot of disgust. This point doesn't apply to cases when you get angry, but you still have the basis of a good relationship with your teacher.

These are very heavy undesirable consequences. It's not very pleasant to listen to, and I've been thinking about it and trying to make sense of this myself. Like I was telling you last time, I wonder what I would be doing if I had not met my teachers. I think of how I would have just continually created a lot of negative karma and hurt myself and other people this lifetime. I would wind up in the lower realms for sure in future lifetimes and be completely far away from any kind of spiritual path. It was only by meeting my teachers—they gave me teachings, showed me how to make sense of my life, what to do and what to look out for—that somehow I was able to make something out of this life. At least I'm able to make some preparation for future lives and eventually, hopefully, get somewhere along the path. And so if I think of the kindness of my teachers in benefiting me, in that way they are kinder than any other person in the whole wide world. They are kinder than my parents, than my best friends—because nobody else in the world has been able to benefit me in the same way as my teachers have. So if, given all that benefit I've received, I then say, "You're full of garbage!", then it's like you're throwing the person who's kindest to you in the whole world into the junk pot.

You can see what that's going to do to your mind. In our own ignorance, we just turn our back and walk away with disgust and contempt from the person who benefited us more than any other being possibly could. What is that saying about our state of mind, and what are we doing to our own mind when we think like that? We are turning our back on the person who teaches us the path to enlightenment. We

are turning our back on enlightenment. So seen in that view, then you can understand these consequences that come. It begins to make some sense.

Is that making sense to you, somehow? If not, what's the difficulty?

## Questions and Answers

[In response to audience:] We are all capable of appreciating things to some extent. But none of us are capable of fully appreciating everything, so we receive benefit according to what we appreciate. But it's not that if you don't appreciate them fully, then you're screwed. It's not that. It's referring to situations where you appreciate someone whom you saw as good, but subsequently, you just let your anger completely take hold of you and completely turn your back on them.

[In response to audience:] Rather than saying as much as you appreciate, you get that much benefit; and as much as you don't appreciate, you go downwards, how about if we say as much as you don't appreciate, you just don't get that benefit; and as much as you depreciate, criticize, and have contempt, you go down. That's slightly different. You can see a difference in attitude if you are ignorant or if you are actively, with a very hostile mind, doing something. Okay?

I know this is a real hard subject, so we need to discuss.

### **[Audience:] What do we do when our teacher engages in what seems to us to be unethical conduct?**

Now this kind of thing has come up many times, and His Holiness has commented on it because it's an important thing. First he said it's very important to select our teachers well, to take our time in selecting our teachers before making the decision that 'This person is my teacher.'

Then, second of all, he says that if a teacher does something that to you seems very unethical, then you have to look at it. You have to say, "This doesn't correspond with Buddhist ethics." And if you feel that continuing to be in this person's presence is going to lead you in the wrong direction because somehow they're not setting such a good example, they are acting in a way that doesn't seem to be in accordance with the teachings, then His Holiness says, instead of criticizing that person, just keep your distance.

I think this is good training for us, because usually when people do things we don't approve of, we get very judgmental and critical. So this is a call for us to not get judgmental and critical when we don't approve of somebody's behavior, but rather, just keep our distance. His Holiness also says to still try and keep your respect for that person for the kindness they have shown you and for how much they have helped you. And for the rest of it, just keep your distance. You don't need to criticize and renounce and gossip and get hostile and belligerent.

I had one friend who had a lot of regard for his teacher whom he took initiations from. It wound up that his teacher was an alcoholic. My friend was shocked because this just didn't fit in to his idea of how a spiritual master should act and his teacher had seemed completely together. It put him into a lot of crisis for a while. So we talked about it. We talked about being able to recognize that this person was kind to him. He did introduce him to the Dharma, and if he hadn't met this person, he would have been doing who-knows-what right now. It's through the kindness of this person that at least he met the Dharma. That kindness will never go away. He can always have respect and regard for that kindness that he did receive. The part of his teacher that became an alcoholic, he could just put that on the back burner. So he just keeps his distance, since being with the teacher doesn't seem so beneficial for him. But he does it without a feeling of hostility and contempt.

### **[Audience:] Rather than ignore the person or get hostile, couldn't we actually confront them and speak to them about it?**

That's very possible. His Holiness has said that if the teacher is acting improperly, the student can go to the teacher and with respect say, "We don't understand what you're doing. Please explain this to us. This is not helping our mind." The key there is first you have to make sure your own mind isn't angry. Going to the teacher with respect and confronting them about it is very different than getting angry and

belligerent and gossiping and yelling and screaming. So I think that it's definitely possible to go to the teacher and ask. I think we do need to do this especially in the West because Asian teachers, especially, aren't really aware of our cultural boundaries. Sometimes we just say, "Oh well this is Vajrayana, and they're Buddha," so we completely abdicate all of our own cultural boundaries and our own sense of ethics. That's not wise. I think we need to communicate with the teachers and let them know what our boundaries are—what's acceptable and what doesn't fit. But to do that with respect for them, not with a harmful, critical mind.

**[Audience:] Maybe that teacher meets up with students who don't have many ethical boundaries, so that gives that teacher the feeling that they can do whatever they want, as long as it's not counter-culture?**

If somebody's coming on like that, that's that person's problem. But it's also the teacher's responsibility to keep their own ethical vows. It's a two-way thing. In all these things, especially when they talk of sexual abuse or power abuse in different religious groups, there are two things there—the behavior of both people. So it's the teacher's responsibility to keep their ethics, and it's the student's responsibility to keep theirs.

Even if the teacher is meeting up with a bunch of people who don't have a lot of ethical values, still the teacher has to evaluate for themselves, is this for the benefit of that student? Even if it's acceptable within that culture, is it beneficial for that person to do that? Because when you're the teacher of somebody, you're responsible for that person's spiritual growth, so everything you do in relationship to that person should be for their benefit, not for your own. When you're not the teacher, then it's a completely different thing. But when you're relating as a teacher and student, you have obligations to that person as their teacher.

[In response to audience:] We can't say that every time the teacher is doing that, that that teacher is wrong, because different teachers are at different levels. Some may be Buddhas. Some may be bodhisattvas. They may be doing things that are completely beyond our concept, but we can say if a teacher is acting that way, if it's not our own personal teacher, and they're doing something out of sight with maybe their disciple, we say "Well, I don't know what level of mind that person has—they might be a Buddha, they might be a bodhisattva. But I know for me, this is not the external example of a teacher that I need to follow. I need to follow a teacher who acts externally like so and so." So in that way, you're not criticizing that person and blaming them—because who knows, maybe they are a Buddha—but you are saying, "I need a teacher that acts in a different way."

[In response to audience:] Yes, that's an example of "Because my own mind is so berserky, I need a teacher who acts in a certain way. If I follow a teacher like that, that external behavior doesn't set a good example for me. Now maybe it does for somebody else. Maybe for somebody else, the fact that that teacher is so relaxed opens the student up to listening to them, opens them up to the Dharma somehow. Who knows? People have different karma. But we can say for us, that behavior just doesn't fit.

**[Audience:] Is it fine to have multiple teachers?**

It's fine to have multiple teachers. You have one teacher who is what we call the root teacher, or the root guru. That's like your principal teacher. And then you have other teachers whom you study with, and it's not contradictory at all. In other words, if you move to San Francisco and meet another teacher, you do not have to abandon your teachers who live in any other parts of the world. It's just that you add on to your relationships. With myself, for example, my root teacher has sent me to study with other teachers. So you add on your teachers. And with some of my teachers, I haven't seen them for years and years, but they're still my teachers. It's not like "Well, you're only my teacher when I'm near you and as soon as I'm far away, you're no longer my teacher." It's like when you marry somebody, even if you're physically separated and you don't see them, you're still married.

This is a difficult subject, and that's why I'm being quite daring jumping into this [laughter]. But I think it's good that we talk about it, because as I travel around in America, this is one of the subjects I find people most confused about. Tremendous confusion about this.

**[Audience:] When the teacher is teaching, it's easier to see them as a Buddha, but when they're**

## living their daily life, that's quite difficult. And so is it really required that we do that?

I'm not sure that it is a matter of requirement, but maybe what we can do is ask ourselves, "Would it be beneficial to see the teacher as a Buddha, even in the times they're not teaching?" Now first...

[This portion of teaching lost due to change of tape.]

...If your teacher behaves in a way that doesn't correspond with what you would like to see in a teacher, try and transform that situation to see it in another way so that you can still have regard for the teacher. For example, what do we do if we see our teacher speaking quite harshly and insultingly to somebody? We could get into our negative mind of "Why are they doing that?" and get all critical like we usually do. But rather than that, we could just say, "They're showing me what I look like when I act like that." In that way, what you're doing is, you're taking that situation and you're using it as something that you can learn from. In that way it helps you. That's a lot more productive than getting into our usual judgmental attitude. This is actually something that we can do with everybody. It doesn't have to be just with our teacher. When you see anybody doing something that you think is bad behavior, think, "This is what I look like when I do it."

[In response to audience:] Definitely. Definitely. It's realizing that there might be a lot going on there that we can't see. They might be doing what they're doing for some very specific reason that we're totally unaware of. So like you said, stay open to the situation. What usually happens, and what we do with most people, is somebody does something, and we project onto them the motivation we would have if we were doing that, and then we get critical. But we don't know what their motivation is, do we? So like you said, at least stay open, or go and ask them.

[In response to audience:] Exactly. I see this in my own personal reflection. When I can think about somebody's good qualities, especially my teacher's, or anybody's good qualities, that makes me so much more receptive to learning from them. When I focus on their good qualities, then I appreciate what they do, and I'm open to learning from them. But the minute I let my mind get into even one negative quality, then it becomes difficult to be open to them. Because our minds are so judgmental—so that we might see ten good qualities, yet we fixate on the one negative one—we just criticize and criticize. By doing that, we completely block ourselves off from being open to all the benefit we could receive from the ten good qualities (of a qualified Mahayana spiritual teacher). This goes with everybody, but you can see it very clearly in relationship to your teacher. When your teacher does something that upsets you, the next time your teacher comes and sits down to teach, you can't even listen, because you're sitting there saying, "Well, he was partial. He had these people in his room to do retreat. He didn't ask me. He's partial with his disciples." He's sitting there giving this incredible, beautiful teaching, but you can't see it, because you're so stuck on "This person is partial". What we're trying to say is "I'm really ego-sensitive, and I want to be big chief." And maybe the whole reason that we're left out is so that we notice how grasping we are, so that we confront our own jealousy and possessiveness! That's one example.

One of my teachers, he'd often do certain things, and I just don't understand why he's doing these things. It's not that he's doing something harmful, it's just that I can't make sense of his whole way of approaching something. I would have approached it in another way. And it was really giving me a lot of difficulty for a while, and then I just had to say, "Hold on. Different people have different ways of approaching things. I might not understand what he's doing. Trying to mimic him might not be the best thing for me, with my own present level of understanding, but I can't expect everybody to act the way I want them to act and approach problems the way I would approach problems." And so, somehow, by very painfully working with this, it made me open my mind to the fact that other people do things differently from the way I do. And that they can actually be good ways of doing things [laughter]! Even if I don't understand the benefits of doing things the way they're doing, I just have to let go. So I found personally that in always trying to keep a positive attitude towards my teachers, what it does is it constantly makes me bang my head against the wall of my own preconceptions.

## Devotion and Glorification

[In response to audience:] Well, that's the difficult thing because you want to have this kind of confidence in and open-heartedness towards your teacher, but not blindly. The word 'devotion' is a tricky one, because sometimes in devotion, we just get too ooey-dooey sentimental. And I see this sometimes.

People get so devoted to the personality of their teacher—this teacher is the Buddha, this teacher is so kind—that they ignore the teachings that the teacher is giving. They're so busy being enamored with this fantastic charismatic personality that they disregard what the teacher is actually teaching. So it's a very fine line. The whole purpose of having this incredible feeling of confidence and faith is so that we put into practice what they're teaching—that's the whole purpose! It's not just to glorify somebody because we like to glorify them.

This is the trick in the West: some people just glorify their teachers because it makes them feel good. And that's when you get into all these possessive and jealous trips about the teacher. "This person's so holy, so I'm going to wash his dishes. Don't ask me to wash anybody else's dishes; I don't want to do it for these creepy other people! But the guru's dishes—they're holy, they're blessed!" And so they get into that because they're more into having this devotion because it makes them feel good. But that's not what relying on a teacher is about. It's about recognizing the teacher's qualities so that we try and follow their example and we try and put into practice what they're saying. So if you have devotion for your teacher, then it's OK to wash your teacher's dishes, but you also go wash somebody else's dishes, because what are the teachings about? What's the Buddha-Dharma about? It's about being humble. So this is a very fine line.

**[Audience:] Should the root teacher be the person who first got us into the Dharma, or can it be a teacher we meet later on the path?**

It could be either. It could be the person who got you into the Dharma, because very often that person is the one you feel a very strong connection with, since they got you into it. Or you could feel a stronger connection with somebody you met later, and that person can be your root teacher. But even when you have many teachers, the idea is to see them all as some way being manifestations of the Buddha. In other words, they're not contradicting in their effort to guide you. They're all cooperating in their effort to guide you.

**[Audience:] Do all religions lead to the same result?**

Here, I'm just going to throw up some questions. I'm not going to give any exact answer. But this is the question that I think we need to check up. Definitely all religions are for the benefit of sentient beings. That's for sure. Definitely all religions talk about ethical conduct. They all talk about love and compassion. So in that respect they all have elements that we definitely need to practice. It doesn't matter whether Jesus said, "Be kind" or whether Buddha said, "Be kind". It's not a question of who said it, it's what was said and if it's something that is important, it doesn't matter which religious tradition it came out of; it's something we need to practice.

Now, as to the question of whether every religious tradition has all the different elements necessary to guide a particular person to a fully enlightened state, we need to look at that at a much deeper level. That every religion has a lot of beneficial things, that's for sure. Whether they have every single element that's necessary to attain enlightenment—that needs further examination.

Generally we would say that for enlightenment, we need two essential things. One is the altruistic intention, in other words, the wish to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings. In correlation with that altruistic intention, we need all the method side of the path, in other words, all the teachings on exactly how to accumulate positive potential, all the teachings on generosity, patience, and so on.

Secondly, we also need the wisdom side of the path. We not only need the method side with the altruistic intention, we need second of all, the wisdom side of the path. This is the teachings on the emptiness of inherent existence. Why do we need both the method side and the wisdom side? When we become a Buddha, we attain a Buddha's body and a Buddha's mind. The method side of the path enables us principally to actualize the Buddha's body. The wisdom side of the path is the cause for us to attain the Buddha's mind.

In that regard, we also talk about two collections—the collection of positive potential and the collection of wisdom. The method side of the path refers to the altruistic intention. We collect positive potential when we do actions with an altruistic intention, and with that, we create the cause to attain the body of a Buddha. Then we have the wisdom side of the path, the wisdom that realizes the emptiness of inherent

existence. By meditating on that, we complete the collection of wisdom, and we attain a Buddha's mind.

Now what we have to check up on, is whether other traditions have these two elements. It doesn't matter if they use the same language or not—it's not a thing of language, but the meaning—do they have these two meanings? Do they teach the altruistic intention to become a Buddha for the benefit of others, and do they have the teachings on the emptiness of inherent existence? So we need to check up on any particular religion to see if they have those two elements. If they have both, then that enables us, by following that, to create the cause for the Buddha's body and mind. If they have some of the teachings on both but not the complete teaching, then the teachings they have so far, that's good and we should practice, but maybe it doesn't have everything that's needed to become enlightened.

So this is what we need to investigate, not look at the words of the other teachings, but to see what their real underlying meanings are.

You're shaking your head. What's giving you difficulty?

[In response to audience:] This is the difference between the words and the meaning of the words. You're quite correct. Mother Theresa would probably frame the path in a completely different vocabulary than we would. What we need to do is look beyond the words that either Mother Theresa uses or the Buddha used, and ask what the meanings of those words are. What really are the meanings of the words? What really are the words getting at? And if the meanings the words are getting at are the same, the paths are the same. If the meaning the words are getting at is different, the paths are different. This requires a lot of investigation on our part. It's obvious that different religions have different words, but what do they really mean by those words? So, for example, there's a Buddhist who takes refuge in the Buddha, but they look at the Buddha as a creator out there who's giving them blessings. That person, though they say they're taking refuge in the Buddha, they're not even having a correct understanding of who the Buddha is.

Another example. You use the word 'God' and you meant by 'God,' a creator. But someone could also use the word 'God' and have a completely different meaning for it. Every Christian you talk to has a different meaning for the word 'God.' It depends very much what that person's individual meaning for the word 'God' is. And what that person's individual meaning for the word 'grace' is. So again it's not the words, but what does the person mean by the word? What are they trying to realize?

**[Audience:] So you're saying that some religions will not get you to Buddhahood?**

Did I say that? That some religions can't get you there? I thought I posed a question—that we have to analyze whether all religions have those qualities. I was posing that question and saying we need to investigate that. I wasn't making a conclusion. I'm posing it as a question because I don't understand the deep philosophies of other religions. I'm in no position to make a judgment whether they have all those steps or don't. I don't even understand Buddhism completely, let alone pretend to understand the deep philosophies of other religions! So I have to pose it as a question, because I don't know. But it's a question that I think we have to look at. Because it's too easy to either say, "They're teaching different teachings. This one's the best and that one's wrong." And it's also too easy to say, "Well, they're all one and they're all going to the same thing." We can reach either conclusion, without understanding anything about any religion. So I think this is a call for us to try and understand what's really going on at deeper levels. So I'm posing questions. I'm not making conclusions.

**[Audience:] How does each particular person approach this whole huge field of so many religions in order to glean from all of them some direction to take in their life?**

It's double-sided, because it seems like in order to choose a path, we have to have a full understanding of it, but we don't. And the other alternative seems to be to just accept what somebody else says and follow that.

I think at some level, what happens is maybe a combination of the two things. You investigate the different systems, and you may find with one system, that its framework, its way of approach jives with you better, it makes more sense to you, even though you don't understand it clearly and completely. And similarly, there seems to be people who are practicing it, who, when you look at them, you think "Gee, I would like to go where they're going. They seem to be somewhere." And so you kind of jump in,

even though you don't completely understand everything. That's the situation. We have to try it out, see where it's going, and all the time, I think, being very aware and trying to increase our own wisdom. Because it's true, we don't have full understanding of every system. It's not on that grounds that we decide. It's like we have some understanding, and whatever it is we understand, it did something to us that makes us want to keep going along that direction.

Personally speaking, if I just look at my own evolution, I had difficulty with a lot of the language and approaches of other religions. Then somehow when I met Buddhism, the fact that the Buddha pointed out so clearly that greed, hatred and selfishness were the core of the problem, I couldn't get away once I looked at that. There was no possible way that I could deny that my selfishness was the core of the problem. I couldn't wiggle my way out of that one. And so somehow, I thought Buddha has something here. Because he really pinpointed it in a way that nailed me. With all the other religions, I can wiggle out of, and I could say, "But, but, but..." But not this one! So I kept going, learning and learning and learning. But while I'm doing that, I'm also trying to understand what it is that Buddhism is getting at. And what is this emptiness that we're supposed to realize?

[In response to audience:] See, this is the tricky thing about a lot of the stories. For example there's the story of this person who was told by the Buddha to sweep the courtyard—he sweeps one side, then he sweeps the other side, then sweeps this side again, etc. At the end he became an arhat. If we hear this story and we start thinking that all we have to do is keep sweeping the courtyard and we'll become arhats, that's a wrong conclusion. It's what that person's mind is doing when they were sweeping the courtyard. People can sweep courtyards with many different things going on in their mind.

[In response to audience:] It also depends on a person's previous life, what they've been doing in their previous life, what they've been meditating on in their previous life. We may have one person who had been in the lower realms for the last fifty million eons, and another who had been an incredible meditator for the last fifty lifetimes. They may both be sweeping the courtyard, but their understanding of what's going on could be completely different.

**[Audience:] So what you're saying is, the words are irrelevant, the context is irrelevant, everything is irrelevant except what's in the mind which are much deeper, the altruistic intention and the comprehension of emptiness.**

Yes. No matter what words you're using, no matter what you're doing physically, these elements, these internal realizations, these are mental states that can't be seen by the eye. These things have to be present.

**[Audience:] On the one hand, we have to mould ourselves to fit into the system of this religion according to its rules and regulations and ways of doing that, and that seems to be coming top-down. On the other, we are an individual, going along the path experiencing and growing. It seems like two different ways. How does one reconcile these two?**

I think again it has to be a combination of the two. If it is just top-down, and we're trying to mould ourselves to conform to an image of what we think we're going to become, then there's not going to be any deep personal change inside. On the other hand, if we remove from our view an idea of where we're going, and we're just open to love and light, then we're going to swim around like this. So I think it's two things. First, we have an idea of where we're going based on the fact that other people who seem pretty together to us seem to have gotten somewhere going that way. The next thing is we have to develop that in ourselves. It has to be an unfolding of that in ourselves. So to summarize the two things: the guidance from those more advanced than us, and us gaining our own experience of it so it becomes inside of us.

### **Appreciating other religions**

Personally speaking, I've found that I've come to appreciate other religious traditions much more since I became a Buddhist. Before I was a Buddhist, I look at Christianity and I could not make head or tail out of worshipping some bleeding guy on a cross. I looked at that and I thought, "This is morbid!" Now, from a Buddhist point of view, looking at Jesus' life, I understand a lot more what was going on, and I could very well look at his life and describe it from a bodhisattva point of view. I don't know, but some Christians would probably agree with the way I describe it. Some Christians might tell me that I was

wrong. That's really irrelevant. The important thing is that from my point of view, it makes a lot more sense to me. Because the thing is with any one thing, you can impute so many different meanings to it. And it's interesting.

One lady I had met in Dharamsala sent me a book on how to run a traditional Jewish household. I've been reading it. In the Jewish law, there are, I think, 613 commandments that God said, and she's going through and describing how you live these in your daily life. In reading this, it's making me think so much about the Vinaya that we have in Buddhism. Reading these laws about doing this and not doing that, I find myself faced with the same questions in terms of Vinaya and in terms of Judaism. I always want to know why. I don't care what system it is. If they just tell me, "Do this," my mind will have real problems with that. Just as before when I was a kid growing up Jewish, I had always asked "Why?", now as a Buddhist, I go to my teacher, "Why do I have to do this?" I'm trying to understand what is the purpose of laws, given any religion. Reading her perspective on why she keeps her commandments, what value it does for her, I see myself checking up, "Well, does my keeping the Vinaya have that same value for me, or do I have a different reason for keeping Vinaya?" But it's the same thing of different religions having laws or rules and how do I relate to that?

[In response to audience:] Buddha also spoke in a cultural context. Just as I, as a bhikshuni, am trying to practice Vinaya in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and having to deal with cultural differences, in the same way this woman, as a Jew, is trying to deal with things that were spoken 4,000 years ago and trying to practice those.

### Respecting other traditions while being aware of the differences

Like His Holiness always says, that really, if you practice your own...

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...then, you will appreciate any teaching that in any way helps any being approach enlightenment. And in that way we come to respect the teachings in other religions. That doesn't necessarily mean we respect every teaching in another religion. But the things that definitely lead the practitioners on a good path are things to respect.

Just to make one example of this. When I was in France, we made friends with a group of clerics, Sisters of St. Claire. We used to visit them quite often. It really helped me develop my respect for Christianity. And then one incident happened that made me think, and really respect where Buddhism was at. We were eating dinner one day. One of the nuns went out to get another plate of food, and there was an insect there. She said, "Oh, there's this bug." I got up with my napkin to go scoop the bug up and take it outside. But before I could get up, the other nun had come and whacked it. Then I thought, "Ah, that's a difference. That's a difference." Christianity went so far as not to kill human beings. Definitely that's good. I respect that. But they didn't make the jump to insects...

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This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>