



# Two Introductory Teachings: On Spiritual Masters and On Abstaining from Nonvirtuous Deeds

H.H. the Sakya Trichen (the 41<sup>st</sup> Sakya Trizin)



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# Acknowledgement

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By the merit of this work, may His Holiness the Sakya Trichen enjoy perfect health and a very long life, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.



“Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher.” Teachers play a significant role in our path to enlightenment.

Why is a qualified teacher needed in our Dharma path? What qualifications should they possess? How should we view our relationships with our Dharma teachers? How can we be mindful about the actions of our body, speech, and mind?

In this teaching, His Holiness presents a comprehensive and detailed explanation on how to decide who is a qualified Dharma teacher and our basic commitment to abstain from the ten nonvirtuous deeds. These are important for us to succeed on the path.

# CONTENT

Part One: On Spiritual Masters	1
Part Two: On Abstaining from Nonvirtuous Deeds	8
Additional Remarks	17

## Part One: On Spiritual Masters

**Y**our spiritual path—and thus the destination to which it leads—depends on your spiritual master. Because this point is so important, the Buddha gave precise descriptions of the qualities that spiritual masters should possess. Just as in a regular school system we have different teachers who are qualified to teach us at different levels, from kindergarten until college or university. Similarly on the spiritual path, we need to have qualified teachers for the different levels of the Dharma, from the basic teachings up to the highest Vajrayāna teachings.

For basic teachings, without entering into a guru-disciple relationship, your teachers can be spiritual friends. Unless you are really convinced of the guru, it is better this way. Through spiritual friends and among Dharma friends, you can learn the philosophical texts of Buddhism and study the basic Buddhist teachings. You can learn without making such a serious commitment as receiving a vow, and then there

will be no danger. If you should find out later that a spiritual friend was not the right teacher, or that the person was not a genuine master, then there was no serious harm done.

There are texts that discuss how a disciple should examine a teacher before taking them as a guru and how a guru should examine a student before taking them as a disciple. In ancient times, gurus did not take disciples so quickly as they do now. Each would carefully examine the other. When a disciple was convinced that the guru was genuine, and when a guru was convinced that the disciple was genuine and sincere, possessing unshakable faith in the teachings and the teacher, only then was a guru-disciple relationship formed.

It is a serious commitment to take someone as a spiritual guru, someone who will bestow upon you the refuge vow, or the prātimokṣa vow, or the bodhisattva vow. Even more serious is taking a guru who bestows the Mantrayāna (or Vajrayāna) empowerments, initiations, and the Vajrayāna vows.

There are different kinds of spiritual masters depending on the level of the vow involved. At each level, the teacher should possess specific qualifications—from the vinaya teacher for the prātimokṣa vows, to the Mahāyāna teacher for the bodhisattva vow, to the Vajrayāna teacher and the Vajrayāna vows (which



are also called samaya). Also, at each of these levels, there are inferior teachers, mediocre teachers, and superior teachers. This is all described in detail in the texts. Essentially, however, we can say that all teachers require three qualifications: good discipline, wisdom, and compassion.

## **Good Discipline**

The basis of all Dharma practice is good discipline, or good moral conduct. To be a teacher, this is the number one qualification. The teachings say that if a teacher's moral conduct is not good, then it will be difficult for the good qualities to arise as a result of one's practice. Good discipline means carefully observing the prātimokṣa vows (also called individual liberation vows), the bodhisattva vows, and the Vajrayāna vows. All the vows that have been taken must be kept carefully.

In this degenerate time, it is difficult for anyone to keep all of the vows; however, at least the major rules should be kept carefully. At a minimum, being a teacher means setting an example, and if the teacher cannot do that, then he or she is not qualified.

## **Wisdom**

Secondly, the teacher must possess wisdom. There are three kinds of wisdom: wisdom gained through study, wisdom gained through contemplation, and wisdom gain through meditation. The best teachers will have all of these. However, it is quite rare to find such a teacher, especially one possessing the wisdom gained through meditation. Much more common are teachers possessing wisdom acquired through study and contemplation. The bare minimum requirement is that a teacher should have knowledge gained through study. In this way, he or she can at least correctly explain the teachings.

## **Compassion**

The third qualification is compassion. A teacher must possess compassion for his or her disciples, the wish to help them on the path, and not just the wish to impart knowledge. It is said in the sūtras that the most important thing for attaining enlightenment is compassion. Possessing true compassion, all the other qualities will flow naturally. It is like inviting an emperor to be your guest: if he comes, all of his entourage will naturally follow with him. To put it the other way around: if you

have the other qualities but you do not have compassion, then it will not be possible to attain enlightenment.

Before you accept a master as your guru and make a commitment, it is important that you examine him or her carefully. You should be convinced that this person has at least these minimum qualities. Once you have received a vow—in particular, after making the commitments that accompany a Vajrayāna initiation or empowerment—it will be important to keep the samaya, or the pledge of the gurus.

Even if you find that there are some faults in your guru, you should not think about those things. You should think about your guru's good qualities instead. With a Vajrayāna commitment, you must view faults in your guru as arising from your own impure vision. Think of it as similar to seeing the reflection of the moon in water. In the sky, the moon shines bright and clear. But if the water is turbulent or muddy, then the moon's reflection will not be clear. It is not the fault of the moon but of the water.

There is no way to receive the blessing of the buddhas except through the gurus. Compare it to the sun: the sun is shining all the time in the sky, yet without particular instruments, we cannot make full use of its energy. Today, there are many

modern instruments for directing or storing the energy of the sun. Similarly, the blessings of the buddhas shine upon sentient beings constantly, and the guru is like an instrument between the sun and the earth. Through our gurus, we hear the teachings of the Buddha and receive the blessings of the Buddha.

## **The Importance of Guru Yoga**

Since the guru is so important, guru yoga is also important. One way to practice is to visualize your primary guru, the one in whom you have full faith and devotion. Then, all the other gurus—anyone from whom you have received teachings and initiations—are absorbed into him. Then, try to cultivate your devotion and faith. You can also visualize it the other way around, starting with the guru in whom you have the least faith. Then, your other gurus are absorbed into him. It is said that people of a superior capacity can attain realization and enlightenment through guru yoga alone, receiving in this way the blessings of the gurus. For lesser practitioners, guru yoga is the most important of the preliminary practices, enabling us to perform the main practice successfully and without encountering obstacles.

To attain enlightenment, we must realize the nature of the mind. This cannot be done through logic, analysis of examples, or studying texts. The only way to realize it is through the two accumulations of merit and wisdom and through the blessings of the gurus.

## **Part Two: On Abstaining from Nonvirtuous Deeds**

Just as the earth is the base for all animate and inanimate objects, the base upon which all the good qualities will arise is one's moral conduct. Therefore the first thing on the spiritual path is to cultivate good discipline.

The prātimokṣa vows, the bodhisattva vows, and the Vajrayāna vows—each of these levels has its own precepts that should be followed. However, the most basic requirement for anyone who has become a Buddhist is that they abstain from nonvirtuous deeds.

The sufferings that we encounter in our lives—physical pain, mental anxiety, wishes that are unfulfilled—these are not random, nor are they created by external forces. Instead, everything arises from its own causes and conditions. All of our miseries, sufferings, and undesirable conditions are caused by our own nonvirtuous deeds, which are the actions that we perform from the defilements. Whether one is Buddhist

or non-Buddhist, regardless of one's philosophy or religion, all humans and non-humans alike are seeking happiness and to be free from suffering. If we want our suffering to diminish, then we should abstain from that which is causing our suffering.

How do our defilements come about? Fundamentally, they arise due to ignorance, or not knowing reality. Lacking the wisdom that perceives ultimate reality and not seeing the true nature of the mind, we cling to a self without any logical reasons for doing so. Once we begin looking for the self, we will not find it anywhere—not in name, body, or mind.

- A *name* by itself is empty. Any name can be given to any one at any time, and names can be changed.
- If we look for the self in each part of the *body*, examining the flesh, bones, blood, veins, and so on, we find that there is nothing in the body that is the self.
- If we examine the *mind*, we will see that it is changing moment by moment. The past mind is already gone; the future mind is yet to arise; the present mind is in flux. Consequently, we see that mind also cannot be the self.

The self exists only as a habitual tendency from beginningless time until now. It is a pattern of clinging as a self. This habit

continues without any logic behind it. It eludes our examination, persisting this way because we are accustomed to this clinging. This is the basic ignorance that is the root of saṃsāra.

When you have a notion of the existence of an essential self, there will also be a notion of the existence of something other than self. It is like right and left: if there is a left side, there will be a right side. There cannot be one without the other. And finally, when there is a self and an other, there will be attachment to one's own side and anger towards the other.

The three main defilements are basic *ignorance* and the *desire* and *anger* that arise from ignorance. These three give rise to other defilements such as jealousy, pride, stinginess, etc. All our actions produced by our defilements are called nonvirtuous deeds, whether they are of body, speech, or mind, and these cause all of our sufferings in this life and in all our lives.

There are ten nonvirtuous deeds: three of the body, four of speech, and three of the mind.



## Nonvirtuous Deeds of the Body

1. *Killing.* This is the taking of any life, from the tiniest of invisible germs up to humans and devas. Killing can be either direct or indirect, and it can be done through a variety of means, including poison, weapons, fire, water, and so on. The abortion of unborn fetuses counts as killing. Taking any life in any way is a negative deed, but there are different degrees of nonvirtue involved. For example, killing an enemy out of great hatred is the worst. Next is killing a living being out of desire—for example, to gain wealth. Killing animals for their skins or bones is a heavy negative deed, but it is less so than killing them out of hatred. Even further down, there is killing out of ignorance, or for entertainment—for example, small children killing insects.
2. *Stealing.* This is taking things that do not belong to you motivated by greed. That which is stolen can be precious or insignificant, and the methods for stealing include force, as in the case of robbery, quietly stealing, or cheating someone.
3. *Sexual misconduct.* This is engaging in any kind of sexual activity with someone other than one's life partner. For a person in a committed relationship, sexual misconduct will bring pain, anger, and suffering.

## Nonvirtuous Deeds of Speech

4. *Lying*, or not telling the truth, especially in order to cheat people.
5. *Promoting disharmony*. This is speech that exacerbates divisions between people, whether individuals or groups. The words can be true or false.
6. *Harsh words* are words or remarks that are hurtful. Note that they do not have to be sharp words themselves; if another being experiences mental pain upon hearing them, then this nonvirtuous deed has been committed.
7. *Idle talk*. This is any speech that has no benefit and merely serves to increase desire, anger, jealousy, or another defilement.

## Nonvirtuous Deeds of the Mind

8. *Hatred*. This is harboring unkind thoughts toward another. It includes such thoughts as wanting a person to suffer, to become sick, or to die.
9. *Envy*. This occurs whenever you see somebody that has something nice—it can be a material possession or a social position—and you want that thing to be yours instead.
10. *Wrong views*. Not believing in the law of karma, or cause and effect, is having the wrong view. The law of karma teaches us that virtuous deeds cause happiness and nonvirtuous deeds cause suffering.

## The Three Kinds of Results

After thinking about the nature and kinds of nonvirtuous deeds, we should think about their consequences. There are three types of results that follow from our nonvirtuous actions.

1. The *ripening result*. Nonvirtuous deeds will ripen differently depending on the degree of nonvirtue, the number of nonvirtuous deeds, and the motivation for the deeds. For example, as was mentioned already, killing someone out of hatred is a stronger degree of nonvirtue than killing from desire or ignorance. In a similar way, the karma of killing will ripen differently if it was practiced extensively rather than only one time. If the quantity and the degree are both large, then one will fall into the hell realms. If the degree is medium (for example, killing that was motivated by desire rather than hatred), and if the quantity is also medium, then one will fall into the hungry ghost realm. If the deed was committed from ignorance, and if the quantity was small, then one will fall into the animal realm.
2. The *result similar to the cause*. This means that you will experience the same thing that you caused. If you engaged in killing in a past life, then you will experience a short, unhealthy life span in this rebirth or in the future. Having caused pain and a shortened life span for others, the effect reflects back on you.

The ripening result of killing is falling into a lower realm, but in the result that is similar to the cause, you can be born into a higher realm; however, you will experience suffering that is similar to what you caused. Those who engaged in stealing will experience the suffering of poverty; those who engaged in sexual misconduct will experience unhappy marriages. We can see that in this world some people have healthy, long lives while others have short ones. Some suffer from great poverty, unhappy marriages, or from having few friends. These are all secondary results of committing negative deeds.

The result similar to the cause includes *the result that is habit formation*. Suppose that, in a past life, you engaged in the negative deed of killing. In this life, you will have a natural tendency to kill, or a liking for it. Through habit formation, you will continue to commit the same negative deed and you will continue to experience the suffering it produces.

3. *The result of ownership*. In this type of result, nonvirtuous deeds ripen as places of rebirth. People who engage in negative deeds are born in miserable places with lots of natural calamities: earthquakes, tornados, floods, wars, etc.

In conclusion, all of our miseries and sufferings are caused by our nonvirtuous deeds, and we should abstain from committing even the tiniest of them. We really should try hard to avoid them. By performing virtuous deeds, which are the opposites of the nonvirtuous deeds, we will create causes that ripen as happiness and the good qualities.

Although everyone should practice the ten virtuous deeds and abstain from the ten nonvirtuous deeds, it is especially important for someone who wishes to enter the Dharma path. Basic moral conduct is the beginning of the Buddhist path. With moral conduct as a sure base, you can practice the Dharma and follow the path that consists of the combination of method and wisdom. If you follow this path diligently, you will succeed in obtaining liberation and eventually ultimate enlightenment.

## **Additional Remarks**

Although my stay is short, it has been a joy to meet you all and share the teachings tonight. It is encouraging to see that so many people are interested in learning about the Dharma and Dharma practice. Whatever knowledge you have gained tonight, please carefully analyze it. Think about it, and then make an effort to put it into practice. If you incorporate the teachings into your daily practice, then you will make great progress on the path.

Practicing the Dharma in a group is a great help and very meritorious. For people with the same interests who are doing the same practice, meeting as a group can strengthen everyone's individual practice. It is a good way to cultivate the Dharma.







■ His Holiness the Sakya Trichen is revered as the forty-first throne holder of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Born in Tibet in 1945, His Holiness is from the noble Khön family, whose predecessors date to the early days of Tibetan history and established the Sakya order in the eleventh century. In his youth, His Holiness received intensive training in Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and ritual from eminent masters and scholars.

Widely regarded as an emanation of Mañjuśrī, His Holiness is the spiritual guide to many in the next generation of Buddhist teachers and practitioners, and has bestowed Sakya's core teaching cycle known as the Lamdre (the Path with the Result) in both eastern and western countries. His Holiness manifests profound wisdom and compassion, tirelessly working to establish monasteries, nunneries, and educational institutions and to impart the Buddha's teachings to countless students around the world.



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