



# How to Choose a Guru

His Holiness the 42<sup>nd</sup> Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche



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By the merit of this work, may Their Holiness the Sakya Trichen and Sakya Trizin enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.



**A qualified and virtuous teacher serves as a radiant moon, shedding light on our journey, leading us to the path of enlightenment.**

**How can we make the right choice when seeking an authentic and qualified Buddhist teacher?**

**Why is the decision to choose a Buddhist teacher so crucial, often surpassing the significance of selecting a life partner?**

**Should we consider our teacher's teacher as our own teacher too?**

**This succinct yet deeply insightful guidance offers direction for individuals presently seeking or about to choose a Buddhist teacher. It can also provide fresh insights for those already following the guidance of a teacher to enhance their spiritual practice.**



Vajradhara Ngawang Lodro Shenphen Nyingpo

# How to Choose a Guru

**F**irst of all, I would like to say *tashi delek* to everyone. As you all know, today is a very auspicious day. It is the month of Vesak according to the Tibetan lunar calendar. This is the month in which Prince Siddhārtha was born in Lumbinī. It is also the month in which he attained enlightenment while seated under the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, and it is the month in which he entered parinirvāṇa in Kushinagar. Lord Buddha performed many noble activities in this month in other years as well.

In Tibetan, we call Vesak *bumgyur dawa*, which means “one hundred thousand.” We call it this because whatever actions we do in this holy month, the karma will be multiplied one hundred thousand times. Regardless of whether our deeds are positive or negative, they will be multiplied by one hundred thousand.

Today also marks another special event. It is the anniversary of the mahāparinirvāṇa of the great Vajradhara Ngawang Lodre Shenphen Nyingpo, who was the root guru of His Holiness the forty-first Gongma Trichen Rinpoche, who is our root guru. As

His Holiness mentioned this morning, when he was young, he received the common and the uncommon Lamdré teachings and many other profound teachings and empowerments from the great Vajradhara Ngawang Lodre Shenphen Nyingpo.

During this special holy time, we should be vigilant. Although we should rely on mindfulness and conscientiousness at all times, we should try to make extra efforts during this special holy month by practicing with even more vigilance and more mindfulness, remembering that our karma will be multiplied one hundred thousand times.

On this occasion, I was asked to give a teaching on how to choose a guru. In the teachings it says that we should perceive the Buddha as our doctor, perceive his teachings as medicine, perceive ourselves as his patients, and perceive our negative thoughts—attachment, anger, ignorance, pride, stinginess, jealousy, and so on—as the sickness. We should receive and follow the teachings just like following the doctor’s advice. I encourage you to hear, study, and practice the Dharma with this perception.

All Dharma teachers can be classified into three kinds that correspond to three categories of the Buddhadharma: the Pali Buddhist tradition, the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition, and the



Vajrayāna, which is considered part of the Mahāyāna. Regarding teachers, the vinaya teacher corresponds to the Pali tradition, and the Mahāyāna teacher corresponds to the Sanskrit tradition. The Vajrayāna guru, of course, is for the Vajrayāna.

### **The Necessity of the Spiritual Master**

But why it is important to have a teacher or a guru to begin with? The best way to understand this is through examples. The first example is the blind man. If someone who is blind were to be left alone in a vast, desolate, and empty place, he would not be able to find a path back. However, if the blind man were to be guided by someone with sight, the man could be led to his destination. Similarly, a totally ignorant person is unable to make progress on the spiritual path. But if that person relies on a spiritual master, then they can be led on the path to spiritual progress. Without reliance on our spiritual masters as we listen, think, and meditate on the Dharma, we are like that blind person. We will lack the eye of wisdom, or the eye of Dharmic knowledge. Without this, we will not know what is to be adopted and what is to be abandoned. Lacking this knowledge, we will never gain liberation or the state of enlightenment.

But by taking a spiritual master as our guide, we can gain a higher rebirth in the next life, gain liberation from the whole

of saṃsāra, and eventually gain the state of enlightenment, or buddhahood, if we have the wish for it and put efforts into practice. With the spiritual master, we can easily achieve all of these short-term and long-term goals.

The second example is a skillful doctor. When we are sick, we lose our strength, power, and energy. We are unable to perform the actions we are able to perform when we are healthy. To be completely cured from a severe sickness, we need to rely on a skillful doctor. Right now, we are like patients in that we are suffering from the sickness of our karma and our mental afflictions. The root cause is ignorance, not knowing what is to be adopted and what is to be abandoned. A person with these mental afflictions is tormented just like a person suffering from sickness. If we wish to gain liberation from the whole of saṃsāra, which is of the nature of suffering, then we must rely on a spiritual master as we would rely on a good doctor. Then, we need to practice the Dharma, which is the doctor's medicine. Through this, we can recover from the sickness of our mental afflictions and from the karma—our actions and their results—that arises from our mental afflictions, which constitutes the suffering of saṃsāra.

The third example is a magnifying glass. A magnifying glass concentrates the energy of the sun. If you put a magnifying

glass over some dry grass on a bright and sunny day, it will concentrate the energy of the sun, and the grass will begin to burn. Without the glass, even though there might be a clear blue sky and plenty of sunshine, the dry grass will not receive enough energy to cause it to burn. Nowadays, there are solar panels that collect and concentrate the sun's energy. There are hot water systems that use solar panels to heat water to scalding temperatures. Without such panels, even if there is sun in the sky and a tank of water sitting in the sun, the water will not get very hot.

The spiritual master is like a magnifying glass and the Buddha is like the sun. The Buddha has compassion for all beings without any exception, but because of our lack of merit and our misfortune, we cannot see the Buddha directly or receive teachings from him directly. The spiritual master, however, transmits an unbroken lineage of the Buddha's teachings with the blessings of the lineage, a lineage that begins with the Buddha himself and has continued unbroken all the way to the present. Only through spiritual masters can we as followers receive the teachings and blessings of the Buddha in an unbroken manner. It is true that the Buddha's blessings shine upon all beings just like the sun shines in all directions, but we need the spiritual master to concentrate and transmit the

teachings to us, like the tank of water needs the solar panels to make the water hot.

Someone might think that we do not need to rely on spiritual teachers today because we can study the Dharma through the internet, social media, and books. It is true that through books, videos, and other media we can hear teachings and gain knowledge about the Dharma, but it is not the same thing. The teachers possess the blessings of the unbroken lineage of the Dharma, which has been passed down from the Buddha to the present day, without any gap. Furthermore, some teachings are difficult to understand without a teacher. Words can have different meanings depending on context. A teacher can explain these things and guide us. Most of all, from the teacher, we can receive the undiluted blessings of the Buddha and of the lineage masters.

### **How to Choose a Spiritual Master**

When we choose a spiritual master, we are choosing someone not just for a few years, a few decades, or for the duration of this life. Once we have chosen the right guru, we pray that we will meet the same guru in the future—in lifetime after lifetime. As you know, the deities are depicted with the owners of their race upon their heads. White Tara, for example, who in reality is

a buddha, an enlightened being, has Amitābha upon her head. Amitābha symbolizes her guru. This shows that even after we have attained buddhahood, we still need the guru.

We should choose a guru only after making a thorough examination. In our ordinary lives, before making a big commitment such as the purchase of a house, we spend time making inquiries so that we can obtain as much information as possible because we know that we are going to spend many months and years living in the house. Before buying a car, we will do the same thing, even if the car will not last as long as the house. These things only last for a few years or decades, but the guru, for whom we will generate great faith and devotion, will last from lifetime to lifetime, all the way to buddhahood.

In worldly life, choosing a life partner is one of the most important decisions in our lives. But from the Dharmic point of view, choosing a guru is much more important. We will be with our life partners for five or six or seven decades, assuming that we live long lives. If you meet your life partner at the age of twenty-five and you live to be one hundred years old, then at most you will have the same partner for seventy-five years, and this is a very rare length of time to be with a partner. But the guru is not only for this life. In our prayers, we say “In every life, may we not be separated from the guru, and may we receive

Dharma teachings from our guru.” We must follow the meaning of these profound prayers and not just recite them.

Someone might say, “He was my guru, but not anymore.” This is easy to say, but it is not the right thing to do. Once you have adopted someone as your guru, you must maintain unshakeable faith. If you lose your faith after a few years, it means that your faith is not unshakeable but changeable. You must not change your guru like you change your car. You adopt a guru and rely upon the guru for a very special purpose, and if you are changeable in your faith and devotion, then you will not receive the blessings of the guru and you will not make progress on the path. In fact, you might be committing serious negative actions. This is why it is so important to analyze a spiritual master before accepting them as one’s guru. You must be sure that you can maintain faith and devotion in this person.

The word *guru* in India is used for teachers of all kinds. If you are studying to be a mechanic, your teacher is called your guru. The word *guru* actually means “heavy,” referring not to the weight of any external object but to someone who is “heavy” with knowledge. *Guru* means someone who possesses great quantities of knowledge.

## Qualities of a Spiritual Master

Although there are different kinds of spiritual masters—divided into the vinaya, the general Mahāyāna, and the Vajrayāna traditions—all spiritual masters should possess three qualities. First, the master should have pure moral conduct, meaning that the master keeps the vows intact. This means keeping the vows from the depth of one’s heart, not only on a superficial level. Whether it is the upāsaka vow, the novice vow, the fully-ordained vow, the bodhisattva vow, or the Mantrayāna vow, the vows should be kept purely and without disgrace.

The second quality is wisdom. The guru should possess wisdom that discerns the words and meaning of the Dharma. The guru should be able to clear the doubts of disciples. If a guru’s disciple asks something, the guru should be able to give the answer that clarifies the disciple’s hesitations and doubts.

The third quality is pure motivation. If the teacher is giving teachings in order to acquire many students—to gain power, wealth, or fame—then this is not right. The teacher should give teachings with a pure intention and a sincere wish to help others. The right motivation means the guru should possess a genuine thought of renunciation, infinite loving-kindness and compassion, and bodhicitta. If the teacher gives teachings

without the right motivation, it will not earn great merit for the teacher. Simply giving teachings by itself is not a meritorious deed, and it is a negative deed to give teachings with the wrong motivation or with worldly intentions such as to gain money or power.

Whether a teacher is great or not is determined by their qualities and not by their fame or by titles. Titles are just names. They are of no real value. Nowadays, it is possible to get an ācārya degree in India after studying philosophy for nine years. One becomes an ācārya after completion of the degree. But we cannot compare these ācāryas with Ācārya Śāntideva or Ācārya Dharmakīrti or Ācārya Candrakīrti. If these great ācāryas from the past, like Śāntideva or Candrakīrti, were to come here now, I would bow down to them. Although I have a title that is higher than the ācārya degree, in reality, those ācāryas are much, much greater than me. There is no comparison. This shows that greatness does not depend upon the title that anyone has. It depends on the qualities that they possess, on their knowledge, and on their level of realization. This is especially important in the Vajrayāna tradition.

If someone claims to be a teacher but they do not possess these qualities, it is like a beggar claiming to be the richest person in the world. The beggar can claim this—he can say whatever



he wants—but saying it does not make it true. If we examine a guru, we can decide whether or not they possess these qualities. Just hearing that someone is a great guru is not enough, and you should not make a Dharmic connection or receive teachings from someone only on that basis. You should do research and ask about the person. Investigate their qualities, attitude, and intention. Then, if you are convinced about that person, you can make a Dharmic connection and receive the teachings from them.

### **Who Is and Is Not Your Guru**

Sometimes, people will call any guru their root guru. However, unless you have established a Dharmic connection with someone, then they are not your guru, although they may be a guru. When you receive Dharma teachings or an empowerment from a teacher, then they become your guru. Until then, even if they have given many teachings to many others but not to you, they are not your guru.

Contrariwise, one's guru's guru—the lineage teacher—will become your guru without receiving any teachings directly from that person. This is not your root guru but a lineage guru. For example, today is the anniversary day of the great Vajradhara Ngawang Lodro Shenphen Nyingpo, who was the

root guru of His Holiness, who is my root guru. Although I have not met Ngawang Lodro Shenphen Nyingpo, who entered mahāparinirvāṇa long before I was born, he is still my lineage guru. I can call him my guru, even though he was not my direct guru or my root guru. The first line of the four-line refuge prayer that we recite says: “I take refuge in the guru.” This refers not just to our root gurus but to all of the lineage gurus. When we recite this, we should understand its meaning, which is that we are taking refuge in the root guru and in the lineage gurus.

### **The Guru-Disciple Relationship**

Once you accept someone as your guru by receiving the teachings or an empowerment from them, a Dharmic connection is established, and the guru-disciple relationship is made. Once this occurs, you cannot abandon them. No matter what they do, whatever their actions, it is important never to lose your unshakeable faith in the guru. Faith is the basis for your practice of the Dharma. In the sūtras it says, “Those without faith will not grow in Dharma or virtuous deeds, just like seeds that are scorched by fire will never germinate.” Without faith, we cannot grow our qualities or attain realization or make any progress on the spiritual path. But if you receive an empowerment from a teacher, and you maintain unshakeable

faith in that person as your guru, with no expiration date, then you will receive the blessings of the guru, and you will progress on the path.

It is said that the guru should also examine potential disciples. The guru should investigate whether the disciple has the wish to gain knowledge and to understand the Dharmic meaning, and also whether or not they have the ability to understand it. Second, the guru should be sure that the disciple has a genuine interest in the Dharma. Third, he should investigate whether the disciple has unshakeable faith. If the disciple does not have the right qualities, that person will not be a genuine disciple. But when a teacher sees someone with these qualities, then they are deemed qualified to become disciples.

Nowadays, if a guru does something against our wishes, it is easy for us to lose our faith. This only means that we are not genuine disciples. The most important thing is never to lose faith in one's guru but to accept them as the guru not just for this life but for lifetime after lifetime. It is necessary to have genuine and unshakeable faith—not superficial faith, but faith that comes from the depth of your heart—because all progress on the path comes from the guru. If you have faith like this, then you will have many qualities, and on that basis, you will make great progress on the spiritual path.

## **Pure Perception**

In short, all the blessings that we can receive by relying on the guru depend on our own perception. If we think that the guru is the real Buddha or Vajradhara, then when we pray to our guru, we will receive the blessings of the Buddha or Vajradhara in our mental continuum. If we think that our guru is a bodhisattva but not a buddha, then when we pray to the guru, we will only receive the blessings of a bodhisattva, not the blessings of a buddha. Everything depends on how we perceive the guru. Especially in the Vajrayāna, the guru is the combination of all the refuges: the guru is the Buddha, the guru is the Dharma, and the guru is the Saṅgha. The guru is the totality of the Triple Gem, none other than the Triple Gem. Regarding the four-line refuge prayer, we say that taking refuge in the guru is the shortest version of taking refuge in the Triple Gem because the Triple Gem is entirely included in the guru.

The guru, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha are inseparable. Although they can appear in different forms or aspects, they are of the same nature in reality. The guru is the Buddha, the guru is the Dharma, and the guru is the Saṅgha. With such a perception, we should generate strong devotion and faith in the guru. Relying on the guru with such faith, we will gain not only great knowledge but receive real blessings, and we can gain the real power of the guru in our mental

continuum. If we rely in a genuine way on the guru, on their advice and teachings, we will be rescued not only from the three lower realms but from the three higher realms. This means gaining liberation from the whole of saṃsāra. Eventually, we can also attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings.

## **Conclusion**

There are many other topics regarding how to choose a guru, but today I will conclude my short talk here. I sincerely wish that the blessings of our guru, the great Vajradhara Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche, will be with us all, now and always. May we be his disciples in this life and in all our future lives. May we have the fortune and merit to receive his precious and profound teachings, through which we will receive great blessings and make great progress on the spiritual path. In this way, may we eventually gain liberation and the state of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

To conclude, we should dedicate all of today's merit, along with all other merit, to the attainment of buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. From the depths of our hearts, we should dedicate all our merit to our root gurus and to the great Vajradhara, the forty-first Gongma Trichen Rinpoche, for his long life, good health, and so that he may turn the wheel of Dharma forever, far and wide. Thank you.





- His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



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