

THE IDEA OF DEVOTION

August 20, 2011

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I would like to say something about devotion in Buddhism. And by devotion I am referring to the whole idea of having a guru or spiritual guide, and especially to being devoted (having devotion) to a human being rather than to god. This very idea makes some people very uncomfortable.

And not all forms of Buddhism depend on working closely with a teacher. There are many approaches to Buddhism where studying texts, meditating together, and working in a group, class-room style, is the norm. Only what is called Vajrayana Buddhism requires a particular teacher-student relationship as an integral part of the approach, and this deserves some explanation. It took me a long time to understand it, so please hear me out.

There are different approaches to Buddhism and the most common approach is similar to our western educational system, where we have classrooms and teachers. The teacher presents the subject and the students do their best to follow and learn. Slow students may require special tutoring and advanced students also may require special attention.

And there are also special courses where a student crams, works very closely with the teacher, and attempts to learn at a faster rate. Not everyone wants to cram and students have to have an aptitude for it. Vajrayana Buddhism is a little like cramming.

Instead of the slower classroom approach, in Vajrayana Buddhism the teacher and the student work very closely together and in an intense manner. This requires a great deal of mutual trust on the part of both the teacher and the student. Not everyone can or wants to learn this way. It requires absolute trust.

Trust in another person is not always easy to come by. Learning to implicitly trust someone outside your own skin is not a given for most of us. It is something we have to learn to do. Like accepting candy from strangers, how do we know what we are getting is not poison? We don't like to take it from just anyone and this is where the trust comes in.

In Vajrayana Buddhism we are trusting our spiritual life (which is perhaps the most important life we have) to another person. We trust that they will direct us in ways we cannot trust our self to do. We cannot always see ourselves clearly; we don't know if we are doing the right thing or the wrong thing.

In the guru-disciple relationship we trust that the guru knows what is good for us and what is not, regardless of what we think or feel. Their suggestion is our command. This requires real trust and you cannot fake it. You either have that trust or you do not. And please here this:

Even if you get to the point of trusting another person enough to accept direction from them, this does not mean that you will have the karma to find that person in this life. We first have to become willing and able to trust (which is a huge accomplishment by itself) and then we actually have to find a teacher we can and do trust. These are two different things. But the old saying is also true: when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

In Vajrayana Buddhism like the Tibetans practice the whole point is about having a

student/master relationship. This has been true for a thousand years. The teacher and the student form an impeccable bond with one another which is termed their “samaya.” They share this equally. On one hand the student gets personal attention from a master in the practices, yet on the other hand the student must follow the directives of the master. There is no in-between. The student trusts the master implicitly. The possible bad news is that should the student pick an unworthy master, he or she will go nowhere or worse yet, suffer harm in their practice.

When all this works well, the student and master work hand in hand and the progress of the student can be very much accelerated over working on one’s own or even as part of a group, at least this is the theory. Moreover, the samaya or bond between the teacher and student is a sacred trust and this promotes great devotion on the part of the student for the teacher. Why is that?

In this world we all live in, very, very few of us get as much personal attention in our spiritual development as we might need or could use. We are hungry for it. When through our good karma someone appears in our lives who has mastered the dharma and unselfishly is willing to accept us just as we are and work with us to develop our awareness, this is good news. It also is very rare. As the teacher succeeds in pointing out to us, again and again, the proper path, this engenders a deep and lasting appreciation for their kindness. I mean: who cares for you like this?

The student naturally develops a sincere devotion to the teacher who is as close to them as a mother or a father, and who is so totally concerned for their welfare. It goes from there. You have the idea.

In Buddhism in general there is devotion and thankfulness for the Buddha, the dharma (his teachings), and the sangha (those who hold the teachings properly). In Vajrayana Buddhism the sacred bond or samaya between the dharma master and the student takes devotion to another level.

In my own experience I can attest to the deep and abiding devotion that has developed on my part for my teacher as I increasingly understand his kindness and compassion in patiently putting up with me for all these years and guiding me in learning to be more aware. Words cannot express the good fortune to have encountered such a being in the vortex of my life. Otherwise, where would I be?

It is not devotion as to a god, but devotion to someone who has cared enough to share what are perhaps the most precious teachings in the world with us. We can be devoted to our parents and devoted to our life partner, but devotion to a dharma teacher is very, very special, because usually there is no personal discord between the two of you. There can’t be.

With parents, children, husbands, and wives there is devotion, but also a history of whatever – agreements, disagreements, likes, dislikes, etc. The relationship with a dharma teacher or guru is never that personal, but rather even more personal – beyond personality. There is a reason that the translation for the Tibetan word “rinpoche” means “precious one.”

The hallmark of a proper dharma teacher is that they see you as you are and accept you just as you are. I couldn’t believe it when I first realized that my dharma teacher was not put off by all of my imperfections and shenanigans. With all that was wrong with me, he still saw something of value there and had no fear whatsoever of being contaminated by my personal faults.

As scary as this next statement might be to some of you reading this, it is true. A proper dharma teacher is master of your karma, master of you. They have your number down cold and know just what you need to succeed in your dharma practice. Otherwise they are not your master or teacher. But you have to be able to receive their instructions, to listen.

I have never argued with my dharma teacher, not because I don't argue but because he has always handled me in an exemplary manner. Tibetan Buddhist history is replete with stories of great adepts taming fierce demons. Let me put it this way. My teacher has tamed the demonic in me and made me voluntarily obey his commands, which commands have always been the essence of kindness and compassion.

This is not to say that my teacher has not administered to me strong medicine, but always in a way I could accept and use, rather than reject. Is it any wonder that I feel great devotion to him for his kindness and compassion?

I hope you will forgive me for being so candid in all of this, but I don't want you to think of devotion as some kind of blind faith. The devotion that I have discovered in the dharma is inspired by the kindness and compassion of my teachers and my gratefulness for their teachings which are more precious than gold.