

## Handout for Class 4: On Meeting a Spiritual Friend

*By Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, Albany KTC, Nov. 9, 1987. Transcribed by Meg Maurer. Edited by Laura Roth.*

(Editor's note: The teachings of the Buddha emphasize that spiritual awakening depends mainly on the individual practitioner's diligent study of the dharma and diligent meditation practice. However, the teachings - especially those of the Vajrayana - also emphasize the need for a spiritual friend (or teacher) to teach us, guide us, and help us avoid pitfalls in our practice. Spiritual teachers also are called the "holders" of the Buddhist teachings, and are the main vehicle for lineage in that they pass down the teachings they have received and practiced to a new generation through their teachings. This article from Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, founder of the Columbus KTC, talks about how we make contact with spiritual friends.)

Rinpoche would like to extend warm greetings to everyone. In talking about meeting with a spiritual friend, we might begin by asking, what is a spiritual friend? What does it mean to meet a spiritual friend, and having met a spiritual friend, what should one's approach be to the relationship? What should be the outcome of having met a spiritual friend? Around these points Rinpoche would like to share his thoughts with you.

To explain what is meant by "spiritual friend," in Sanskrit the word is *kalyanamitra*, and in Tibetan *gewa chenyen*. *Gewa* literally means "of virtue" or "of goodness," something that is wholesome, and so the word we are using here, "spiritual," may not exactly express it. And so *kalyanamitra* has to do with wholesomeness, something that is in the correct direction, and the second word *che nyen* is generally referred to as friend, but really means more than a friend. Of the two syllables, *che* has the meaning of friendship, and *nyen* means kinship, which is a family or blood relationship. Whatever proper understanding, whatever wholesome knowledge and experience, someone who extends the generosity of such knowledge, is expressing friendship. And what knowledge or insight the one who extends them has, could become your knowledge and your realization. Through the sharing of the knowledge and the realization, you develop a more precious and special relationship like a kinship. Through the bloodline in the case of family we are related to each other, and through the means of the teachings, through the possibility of common understanding an intimate relationship takes place.

A spiritual friend is also able to extend one's understanding as to what is unwholesome and destructive in one's life, that one should be aware of and avoid getting caught up in. How does one meet such a person? This can happen in two ways. One is a ripening of previous good connections, a previous history of having worked and studied with the help of such a spiritual

friend. In this case, because of continuous ripening of wholesome karma, a good relationship that one has started in the past, in some former lifetime for example, is able to continue, and so it is a matter of making a reconnection. This is actually the best way, and the experience is very special, in that, when you meet such a spiritual friend, there is a sense of coming home. It is like a good friend whom one has not seen in a long time, and when you see that friend again, there is a sort of mutual recognition, a good, relaxed feeling free of uncertainty or hesitation. As for the guidance of that spiritual friend, and the inspiration that one can receive from such a spiritual friend one does not have any questions. There is a genuine, effortless confidence. But such a meeting is rare, because one who meets a spiritual friend in this way must be very fortunate, and have a good history of connection, a good history of cultivation of what is wholesome and virtuous, as far as mental development is concerned.

The other way one meets a spiritual friend is because of auspicious coincidence, because certain circumstances brought one to the situation. Auspicious coincidence, Rinpoche says, does not mean simply by chance, not coincidence in that sense. While the meeting with the particular spiritual friend not because of previous connections, and it is not the spiritual friend who you have worked with, but the fact that one can have this experience at all is because of some degree of previous connection with wholesome dharmic activities. When you come into contact with something that is good, especially towards the experience of awakening one's mind, the ripening of these experiences happens mainly because of two things.

One is that one has some history of conducting one's life or lives in wholesome or virtuous ways, coupled with an aspiration that in all future times until complete awakened mind is experienced, may one be always able to continue to cultivate such qualities of mind, and may one find the necessary conditions to do so. That is the reason on the part of the student. Then on the part of the spiritual friend, the fact that particular teachers of the dharma are able to effect benefit in the lives of others, is not only because they have cultivated some realization and accumulated some knowledge, but also because of the strength of their aspiration. That is, whatever knowledge and insight and realization they have, may they be able to continually extend them toward the benefit of others. Because of these two situations meeting together, the auspicious circumstance arises.

With regard to meeting a spiritual friend, how does one know that one has met the proper spiritual friend, not just in name or appearance, but in reality? That is not impossible, but it is not very easy to know, because whether someone you have met is a true spiritual friend or not is not immediately apparent from looking at the outward appearance of the person. The depth of knowledge and realization, the level of commitment to helping others, that a spiritual friend has are qualities of the mind and are hidden from being immediately visible. Nevertheless it is not impossible to know whether one has met with a proper spiritual friend, if one has some degree of intelligence and common sense, based on what this person, known as a spiritual friend, is saying.

Are the words and the knowledge that are being shared intelligible and reasonable, are they sane and beneficial? Then, more importantly, does his or her action go along with what he or she says? What is said may be very sensible, intelligent, and beneficial, but are the actions reasonable and wholesome? And so, if not immediately, at least given time one would have the ability to know. With regard to this, Shakyamuni Buddha said that it is difficult for ordinary people to have insight into other people's minds. Nevertheless it is impossible to know about them without having exact knowledge of their minds. Where you see smoke, there you see the possibility of fire, where you see swans, there you see the possibility of water, where you see the actions that are like the actions of a Bodhisattva, there is the possibility of the Bodhisattva mind, where there is sane action there is the possibility of sane mind.

With regard to what should be some of the characteristics or marks of a true spiritual friend, there are a few which Rinpoche would like to share with you. One is in regard to helping and guiding others, that from the side of the spiritual friend there is no discrimination between old and young, weak and strong, poor and rich, man and woman, he or she is simply and purely concerned with benefiting whoever needs help, whoever could be reached by what he or she can do. Another is being able to maintain these qualities month after month, year after year. Anyone can be impressive once or twice, without any discrimination or favoritism; that should not be difficult. But being able to remain the same way, having an even mind all of the time, is not so easy.

Another mark of a true spiritual friend is that he or she is consistently responsible for a relationship which has been made. It is not a case of immediate excitement and concern and then later withdrawing, when whatever personal interest involves is no longer being fulfilled. But if a spiritual friend is interested in the well being of others, the experience of awakened mind of others, he should remain interested until the others have experienced the awakened state of mind.

And then again, when sharing knowledge and understanding, the true friend does so with the intention to help others, not with arrogance or pride or a superior attitude, not bullying others' ignorance, but rather being patient with others' ignorance, being sensitive to others' not knowing. One might have started that way too, and the understanding and realization one has received, one did not begin with, and obviously any spiritual friend might know the same. And another virtue of not becoming inflated by praises and compliments, not being deflated and shrinking because of criticisms. So these are some of the characteristics of one who might be regarded as a proper or true spiritual friend.

So in this way, you can actually examine and recognize a proper spiritual friend, even though you do not have insight into the mind of the person. A simple example is that if an object with a terrible odor is wrapped in silk or brocade, it is immediately very impressive, but slowly the

odor comes through and it smells more and more, and so you have an idea of what is inside the package. On the other hand if an object which is full of fragrance and freshness is wrapped in rags or any simple piece of cloth, at immediate glance, it may not even seem worth keeping. However, the longer you are around such an object, the more the fragrance comes through, and the more you value it. So, based on common sense and a discerning mind, it is not difficult to have a sense of whether one is a proper spiritual friend or not.

Meeting a proper spiritual friend, someone having the marks and qualities Rinpoche talked about in our times is extremely rare. Given that reality, if one has met such a true spiritual friend, then it is extremely important that one makes the connection and maintains that connection. Because first of all such a true spiritual friend is very rare to find, and second of all, being able to come across with another is almost impossible. There is a Tibetan saying that finding a true spiritual friend is like seeing stars in the daytime, or seeing flowers in the winter. In the cold and rugged climate of Tibet, it is almost impossible to see flowers in the winter. If it ever happens, it must be something special and auspicious. It is known that once in a while it happens, at the passing or at the rebirth of some great teacher, a flower growing in the snow or in some rugged place, so that it is not impossible but it is certainly rare.

Then, when you have come into contact with a true spiritual friend and you recognize that there is a good possibility you will be able to appreciate and recognize the wisdom, the insight that flows from such a relationship, through such a person. And so, now you are making a true relationship, and when you begin to receive such knowledge, there is a friendship and a kinship happening. In a relationship between parents and children, there is the passing down of genes or inheritance, which is very special, which we should honor and respect and acknowledge by all means. But nothing is more special than to be able to inherit the knowledge and wisdom of someone else, to have that become integrated in one's life. So when you have a proper relationship there is all the possibility of benefit happening because the conditions for things to happen in a wholesome and proper way are there. If, let us say, there is a piece of scented wood that has fragrance, and if another piece has no scent at all is put with the scented wood, given time, that second piece of wood begins to become as fragrant as the first. When good things meet, good things happen.

Once again, such a meeting with the proper spiritual friend is rare. But once such a relationship takes place, that could be the most beneficial thing and the most important occurrence in one's life, because whether we know it or not, the reality is that from beginningless time, for eons and eons, one has experienced birth in cyclic existence. One's mind, the complete involuntary way of one's mind has been in accordance with the dictates of confused conditioning. When one's mind is experiencing confusion, that causes suffering and pain, and pain and suffering causes more confusion, and this has gone on choicelessly, from birth to death, again and again. And also the present experience of our lives is quite temporary. We should know that our life is very

fragile, we will not have it all the time. While we do have it, when we have the opportunity to make the best use of it, it should be obvious that we must take advantage of that.

Also, there is a variety of very serious ignorance that people like to hold on to, a very strong wishful thinking, and that is the idea of natural evolution. From lifetime to lifetime, naturally you become more refined, better and better, and then, at some point, you reach some culmination, and you are there. If that is really true, should it not have happened a long time ago? This idea denied the truth of cause and effect, which is not an individual opinion or a possibility, but from a material point of view and from a mental activities point of view, the truth of cause and effect is obvious. We know that when we do certain things we experience certain results. If our actions have been wholesome, we experience some happiness, even if it's temporary, and if our actions have been unwholesome and very destructive we experience the result as pain and suffering. That is the truth of cause and effect. But we would like to have on the other hand somewhere else, a natural evolution taking place, which is not our doing. But if there is such a thing as natural evolution, there is no point in telling someone to do wholesome and beneficial things. You could be doing the most heinous of crimes but natural evolution will take care of you. You could be doing the most incredible wholesome things but it does not matter because you are subject to natural evolution. So the notion that things are going to work out by themselves and obviously for the better is an illusion and wishful thinking.

We are responsible for our actions, we are responsible for our thoughts. We are responsible for the influence that we have on others. We have the ability to have a wholesome influence, we have the ability to have a very unwholesome influence. We are responsible for the harm that we do to ourselves, we are responsible for the harm that we do to others. And so, in this way, it is more realistic to take care of one's own work whatever one has to do, and given that understanding when there is an opportunity of having a relationship with a true and proper spiritual friend and fostering that relationship, one cannot afford to miss it.

As for the experience of the ultimate and absolute happiness of one's mind, the experience of freedom from sufferings and confusions, absolutely nothing else you do is going to bring that about, other than working with one's mind through the help of the instructions and the guidance of the spiritual friend who has the knowledge. We have the potential to become free of suffering, to become as totally enlightened as anyone else who has experienced the awakened state of mind and has become endowed with absolute wisdom. We have incredible potentials, we are profoundly resourceful, but if we imprison ourselves and let our potentials remain completely obscured, our potentials by themselves are not going to evolve without our facilitating the unfolding of the potentials by receiving guidance and then integrating it. We are doing so many things in our lives. We will try to move any obstacles, do anything, to be able to experience some degree of stability of mind, some freedom from dissatisfaction. But, if our actions are limited to things that are not directly related with the problems and potentials of our mind, they

are all wasted efforts.

And finally, fully awakened Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, endowed with true wisdom and free from confusion and suffering, how did they reach that state? It is having made a connection with the proper spiritual friend, recognizing the importance of that relationship, developing the knowledge and the wisdom needed to unravel the defilements and obscurations of one's mind, and unfolding the potentials of one's mind. That is what led to the experience of awakened mind. Our situation and potentials and journey are the same.