

~ *Choosing a Teacher* ~

By Mingyur Rinpoche

Tibetans say, “When you meet a teacher, don’t devour that person like a dog that gulps down meat without tasting it first.” Investigate. Examine. This is the student’s responsibility. Remember, we can complete Vajrayana teachings without having one special teacher. Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche had twenty-five gurus.

One reason to take our time is that most people come to a teacher, especially their first teacher, with no real understanding of what a master has to offer or even what they themselves are looking for, and their expectations may create confusion. Many of the greatest Tibetan masters in history shared the characteristic of never displaying the slightest indication of their wisdom mind. My father was like that. There was nothing shiny about his enlightenment. If he had gone to the market by himself, no one would have paid him any attention, which would have been fine with him. He was often treated like one. There are many stories of how the caretakers or cooks in monasteries would try to kick him out when he showed up to see teachers or even to give teachings. Until they heard who he was, they could not perceive his qualities.

Once as Patrul Rinpoche was approaching Tsechu Monastery in Tibet, he passed by a retreat hut and the monk there called out to him, “Hey old man, you do not have any nice clothing or good shoes. I will give you some clothes and feed you if you will clean my hut and cook for me and clean the offering bowls and make offerings. Then maybe I can teach you sometimes.”

Patrul Rinpoche said, “Oh, this sounds like a good deal.” So he set about doing his chores impeccably, cleaning the shrine and making offerings and cooking.

The retreatant was very happy with this arrangement, and one day he

said, “Now I will teach you some dharma from *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, the text of the great master Patrul Rinpoche.” Patrul Rinpoche listened very respectfully and thanked the monk for his teachings.

This continued for many days. Then one morning the lama noticed that the line of offering bowls on the shrine was not perfect. He scolded his old attendant, saying, “Did you not hear Patrul Rinpoche say that the offering bowls should be lined up perfectly?”

And Patrul Rinpoche said, “Oh, I am so sorry.”

On the day of the full moon, Patrul Rinpoche said, “I would like to circumambulate the stupa at the temple today and have come to ask your permission. I will be back in time to prepare your midday meal.” The monk gave his permission.

Patrul Rinpoche walked to the stupa and was making prayers and circumambulating when one of the administrative heads of the monastery recognized him and immediately began making prostrations in the middle of the muddy path. He offered him *katas* and was so happy and felt so blessed to have the great master visit his monastery. All the other people at the stupa, including monks and laypeople, wondered who this could be. Soon word got around that it was the great Patrul Rinpoche. Everyone started crowding around to make prostrations and receive blessings. He kept repeating, “Please stop, please. I am sorry to leave, but I have an important engagement and cannot stop here. Please allow me to pass.” But more and more people came.

Soon the monk back in the hut began to wonder, “What happened to my old man? He is quite late.” Suddenly he saw people coming from the direction of the monastery and he asked, “Did you see my old attendant?”

The people said, “We did not see any old attendant, but Patrul Rinpoche is at the stupa and everyone is receiving blessings, so he is probably there.”

This made the monk a little angry, and he thought, “As soon as the old

man cooks my lunch, I will leave and go see Patrul Rinpoche myself.”

A while later, he saw an old man coming down the road surrounded by people bowing and prostrating and offering *katas*. The monk thought, “That could not be my old man.” When the crowd got closer, he saw that it was him. He became so embarrassed that he ran into his house and locked the door and all the windows and hid.

Patrul Rinpoche stood outside the door, saying, “Please let me in. I am so sorry that I am late. I have returned to cook your lunch.” Then he walked all around the house asking to please be let in, but the lama was too embarrassed to appear, and finally Patrul Rinpoche left.

Who among us would have acted differently than that monk? If we apply worldly values to our search, we may end up with a worldly teacher. So we might want to cultivate some sense of what qualities we are looking for. However, once we take teachings, we automatically become that teacher’s student, so it’s important to investigate first. We can ask around, read the teacher’s books, watch their videos, or listen to audio materials.

If a teacher is not qualified, not authentic, then it’s like the blind leading the blind. If you allow blind faith to dictate our choice of guru, then you might chose a blind teacher, and this blind teacher might lead us over a cliff. In these degenerate times, it’s almost impossible to find a perfect teacher. Even if the teacher is 100 percent perfect, the student may not have enough wisdom to know that. Anyway, the guru does not choose the student; the student chooses the guru, and guidelines exist for making that choice.

The Four Considerations for Choosing a Teacher

The four considerations for choosing a teacher are: an examination of the lineage, the teacher’s practice history, the teacher’s compassion and willingness to take care of the student, and the teacher’s discipline with regard to maintaining whatever vows he or she has taken. This is not information that you can look up on the Internet. You need to do a

little work. But if our assessments check out and there is a heart connection between you and the teacher, our efforts will be worthwhile.

The First Consideration: Examining the Lineage of the Guru

The lineage of a guru cannot guarantee a teacher's trustworthiness. Yet these considerations are meant as guidelines, not guarantees, and lineage provides an excellent place to start. Through hundreds of years, contributions from enlightened beings have enriched these lineages through oral teachings, written texts and scholarly commentaries. Also the art and imagery enhance the history of the lineage as well as the legends and stories of the great masters. No one teacher equals the magnitude of lineage, but the teacher brings us into the lineage.

Imagine entering a university that specializes in the subject that most interests you, like some aspect of science, art, or history. You have access to the cumulative wisdom of professors, senior students, peers, libraries, databases, and so forth. The richness of experience and knowledge is vast and you are there to drink it in. That's our job. What an amazing opportunity—and it's the same for dharma lineages. With lineage, the practice becomes alive and transformative. It never dries up and becomes boring and stagnant, the way it can with just using books.

What if we come across a teacher who has no lineage? No predecessors? A teacher who reveres not one living master? Or a teacher who puts down other teachers and makes himself or herself appear to be better than they are? It is best to avoid those who advertise themselves as ultimate masters, or self-acclaimed adepts, or who promote their own realization. In vajrayana, we say that if a teacher claims to have clairvoyant powers, or to perform miracles, or says that he or she has a direct message from the Buddha, or advertises special energies and healing capabilities, or a high level of

realization, then there is definitely something wrong. This is not an authentic teacher.

It's the student's responsibility to check the lineage and ask the lineage masters: "What do you think of this person? Is he or she a worthy teacher or not? Do the other lineage holders support this person or not?" Check with your own peers and check with the teacher's peers.

The Second Consideration: The Guru's Practice History

The teacher must have a history of practice, meditation, and study. If we want to learn dharma, we must study with someone who knows more than we do, who has more experience, more practice history, and more understanding. Someone's history can tell a lot about their real interests. What are they truly committed to? Deepening their own understanding? Helping their students? Helping their own gurus? Taking care of others? Speak to other students about this teacher. Of course there will always be surprises; we can't figure out everything in advance.

The Third Consideration: The Guru Must Take Care of the Students

Students choose their teachers. Once the teacher agrees to accept a student, that teacher has a responsibility to guide the student toward enlightenment to the very best of their capacities. Students should have a sense that the teacher is in their court, trying to help them on this journey and caring about their spiritual maturation. It is the kindness and compassion of the guru, the kinship and friendliness, that makes the journey alive and wholehearted. We cannot feel the strong pulse of dharma from texts and dead masters alone.

It is important to keep in mind that no two students are alike. Differences in personality and neuroses mean that guidance tailored

to help one student might hinder another. For this reason, a student cannot always understand how a guru is relating to others because no two students are exactly alike.

The most important point is that the student needs complete trust that their teacher is making every effort to help them on their path toward liberation for the benefit of all beings. That does not make the teacher a perfect person. But it makes that teacher perfectly qualified with regard to this consideration.

The Fourth Consideration: Maintaining Vows

The fourth consideration when choosing a teacher concerns the teacher's discipline with regard to the vows that he or she undertook—or, to put it another way, to check if the teacher is keeping *samaya*, which is a term only used in vajrayana. *Samaya* means to maintain unwavering respect toward the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and in the case of vajrayana, the guru.

Some Westerners have the idea that leaving a teacher is breaking *samaya*, but this is not necessarily true. If after a period of study, you conclude that the teacher is not suitable, then it's best to cut the connection. There are no rules in vajrayana that say you have to stick with a teacher no matter what. Definitely not. If you have 100 percent proof that the teacher is not qualified according to these four considerations, then you should cut the ties and you can even discuss the situation with other people. This is completely legitimate. If the teacher does not have these four qualities, and we have proof of inappropriate activities, then we are not breaking *samaya* by telling others. If the teacher is affiliated with a monastery, the best option is to discuss these issues with that person's superior.

There was a situation concerning a tulku in the monastery nearest my own monastery in Kham in eastern Tibet. This tulku was one of the main teachers for the young monks as well as a senior administrator. But he developed an attachment to a woman in the village. Several times he was discovered missing from his room at night, and rumors

in the village and in the monastery became the subject of endless gossip. This tulku had grown up in this monastery, so everyone knew the nature of his vows; if the rumors were correct, he had violated them.

When people live in a tight-knit monastic community, each person's behavior affects the entire community. Imagine twenty people rowing a boat forward, when suddenly one person decides to move the oars in the opposite direction. This throws the whole boat off course and the atmosphere can become poisoned. The program for young monks is a training ground, and they need to be inspired by their teachers, not let down or disturbed.

Many junior monks were going to monks in the administration and complaining about this tulku's behavior, but they had no proof, and the tulku himself kept denying the rumors. Without proof, nothing could be done. Finally everyone became fed up with the rumors and gossip and confusion. One night after a snowstorm, some senior monks followed the tulku's footprints and caught him at the home of the woman. He was dismissed from the monastery. Eventually he married his lady friend and they had children. He visited the monastery on special occasions as a layperson, but could not practice inside the dharma hall.

Pragmatically speaking, we do not always know the exact nature of a teacher's vows. And we do not always know what kind of flexibility is built into those vows by the lineage. Also, we already know from many examples in the East and West, that whenever a teacher is accused of inappropriate behavior by one or many students, other students step up to defend that teacher. So accusations are not easy to confirm. However, if we feel that a teacher is behaving badly, even without proof, we should probably leave, because under those circumstances we may not be receptive to learning from this person. That is reason enough to move on, but try to leave in a neutral way, without animosity. We neither encourage others to study with this teacher nor discourage them.

A lot of times, especially in the West, students fault themselves for

seeing the teacher with impure perception. If they have any criticisms or negativities about the guru, they blame themselves. This is of no benefit. If this teacher-student relationship is not working to help us on our path, it's the student's responsibility to make a change. In this case, try to make the change without leaving a sour taste in your mouth.

The Balance Sheet

Considering how truly alien the concept of guru is in the West, the most important questions are the simplest: "Is this helping me? Am I more inspired to practice? Does this situation support my aspirations or not?" Sometimes students spend a lot of time making a balance sheet: "There are these good things, and then there are these bad things. Which outweighs which? What should I do?"

If you cannot benefit from the teachings or if the situation becomes an obstacle for your path, then you should leave it in a neutral way. Saljay Rinpoche said that if our balance sheet shows about 70 to 80 percent positive, that's pretty good. If it's 70 to 80 percent negative, then it's best to leave and does not break samaya. But try not to create a lot of negativity around the situation.

If you go from teacher to teacher, always disappointed, always complaining and always feeling betrayed by each teacher's behavior or personality, then you need to question what you are looking for. Many modern people look for a guru in the same way as they would a marriage partner: seeking Mr. or Mrs. Perfect. Impossible. A conceptual ideal gets developed that even Shakyamuni Buddha himself could not fulfill. That approach to "an ultimate best" doesn't work in marriage, and it doesn't work with teachers. There is no perfection in samsara, and that includes gurus and partners.

Flesh-and-blood gurus have personalities with inclinations, tendencies, karma, and tastes. If you concentrate on personality traits, you will always find fault, guaranteed. One guru eats meat and that is terrible, another eats candies all day, and another slurps soup too

loudly. One Buddhist teacher was told that he could not be enlightened because he was fat. Another horrified his students because he liked to watch boxing on television. Some teachers like women, others like beer, and one buys maroon cashmere socks in London. “Terrible. Just terrible.” But none of these behaviors tell us anything about a teacher’s capacity to guide us on our path. When used as criticisms, most of these descriptions are simply behaviors that one does not like, or does not approve of, or that one judges just as one would friends. The biases and opinions formed through culture, class, and personal preferences come into play. We judge the guru in terms of the relative.

But the role of the guru is to lead us to the absolute nature of our own being. That is why we speak about the benefits of pure perception and of seeing the guru as the buddha. Looking subjectively at the mundane aspect of the teacher’s behavior will never serve us well if our aspirations for enlightenment are genuine. This is why Saljay Rinpoche told me: “The essence of the guru is the guru. You cannot receive any blessings from this ordinary form. The real teacher is the wisdom essence of this body, speech, and mind.”

The Buddhist caves at Ellora and Ajanta in India contain massive buddhas and halls made from rock-cut architecture. The face of the rock was chiseled away to create precise, monumental structures. Nothing was added. No form was carved out and added to another. Every image and shape emerged from eliminating layers of rock and mud. Someone looked at the side of a mountain and saw an assembly of buddhas. It took a shift in view.

When I first arrived at Sherab Ling, I was disappointed that an old, toothless guy with a cane had to be my guru. But once I got a taste of what he knew and what he had to teach me, I concentrated on that. It’s not that the physical body of the guru disappears or that we perceive it as the most beautiful form in the world. What we see shifts. The guru’s mind is essentially no different than anyone else’s mind, including our very own mind. But how we perceive that mind can help access our own best qualities.

Three Styles of Working with Gurus

There are basically three styles of working with gurus. In the first, we choose one particular teacher who is our main, root teacher. We might take teachings from other teachers, especially those in the same lineage as this guru, but there is no question about who our main teacher is. The second style is to have many teachers, without having any particular root or main guru. The third style is what we call the automatic guru.

The First Style: Taking One Root Teacher

Having one teacher for one lifetime works very well for many people. A strong sense of trust can develop, whereby the student's openness to the guru over time can increase the opportunities for the teacher to help this person work with their mind, their aversions, and their self-imposed mental constructs.

But this is just one style. It's common among Westerners to feel that one special guru is necessary, or that they have to be very intimate and tell the guru everything—about family, relationships, money problems, and to ask the guru's advice about where to live, what house to purchase, and what stocks to buy—almost like being married. Then if an opportunity to take teachings from another teacher arises, it feels like betraying the guru. This is not quite right, and the closeness can work in reverse. Too much emphasis gets put onto the person, or onto that person's personality and characteristics, or onto the relationship.

In the West, Tibetan teachers are still not that common, and genuine dharma students may only have access to one teacher. Yet this is changing rapidly as more Tibetan teachers travel regularly and as more of their Western disciples become teachers. But there is also an idea of "oneness" that creeps into this situation that can become out of balance: "I have only one father and one mother and one husband or wife, and now I have one teacher. I used to have one God and one church, and now I have one teacher."

The tighter the fixation on “my one guru,” the harder it is to comprehend Saljay Rinpoche’s teaching: “The essence of the guru is the guru.” The personality traits of the guru—good, bad, or neutral—are not the source of wisdom or blessings. The benefits available from the guru magnify when the guru is perceived as the essence of the guru, and also as the essence of all the buddhas and all the enlightened beings in the ten directions. Real dharma nourishment comes with this expansion, this radiant wisdom of the guru’s mind. We might say that the amplification comes by allowing the individuated guru to melt into the field of merit and wisdom, where he or she unites with all the buddhas. But the tighter we bind the guru with the person and personality into “my one and only guru,” the less the guru becomes the object of the pure perception that reflects back to us. This reflected pure perception is what benefits us the most benefit.

Because the guru-disciple relationship is so new for Westerners, it will take time before it’s understood with any consistency. It’s understandable that some Westerners expect the guru to function in ways similar to other authority figures in their society, such as parents, bosses, generals, police officers, or psychiatrists. All of these projections can be worked with—if the student is willing to bring the issues into the realm of dharma.

Sometimes people tell me about their childhoods, what their mother did to them, what their father said, and about this one sibling, until the story includes the entire family history. Meanwhile I am wondering: “Where is the dharma question? Where is the opening? Where is the opportunity for practice?” A teacher does not have to be a therapist to see the fixations, the grasping, the anger, or the jealousy. But sometimes when I introduce practices that can help alleviate these problems, I meet resistance. Then I might wonder, “Gee, maybe this person wants a therapist, not a dharma friend.”

When students ask about psychological issues, marital problems, family dramas, and so forth, my own general response is to try to turn the conversation to dharma so that I can suggest activities, practices, or prayers that I hope can help. Generally, with non-dharma questions,

I try to turn people's minds toward their own wisdom, their own inclinations and knowledge. With a little encouragement, people can usually arrive at the answer to their own worldly questions. If the person is willing to use dharma teachings to help themselves, then I have a role to play.

Many people come to dharma because they are in some emotional crisis or experience chronic mental suffering. That makes sense. But they may want their guru to solve all their psychological issues. Somehow they have the mistaken idea that solving their problems is the guru's job, rather than taking their problems to the path of meditation and study. Nowadays many students spend more time following the gurus than they do practicing. The great masters of Tibet went to their gurus to receive teachings or to clarify their instructions, and then they left to practice. The point is not how or where we practice, but rather not to confuse practice with being around a teacher. We need to nurture our own inner guru.

Tibet had a lot of gurus. Good, bad, and fake gurus. This is normal. Many people accomplish name and fame by being a big person in government or in trade, and some people accomplish social status by setting up shop as a guru. Unavoidable. But in old Tibet, and even today among the exile communities, some kind of "quality control" prevails. If a teacher behaves badly, say by speaking disapprovingly of the abbot, or if such a person compromises the monastery through inappropriate behavior, peers affiliated with that lineage or monastery take action. The first efforts involve private discussions aimed at giving the person another chance. But if someone continues to adversely affect a community or lineage, they get "fired," so to speak.

Not long ago, there was a case of a tulku in Nepal who had some education but had been breaking his vows. He had been misrepresenting his spiritual accomplishments to the young monks in the monastery as well as to laypeople. He would say that he was a realized master, able to see the buddhas and bodhisattvas. He talked like this to sponsors as well. Apparently he took money from sponsors on behalf of the monastery. But then, after everyone else was asleep, he changed from his robes to lay clothing and spent this money

drinking whiskey and dancing at nightclubs in Kathmandu. He even bought himself a car, so he was certainly not discreet about accumulating funds. This person disrespected those who had tried to help him and refused to make corrections.

Finally the head of the monastery called a meeting. Many lineage masters from different monasteries were joined by other lamas and monks, and the tulku was present. In front of this assembly, the abbot publicly denounced him, saying “You cannot represent yourself as affiliated with this lineage or monastery.” He also stripped him of his tulku status. He could not use that to promote himself anymore, and he lost his credibility. Being a tulku does not mean that this person can do anything: a tulku must abide by the rules and ethics and style of a monastery just like anyone else, or face being reprimanded or ousted.

Every community inevitably experiences disturbances. What’s important is how people deal with them. Problems also arise when isolated teachers are living and working without a community of peers. In Taiwan, fifteen or twenty years ago, there were several Taiwanese who claimed to be vajrayana lineage holders and named themselves “Rinpoche This and Rinpoche That,” and said things like, “I am the second Buddha.” Since there were no alternative teachers, they did quite well for themselves. But when authentic lineage holders started to teach in Taiwan, the fakes couldn’t maintain their charade. Once people were given a choice, the difference between false and true became obvious, and today the situation in Taiwan is much better.

In old Tibet, the isolation of villages offered little protection from fake lamas who traveled among peasant communities dressed in nice robes and perhaps holding a mala and a prayer wheel. Maybe they would sit at the village stupa with their chins jutting out and recite om mani peme hung. Even though every child in Tibet knows this mantra, they could still get enough in their alms bowl to make the deception pay off.

The Second Style: Having Many Teachers

If we make a connection to one teacher, fine. If we make many connections, fine. Just keep practicing. The First Khyentse Rinpoche, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo [1820–92], traveled the entire width of Tibet for more than a decade, seeking out genuine, profound teachings without regard to lineage. He had 125 root lamas. His openness to many lineages and teachers—and his superior understanding of all the teachings—led him to initiate an approach to Buddhist practice that came to be known as the non-sectarian Rime [“ree-may”] movement. The great Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who subsequently followed these footsteps of utmost openness, was said to have received teachings from over fifty masters.

The important point is to apply the four considerations to however many teachers we may study with. In general, even if we are attracted to studying with several teachers over a period of time, there should still be some real heart connection with each one, or some genuine motive. The teacher is like the flower, the dharma is like the nectar, and the student is like the bee. We can go to many flowers to collect the nectar of dharma.

Sometimes circumstances require patience, such as my case with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. After our initial meeting in Bhutan during Dilgo Khyentse’s cremation ceremonies, I saw Khen Rinpoche a few times when we were both visiting Kathmandu. I always learned something from him, but not through formal teachings. In 1994 I joined the shedra affiliated with Sherab Ling. I spent most of my vacations at Nagi Gompa, and during this period I asked my father many questions about meditation. But he always gave me the same reply: “As I told you before, you should receive teachings from Khen Rinpoche.”

The nyongtri lineage started with Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche. Both came from India in the eighth century c.e., and are revered for planting the seeds of Buddhism in Tibet and for bringing with them the precious pith instructions of the nyongtri lineage. Vimalamitra said that the lineage should be

preserved with one master teaching one student, until degenerate times would call for these profound teachings to become more available.

Five signs define degenerate times. The first sign is the rise of non-virtuous activities such as warfare, murders, and animal slaughter. The second sign is when personal emotions such as anger, jealousy, and revenge are misused for political or military ends resulting in tremendous suffering for masses of people. The third sign pertains to degenerate views, such as when people blindly trust in the limitations of their own understanding and act to satisfy their own short-term desires, thus valorizing fame, greed, and money. The fourth sign is extreme problems caused by the four elements: flooding, earthquakes, droughts, fires, tsunamis, and hurricanes. The last sign is the rise of new diseases and epidemics, such as the HIV virus, herpes, or hepatitis.

After I first asked Khen Rinpoche for teachings, some time passed before I had an opportunity to return to Bhutan. While I was studying at the shedra—I made a plan with my brother Tsokyni Rinpoche to travel together from Nepal to Bhutan during a spring break. Everything was arranged, and I was in Nepal. One problem: I could not get my visa. Each day I checked the mail and called the visa office. Meanwhile, my six weeks of vacation were running out. Then Tsokyni Rinpoche had his own program to attend, and it was not certain that Khen Rinpoche would even teach me. Through a friend, I learned that if I arrived in Bhutan by land, I could get my visa at the border crossing. So I did this. But it turned out that Khen Rinpoche was not in Thimphu. He was in Tarpaling in eastern Bhutan, holding a big *puja*—a ritual ceremony. This particular one lasted for eleven days and nights, twenty-four-hour-a-day for eleven days. When I arrived in Tarpaling I explained, “My father sent me and I really want to receive teachings . . .”

He said, “You can join the puja,” but he did not actually say yes to my request. So I joined the puja for one day, two days, three days. Every evening we had dinner together, but still no teachings. On the last day of the puja, he gave me a general introduction to dzogchen. Then he

asked me to come to Thimphu.

Thimphu sits at the bottom of a narrow, forested valley, and Rinpoche's house was at the base of a mountain. It was a two-story house made from concrete and wood, with an extension on the ground floor where we sometimes did ritual practices. Above were the living quarters, which included a small room where I stayed. Once we were back at his house, he taught me every day. For ten weeks I had to practice three sessions a day for two or two-and-a-half hours each. There were no texts. No study. Working only mind to mind, heart to heart, and then practicing on my own and meeting with him. Throughout this process, he would decide whether it was time to proceed or not.

My four main teachers were closely connected through lineage and their own practice histories, so the teachings of each one continuously deepened and affirmed the others. Yet sometimes if you have many gurus, you may encounter contradictory instructions due to different styles, or different traditions, or different understanding, and so forth. For example, according to one teacher, you should do ngondro in the traditional sequence—as presented here—but another guru says you can practice different parts simultaneously. In that case, just pick one teacher and stay with his or her instructions for the duration of the ngondro, or for another specific practice. Then you can use a different teacher for another practice. If you have many teachers, then with a practice such as ngondro, you can imagine Vajradhara as the essence of all those different teachers, or of the particular teacher that authorized a specific practice.

No matter how many teachers we may choose, even if it's 125, each should meet the qualifications to the best of our knowledge and assessment. If the teachers do meet these qualifications, and if they have a connection with us, then we can benefit from the teachings.

Of my four main teachers, only His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche is physically alive, and I feel fortunate to still have access to this perfect and authentic teacher. But on the deepest level, I never experience one teacher as being alive or another dead because they are all with me, always, and I still seek their blessings. Sometimes I miss the relative

appearance of those no longer here, but the mind and heart connection is always with me.

The Third Style: Automatic Style

In addition to choosing one teacher or many teachers, we have a third category called automatic style. This occurs when we receive instructions that directly point out the nature of our own mind, and we actually recognize the nature of our own mind. This teacher then automatically becomes one of our “root” teachers. If we have already chosen one teacher prior to this, then we’ll have two teachers. No problem.

An example of this occurred with my father’s uncle. He was six or seven years old when he left home to study at a monastery. He had already been identified as a tulku, so he was treated very well. Nonetheless he arrived at the monastery with the habits of a very naughty boy. He was always looking for ways to sneak away from his tutors and attendant, and run down the hill to play with the children in the village. One day, he was playing with some boys near the village stupa when a toothless, bent, old lady holding a mala in one hand and a prayer wheel in the other recognized him. She yelled out, “Hey kid, what are you doing here?”

All the little boys stopped playing and moved close to each other as if for safety. But the old lady continued to look straight at my father’s uncle, and in a scolding tone she said, “You should not be in the village. You are supposed to be at the monastery, learning meditation and studying Buddhist texts. You’re wasting your time playing here.”

The boy said, “What are you talking about? What is meditation?”

And the old lady said, “Ha! What a funny kid you are! You don’t know what meditation is?”

The boy turned to his friends but they just shrugged, and so he turned back to the old lady and shrugged too and shook his head. “I don’t

know.”

“It’s like you turn your eyes inward to the back of your head and look at your mind,” said the old lady.

So the little boy turned his attention inward as if looking toward the back of his head, and boom!—he recognized nature of mind. This experience left him feeling very vast, spacious, and ordinary. Then he climbed the hill back to the monastery and asked his tutors for meditation instruction.

As my father’s uncle grew up, he received many teachings from many great masters, but he said that nothing he learned was greater than what that old lady taught him. He always said, “That old lady was my first guru.”

This concludes the three ways of choosing gurus. Now we can get into some details of the practice itself.

From chapter 11 of *Turning Confusion into Clarity* by Mingyur Rinpoche