



When the Teacher Calls You From Afar

A Teaching from Jetsunma Ahkön Lhamo

In Buddhist tradition and particularly in Vajrayana Buddhism, there is a kind of practice called devotional practice. One of its most meaningful and foundational aspects is developing a relationship of pure devotion with one's lama or teacher. In Vajrayana, the teacher is considered to be the door to liberation because even though the Buddha was once on the earth and even though the Buddha's teachings are written in books, it is just about impossible to enter onto the Path without the blessings of the teacher. The lama, who is necessary for empowerment, transmission and teaching, is considered to be the blessing that is inherent in the Path.

In the Vajrayana tradition there is a devotional aspect to every practice that is done, from the most preliminary to the most superior practice, and it is considered to be the means by which blessing is actually transmitted. In the Nam Chö Ngöndro, the preliminary practice accomplished at this temple, there is a beautiful song of invoking the lama's blessing called "Calling the Lama from Afar." It has haunting melody, and it is done from one's heart in order to soften the ego and make the mind like a bowl ready to receive any blessing.

This type of practice functions like a cultivator. Think of planting a field of grain. One has to plow the field and work the soil so that it's capable of receiving the seed. Otherwise, if the soil were not ready, when seed was thrown out it would just bounce, as on a hard surface. Likewise, devotional practice is considered to make one ready. Its benefit is immeasurable. Without it there is no possibility of the blessing being fully received.

Devotional yoga is meant to benefit the student. The teacher is not "pleased" by devotional yoga. Rather, the teacher is pleased by movement and the softening, the gentling and the change that occurs within the student.

In the same way as the student calls the lama from afar in traditional practice by putting one's heart in a position of surrender, we may talk about what the lama experiences when the lama calls the student from afar and the student responds to that call.

When a student calls the teacher, with his or her mind and heart like a bowl, many things are happening. First, there is fantastic auspicious karma ripening. In order for a

student even to make that step, he or she must have accumulated a tremendous amount of merit or virtue in the past. A nonvirtuous mind cannot call the teacher with devotion.

When the student calls the lama, it's because the student has realized certain things. First of all, they have looked around and have seen that cyclic existence or ordinary life is flawed or faulted. Sometimes it's older students who, in some ways, are able to do this more readily because they've seen their lives pass, and they have looked around and said, "What have I done? I've worked so hard my entire life, and what have I really accomplished? What am I going to take with me?"

At any rate, the student that is prepared to call the teacher has been awakened, stimulated, has understood that much time has passed and that very little can be really accounted for. There has been some fun. It's been up and down. We've all experienced getting older; we've all experienced sickness, and we will certainly experience death. At some point we look at all of this and ask ourselves, "Isn't there something more? There must be something!"

We begin to think in this way, and then we see someone who can give us a path, not just thoughts about the path, not just ideas that are popular in the New Age, but a technology that is succinct and exacting, a method that has shown itself to give repeatable results. When students see this they become hopeful and joyous. Suddenly they're excited, and they begin to want to come in closer to this experience. It's a beautiful, precious moment, but that moment can only happen due to the virtue of the student's previous practice.

Eventually students will come to the point, due to the virtue of their practice, where they will do anything because they know their time is short. They know that they've tried everything and nothing has worked. Nothing has produced permanent happiness, so they are looking at the door to liberation, and in part, that is how the teacher is considered. They want to walk through that door.

But what is it that the teacher experiences as the teacher begins to call the student? In the Vajrayana tradition we are taught to consider a tulku as an emanation of Lord Buddha or Guru Rinpoche's enlightened compassion. Guru Rinpoche himself said, "I will appear in the world as your root teacher." The root teacher is defined as the one with whom you have such a relationship that upon meeting this teacher, upon hearing this teacher, you have understood something of your own mind. You have come, in some small way, to see your own face. When you meet your root teacher it is truly the display of Guru Rinpoche's touch. It is how Guru Rinpoche has appeared in your life. You cannot doubt that. It is the beginning, it is the movement, it is the method of enlightened awareness.

Generally, if the teacher is a bodhisattva or an incarnation who has achieved some realization and therefore has returned solely to benefit beings, there is some design in his or

her method. The *tulku* will have a sense of purpose from a very young age, and all of the circumstances that arise in the *tulku*'s life will arise from the intention to be of benefit.

As the *tulku* moves toward his or her time, there is a sense of calling the students. It isn't really like the teacher will know the name of a certain student and necessarily be about finding that student. What begins to happen is that there is a quality of intention, of loving kindness, of compassion that begins to ripen in the teacher's mind, and it sets up a vibrational field, almost like a sound or song that will reach out and touch particular students, and their minds will respond to it. Students literally will appear from nowhere. The sound that goes out is like a hook. Just as a piece of Velcro doesn't attach itself to a smooth surface, if the student doesn't have the responding "piece" in them it won't connect. But if the student has that other piece they'll be tight. You can't separate them. To separate them literally sounds like Velcro: it sounds like your heart is being torn out. There's something there that is so fantastic that it cannot be explained in ordinary terms.

From the lama's point of view there is simply the display of that compassionate intention. That's all that happens. The student might be a course and crude construction worker, a ballerina, the student could be a disco dancer or drummer, but suddenly something begins to happen and they will say, "What am I doing here? How did I get into this? What is this?" Truly there is no "monkey business" on the part of the teacher. There is simply this call, this sound that is going out, and the student, if the hook is there, suddenly becomes velcroed.

Sometimes one is angry at first because you didn't want to be velcroed. You didn't ask for this. You wanted to be free and independent. But suddenly you can't get away, you're hooked. The hook doesn't happen because the teacher is manipulative; the hook happens because you have seen your face and the karma in your mind is such that you have responded in a way that you could never have predicted.

The student might be very conventional, never religious before in their life. The student might be very unconventional and never thought they would deal with a conventional religion like Buddhism. They might be really ticked off about it. They just didn't want any of these things to happen, and suddenly they're hooked! They can't move. What are they going to do? And they grieve. They start to grieve C they grieve like someone died. Something died, yes: the part of their life when they were not hooked just died.

The teacher continues in what seems to the student a relentless way to send out this call. You can't resist something that is like your mind. The teacher is karmically set up, due to his or her compassionate intention, really without any choice, to sound like them vibrationally, sometimes like them situationally. Sometimes a student may simply hear the words, and it's so much like the way they are. So funny, so strange. All you're really experiencing is compassion. That's all that is to be understood.

You should never think that you're understanding the teacher by determining how much the teacher is like you. All you're understanding is yourself. The teacher is only acting from the point of view of compassion. If the teacher is considered to be a bodhisattva or a tulku, then what you're seeing, really, is the display of compassion, and what you're seeing is your own face.

You must understand that all that is really happening is that there is a sound being sounded that on some level you are capable of hearing due to the karma of your mind. What is happening is happening because of you, not because of anyone else. This is your mind, this is your karma, this is your face that you are seeing. Your response is your own response.

When the student first responds, generally there are obstacles that come up. Sometimes □ and this is odd □ when the student first finds the path they'll get physically sick. They'll suddenly come down with everything you can possibly imagine. But hopefully, if they can really work on devotion and purify their connection to the teacher, whatever obstacle arises will ripen benignly. When the student starts off in a different way, sometimes with anger, they must understand that suddenly this piece of anger didn't come from somewhere else. Who's running this show anyway? If the student feels anger it must have been in the student's mind. What happens is that obstacle ripens, and it comes to the surface like a bubble rising to the surface of a pond. You have the opportunity to live and breathe and hold onto the stink of anger, or you have the opportunity through your practice, through practicing the antidote which is compassion, to let the bubble do what bubbles do: come to the surface of the lake and simply pop. What is the bubble once it has popped? Gone. The first breath of kindness and devotion can surely blow it away.

The student always has this opportunity, but instead the student generally responds by saying, "I'm right here. I have reasons to be angry." Try to realize that what is coming to the surface is an obstacle to your practice and that it has no more power than you give it. Realize that you are capable of simply letting go, of surrendering, of practicing devotion, of using method in order to overcome the obstacle.

Remember, all the teacher is really doing is sounding that note that is so like the student's mind that it begins to bring forth this response that is in the student's mind. What the student sees is their own face: layer upon layer of their own face. Ultimately, if they practice devotion, they will see their true face, which is their nature. Now they're only seeing the dust that is covering it.

The sound is some kind of thing that you can't even hear with your own ears, but it is so powerful it can change the life of a student instantly. It is so powerful that it can change a community, it can change the world, but it's so subtle that you probably couldn't even hear it with your own ears. What is it? It is the greatest and the most gossamer force that there is, and that is the force of compassion, the Bodhicitta.

In the practice, the Bodhicitta is compassion. It is kindness as we understand it, but in its ultimate nature, the Bodhicitta is the ultimate truth. It is the ultimate Buddhature. It is the sound that is being sounded. Each student must have the strength to understand what is happening to them. Do you know what is happening to you when discursive thought, anger or disagreement come up in your mind? Do you have the courage to take hold of yourself and understand that you are, in fact, seeing your own face? Your resentment, your anger, your sadness, your needing to be independent are reflections or images of your own mind. In truth, so long as they keep you from pure practice and perfect surrender, from truly seeing, with the help of your teacher, your own primordial face, they are only obstacles to your practice that are coming up, and this is the form in which they appear.

Students respond as they do, with hope and fear, with judgement, with discursive thought. They respond that way because it is their nature to do so. We have developed this habitual tendency to respond in this way.

Why should we change? One reason is that now we have a choice, and we can begin. We can respond through mindfulness. We can respond by recognizing that our response is due to our habitual nature. We can stand outside of the whole deeply reactive scenario, and instead of reacting with hatred or grief, or instead of reacting at all, we can understand: this is my mind, that is my teacher, the only thing to do is to walk forward and continue. To walk through the door □ so simple, and yet due to our strong reactions, so difficult.

You must remember that all you are truly seeing when you meet your root guru is the compassionate extension of the Buddha's miraculous activity. How much you do, how little you do, how honest you are, how real you are, how well you apply yourself, it's really up to you. On this path, literally, the ball is in your court. You can do anything. You can achieve enlightenment, and you can also do absolutely nothing while you're working real hard looking like you are. Think about that and have courage. Have the courage to really walk through the door. That is all anybody asks of you. I want to see you walk through the door of liberation and be free. That's the point, isn't it?

-- Jetsunma Ahkön Lhamo