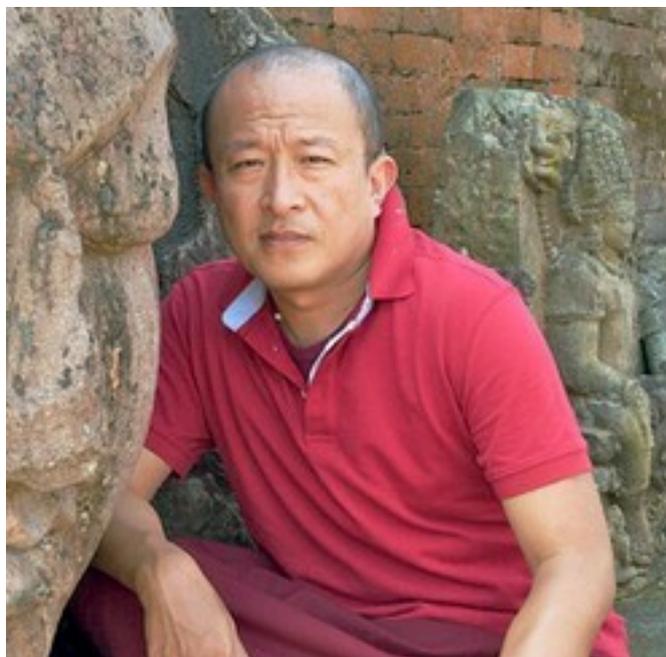


Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche about Sogyal Rinpoche, his students and Tantra in general

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche is the son of *Thinley Norbu Rinpoche* and was a close student of the Nyingma master *Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche* (1910–91). He is recognized as the third incarnation of *Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo* (1820–92), founder of the Khyentse lineage, and the immediate incarnation of *Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö* (1893–1959). His projects include *84000*, which has undertaken to translate and digitally preserve the surviving canonical Tibetan texts, *Siddhartha's Intent*, which organizes, distributes, and archives Rinpoche's teachings; the *Khyentse Foundation*, which provides the financial support to fulfil his aspirations; *Lotus Outreach*, which directs a wide range of projects to help refugees; and most recently *The Lhomon Society*, which promotes sustainable development in Bhutan through education. (This description is from *The Buddhist Door*, Hongkong.)



Previously, Tilogaard has published Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's paper on the 'alternative' Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, that did not feel like being a Tulku and left the monastery of his allegedly predecessor, the 3rd Jamgon Kongtrul.

Guru and Student in the Vajrayana

by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse

I have written the following in response to a number of requests, including some from the press, for my take on the present situation in the Rigpa Sangha over Sogyal Rinpoche's behaviour.

I have not responded to any of the questions put to me by the press before now, because what I want to say can't be edited or altered in anyway. Unfortunately, journalists always cut up texts, then pick and choose the bits and pieces that fit in with their own preconceived ideas. If you don't believe me, just spend five minutes looking at CNN, Fox News, al-Jazeera, The New York Times, The Guardian newspaper or Breitbart News Network. You'll soon see what the nature of 'freedom of speech' is like in our modern society. Sadly, most 'Buddhist' magazines and bulletins are no different.

So here's what I want to say, uncut and unedited. Please summon up all your patience and read the whole thing from beginning to end; this text is meant to be read all the way through, not in bits.

First, though, I feel I must point out that what I want to say concerns the relationship between a guru and a student that is specific to the Vajrayana. As this kind of guru-student relationship is a Vajrayana phenomenon, I wish I could say that if you are not a Vajrayana student, you don't need to worry or care about any of what follows. But I can't. Why? Because like it or not, the Vajrayana is associated with Buddhism, and so in the process of addressing a Vajrayana situation, I can't avoid talking about Buddhism and its future.

Having said that, I'm sure that the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists who have been dragged into this public debate by mere association, must be pulling their hair out with frustration. I empathize; if I were in your shoes, I would feel the same.

But there is one thing we must all be clear about. There is a clear difference between Sogyal Rinpoche's role as a Vajrayana master and his role as a very public Buddhist teacher and head of a non-profit organization. Vajrayana masters are not necessarily public figures. Many aren't even known to be Buddhist teachers—in the past, some Vajrayana masters earned their livings as prostitutes and fishermen. But unlike the teacher-student relationship in other traditions, in the Vajrayana, the connection between the guru and the student is sometimes more personal and constant than family.

More often than not, the opposite is true for teachers who present Buddhism more generally. These teachers are often public figures. In many cases, they have many followers, and they and their teachings are widely available. They may also be at the helm of any number of monasteries or non-profit organizations.

So 'Vajrayana guru' and 'Buddhist teacher' are, in fact, totally different roles—even when both roles are fulfilled by one person. What I want to discuss here is the role of Vajrayana master generally and Sogyal Rinpoche's role as Vajrayana master in particular, not Sogyal Rinpoche's role as spiritual director of Rigpa and public Buddhist teacher.

This distinction is important because many Buddhists students are wondering how to explain this kind of scandal to their friends and loved ones. How can you talk about it with your little sister who goes to a Christian high school? Or to your new non-Buddhist boyfriend, who you really want to impress but who already thinks your eagerness to do anything this guru asks of you is really strange. So this is an issue that should be contemplated and addressed separately, especially in light of the increased media coverage Sogyal Rinpoche's behaviour is bound to elicit. None of what I have to say here about the Vajrayana in particular is easy to explain. In fact, I am a bit concerned that I might end up raising more questions than answers. And I'm also sure that my words will be misinterpreted. But I have decided to try to write this piece anyway, because

there are many genuine Vajrayana practitioners out there who are struggling with how to view the present situation and who might want to consider the issues I wish to raise.

The Guru-Disciple Relationship

Nalanda University in India was one of the oldest universities in the world. It was at Nalanda that one thousand four hundred years ago, scholars confirmed that there is no such thing as an atom, or a ‘smallest particle,’ or a god that inherently exists; and these scholars would have laughed heartily at today’s theories about the Big Bang and democracy. My point here is that at Nalanda University there was absolutely no room for sentiment or blind devotion or blind belief.

Naropa was Dean of that great university. His scholarly achievements were remarkable, but left him unsatisfied. So he relinquished his prestigious position and set out to find a teacher whose wisdom transcended his own great scholarship and all he knew. Eventually, he met Tilopa, a fisherman, and that meeting marked the beginning of an adventurous and highly unpredictable journey.

Among many other inexplicable tasks, Tilopa told Naropa to pinch a princess’s bottom in public and to steal some soup, as the result of which Naropa was badly beaten. Yet Naropa—a fully trained sceptic—wholeheartedly did everything Tilopa asked of him without asking a single question. His reward was the teaching on Mahamudra, which he passed on to his own students, who also passed it on. Over the centuries, Naropa’s lineage of Mahamudra teachings went on to liberate countless human beings.

People who treasure Mahamudra are not stupid; they are neither sycophants, nor are they prone to cultism. Naropa’s Mahamudra lineage has spread far and wide—not just to jobless hippies, dropouts, social misfits and rebels, but to some of the world’s greatest emperors. And the story of how Tilopa taught Naropa has been cited again and again. Not as some kind of legend, but as a teaching and an example—an example that most budding Vajrayana practitioners long to emulate.

Naropa’s Mahamudra lineage continues to the present day thanks to great Mahamudra merchants from the Far East, like Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who even transported it to the wild west of America.

More than thirty years ago, Trungpa Rinpoche commanded his students, including successful lawyers and dentists from Boulder, Colorado, to move to the gloomiest place on the planet: Halifax, Nova Scotia. And they did. In modern times, such a command is the equivalent of ordering Naropa to steal soup. Amazingly, decades after Trungpa Rinpoche’s passing, those obedient dentists and lawyers are still living in Halifax, and have gone on to spawn a third generation of practitioners.

By the way, if you're ever surrounded by a few of these practitioners, they'll talk about the glories of Trungpa Rinpoche until your ears fall off!

This kind of story—from the time of Naropa to Trungpa Rinpoche in the 20th century—exemplifies the guru-disciple relationship on which the Mahamudra transmission entirely depends.

Did Sogyal Rinpoche Do 'Wrong'?

Recently, it was alleged by some of Sogyal Rinpoche's students, who also consider themselves to be practitioners in the Vajrayana tradition, that Sogyal Rinpoche regarded abusive behaviour as the 'skilful means' of 'wrathful compassion' in the tradition of 'crazy wisdom.'

However you describe Sogyal Rinpoche's style of teaching, the key point here is that if his students had received a Vajrayana initiation, if at the time they received it they were fully aware that it was a Vajrayana initiation, and if Sogyal Rinpoche had made sure that all the necessary prerequisites has been adhered to and fulfilled, then from the Vajrayana point of view, there is nothing wrong with Sogyal Rinpoche's subsequent actions. (By the way, 'initiation' includes the pointing out instruction which is the highest Vajrayana initiation, known as the fourth abhisheka.)

Frankly, for a student of Sogyal Rinpoche who has consciously received abhisheka and therefore entered or stepped onto the Vajrayana path, to think of labelling Sogyal Rinpoche's actions as 'abusive,' or to criticize a Vajrayana master even privately, let alone publicly and in print, or simply to reveal that such methods exist, is a breakage of samaya.

This is not to say, as has been suggested, that tantra provides teachers with a list of ways they can abuse students sexually, emotionally and financially—you will not find such a list in any of the tantras. At the same time, a Vajrayana guru will use anything he can to challenge and go against each individual student's ego, pride, self-cherishing and dualistic mind, and might well end up telling a sexually voracious, horny man to become a monk.

I'm sorry, but we can't bend the rules on this point. When both the giver and receiver of a Vajrayana initiation are fully aware and clear about what has happened, they must then both accept that pure perception is the main view and practice on the Vajrayana path. There is no room whatsoever for even a glimmer of an impure perception.

But what is 'pure perception'? Ultimately, according to the Vajrayana, the practice of pure perception doesn't mean just seeing the guru as a god, or even as a tantric deity. Although the Vajrayana does famously include techniques for visualizing not only the guru but every being on this planet and in the universe as a deity, the main point of pure perception is to go beyond dualistic perception altogether and realize the union of emptiness and appearance.

To put it simply, pure perception is the highest form of mind training—dag nang byang in Tibetan. Dag means ‘pure;’ nang means ‘perception,’ and byang means ‘train’ or ‘get used to.’

So, how does pure perception work? As a Vajrayana student, if you look at Sogyal Rinpoche and think he’s overweight, that is an impure perception. To try to correct your impure perception you might then try visualizing him with the body of Tom Cruise, but that is still not pure perception. One of the Vajrayana’s infinite number of skilful methods that are used to deconstruct and dismantle impure perception, is to visualize Sogyal Rinpoche with a horse’s head, a thousand arms and four legs. But even this technique must ultimately be transcended in order fully to realize pure perception.

Basically, while the student’s perception remains impure, the guru they see will be a projection based on their own impure projection, and so it can only ever be imperfect. The only way we can change our impure perception and see the guru as an enlightened being is by training our minds, using the visualization practises provided by the Vajrayana path.

No Vajrayana teaching or qualified Vajrayana teacher would ever expect a student’s perceptions to be completely pure from the moment they step onto the Vajrayana path. This is why the techniques we apply are called ‘training’—and even the English word ‘training’ implies that mistakes are inevitable. But there’s a very simple way of checking your progress with this practice. In the Vajrayana, you are supposed to see not only the guru but yourself as a deity. So if, having just been taught that you are a deity, you skip lunch and feel hungry, it means your training is not complete. You will only be perfectly trained in pure perception once you have finally actualized the union of appearance and emptiness.

So if a student of Sogyal Rinpoche were to see him floundering in the middle of a lake and based on their impure perception, project onto him the idea that he seems to be drowning, it would probably not be a good idea for that student to think, “Rinpoche is an enlightened being and should be able to walk on water.” A much better thought would be, “This is my impure perception! Rinpoche is manifesting as a drowning man so that I can accumulate the merit of rescuing him.”

As your practise improves, your perception of the guru will no longer be bound or limited by the causes, conditions and effects that once made you think he was drowning. This is the point in your spiritual development when you will truly see the outer guru as the Buddha and will also be able to see your own inner guru.

Until then, when your guru chairs a board meeting and it becomes obvious that he has no clue about an issue, as a prudent member of that board you shouldn’t hesitate to supply him with the information he needs. At the same time, as a Vajrayana student, you must skilfully remind yourself the guru only looks clueless to you because of your own impure perception, and that by appearing to need your assistance the guru is actually giving you the chance to accumulate merit.

We all have habits, and it's habit that makes impure perception inevitable. The moment we step onto the Vajrayana path, we start breaking 'samayas'—which are our commitment to maintaining pure perception. This is why the assumption that all Vajrayana practitioners will make mistakes is built into the Vajrayana path. A practitioner's path is then to immediately confess, expose and fix any impure perceptions the moment they arise, and to continually aspire to make fewer and fewer mistakes.

This is what is meant by keeping the samaya vows. In fact, Vajrayana practice cannot be separated from keeping samaya. There is no such thing as: "Let's keep samaya and then practice."

Ultimately, once we transcend all possibility of making errors or breaching samaya, even thinking that there is something to confess or such a thing as a confessor is a breakage of samaya. In Buddhadharma, not just the Vajrayana, the only way any of us can keep all the samayas, is by fully realizing a perfect understanding of shunyata.

If an impure perception—such as criticism of one's guru—is made deliberately and consciously, and if it then goes on to become a well-organized, choreographed public discussion with no room for amendment or correction, it constitutes a total breakage of samaya.

Once an initiation has been given and received, neither the guru nor the student can continue to analyse each other—the guru cannot analyse the student and the student cannot analyse the guru. Having given someone an initiation, no matter how irritating, stubborn, neurotic or even criminal they may be, the guru must accept that person as his student and look after him or her as if they were his own child—even more so, actually. I know that many of you don't want to hear it, but this is the Vajrayana view and this is what is taught in all the tantras.

It's a big mistake to speculate about the possibility of continuing to analyse and criticize the guru after having received a major initiation—actually it's totally wrong. We cannot modify Vajrayana's fundamental view just because it doesn't suit the minds of a few liberal, puritanical, Abrahamic, or individualistic activists.

If you find this view doesn't suit you, but you still want to follow the Buddha's path, you can always try the Mahayana and Sravakayana paths instead. If neither of those paths work for you—if you are uncomfortable with the non-dual groundlessness of Buddhism—you might just as well follow one of the Abrahamic religions. These are the religions that follow a clearly grounded dualistic path and say things like "don't eat pork, do eat fish, and women must wear burqas." If the label 'religion' is altogether too embarrassing for your elitist so-called progressive minds, you might try some kind of quasi-atheistic secularism, coated with moralistic ethics and bloated with dogmatic liberal self-righteousness. Or you could blindly allow yourself to be swallowed up by existentialist angst, then get annoyed with those who get blissed out on hope.

And yet, there may be some among you who long for tantric teachings because you quickly want to gain all the spiritual accomplishments you can, but without suffering any of the pain; or because you're the kind of person who has a strong sense of entitlement and love to bypass preliminary practices. Or you might be very smart and want to follow the simplest path that gets the quickest results, so you might try outwitting the system by cutting corners to get at the highest Dzogchen and Mahamudra teachings more quickly. Or you might be one of those who whine bitterly when the guru says it's not the right time to give such teachings and then apply intense emotional blackmail to get what you want. If you fall into any of these categories, the all-or-nothing guru-disciple relationship is what you will get. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is and there's nothing I can do about it.

We can't change the Vajrayana view or invent some 'moderate' version of Vajrayana Buddhism just to suit the 21st century Western mind-set. If we did, it would be like saying that in these modern times, we should say that certain compounded phenomena are permanent and some phenomena do exist inherently—but we can't do that either. The view is fundamental to Buddhadharma and therefore to the Vajrayana path.

In Buddhism, the general idea is that we train our minds to actualize non-duality. Tantra offers us the most profound way of achieving that non-duality through the practice of pure perception; and in the Vajrayana we essentialize that practice by maintaining a pure perception of the guru.

Ultimately, as Vajrayana practitioners, we must apply pure perception to everyone and everything without exception, which means we must also apply it to Donald Trump and even Hitler. But we will only manage to achieve a pure perception of everyone and everything if we can first maintain a pure perception of our guru. If you try to retain the option of questioning, criticizing and analysing—in other words if you retain some kind of selective impure perception as an insurance policy that allows you to question your very path—then how will you achieve the cessation of the dualistic mind? How will 'one taste' be actualized? How will you realize the union of samsara and nirvana?

One of Buddhism's fundamental practices is that of working with our own projections. It's a practice that is particularly emphasized in the Vajrayana. I know many of you will roll your eyes and accuse me of copping out when I say this, but everything Sogyal Rinpoche's critical students are accusing him of is based on their projection. I know it's hard to accept, I know it seems very real, but even so, it is a projection.

The bottom line here is: if both student and guru are consciously aware of Vajrayana theory and practice, I can't see anything wrong in what Sogyal Rinpoche then does to his so-called Vajrayana students—especially those who have been with him for many years. Those students stepped onto the Vajrayana path voluntarily; it's a journey that they chose to make. At least, I assume they did.

Do aspects of this journey go against commonly-accepted laws? Possibly. Do they contradict the way 21st century modern human beings usually think? Yes. From a worldly point of view, much of the Vajrayana seems unthinkable, perhaps even criminal. If Tilopa were alive today, he would have been locked up long ago. Come to think of it, which Western country or culture would actually brag in its great literature about Marpa beating up Milarepa? Yet the Tibetans celebrate this story, holding it up as one of the most glorious examples of a true guru-disciple relationship.

I also assume that these critical close students of Sogyal Rinpoche didn't originally go to him for advice about how to achieve worldly success or for therapy, but to find out how to transcend this ordinary world—which necessarily involves going beyond all kinds of worldly values like morality, the rule of law, accountability, transparency and so on. You can't leave one foot firmly grounded in your worldly comfort zones and ambitions, then expect to be able to transcend them.

This is the very reason the Vajrayana is said to be exclusively for disciples of 'superior faculties'—which in this context, has nothing to do with being clever enough to qualify for a Rhodes scholarship or graduate from Stanford. A person with 'superior faculties' is totally disgusted with the dualism of samsara and nirvana, repulsed by ideas of fundamentalism and moderation, revolted by anarchism and morality, and single-minded and sincere in their devotion to the transcendence of duality. And this is why students are given so many warnings before they receive Vajrayana teachings.

Were Sogyal Rinpoche's Students Warned? Were the Necessary Foundations for Entry into the Vajrayana Laid?

Anyone with even a modicum of common sense knows that a warning must come before, not after the event. So it's a Vajrayana master's duty to warn aspiring students repeatedly and in advance about what they are letting themselves in for. Students must be warned about what they are about to undertake—the full picture, not just the highlights.

If Sogyal Rinpoche had given these warnings, if he had laid proper foundations by teaching the fundamentals of Buddhism, if he had made sure his students had established a strong foundation through study and practice, and if he had told them before they received initiation and teaching about the nature of the Vajrayana path and the consequences they would face if they broke samaya, the chances are that this current situation would never have arisen.

But I suspect that's not quite what happened. What are my suspicions based on? Partly my knowledge of Tibetan teaching habits, and also what little I know of Sogyal Rinpoche's teaching methods.

First of all, many Tibetan teachers are still in the habit of teaching non-Tibetans as if they were Tibetan. In Tibet, the Vajrayana wasn't taught

nearly as secretly as it was in India, where the necessity for maintaining absolute secrecy about the nature of the teachings and even the identity of the teacher was emphasized again and again. Even initiations were given in secret, often in uninhabitable places like cemeteries and mountain tops. This is quite the opposite of how Tibetan lamas—who usually sit on huge thrones in front of thousands of people—give initiations.

In India, our tantric predecessors were already extremely well-informed—Naropa, for example, knew exactly what he was getting himself into. That was not the case in most of Tibetan Buddhist history.

It's ironic that today's Western students are so eager to emulate the Tibetan way of doing things—habits which, by and large, really aren't worth cherishing. Two millennia before the European Renaissance brought a new culture of inquiry and investigation into the modern world, the Buddha had already pointed out and emphasized the vital part analysis plays in the discovery of the nature of reality. More than two millennia before the downfall of authoritarianism in the West, the Buddha taught, "You are your own master. No one else is your master." Neither of these pieces of advice has ever been taken seriously in Tibet. Not taking such teachings seriously is a very bad habit and certainly nothing to be proud of.

Tibetan lamas often use tantric rituals as part of local public events, which means that Vajrayana initiations take place alongside flag hoisting and ribbon cutting. This use of tantra was unheard of among the Tibetans' Buddhist predecessors in India, where not even a trace of sacred Vajrayana transmission or ritual could be seen before, during or after its discrete performance. Tibetan lamas also openly boast about their gurus, as if they are unveiling a commemorative plaque. But I would be extremely surprised to learn that Naropa put any effort at all into building up his CV, or that he ever announced publicly that his tantric guru was Tilopa.

It might be possible to give Vajrayana initiations and teachings openly and publicly in places where the initiates are completely devoted, largely illiterate and have no academic training or custom of analysis. But it's difficult to find that kind of person in a world that's full to overflowing with smart-arses. So nowadays, when Tibetan lamas apply their habit of openly giving Vajrayana teachings to non-Tibetans—particularly Westerners—but forget that they are presenting these disciplines to people who read *The New York Times*, are groomed in critical thinking, trained to cherish analysis and contemplation, and applauded for rebelling against convention, isn't it inevitable that things fall apart?

In stark contrast to the characteristics that mark out modern Western Dharma students, the majority of Tibetan disciples were culturally obliged to receive initiations and teachings as part of their traditional life. Very few Tibetans approached the Vajrayana with any thought of applying the proper, recommended analysis, and instead relied on blind devotion. To this day, many of us Tibetan lamas, not just Sogyal Rinpoche, stick closely to our traditional habits and therefore devote very little time to giving students the

appropriate warnings and laying the necessary foundations prior to giving initiations and teachings.

I know a little about Sogyal Rinpoche because I have visited several Rigpa centres and have witnessed the Rigpa set-up first hand. To be frank, I didn't see enough evidence to convince me that the appropriate warnings had been given, or that adequate foundations had been laid, or that the fundamental teachings were properly given. On several occasions it seemed to me that some of the students had been Christians until perhaps the day before they attended the teaching, then suddenly, 24 hours later, they were hearing about guru devotion, receiving pointing out instructions and practising Guru Yoga—it was as extreme as that.

If that's how it happened—if no proper warnings and no fundamental training were given prior to the Vajrayana teachings—then Sogyal Rinpoche is even more in the wrong than his critical students. Why? Because it is his responsibility to prepare the ground in accordance with the Vajrayana's prescribed and well-established foundation teachings and practice. There is no question that the person with the greater knowledge, power and therefore responsibility is also more culpable when those obligations are not fulfilled.

How Western Students Respond

But there are things about all this that puzzle me. The students criticizing Sogyal Rinpoche seem to be highly intelligent. Why, then, weren't they smart enough to examine and analyse the teacher before signing up? How did they allow themselves to get so carried away by the Rigpa experience, those glossy, well-crafted pamphlets and all the other hoo-ha? And I really don't understand why they waited ten or even thirty years before saying anything? How come they didn't see all these problems in the first or second year of their relationship with Sogyal Rinpoche?

I should also say that my puzzlement is mixed with sympathy, because we human beings are not only subject to our intellects, we get stirred up by our feelings. I can only speculate, but perhaps these students were moved and even awed by everything they encountered at Rigpa? Perhaps the glossy pamphlets, the incense, thrones and chanting did their job? And of course, Rigpa has hosted many very highly respected, illustrious lamas, including the highest of them all, which must have cemented the veneration and respect these students felt not only for the whole tradition, but for Sogyal Rinpoche himself. As a result of the unexpected eruption of pious feelings they then experienced, there must have been very little room left in their minds for further analysis, because emotionally they just wanted to 'jump!' From what I have seen in Rigpa, this may well have been what happened.

Alas, karma does also seem to play a role in all this, doesn't it? And now that I've brought up karma, I'm sure some of you will accuse me falling back on another cop-out. Nevertheless, the reality is that falling for glossy advertising and Tibetan paraphernalia, feeling inspired and touched by

Tibetan exoticism and the endangered Tibetan species, and everything else that pops into our minds, all arise from the causes and conditions that are the essence of karma.

That's the way it is and all I can do is encourage each one of us to accumulate more good karma so that we won't be faced with this kind of situation again in our lifetimes. Feelings are karmic. And I am afraid this situation won't be settled until that karma is exhausted.

If a Vajrayana Teacher and Student Fall Out, What are the Consequences?

If the teacher and student have reached a genuine understanding about the path being practised, and if all the necessary and appropriate foundations have been laid and a clear idea of possible consequences conveyed, but the student still has a wrong view and acts on it by slandering and criticizing the teacher, then, according to tantra, that student will face grave and unimaginable consequences.

But the same also applies to the teacher. In fact, if the teacher hasn't laid the proper foundations, if the teacher takes advantage of a student physically, emotionally or financially, and if the teacher gives the highest yoga tantric teachings to those who have not established a proper foundation and as a result an immature student breaks the most fundamental root samayas, then the teacher will also suffer extremely grave consequences—consequences even more serious and terrible than those faced by the student.

If the proper foundations have been laid, but the guru's actions—physical, verbal, emotional etc.—do not bring the student a centimetre closer to enlightenment, and if the teacher's actions are aimed at personal gain, sex, money, power or selfish indulgence, it's clear he doesn't know what he's doing. He is therefore obviously not a great Vajrayana master, let alone a mahasiddha. And he will therefore experience extremely grave consequences.

When I say 'grave consequences,' I don't mean exposure in social media, or having his image ruined by scandal, or even that he is arrested and imprisoned. That's nothing! The consequences for the teacher are far worse than mere worldly humiliation: he would end up in vajra hell. What is vajra hell? It isn't merely being boiled in molten iron or fried by hell guardians—which actually sound quite comfortable by comparison. The unbearably awful characteristic of vajra hell is that once you're there, you will not hear a word about the teachings on cause and condition, dependent arising, shunyata and the rest, for aeons and aeons and aeons. A thousand buddhas might come and go, but in vajra hell, you will hear absolutely nothing about them or their teachings.

If a teacher's actions ruin the image of the Buddhadharma, or spoil an aspiring student's appetite for the Dharma, or if the seed of inspiration that

leads just one person to follow Buddhadharma is burnt irrevocably, the consequences are so terrible that they are, in fact, inexpressible.

Few people seem to know how difficult it is to be a Vajrayana student, but almost no one knows that it is far more difficult to be a Vajrayana master. I think the widespread woeful ignorance of these consequences is why so many people today fall over themselves to get a job as a guru—even the non-religious secularists. But given the opportunity, these so-called gurus dish out abuse in exactly the same way ordinary people do. If people knew how precarious and dangerous a guru's job really is, I doubt anyone would want it.

A guru's very prestige and all the perks he or she appears to enjoy, signify just how much greater the guru's opportunities to deceive and be deceived are, in comparison with the student's opportunities. As Patrul Rinpoche stated in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, when a student offers a single penny or makes any kind of effort, however small, to show respect for the teacher—by standing when the teacher enters a room, or bowing to the teacher, or letting the teacher go first—there are consequences; and if the so-called Vajrayana master is not enlightened, he or she is not above the karmic debts these offerings create.

Of course, ideally, a Vajrayana master should be an enlightened being. But the reality is that many Vajrayana masters may not be, yet for reasons that have nothing to do with personal gain, fame and power, they take on that role. Some assume it out of necessity. Or when the teachings need to be upheld or the lineage is at risk of being broken, they accept the role of Vajrayana master out of love for the teachings themselves. Basically, if they find themselves in the position of having no choice but to pass on these precious teachings, then very reluctantly, they become Vajrayana masters.

So an unenlightened master should be under no illusions. He must know in himself that he isn't enlightened, and he should never deceive himself by claiming that he is. As his student, though, you must see your Vajrayana master as an enlightened being. This is the choice you must make. But doesn't that contradict the Buddha when he said, "You are your own master. No one else is your master"? No, it doesn't, because you are the one who is making that choice.

A Vajrayana master is definitely not a mahasiddha if he is affected by scandal, afraid of being publicly shamed and terrified of being thrown into jail. Neither is he a mahasiddha if he worries about losing disciples. A genuine mahasiddha, like Marpa or Tilopa, wouldn't give a damn about any of that, nor would he give a second thought to being thrown into prison. And a mahasiddha would certainly never feel the need to apologize for any of his actions, because everything he does is done out of compassion.

On the other hand, if your Vajrayana master is not a mahasiddha and not only beats up his own students but also random people in the street, prefers shit to gourmet food, tears up \$100 notes, carries around a suitcase full of footballs or sand, gets equally turned on by a rock and sexy man or woman,

talks gibberish, and doesn't guide you onto a path that has a view, meditation and action, or a ground, path and fruition, then he is simply mad and belongs in a lunatic asylum.

But what if a Vajrayana master is neither a mahasiddha nor mad, what should he do? He should behave 'decently'.

Whether he's enlightened or not, a Vajrayana master will have studied many precious, profound teachings and techniques. Now that he's a teacher, he can share what he's learned with sincere and devoted students. He knows that by using these teachings and the methods his masters used to teach him, there is every possibility that his disciples will get enlightened before him. So he has very good reason for being decent and for not taking advantage of those who have surrendered everything to him. Whatever his students have sacrificed and offered—time, money, offerings, respect, whatever—he must use it to help them. If he lights one candle and puts it in front of a statue of a Buddha with genuine aspirations for his students' enlightenment, that will do.

Being decent also means that the Vajrayana master must know his students' limits—what they can and can't take. To do that, he simply has to use his common sense and ask himself what his own limits might be. What, for example, wouldn't he have done even if his own Vajrayana master had told him to do it? If Sogyal Rinpoche's Vajrayana master had told him to become celibate, would he have?

To always obey the guru's orders is difficult. Fortunately, none of my Vajrayana masters ever told me to do anything that I would have found impossible to attempt—I'm quite certain they knew that I lacked the capacity to do absolutely anything they asked of me.

At the very least, an unenlightened Vajrayana master must always consider the consequences of his actions. In particular, he should ask himself if his actions might turn people away from the Buddhadharma in general and the Vajrayana in particular. And an unenlightened but decent Vajrayana master must always remind himself to distinguish between the fearlessness of 'crazy wisdom' and the stupidity of 'I will never get caught!'

Lost in Translation: Misreading Cultural Cues

From my own very limited point of view, and after the experience of having Western friends for several decades, I would say that only one lama has really understood Western culture and acted on it appropriately, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

Most Tibetan lamas, as I said earlier, teach non-Tibetans in exactly the same way they teach Tibetans. In the process, they try to do the impossible by transforming their Western students into Tibetans. Believe it or not, I have met people who genuinely believe that the only way they can study and

practice the Dharma is by learning Tibetan, chanting Tibetan-style, saying prayers in Tibetan, and even wearing Tibetan traditional dress.

I've also noticed that Tibetan lamas spend a great deal of time teaching their students Tibetan traditions that have nothing at all to do with the Dharma. I wouldn't be surprised if, by so doing, some lamas have led their Western students to believe that it's only possible to attain enlightenment as a Tibetan.

If Buddhadharma in general and Vajrayana in particular are to be passed on and taught to non-Tibetans, it is so important that there is a proper cultural understanding between teacher and student that allows the genuine Dharma to be transmitted properly and accurately. This is really difficult, but absolutely necessary.

Culture, after all, is a habit, and habits are the fundamental manifestation of ignorance. So it is totally unfair to blame the Vajrayana system when lamas and students don't follow Vajrayana procedures because they prefer to rely on their cultural assumptions and habits—which I'm afraid most lamas like to do.

The Vajrayana system itself lays out all the necessary procedures very clearly. Almost all major initiations—even the very first of the usual four initiations—are preceded by at least six warnings. These warnings include instructions about the lama showing the vajra, giving the oath water, and more. But how many of us lamas really emphasize these warnings?

When Tibetan lamas give initiations to Tibetans and Bhutanese, most recipients have no clue about what's going on, and very few even care to know. By and large, Tibetan lamas take for granted that Western students have the same attitude. These lamas sometimes give initiations to thousands of students at a time, but too often students don't know what they received, let alone what the ritual meant, because the Vajrayana's warnings were simply read out loud and left unexplained.

To be fair, some responsibility must also rest with the Western students, who are sometimes more interested in looking and speaking like Tibetans than actually practising the Dharma. If they are Tibetologists, activists who yearn to be the saviours of Tibetan culture, then that's the way to go—and I assume there might be some benefit in it.

But here we are talking about Buddhadharma, and Buddhadharma is way beyond 'culture' and 'country.' So if you are interested in attaining so-called enlightenment, if you want to be 'awakened' and liberated from all defilements and the effects of defilements, then obviously you have to go beyond culture altogether—even the curry-eating, tsampa-chewing and coffee-drinking cultures.

Clear distinctions between Dharma and culture must be made if we are ever to sort out the current confusions—which, as I've said, will probably continue for a while longer. Looking at the next generation of lamas and

how they are currently manifesting, I must say, I can't see a glimmer of awareness of this issue amongst any of them.

I've been told that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche made his students do sitting practice—shamatha—for several years. He also made them study the Sravakayana and Mahayana teachings in detail, putting them through years of preparation before they were granted any Vajrayana initiations or pointing out instructions. Trungpa Rinpoche went so far as to create the Shambhala phenomenon—Shambhala training and sitting practice—to ensure that his students were really well prepared for the Buddhadharma.

All the prescribed preparatory procedures are important. Remember, Naropa was already a celebrated scholar and the Dean of Nalanda University before he even tried to find his guru—in other words, he was fully prepared.

Direct Warnings that were Misinterpreted

Another factor that adds to the complexity of the current situation is that however familiar students are with the advice that they should analyse and test the guru before becoming his student—and even when they are given direct warnings—part of being human is that there are some things we simply don't want to hear, especially when we have been hit by the arrow of inspiration. This means that in practice, on the rare occasions when the proper warnings are given, many people simply don't listen. Some don't even hear the words of the warning. For many of us human beings, the skill of being able to listen and actually hear isn't easy to pick up.

Sadly, warning people of potential danger or trouble can itself end up causing even more problems. Recently, I was very frank with a young woman who was new to the Dharma and suggested that she stay away from a particular young lama because of a few things I knew about him. My advice was heartfelt and disinterested. I wasn't only concerned for her, but also for the young Rinpoche and for the Buddhadharma. But she didn't take my advice well—actually, she took it completely the wrong way. To her I was being controlling, possessive and jealous. Of course, many young people have rebellious natures and often do the opposite of what you suggest. But in this case, she repeated everything that I'd told her confidentially to the young lama, and the upshot was that a rift opened up between the lama and me. This was very unfortunate.

Something similar happened when a student complained to me about how her guru was constantly asking her to buy him things—expensive Rolex watches, cars, antiques etc. By the time she came to me, she had already bought him many things, but now, she said, she couldn't keep it up because she also had financial obligations to her family. I replied that generally speaking, if she, as a student, really wanted to make expensive offerings to her teacher, she should make as many as she could, for as long as she could. But, if she felt the slightest awkwardness about what she was doing, she should express her concern directly to her guru instead of to me. So she

spoke to her teacher. Unfortunately, she also told him that I was the one who had told her to address him directly, and from that day to this, he and I have not been on speaking terms. Giving advice can be hazardous.

What if, years ago, I'd warned the Rigpa students who wrote the letter critical of Sogyal Rinpoche, to examine and analyse their teacher carefully before they became his students. Would they have listened to me? I doubt it. At worst, an overt warning could have resulted in major misunderstandings and serious conflict—which as a human being I certainly want to avoid. I also remember some very defensive reactions from Rigpa students after a joke I made about the excessive Tibetan paraphernalia I saw in Rigpa centres.

But what if I had taken on the role of devil's advocate? What if I had not only advised these students to check and analyse their guru, but gone further and said: "Sogyal Rinpoche has introduced you to so many truly great Vajrayana teachers. Why did you choose to continue following him rather than one of those great masters?"

What if I'd raised the question: "Apart from what Sogyal Rinpoche himself tells you, what proof do you have that he was fully and properly trained? He was only a child when he received teachings from Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö—did you know that? Did you know he was just ten or twelve years old when Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö passed away? Did you know that he went to a Catholic school in Kalimpong and then to Delhi University? So when did he do his training?"

What if I'd asked: "Do you see Tibetans flocking to Sogyal Rinpoche for teachings? Tibetans are always very polite to each others' faces, but do you know what they really think? Maybe, in spite of the fact they know he hasn't been well-trained, they are polite to Sogyal Rinpoche because they are following Tibetan custom."

What if I had raised such questions? Would any of the students who are now being so critical have listened to me? I'm not just talking about Sogyal Rinpoche here. What if I raised such questions about all our present lamas, rinpoches and khenpos?

Karma so often undercuts analysis and bypasses warnings. And of course, karmic links and karmic debts always play out, including the continual misreading of cultural cues—for example, whatever they think of each other, Tibetans are always publicly polite to each other, which many Westerners misinterpret as a confirmation of high regard.

The Tibetans and the Bhutanese—and I myself am a Tibetan-Bhutanese hybrid—have been thoroughly marinated in umpteen cultural habits. I must admit that more often than not, when it comes to talking frankly and honestly about these important issues, these habits really get in the way. People like me think we should always act humbly and often misunderstand the difference between being humble and not being upfront. But the habit of humility often serves a purpose, and can, for example, prevent unnecessary

arguments from breaking out. Personally, I would still opt for this approach, partly out of habit and partly to stay out of trouble—and as human beings, most of us usually try to stay out of trouble if we can.

Of course, lamas often don't say certain things openly because their words have, in the past, been misreported, misquoted and cut and edited to mean something else entirely—lamas are too often misrepresented in all kinds of ways. So, being able to say what they really think can become problematic.

Basically, as I said earlier, warning people about how to choose their guru is one of the most difficult things a lama can do. But if we hold back from warning students openly, how can consequences be avoided?

Different Times, Different Challenges

I have received abhishekas from about thirty lamas, but I cannot claim to have properly analysed all of them. To be perfectly honest, I'm one of those Tibetans who mostly jumps into initiations without taking the time to examine the preceptor much at all. But before I decided to receive a particular initiation or teaching from a lama, I did usually remember to use my common sense.

One method you can use to choose which lamas to receive initiations from is very similar to the way you can, for example, find out where to get good pasta in Italy. We assume that the places local Italians eat will be pretty good, because Italians know about pasta. Based on that common sense principle, I have myself avoided receiving teachings from certain lamas.

Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche once told me that when Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche first visited France, hardly anyone attended his teachings, but as soon as it was known that Sogyal Rinpoche would teach, everyone would go to hear him. Of course, I understand why people flock to hear Sogyal Rinpoche; he speaks English and is humorous, so students can relate to him—they feel connected. We human beings do tend to opt for accessibility when we can, so that may also have been a factor.

I have to say that none of the gurus from whom I received initiations and teachings ever abused me financially, sexually, physically or emotionally. But I must admit, I also assumed that they would never do such a thing—which was wrong of me. Once you decide to take a teacher as your guru, you are not supposed to make any assumptions about whether you will be treated well or not, because the point is to have the courage to surrender completely before you embark on the completely unknown and unpredictable Vajrayana journey. And as a Vajrayana student, I like to aspire that in future lifetimes I really will be able to maintain pure perception of my guru and have the ability to do whatever he or she asks of me, no questions asked.

However, the common sense method for choosing a guru that I spoke of using the pasta example has its limitations. I am quite sure that many people

fall for a guru because he or she happens to be the student of a great master, or because he or she has been publicly lovey-dovey with many other great gurus. My own experience has taught me that this approach doesn't always work.

Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche so venerated and respected Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö, Shechen Gyaltsab and Khandro Tsering Chödrön that anyone connected with them also became very precious to him—even their pet dogs. I couldn't see much greatness in several of the people for whom Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche showed such great affection. When I mentioned how I felt to my personal tutor, he replied that Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche had perfectly pure perception of everyone and everything, especially those connected with his own guru. Then he scolded me, "This is something you need to learn." Now I realize just how priceless that advice was.

In a nutshell, for those of us who set out on a spiritual journey, judging a guru by his own CV and the illustrious masters he knows is not always a reliable method. In fact, on this path the very existence of that type of CV is fishy. Naropa didn't go to Tilopa because he had a great CV. On the contrary, Naropa had to seek Tilopa out. No one knew Tilopa because he was a common fisherman, so just finding him was extremely difficult.

Checks and Balances

To institute checks and balances in the spiritual world isn't easy. As the Buddha himself said a couple of millennia before it was recognized in the American constitution, no system is perfect. Buddhism is, nevertheless, a system, but a system that itself doesn't actually believe in system; and its ultimate checks and balances are karmic causes and conditions. Buddhism also recognizes that only an enlightened being can tell if another person is perfect or not.

Some of you are currently trying to do everything you can to ensure that lamas who misbehave are not left unpunished. Your motivation may well be good: you may want to spare more innocent people the suffering caused by that kind of bad behaviour, and you may not want to see anyone else driven away from the Dharma because of it.

My personal feeling is that, these days, there are very few morally decent, compassionate, kind, caring and uncorrupted human beings in the world—the kind of person for whom we instantly feel a sense of awe when we meet them. And as the mentality of 'each man for himself' grows stronger every day, the few decent human beings left on this planet are disappearing fast. Perhaps exposing people's faults publicly like this, in social media and elsewhere, will make others afraid to act badly? Maybe this is the best we can do in this degenerate day and age. At least some lamas, especially the younger generation, are being sent a powerful message that they can't get away with this kind of behaviour. So at a time when power and prestige are so intoxicating that some lamas consider themselves untouchable and forget

that they could well be held to account, perhaps it is necessary? But I really don't believe that public shaming or legal punishment is the answer, or that it will actually solve the whole problem.

Many people seem to be so disillusioned by this current situation that they think we have reached a turning point that signifies the beginning of the final decline and demise of Buddhadharma. Sadly, some students may be so disillusioned that for them, there is no turning back.

I'm afraid there is no doubt about it: Buddhism is declining in this world. I am certain that the misgivings people have about the key stakeholders in Buddhadharma—like the Tibetan rinpoches who should have a vested interest in the survival of Buddhism—is one of the reasons why so many feel so discouraged.

While Buddhism has always faced outer obstacles—like invasions, forced conversion by Islam, cunning conversion by Christianity, patronizing assimilation by Hinduism, and so on—its main obstacle is internal and stems from sectarian attitudes. Today, most of us are barely aware of this, even though it's the greatest of all the threats Buddhism is facing.

There are many factors contributing towards the degeneration of Buddhadharma. Under the banner of rational objectivity as opposed to superstition, and clothed in a supposedly undogmatic liberalism, many among the European and American Buddhist elite are currently promoting a version of Buddhism that completely does away with reincarnation. Their campaign has the potential to destroy Buddhism far more surely than any of its internal scandals. After all, the current scandal is about just one person, whereas the pernicious and apparently contagious trend of misrepresenting the Dharma—which is being perpetrated by many and affecting even more—is spreading so fast that it is far more insidious and destructive.

In addition, there's a large group of 'respectable' life-style teachers who cherry-pick and plagiarize Buddhist ideas without compunction. They market their approaches as 'mindfulness' and 'secular ethics', but are careful to leave out any terms, expressions or jargon that sound even remotely religious, on the pretext of making the Buddha's ideas accessible to modern people. They lack the decency even to acknowledge the original author of the ideas and practices they peddle, and instead often try to insinuate or even baldly claim that they have discovered it all for themselves. To me that's theft, plain and simple. I would have thought that Westerners, who so cherish notions about intellectual property and whose countries enforce strict copyright rules for the protection of writers and institutions, would behave better.

Even more dangerous are the self-made gurus who use mindfulness and other Buddhist practices to turn the essence of the Buddhist path into techniques for increasing our love of samsara. By doing so, they utterly destroy the entire purpose of the Buddhadharma, which is to liberate suffering beings from samsara. If this perversion of the Buddha's teachings is not demonic—the 'devil incarnate,' as Christians might say—what is?

At the other extreme, Buddhism is also being undermined by the pervasive tendency in Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan to preserve so-called ‘precious culture’ and ‘age-old tradition’ at any cost. In the process of trying to embalm their traditions, they are effectively hijacking Buddhism and stripping it of all meaning and relevance for this modern age.

Sogyal Rinpoche’s misbehaviour may be his ruin and, sadly, it may be the ruin of some of his students. But the other far more destructive trends within Buddhadharma have the power to affect millions and will ultimately destroy Buddhism far more completely than this present scandal. Frankly, they are even more deadly than the decimation wreaked on Buddhadharma by the Cultural Revolution and other external forces.

What Now?

The present situation is difficult and unfortunate, there’s no doubt about it. But at the same time it’s nothing new. In the course of Buddhist history many such scandals have blown up—and some were much worse. I think that this particular situation is giving us all the opportunity to show how resilient we are. It’s also our chance to think about Buddhism’s big picture rather than just one small corner.

For followers of the Buddha, particularly Vajrayana students and especially students of Sogyal Rinpoche and those who are asking very hard questions, I firmly believe that the current discussion about how gurus behave is rooted in a sincere desire to sort things out and to help the Rigpa sangha and larger Buddhist world. This is the positive aspect of the kind of questioning we are seeing today, and it’s an aspect that really must be recognized and appreciated.

Like it or not, as members of the wider Buddhist sangha and specifically as vajra brothers and sisters, we have created a bond between us that is far more important than family. But in our close relationships, we human beings often suffer as a result of miscommunication. What is the antidote for miscommunication? Communication! So now’s the time to clear a space in which genuine, wholehearted communication can take place. In fact, I’ve already seen a number of letters and on-line postings by people who are making a big effort to find a good solution.

Above all, though, we really must look at the big picture—this is most important. We must not make outcasts of the Rigpa sangha or of any of its individual members. It’s also vital that we remember and acknowledge just how much goodness Sogyal Rinpoche has brought to Europe and to America. The fact that he introduced so many people to such truly great teachers alone is a contribution to the Dharma that can’t be repaid, because those outstanding masters were not just authentic Dharma teachers, they were some of the greatest living beings of the century.

On balance, I would argue that Sogyal Rinpoche has contributed far more benefit to this world and Buddhadharma than harm. We must remember this. It's far too easy to view this current situation simplistically, then take sides and gang up on those with opposing views—especially where devotion is involved.

For myself, what's been happening recently amongst the Rigpa sangha has really enhanced my appreciation of many of Rigpa's students—those that some might label as blind sycophants. I myself know many who are diligent, kind, eager to learn, and who really care about the continuity of the Buddhadharma and lineage—which is rare in this world. In this day and age, for anyone even to attempt the practice of pure perception and maintain devotion for their teacher and the teachings is truly admirable. It is so encouraging to see so many first- or second-generation Western practitioners dedicating themselves to Buddhist practice in this way. While it is tempting to focus entirely on the scandal and the disgrace, what we should really try to do is view it through a much larger and more positive lens. From what I can see, most Rigpa students recognize that there is something incredibly good in the teachings they have heard and in their lineage. And of all the Western Vajrayana students I've come across, Rigpa students are among the best and humblest.

Tibetans should also recognize that these Westerners, unlike Tibetans themselves, were born and grew up in countries that lacked any form of Dharma influence. Yet many of these Western students go to great lengths to seek out the Buddhist teachings. Without any historical Buddhist roots and absolutely no Buddhist culture in their countries of birth, they have nevertheless tried to do everything the Tibetans, who were their teachers, have asked of them. They have always tried to do their best. Many have even done things like turn their living rooms into small gathering places where people can practice. And most of them are not rich—many can barely make ends meet.

In this extreme, fanatical age, when so many are lost and desperately looking for some meaning in their lives, these Westerners' pursuit of Buddhadharma is remarkable and worthy of lavish praise. This is especially so at a time when so many people in the world voluntarily opt to follow the most extreme of all views and paths which glorifies harming themselves and others. Yet our so-called liberal, free, intellectual society tries so hard to justify this kind of extreme outlook and action. Some even label it 'moderation,' laying the blame for its violence on an errant few, rather than recognizing that it's the view and the path that are mistaken.

I would go as far as to say that there seems to be a trend amongst liberals and intellectuals—all those who pride themselves on being objective and love to criticize—for finding fault in things that are obviously good, and finding good in things that are obviously very bad. As a result, they put a remarkable amount of time and energy into deriding a path that's based on love and compassion, has virtually no historical record of violence, and that teaches the most profound wisdom of dependent arising. And they put even

more time and energy into justifying a path that glorifies violence and dualism.

The present upheaval caused by the very public criticisms of Sogyal Rinpoche is distressing for many genuine Buddhist practitioners, especially now that the Western media are seizing on it with such enthusiasm. I suspect that many liberals, atheists and much of the Western media would be delighted if news of a Jain suicide bomber now hit the headlines, because it would prove their point that all religions have a dark side and harbour extremists. How can we not be discouraged when Germany's largest daily newspaper, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* with a daily readership of more than one million, publishes a lead article about the Sogyal Rinpoche scandal under the section heading 'Buddhism,' and entitled "Abuse." Imagine the outcry if the Western press were to report every Muslim bombing and massacre under the heading 'Islam!'

So in this hypocritical age, followers of the Buddha must be braver and more courageous than ever before. At a time when there is almost no support or encouragement for those who follow a genuine path, and when doubt is sown at every turn, it's more important than ever that we—as individual practitioners and sanghas—don't get swallowed up by scandal and factional conflicts. In an era when wrong views and murderous actions not only prevail, but are celebrated and even justified by respected liberal intellectuals, we must redouble our efforts to study the authentic view of Buddhadharmā. By focusing on the big picture and the long-term future of Buddhism, this present crisis could be the perfect opportunity for us all to renew, for the sake of all suffering beings, our commitment and dedication to the study and practice of the Buddha's authentic path to enlightenment.