

Kunzig Shamar Rinpoche

Learning to see

An Interview with Shamar Rinpoche at Dhagpo Kagyu Ling, France (Edited - From KKÖ-INFO, a quarterly magazine of Karma Kagyu Austria.)

Kkö-info: What is important to Dharma practitioners in the West?

Rinpoche: In order to practice Buddhism it is most important to learn for yourself. There are different ways of approaching the Dharma. If a worldly person who is busy with his profession or family, wants a simple daily practice, then a limited understanding of Buddhism is sufficient. But if you want to get into it with some depth and to practice extensively, then you should become quite familiar with the teachings. Once you have seriously studied, and analyzed Buddha's teachings, you must connect what you have learned with meditation so that it becomes a real experience. Buddhism is a vast and rich field of knowledge. It is not just a religion or a belief. Therefore, it takes a long time to learn the Dharma properly.

Kkö-info: Many people don't have the time for intensive studies or long retreat. How can people best study and practice in normal daily life?

Rinpoche: Concerning study, one should gain a basic knowledge of the Madhyamaka, and about the empowerments and their significance. Concerning meditation, it is always good to practice as much as possible. There were and still are successful practitioners who meditate at home, without going into long retreat.

First learn as much as you can about the basic Dharma in order to be able to meditate properly. If you proceed in this way, especially in the West where people tend to be more secure in your old age, you could have the opportunity to practice intensively later on in life, because you will have created the basis for it over your lifetime.

Kkö-info: In order to gain knowledge we need teachers we can have faith in. How does this faith develop?

Rinpoche: Faith comes from knowledge. If you have no knowledge of the path, it is impossible to have real faith. Faith means knowing the way, having faith in your own knowledge. If you study intensively, faith appears spontaneously.

For example, a blind person needs a guide whom he must trust completely. If you prefer to be blind you will always need a guide. But if you do not want to be blind, you should learn to see. Gradually you can open your eyes and learn to trust your way of seeing and walking along the path. To need a teacher does not mean that you have to hang onto him like a blind person to his seeing-eye dog.

Kkö-info: What do you really mean by this example?

Rinpoche: I am talking about people who when they meet the Dharma become extremists and turn into groupies. They run around in tee shirts printed with OM MANI PEME HUNG mantras. They would love to slip into the skin of their teacher. They even try to sound like their teacher, to imitate him in a certain way. In Buddhism a natural human understanding is important. In Tibet there is a saying for this, "A first class businessman when learning the Dharma will also be a first class practitioner." A businessman possesses practical understanding and clear thinking so necessary for Buddhist practice.

Kkö-info: How should one follow one's teacher?

Rinpoche: You should respect and feel gratitude towards your teacher. If you do follow a teacher you should be persistent. You should also be careful that when you have gathered profound knowledge you don't leave your teacher behind. This would bring negative results. For example, after you've learned a language, you would not be rude to your teacher and not say hello to him anymore. You actually owe a lot to that person.

Kkö-info: How can one judge which qualities a teacher really has?

Rinpoche: People initially thought that all Tibetan monks were very learned. Their robes impressed many westerners. But most monks are not very learned. To learn properly requires formal education. In Tibet, wearing a robe is a cultural tradition. Anyone who wears a robe is not necessarily enlightened. Dharma practitioners need real qualified teachers who have completed their education. They don't necessarily have to be monks; they can be learned lay practitioners. In order to avoid obstacles when learning the Dharma, one should follow the teachings instead of the teacher. One should know enough to act correctly even with an imperfect teacher. It is possible to follow the teachings more closely as a student than the teacher does himself. This happens when the teacher correctly transmits the contents but does not live according to their meaning. In particular, a teacher worthy of trust should have great knowledge and compassion. In the Vajrayana the teacher should actually be enlightened. Faith can therefore develop in such a teacher who possesses those qualities, but it is also very important to develop faith through study.

Kkö-info: Is it possible to check on one's teacher?

Rinpoche: If you have a thorough knowledge of Vajrayana philosophy, you can check on your teacher. You can look at his education and the transmissions he has received, and to what extent they were practiced. It is similar to checking a professor at a university. You can find out how good a professor is in his field; you can ask other students or teachers for references. In this way one can check on the knowledge of a teacher. However, the quality of a teacher's meditation can only be judged if you have developed meditation yourself. And therefore it is necessary for you to first become intimately familiar with the Dharma.

Kkö-info: What is the connection between Mahayana, the Great Vehicle, and Vajrayana, the Diamond Way?

Rinpoche: You cannot talk about a relationship or connection between the Mahayana and the Vajrayana, because a relationship can only exist between two separate things. Mahayana and Vajrayana cannot be separated; they are not two different things. The practice of Vajrayana is completely based on Mahayana. This can be demonstrated with examples. In the Vajrayana, if you meditate on some Buddha aspects, they arise in the visualization from the inseparability of compassion and emptiness. Emptiness is not just a black hole and compassion does not mean our normal emotional feelings we share with one another. What then do emptiness and compassion really mean? Both terms are precisely explained in the Mahayana. You need the foundation of the Mahayana in order to understand and correctly apply the methods of the Vajrayana. Suppose a letter HRIH symbolizing the true nature of mind appears; these qualities are described in the Mahayana. In that way, through examples, it becomes clear that the Mahayana and the Vajrayana are inseparable from each other.

Kkö-info: Does that mean there is no Vajrayana without the foundation of Mahayana?

Rinpoche: Yes, they are completely inseparable. There is nothing in the Vajrayana you could extract and practice independently from the view and meditation of the Mahayana. The methods of the Vajrayana are based on the Mahayana. They are like a fertilizer that accelerates the development. The Vajrayana indeed offers additional tools, but it never departs from Mahayana

view.