



A Gift of Liberation

Course Four—Learning to Be Quiet

Homework Master, Class Four: The Shelter of the Lama

1) The fourth of the six preparations for a meditation session is to picture those Holy Beings in which we put all our hope. Who is the central figure here, inside and outside, and why?

[The central figure is visualized, on the outside, as Lord Buddha in his classic form, with his right hand pressing the earth, and his left hand holding a wisdom bowl. The reason that we picture the Buddha is to recall the totally enlightened source of all the teachings, and practices, and the very way of life that we are receiving.]

At the same time, Pabongka Rinpoche advises us to picture that, in essence, this being is none other than our own Heart Teacher. This is because, for us, our Heart Teacher is the source of all of our realizations, both as we travel the path, and as we reside in the final result of the path.]

2) Lord Buddha, as someone in whom we place our hope, is often pictured with a wisdom bowl cradled in his left hand, and his right hand pressing the earth. What does this bowl hold, why is he pressing the earth, and how do these relate to the “Four Demons”?

[Lord Buddha is traditionally pictured as pressing the earth with his right hand in order to signify that he has overcome the first of what are called the “Four Demons.” This first demon is known as the Son of the Worldly Deity. This demon represents emotions, such as jealousy, which keep our mind distracted.]

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The bowl cradled in Lord Buddha's left hand is filled with different kinds of nectar. One is called the Medicinal Nectar Which Removes All Illness, and represents how the Buddha has overcome the second demon: the Demon of the Impure Parts of Body and Mind (that is, the five heaps in which we were born).

Here in the bowl as well is the Nectar of Life, Which Stops Death; this represents how Lord Buddha has destroyed the third demon: the Demon of the Lord of Death. Finally in the bowl there is the Nectar of Immaculate Wisdom, which symbolizes how the Buddha has overcome the Demon of Negative Emotions.]

3) How does Pabongka Rinpoche suggest that we select the image to use for our Lama in the Refuge Visualization, and how does this relate in general to our relationship with all our Lamas?

[Pabongka Rinpoche raises the question: If there are many Lamas who have instructed us in the teaching on the steps of the path (the lam-rim), then which one is it that we should picture, as we expand the visualization beyond Lord Buddha?

His answer is that "We should visualize the one who has helped our heart the most." This then is, in essence, the Rinpoche's description of a Heart Lama, and it is useful to hear it, especially if we are still looking for one.

The answer implicitly helps us also answer the question of what we should do if we have more than one Lama, and we receive (as can sometimes happen) conflicting advice from them. We should see which of the Lamas is our Heart Lama—that is, the one who has done our heart the most good—and then follow their instructions, considering any conflicting instructions still as the Word of the Teacher, yet purposely meant to challenge us to decide what the right path is.]

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4) As we picture our Lama, we see them performing a certain gesture, or *mudra*, with their hands. Describe this mudra, and explain its significance in several ways.

[In the Refuge Visualization, our Lama's right hand is in the gesture, or *mudra*, of explaining the Dharma. His or her left hand is in the gesture of meditation—on the lap, with the palm up—and in this hand is (as with the Buddha) a wisdom bowl filled with deathless nectar.

Pabongka Rinpoche gives a wonderful explanation of the significance of these two mudras here. For one, the fact that our Lama is making both gestures at the same time is a sign that they are truly the Buddha himself, for they are teaching their disciples even as they sit in the direct perception of emptiness—something only an Enlightened Being is capable of doing.

The Rinpoche says that we can also interpret the teaching gesture as encouraging us to continue our learning of the path; while the meditation gesture is encouragement to practice what we have learned.

There is another way to take the two gestures. Pabongka Rinpoche quotes Je Tsongkapa as saying that there are two primary obstacles to our practice of the path. One is the dark ignorance which kills our mind; and the other is the Lord of Death, who kills our body. The teaching gesture represents the instructions which will destroy the ignorance; while the nectar (called *amirta* or *deathlessness* in Sanskrit), within the bowl cradled in the hand with the meditation gesture, destroys the Lord of Death.

Rinpoche finally notes that there are many other points conveyed by the two gestures which relate to our achieving the Four Modes: the ability to relate to a disciple in a peaceful way; a generous way; a powerful way; and a fierce way—just as a parent makes a show of each of these modes when it is necessary to protect and instruct a child. It might be interesting for us to try to figure out how the gestures relate to these four.]

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5) What does Pabongka Rinpoche have to say about how we visualize the physical bodies of Holy Beings, such as our own Lama, during a meditation?

[Rinpoche is adamant that we are not to visualize Holy Beings as being flat and two-dimensional, like figures in a Tibetan *tangka* painting. But neither are we to picture them as three-dimensional and made of gross physical matter such as blood and guts and bones.

Rather, we are to see them as made of a crystalline light, like a rainbow: not *colored* a certain way, as if paint had been smeared on their bodies, but rather actually *made* of light of whichever color it may be for the particular Holy Being we are visualizing. Like the difference between looking at a paper photo and gazing into a candle flame.

In fact, Rinpoche quotes an ancient scripture of the Vinaya, or Vowed Morality, which gives three different examples for how these beings shine. A fourth is often seen, and so they are: (1) the Holy Beings shine like tongues of flame molded into the shape of a human body; (2) like a tongue of fire rising from a butter lamp filled to overflowing with finest butter; (3) like a butter lamp set inside a great bowl made of gold, and polished to a high luster; and (4) like the wick of a butter lamp wrapped in the sparkle of many jewels.]

6) How does Pabongka Rinpoche feel about picturing Holy Beings as “static” in a meditation?

[This calls back to a joke that our own Khen Rinpoche made almost 40 years ago; he was teaching in a small apartment in Greenwich Village in New York, and someone asked him, “What will we all spend our time doing when we all get enlightened?”

“What do you think?” he answered. “That we *retire*?” One traditional answer we find here in the visualization: we are not to picture these Holy Beings as static, but first of all as engaged in lively conversations about the meaning of the Teachings, despite the fact that they can all

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read each other's minds, and can see ahead to the outcome of their conversation.

And more fun, we are advised to see all the beings in the Refuge Visualization as being *very busy*: as if they were all working at the White House, running in and out with important messages and jobs to do—these are to represent the avatars or emanations of our Lama and other Holy Beings, which are in actuality sent out and withdrawn back spontaneously in a constant instantaneous stream, forever.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, practice a simple Refuge Visualization with one or two of your Teachers, working on their bodies as pure and glorious light, and the constant emanation and withdrawal of countless enlightened and worldly forms from them, to help beings on many planets—as well as some sweet conversation they may be engaged in. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations.