

The Root Guru **By Chamgon Kenting Tai Situpa**

What exactly Is a "Tsawe-Lama" or "Root-Guru"?

There are several forms of Tsawe-Lama but we need only discuss the two most important ones here. The first form of Tsawe-Lama is the head of the particular school of Tibetan Buddhism that you are considering joining. The heads of that school can be traced right back for many centuries and this is called 'The Lineage'. The head of the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism is His Holiness, Ugyen Trinley, the XVII Gyalwa Karmapa. You could say that the heads of the schools hold a similar position to that of the heads of the Christian orders of the Benedictine or Franciscan monks. The second form is the Lama (who may or may not have the title of Rinpoche) under whose guidance you feel you can learn most and travel furthest. It is someone for whom you have total respect; the person you turn to in need; someone you can follow without doubt or hesitation—whose words 'enter your bones'. It is the person who helps you most to realize the true nature of your mind. This Tsawe-Lama will be your strongest connection with the dharma.

What does the phrase "true nature of your mind" mean?

It means your 'Buddha-nature'. It is the essence of the Buddha, the innate goodness, which lies within every sentient being. It is the revelation of the supreme qualities of compassion and wisdom.

What is the difference between a Tsawe-Lama and any other Lama or teacher? You can learn, or should be able to learn, something from any Lama; indeed from any person and every situation. However, you will learn more from your Tsawe-Lama than from any other. The contact will be deep and will last for the rest of this life. It may have lasted for many lifetimes already and the connection will probably continue for many lifetimes to come. 'Tsawe-Lama' is sometimes translated as 'spiritual friend' or 'spiritual guide' because he or she will be your main guide along the path of dharma.

Is your Tsawe-Lama the Lama you take Refuge with?

Not necessarily. We call this Lama your 'Refuge-Lama'. The Refuge-Lama is the one who opens the door of the dharma and introduces you. That Lama may become your Tsawe-Lama but only time will tell.

How does someone go about finding their Tsawe-Lama? How do you recognize him or her?

Have patience. Follow the advice of your Refuge-Lama. Practice diligently. Go to teachings when possible and the situation will become clear.

Is it possible to have a woman Tsawe-Lama?

Of course, why not?

Once someone has found their Tsawe-Lama does this mean they should not attend teachings or initiations given by other Lamas?

No, of course not, but a little care should be taken. Each tradition of Buddhism, such as Zen or Theravada, and each school of Tibetan Buddhism has a different way of presenting things. If you listen to a great variety it is easy to confuse issues without realizing you are doing so. It is like a paint box! The red is a nice color, and those two greens are both clear and bright, and the yellow and that rich purple—all are fine colors but if you mix them all together you get a muddy brown! It is better to stay with teachers of the same lineage as far as you can so that your mind does not become muddy brown! However, a little of one color added to another can be good. Ask your Refuge Lama or your Tsawe-Lama for advice.

It is said that there is a strong connection between the student and their Tsawe-Lama and that the student should offer uncritical obedience. Is this correct?

Yes, there is a strong connection or bond between the Tsawe-Lama and the student but the student will offer what he or she can. Some students learn more by simple acceptance; others learn more by asking questions. Both are good. This is not the army! The role of the Tsawe Lama is to bring you to know the true nature of your mind—to see the truth as it is—not to brain-wash you.

If someone learned that their Tsawe-Lama had behaved in a manner contrary to their own moral standards, is it possible for that student to break the bond and find another Tsawe-Lama?

The student should remember that the bond is voluntary and it is possible that that Lama is no longer appropriate. Perhaps it was not their true Tsawe-Lama so in that case there was no bond to start with. If the Tsawe-Lama should break his own personal Samaya (deep vows) then that dissolves the 'contract' with the student and there is no longer a bond to break. If the student is unsure or uneasy then they should try to discuss the issue with their Tsawe-Lama, or with another Lama whom they respect—perhaps their Refuge-Lama. There may be a misunderstanding and an easy explanation. Time and common sense will show the way. If this is not possible, or if the student is still distressed, they should turn to their own Buddha-nature for guidance.

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