

## How to be a qualified student-Ven. Thubten Chodron

How do we become a qualified disciple? One quality to develop is open-mindedness. In other words, we let go of our own hard and fast agenda, of our likes and dislikes, and of our erroneous opinions about the nature of reality or the stages of the path.

If we attend a teaching yet still hold strongly to our preconceptions about the path, we will evaluate teachers by whether or not they agree with our ideas. Is that a valid criterion for selecting a teacher? Such an attitude blocks us from learning because we're holding on to what we believe and only accepting what validates our own opinions. In that case, we aren't receptive to the Enlightened One's teachings. To learn, we must set aside our own prejudices, be open-minded, and listen with a fresh mind.

The second quality of an excellent disciple is intelligence. This isn't referring to a person's IQ, because people with high IQs can be dull when it comes to understanding the Dharma. Intelligence means a willingness to investigate the teachings and think about them. We don't just accept things on face value, "Yes, the teacher said it, therefore it's true." Rather, we think about things, examine them using reason, and apply them to our own experiences. A disciple with this quality is willing to do the work of deeply investigating the meaning of the teachings.

The third quality is earnestness or sincerity, that is, a pure motivation. Having a pure motivation at the beginning of our practice is difficult. It takes time to develop it; we start with the earnestness, sincerity, and genuine spiritual longing that we have now, and then we build upon them.

Some people automatically think they have a pure motivation and are intelligent and open-minded. How can we be a good spiritual disciple if we already think we are one? That's arrogance. On the other hand, let's not go to the other extreme of low self-esteem, "I'm totally unqualified. My nose is in the mud. I can't learn anything." That's also ridiculous. Let's try to have a realistic appraisal of ourselves that enables us to be both humble and confident. "I've developed some qualities, and there's a long way to go." Humility is based on self-confidence but leaves us open to learning, whereas arrogance closes the door to learning.

We come to the Dharma with a wide variety of motivations. We don't start with bodhichitta, do we? How many of us have actual, spontaneous bodhichitta? Maybe you do; I don't. I have a hard enough time generating effortful, fabricated bodhichitta, which is the kind that we develop when we consciously cultivate our motivation. We have to be honest here and acknowledge our selfish motivations. This honesty is a sign of integrity in our spiritual practice; it enables us to develop better and better qualities.

We can be truthful about what's going on in our minds without falling into low self-esteem and self-hatred. Let's be honest that, until we become Buddhas, there will always be ways to grow. That humility keeps us open. His Holiness the Dalai Lama exemplifies humility, and he's certainly more advanced on the path than we are. So if somebody more advanced than us can humbly admit, "I don't fully understand the great texts," shouldn't we also have a modicum of humility? There's nothing wrong with not knowing everything!

I remember in the mid-seventies when people were just learning Tibetan Buddhism, they would often request highest yoga tantra initiations from Lama Yeshe. Lama would shoo them out, saying, "Go meditate on Lamrim and thought transformation. Learn to be kind to each other first."