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“The Life & Teachings of Naropa”

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VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN:

Well, whole new world. I wonder if this is the Ebell Theater. Continuing with our discussion, Naropa became completely frustrated and decided that he should commit suicide, since he wasn't getting anywhere. He said to himself, “I understand that these experiences that I've been having are manifestations of Tilopa, but I don't seem to be able to meet him.” And he thought, “Well, maybe if I commit suicide, in the next life I'll have a better chance.” Which is very interesting when we think of our own experience and our relationship with the teacher and teachings—how we at some point actually get completely frustrated and feel that nothing's happening at all. And we say to ourselves, “I understand, and yet I continue to”—blah, blah, blah, dot, dot, dot. “And it doesn't seem like I'm ever going to get close to the real teaching and to the teacher, because I continue to do the same thing over and over again—might as well give up the whole thing.” At that point, according to the story, a voice said to Naropa, “How can you meet the guru if you kill the Buddha?” Which in this case as we're talking about it means how can you ever meet the guru if you kill your own intelligence? How can you make a connection with the source of the

teaching if you kill your own inquisitiveness into that teaching, if you give up? At that point, Tilopa walked forward, and Naropa said, “I am so grateful to meet you, please have some compassion for me.” And Tilopa said, “Ever since you saw that old hag, we haven’t been separate. But because of your karmic defilements,”—in other words because of your preoccupation with your own trip, your own ego trip—“you didn’t see me. But from my point of view we have never been separate.”

At that point, there was a meeting between teacher and disciple, guru and disciple, which is a very important meeting. It’s confronting one’s own mind in the form of the guru or, we should say, one’s own mind as basically pure. And that sort of meeting of two minds is essential in terms of the realization of complete enlightenment. On meeting Tilopa, Naropa was overjoyed, and he asked for teaching. And Tilopa presented him with thirteen similes, which we don’t have to go through right now—you can read them. But Tilopa didn’t say anything particularly. He held up certain objects and made certain gestures. And Naropa would say, “I understand that to mean...” and he’d go on. And finally, after the thirteen signs were shown and Naropa had given his understanding, Tilopa then gave his understanding, saying that they were the same, saying that Naropa, you are a worthy vessel.

The point is that, upon meeting the guru, there is some kind of mutual testing ground that is necessary to avoid any kind of sloppiness and any kind of materialism. The student must see that the guru is genuine guru, not a charlatan or fake of any kind. And the guru must see that student is a genuine student and not a fake of any kind. So some kind of meeting of minds is necessary. And that meeting of minds does not have to involve any kind of doctrinal thing. It involves the situation you are in at the time, basically. And it also doesn’t mean that the student challenges the guru. Quite the contrary. The challenge part will come from the guru, and it’s the student’s role to respond at that point, to make some gesture of committing himself or herself to actually going further, so that neither one, neither guru nor disciple, is indulging in any kind of deception. So there’s some kind of clear communication—maybe in terms of symbolic language, maybe in terms of domestic language, domestic gestures, maybe going out to dinner for that matter, or driving in a car—could be anything. But there’s some sense of talking directly, with no hiding, no kind of holding back, but direct meeting.

So once that genuineness is established, that both parties understand what they’re getting into, guru and disciple, that it’s mutually understood that there’s no deception, then they can proceed together with actual teaching and practice, or

application of that teaching. So nothing is based on just emotional whim or dream-come-true quality. There may be a lot of emotion involved, but not whimsical emotion, emotion just happening. Naropa meeting Tilopa fell down—could be exhaustion at that point. On the other hand, he still had the presence to fold his hands, like so, and request. At that point Naropa committed himself to work with Tilopa. Tilopa said, “If you want teachings, you’ll have to follow me. Maybe you’ll get them, maybe you won’t, nothing’s guaranteed.” “But,” Tilopa said, “you’re intelligent enough to get them, but it’s up to you. You can follow me.” So there’s no blind faith whatsoever at that point. Naropa makes his commitment based on the intelligence of Tilopa, and Tilopa does likewise. So there could never be any kind of blame situation, any kind of Jonestown approach—is that it, Jonestown? Or any kind of—in our world, the people who give you zaps and things like that, and a year later, month later, they get disillusioned and say, “Well, I was cheated.” You know, that kind of thing. And Naropa and Tilopa, there’s no sense of cheating or not cheating. They looked at each other straight in the eye, and say, well, Tilopa said, “You asked me, so here we go.” At this point, Naropa has committed himself to actually burn out any kind of ego tendency, because he realized that enlightenment is not far away—in fact, right here—except he also understood that as long as he deceived himself by any kind of puffed up version of himself, any kind whatsoever, even little tiny, tiny, tiny one, that he could not be fully awake. And also seeing that Tilopa, who had presented those thirteen symbols to him, understood what awake meant. In other words, the connection of awake between Naropa and Tilopa took place. Naropa recognized that that gentleman called Tilopa was awake, because he also had some quality of awake. So he committed himself to follow.

He didn’t say to Tilopa, “Now listen, I’ll follow you, but treat me nicely, don’t ruffle me, tell me what I want to know when I want to know it, and if I want to sleep, don’t wake me up. And don’t call me for a meeting at Dharmadhatu, don’t tell me I have to sit these credits per month”—he didn’t say any of that—units per month. “Don’t tell me I have to participate, you know. I have a job, you know, I work weekends.” He fully understood that once he entered that path with his guru that there was no further excuse for self-deception. He knew what he was getting into. He went along.

Now, Tilopa, on his part—do you know what kind of gentleman he was? He sat on a riverbank and ate fish entrails, stuff that the fisherman threw away. In fact, when Naropa was looking for him, said, “Do you know anyone named Tilopa, great yogi?” The people said, “Well, I don’t know any great yogi, but there’s this guy down

there, who just lives off of what other people throw away.” So Tilopa didn’t have any kind of retinue or palace or anything. But he was just being there, not doing very much actually, until Naropa came along. Probably he was waiting for him. So then he set off with Naropa, said, “Follow me.”

For twelve years, Naropa followed Tilopa. And he went through incredible test, trial or hardship, incredible commitment because he was so stubborn and so intelligent. At the same time, he was so vulnerable that he actually could go through with it. And Tilopa presented him with a very interesting situation. As the story goes, he sat for a year in meditation and didn’t move. And at some point, after almost a year is up, Naropa, who’s anxious at that point, circumambulates and folds his hands and says, “Please give me the teaching,” or something or other, and Tilopa stirs himself, looks at him and says, “Well, come along with me.”

And I’m sure you read some of this, some of you have. Different things happened. Climbed up to the top of a temple, looked out, and he said, “If I had a student, he would have jumped off this.” And Naropa thought, “He must mean me,” and he jumped. He’s lying there with broken bones, everything. Tilopa comes along and says, “What’s the matter with you, why are you acting like this?” And Naropa said, “Because of habit-forming thoughts I jumped, and I’m suffering because of that.” And Tilopa touched him, and there wasn’t any pain anymore—it’s a story, okay? And said, “This particular body, if it believes in the ego, deserves to be crushed. Now listen to me.” And then he gives him some teaching on a particular aspect of vajrayana teaching. And this happened for twelve years, each year another one. That’s a lot of different stories. Each time, the actual thing that Naropa does relates to the teaching that he gets.

So what is Tilopa’s method as a teacher then? He’s completely unconcerned about Naropa, has no sense of sentimentality at all. At that point he said, “Well, you want to follow me, it’s your business. If you learn anything, it’s your business. As far as I’m concerned, I’m just going along.” So this kind of guru-disciple situation is a little bit tough, I suppose, especially for everybody with the eyes wide open and thinking about themselves, this happened to me, kind of [inaudible]. But on the other hand, Naropa was quite sure that he did not want to live with any kind of self-deception anymore. And he was also quite certain that any kind of theistic notion or gimmick wouldn’t work. That he actually had to squash that self-importance completely in order to be as he was, without any kind of second thought. And he also realized that Tilopa was the fellow who could do that, because Tilopa couldn’t care less. It’s very interesting. It’s Buddhist logic, and it keeps circling around.

So Tilopa actually didn't do anything to Naropa. He just said, "If I had a student, he would have jumped by this time." He didn't say, "Naropa, jump off this balcony." So he left a space for Naropa to actually catch himself, so to speak. Catching himself with his devotion, his awareness and his ambition and expectation. His ambition and expectation make him jump off the thing, not his devotion.

Another time they were walking together, and there's a stream full of leeches. They come to it, and Tilopa said, "If I had had a student, he would have thrown himself down at this point so I could walk over." And Naropa thought, "He must mean me," so he lay down, and leeches were all attacking him. And he's lying there and everything, covered with leeches. And Tilopa comes back and says, "What's the matter with you, why are you acting like this?" And Naropa said, "I'm still believing in something." And Tilopa said, "If you continue to believe in this something, then you'll be eaten by leeches continually, so get up."

So it goes on like that for twelve years. And Tilopa's method is the same, and Naropa's method is the same. Finally, as the story goes, after twelve years, they're sitting together by the bank of a river eating something. And Tilopa takes off his slipper and smacks Naropa in the face, pop! And Naropa recognizes his intrinsic nature, as it is, on the spot. And the whole twelve years comes back, immediately, and he understands.

That's the story. It points to the necessity to actually make a journey. That because we think we don't know, then we have to travel. And we have to travel with our guide more so, because we think we don't know. Now it's no use speculating whether or not we do or we don't really know. The point is we have a question, and we seek the answer to that question. And that means we commit ourselves to a path, which we are certain or somewhat certain provides the answer to our question. As far as the method of traveling, well, it's on foot, no mechanization whatsoever. It's manual traveling—or fe-manual traveling [laughter]. Have to be careful [laughter]. One has to go by oneself, there's no other way. And the guru is like the road in front of us, the sunset, the sunrise, the wind and rain, the hardship, the obstacles and the fulfillment, altogether. The guru represents the end of the journey, but also represents the journey itself. Because there was a moment of the meeting of two minds, then the journey could be taken. Traveling on a path is awakening of enlightenment. When that actually happens, then the path and ourselves are not different, but it's just traveling anyway.

There's one other thing, and that's fear, which is very real in terms of practitioner's point of view. And that fear and the obstacles on the path go together.

There's basic fear, which is we feel we can't make the journey at all, and that we feel that we could never achieve enlightenment. And then there's fear as it relates to obstacles along the way. If we actually feel that to begin with, such sense of poverty-stricken ghostlike fear, then obstacles become monumental. Naropa was a human being, so was Tilopa, so was Milarepa, so was Marpa, so was Gampopa, so were all the Karmapas. So are all of us human beings. We possess body and senses, consciousness and intelligence to achieve enlightenment. And fear is holding on to the habit-forming thought of ego. So just as Naropa and those following him achieved, so too any human being like us can do so. Fear is basically thinking that we can't, and the obstacles are personifying that fear, projecting that fear onto the world, so that obstacles become like armies against us, enemies. Even if you have a faint notion of confidence in your own intelligence, that's also good, so that fear becomes slightly in and out-transparent. We all begin that way, that's fine. If you have some notion of that, then obstacles become workable. Obstacles become part of the journey. If there's a thunderstorm or mudslide, or snow, heavy snow, or dry heat, we still journey anyway, because we realize that those things are just the nature of what is, and our own experience partakes in that nature, so we can journey forward. So Naropa took his fear with him and made a lot of mistakes, but was not a coward about that.

We could have a discussion at this point.

QUESTION: You spoke about the meeting of the two minds with the guru as the beginning of the path, and you spoke about having to follow the guru to be on the path, the guru being your own mind, a pure manifestation of your own mind. I kind of understand this to be pointing at meeting, coming to a meeting with your own mind, or not necessarily that it ends up being your own, but a meeting of your mind.

VAJRA REGENT: Sure, sure. It's a meeting of two minds, this case - your projection and your projector.

Q: It seems like that moves towards seeing the quality of your own projection—

VR: Sure, sure, sure, yes, of course.

Q: Is that adequate?

VR: Well, Naropa had the same question. And Tilopa said, "Watch without watching *for* something." Watch without watching for something in particular. Does that make sense to you?

Q: In a way, kind of leaves you out in the open though. Watching for anything particular—

VR: But watch, watch, but don't watch for anything in particular. It's very specific. It's not as out in the open all as much as you think. It's very specific.

Q: Can you say something about what watching is?

VR: Well, it's just basic inquisitive, you know. Since we think we have desire for something, therefore Tilopa says. "Watch without watching for anything."

Q: Say it again, please?

VR: Well, we still have desire for something, right. We have some kind of desire to watch for something, look out for something. So Tilopa's working with Naropa's desire at that point. And he's saying, "Yes, you can watch, but don't watch for anything in particular." So that's how you work with desire. Does that make any sense to you?

Q: Yes, kind of.

VR: Kind of [laughs].

Q: I mean, you know, watching for something is wanting something, and that would get in the way of watching.

VR: No, no, almost but not quite. Say it again. "Watching for something is wanting something, but that would get in the way of watching," right? Is that what you said?

Q: That's what I said.

VR: Sounds funny, doesn't it?

Q: Yes, a little funny [laughs].

VR: In this case, watching without a "something." Forget about the "get in the way" business. When you say, "get in the way of watching," then there's something there. Just, you know, what color is this candle? Quick!

Q: [Inaudible]

VR: Good! Is there any problem with yellow?

Q: No.

VR: You sure?

Q: Yes [laughs].

VR: That's good. You don't want anything from yellow?

Q: No.

VR: No, just yellow.

Q: I get it [laughs].

VR: Yes, but don't—that's the whole point, okay?

Q: Thank you.

QUESTION: We have learned that Naropa had many teachers before meeting Tilopa, had become famous for much wisdom and much enlightenment of a kind, to a degree—

VR: That's right

Q: —and was chancellor of a school, et cetera. Now he was still dissatisfied, had still not found the teacher who could give him the kind of enlightenment that he needed and sought. Now the question is how did he know that he found the right guru? How did he know this was the man who could give him what he was missing? To broaden the question, how does anyone in this room know when he has found the right teacher? There are many teachers...

VR: Well, I knew. You said anyone in this room? [Laughter] I'm one of those, yes. It was quite obvious. It's a confrontation with one's own sense of perception even, on just basic level. Forget about thought process, even one's sense of perception. Confronting the belief, the whole package of belief, straight off. On the other hand, not whitewashing anything, but actually face to face. And that particular guru doesn't have to say anything in particular about belief. Just demonstrates that sense of being totally honest, and if you're interested in pursuing that yourself, I think it becomes quite obvious.

Q: Have I understood rightly that when one does meet the spiritual friend, one knows it?

VR: That's correct.

Q: Thank you.

VR: That is not to say one might not have second thoughts later on [laughter]. But on the spot, one knows it.

QUESTION: When Naropa was confronted by this old lady, the question that she put to him—

VR: We don't know if it was even a lady.

Q: Oh right, his projection or whoever—

VR: It's called a hag [laughter].

Q: Dakini, the hag. She said, "Do you understand the words or the sense?"

VR: Or the sense.

Q: It would seem that there's a rather fine distinction there.

VR: Not to that hag there wasn't.

Q: Not to her, okay. But you've been talking a lot about Naropa's self-deception, and I'm wondering, I'm missing a couple of connections there about the difference between the words and the sense, and his thinking that he understood the sense and her thinking that he didn't understand the sense.

VR: No, she didn't think anything.

Q: Well, could you expand on that a little bit?

VR: Well, basically when we deceive ourselves with our whitewash, good news about what happens to us, you know what I mean? We actually shut down, shut it off at a certain point. Because if we didn't, we would feel so sad and pretty much upset to realize that we didn't know it, and we invented something. That's what happened to Naropa. His first thought was correct. He said, "I don't understand, I only understand the words." But then when he saw the old hag was smiling and laughing he thought, "Ha, I can go further with this." We do that all the time. First, confronted with just one genuine moment, and we're honest. And then it begins to open up, and we think, "Oh, I could go with that?" I could??

QUESTION: Was Tilopa Naropa's spiritual friend?

VR: Guru is the word, guru.

Q: But was he also a spiritual friend?

VR: I think he's a guru.

Q: Can you explain what that means?

VR: Yes, somebody who says yes or no is a guru. Spiritual friend might say, "Maybe." Spiritual friend might say, "Well, it's up to you, you know. Think about

it.” But guru says, “Do this or don’t”—yes, very simple. You can’t meet the guru that easily. You can’t bring your defilements into the guru’s world. They won’t accept. That’s why Naropa went through all that just to meet Tilopa. Why do you think we’re practicing like this? We think this is some kind of game, entertainment. Supermarket’s open 24 hours a day. But not so with the guru, doesn’t happen that way. That’s why it’s basic confrontation with reality. It’s not open twenty-four hours a day. It’s not open when you want it. Yes, no. Can I come in? No, close the door. Say, “But I want to come in.” No, you can’t, you can’t. Good night, Choo! Outside, say [inaudible]. “Why are you acting like this?” “I can’t stand to hear no. For that matter, I can’t stand to hear yes.” Anyhow, I’m going off on this.

QUESTION: I was thinking about suicide, in terms of—

VR: Please don’t. [Laughter]

Q: Naropa reached a point of wanting to commit suicide, and Milarepa reached a point, that I recall, of wanting to commit suicide—

VR: That’s right

Q: —and—

VR: Marpa didn’t.

Q: Oh, so it’s not... [Laughter]

VR: Is that all you wanted to know? [Laughter]

Q: Well, that may have been all I wanted to know, but I was wondering, in terms of our own practice, the way—

VR: Just wait [laughter]. You were wondering about what?

Q: In our practice, there’s a sense of awakening as well as a sense of desperation, it seems. I mean, we talk about it in those terms all the time, and—

VR: Kindergarten.

Q: Are you saying that the sense of waking that we feel—

VR: Half-baked.

Q: — is deception?

VR: Half-baked. No, “the sense of waking that you feel is deception” is like Russian roulette. What should I say, “Yes, it is? And when you feel awakened, that’s deception?” Or, “No, when you feel awakened you’re really awakened?” That’s like

kindergarten in a way, you know, sort of feeling your way around in the space. Manage to get a square peg in square holes—I feel awake! Awake! I’m definitely awake! Is that deception? No, not deception, it’s kind of like [makes snoring sound; laughter].

Q: Well, is there a point where your identification with the teachings becomes the source of your despondency? Or, do you know what I’m—

VR: No, I don’t.

Q: Well, I guess what I don’t understand is that point where Milarepa or Naropa felt like committing suicide, I don’t understand that point.

VR: Oh, that point is being so certain that truth of suffering becomes overwhelming, and not being able to strategize one way or another how to get out of it.

Q: Despite what one has understood—

VR: Despite what one has understood, or practiced. Here we go. See you there, maybe.

QUESTION: [inaudible]

VR: It was strategy, that is strategy.

Q: [Inaudible] may have been positive act? [Inaudible]

VR: That’s right, well, that’s same thing. That’s still strategy. You see, at that point when Naropa said, “I might as well commit suicide, because it doesn’t look like I’m going to get anywhere with this.” And maybe his logical mind is saying, “Maybe if I do this, in the next life I’ll have more of a chance to meet Tilopa.” But then again, Tilopa says, or a voice says, “If you kill your own intelligence, how do you expect to meet Tilopa, which is same as your own intelligence.” So Naropa, he’s good and bad all the time, you know. And after that, then the journey actually began, after some kind of fundamental flop, letting go of his whole trip about meeting Tilopa. Then the journey actually began, the ambition turned into expectation later on. But had to have that starting point of actually letting go, of finding what you wanted so much, you know, what everybody wants so much, you finally have to let go of the whole thing, you know. At that point the space becomes a lot wider, you can see the horizon and everything. That doesn’t mean you have to go after that anyway. You have to journey at that point. But at least you see where you’re going.

Q: Do you have to confront that kind of extreme despair?

VR: Well, “extreme despair” is not the right words, actually. That’s kind of a Western approach to things. You have to confront your own sense of disillusionment, or even disgust, or better words might be your own sense of not being able to be fulfilled, that kind of thing.

Q: Yes.

VR: I think so. I think definitely so. It’s kind of the crux of the whole matter in a way, to proceed on the path, so you don’t take any kind of false baggage with you, any kind of false passport.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, coming on to eleven o’clock, which is interesting. How many hours do we need to sleep in order to meditate tomorrow? See, what time does the sitting practice start tomorrow?

Audience: Nine a.m.

VR: Nine a.m. tomorrow. Oh, everybody works tomorrow. Well, even if you work, you can still apply a sense of meditation in action and not fall asleep while you are working because it’s a habitual thought, see what I mean? Habitual thinking, it’s my job. And those people who are going to sit tomorrow, maybe there might be two or three of you, maybe more. Take your seat and occupy this particular space. I’m glad to be here by the way, Dharmadhatu. We have any discussion group tomorrow or not? What time is that?

Audience: [inaudible]

VR: Well, try to come around for that, so we can continue. We have one more talk and discussion, one more day. We should make use of it while we have the chance. Thank you very much.

[END OF RECORDING]