

Unpublished Transcript: no reproduction without permission.
Copyright 1979 by Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin. All rights reserved.

VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN
Public Seminar: The Wheel of Life

Naropa Institute
Boulder, Colorado

Talk 1 of 4
April 25, 1979

Transcribed by Robert Walker and Tamara Eric
Checked by Donna Holm

Word Count: 3537

VAJRA REGENT OSEL TENDZIN: I would like to welcome everyone to this training session. Our subject for the next few days is called the wheel of life. And this particular teaching of the wheel of life in Sanskrit is called *bhavachakra*, "the wheel of becoming," more literally, wheel of becoming. Wheel of life is kind of a, a slightly cop-out. The wheel of becoming—we could say the process of becoming—that's our topic.

I thought it would be an excellent topic for us to study at this point, no matter what stage of practice we are at, because of the vividness of the presentation. This teaching of the bhavachakra was taught by the Buddha and was especially taught in Tibet. And the whole point of teaching this subject is the notion of liberation, or enlightenment. In fact, that is the whole notion of dharma.

I'm sure all of you have seen the representation of this particular teaching as consisting of a circle. Within that circle, contained different rings, and without the circle, the figure of Yamantaka, the Lord of Death, embracing or holding the entire wheel or circle. Within the circle is the description of how confusion manifests itself. And the whole idea of a circle represents totality, that all of confusion is completely described within that circle, little circles. So what we are talking about in our training session is the complete description of the world of confusion, which is embraced by death. And death in this case could be the ultimate result of confusion or, on the other hand, could be the ultimate truth of confusion, but we'll see about that.

The notion of Yama, Yamantaka, this fierce figure who encompasses the whole wheel of confusion, is that the possessor of samsaric life, the whole of our life is possessed by death, the whole of confused life is possessed by death. Death has its teeth and claws in confused life.

This figure of death represents one of two things: either the nonexistence of the whole wheel, or the ultimate development of confusion. We could say that the whole production of confusion manifests as death, as Yamantaka. As sophisticated confused persons, that's how we view our life, from the point of view

of death. Whether we see death as an obstacle or death as an ultimate reward, still it remains our reference point. Our study in the next few days is how that develops, how that situation develops to the degree where death becomes our saving grace or our enemy; or the statement of the truth, which is different from the first two.

There is a fierceness depicted in that figure. Has claws, teeth, fangs, actually, and three eyes, and seems to grip everything, hold everything. Why do you suppose it's pictured that way? That our death is such a terrifying event, or that death itself is such a terrifying event? Or something else—that death itself is so vivid that it portrays itself as absolutely terrifying.

So we should begin at the beginning. That is to say, the whole notion of death and what occurs before and after, or in the meantime, is based on a flicker, based on a momentary panic, momentary flash that occurred, and that momentary flicker or flash is the truth of the non-substantial quality of existence. That the whole of existence has no substance whatsoever, occurred in a flash, occurred in a flicker, and that could be Yamantaka.

On the other hand, it could be the development of the whole wheel of life, or the proliferation of confusion. In a flash, in a flicker, something occurred. Or did it? Did it? We understand, from our sophisticated point of view, all kinds of notions about existence and nonexistence which we've studied, read, and all that, but on the other hand, in the very moment, there is a flicker, a question: "Is it so, or isn't it?" Next, "It is!" "No it isn't." That flicker is called the existence of mind, the notion of mind, that mind becomes apparent, or exists in a moment, in a flicker or a flash. And that notion of mind is the same thing as the notion of self, that there is existence as such, as something solid and definite, exists in a flash. So we're exploring our topic from the point of view of two areas: one, again, that our notion of existence is the complete culmination of confusion, or our notion of existence is simply a flicker, a momentary event.

When we look at something from a distance, we see its general shape, and it looks completely solid to us. When we get up close, we see it's made up of parts and, in fact, those parts have cracks, slits, made up of particles and all of the rest of it. The same with our notion of existence: we view it from a distance, and it looks solid and complete; we get up close, and it becomes discontinuous. We can't put our finger on what existence actually is, because it's seemingly strung together with bits and pieces. If we get up really close, none of those bits and pieces seem to fit exactly; there's always some sort of flaw.

That sense of viewing things at a distance is what's called ego. Also called mind, in the ordinary sense of mind—that which perceives and that which projects. That's the mind we're talking about—that which perceives and that which projects happens like this: there's a flicker, echo: perception and projection. There's an occurrence: echo-perception; and further definition of that perception, which is called projection. That's what we do; that's called mind. That's who we claim we are, and we claim so much of it that it becomes Yamantaka at the end, death. That's our ultimate projection of who we are: dead. It's true. It's fiercely true, terrifyingly true.

The whole notion of studying this wheel of life, which was taught by the Buddha, is first to understand that, from the very beginning, there is no such thing as self. This self, which is so deliberate and so complete that it winds up as Yama,

Yamantaka, never existed to begin with. The notion of nonexistence is the basis of studying what we're studying, nonexistence of anything solid.

Now when we talk about anything, let's talk in concrete terms. We talk about anything, we're talking about, first of all, mental events, what occurs in mind, that's what occurs first. Then later on, emotions, and later on, body, the whole sense of body and mind and the communication between the two: all of that never existed. That's how we should study this wheel of life, which is, might be, shortcut for everybody but, on the other hand, this is the modern age, and everybody's pretty smart and studied a lot of things. On the other hand, everybody's still confused, so why not inject some word of sanity.

Our whole sense of being who we are is nonexistent. It's a complete fake. When we see something from far away, it looks solid; when we get up close, it looks like it has different compartments, it's made up of layers and different things, and we see that even those layers don't quite fit. The whole notion of studying this wheel of life is based on the nonexistence of mind, or we could say the nonexistence of death. On the other hand, the whole study is involved with the existence of mind and death. So we say, as Buddhists, that mind itself never existed, therefore, the whole production of passions and aggressions and development of the person, the so-called person, is also nonexistent.

How we come to that conclusion, how we have ever come to that conclusion, is through the practice of meditation, simply because we begin to see that what we call mind, which is the same thing as existence at this point—existence of ourselves, who we call ourselves, what we are, mind—is a series of events, mental events. And when we actually look at those events, examine those events through meditation practice, we see that there is no continuity whatsoever between one event and another as far as content is concerned, there's no continuity. The content of one situation is completely different from the next. We begin to see that.

And then when we see that, we begin to look at the individual event itself, mental event, such as a thought, and begin to see that that particular thought has absolutely no ground, no solidity, no reality in itself. And further than that, we begin to see that the **two together** start to form a pattern, and that pattern has no reality in itself, no solidity in itself. It is a pattern of discontinuity. It has no particular point of view. All of that we call egolessness. And there's one further aspect of it, which is our experience of that, which we call the experience of egolessness, which is rather redundant. It's rather redundant it's rather redundant [laughs]. Instead we begin to see that we're talking to ourselves, and it doesn't make any sense, and that it used to make sense, and now it doesn't, which doesn't make sense, and we feel we understand, we experience that even experience itself doesn't have any solidity at all.

The reason why I'm talking about this is that we're going to go through the accumulation of neurotic tendencies, what makes confusion and the world of confusion, and we should do it from the proper point of view, that is, none whatsoever. We can do that. Even though we're skeptical about our so-called existence or nonexistence, we should do that, otherwise our study together in the next few days will be slightly suspect. Suspect to whom? Nobody knows. But still suspect. So Yamantaka doesn't exist, and yet does.

Basically, I would like to quote, at this point, a very revered person, a friend of mine, more than a friend of mine, I should say. He said, "There is a world which does not exist in your own mind." And that's how we should approach our study.

If you have any questions, we could have a discussion at this point.

QUESTION. Is it true that the notion of death here, the way you've been presenting it has two aspects—one relates to holding onto existence or I, and the other one has to do with egolessness...sort of two aspects?

VR: That's right.

Q: Thank you.

VR: Could be one or the other depending on us—whatever that means, "us."

Q. Is it either, or is it always both, or is it either depending on how you view it or...?

VR: Hah! I suppose the madhyamika people would say neither, both, no—how does it go? I would say it's not one or the other, but it's definitely one or the other. Definitely.

Q: One or the other?

VR: Definitely one or the other. But it's not either of them. You see? How much can we figure out?

Q: Well, we just figured out that it was either one or the other.

VR: Oh, no. We also said it was not either of them. Which is the real death? Will the real death please stand up and drop dead. I don't think so, you know. We can't approach it that way. It's good to have a party, but the party ends and then?

QUESTION: Did I understand you when you said that, the quote at the end, there is a world that does not exist in your own mind?

VR: Do you understand what?

Q: Is that the quote? [Laughs]

VR: Which?

Q: [Laughter] Okay. Which witch? Okay. You also said there is the nonexistence of anything solid.

VR: Like Jello.

Q: Well, does that mean that the world that doesn't exist in your own mind has no solidity, has no—

VR: The world that does not exist in your own mind is real.

Q: You mean there is a real world?

VR: One never knows.

Q: But he said so.

VR: Who did? He did?

Q: The quote. [Laughter]

VR: He did?

Q: No, the quote said it.

VR: Oh, I don't know, I don't know. I'm chicken.

Q: What do you think? [Laughs]

VR: I'm chicken. Well, basically, I would never say, because I don't know.

Q: Oh, only he knows. [Laughs]

VR: Maybe I do, maybe I do... but I wouldn't say. But basically, I don't think I know. [Laughs, laughter] On the other hand, it seems real. [Sighs]

Q: Nothing further.

VR: Well, there's a lot further, yes. Depends on our study and practice, definitely. It doesn't depend on speculation. Absolutely not. Speculation is Yama's. That's death from the point of view of samsara-speculation.

Q: So that the world that does exist would be life?

VR: Would be what?

Q: Life?

VR: Death, life, life...? Well, that's the same old story. What can we say? The world that does exist would be...would be what?

Q: Would it be egoless?

VR: Would be...it's very hard to say would be egoless.

Q: [Laughs] Sounds wrong.

VR: Well, it's not particularly wrong. It would be egoless from the point of view of ego. You see?

Q: Yes.

VR: From the point of view of looking at the world as solid, you say, the world isn't solid, is it?

Q: Mmm-hmm. No. It isn't.

VR: Well? Who knows?

Q: I don't know.

VR: Neither do I.

Q: Oh, good.

VR: And now we're happy. [Laughter] Whatever. But still, at least a little goodness in the world doesn't hurt. Or does it? We don't know yet. But we've been practicing a long time here at Karma Dzong.

Mr. Fitzgerald in the front here. Yes, sir?

QUESTION [Joshua Zim]: Mr. Gatsby, I wonder if you could clarify-

VR: Did you say Catsby or Gatsby? [Laughter]

Q: Can't be.

VR: Can't be?

Q: Could be.

VR: Well, can't be is better.

Q: Can't be.

VR: Could be is okay.

Q: Could be is all right. Would be is not so good.

VR: Well, let's see.

Q: All right. Could you-

VR: Would?

Q: Please-

VR: Let's see.

Q: -clarify for me [Laughter]

VR: It's a Vajradhatu word game. Yes, sir.

Q: This is a crossword puzzle.

VR: Yes.

Q. You said, sir, that the image of Yamantaka was either that death is terrifying, or that death is so vivid that it portrays itself as terrifying. Could you clarify that distinction? I can't quite get it.

VR: Well, I think that's difference between egolessness and ego at that point, that one's death could be personified as something outside oneself. Or in this case the whole of existence could be egoless, personified by that. In other words, whatever we experience is egoless. Whatever. Therefore, it's not clinging to anything. It doesn't have to wait to be caught in the claws and the teeth of some external death.

Q: Thank you, sir.

QUESTION: [tape turned over; first part of question inaudible] ...say that there is a world which exists—

VR: No.

Q: —outside of hope and—

VR: No.

Q: No? [long pause] What was the quotation again?

VR: There is a world which does not exist in your mind. Not there is a world that exists other than your mind.

Q: So where do hope and fear come into this?

VR: Does not exist. Hope and fear exist in the mind, you see, and the mind exists in the notion of a flicker of being born. You see? Everybody was born, right? Were you born, then?

Q: think so.

VR: You think so? Yes, we all think so, don't we? How interesting, how we think we were born. We consider it a memory, because we don't remember if we were or not. That's how confusion arises.

QUESTION: Is the flicker or flash the beginning of the skandhas—

VR: That's right.

Q: —like at the level of form?

VR: That's right. Yes.

Q: What is the origin of flash?

VR: Origin of flash doesn't have any origin. That's the whole point.

Q: It's a gap?

VR: No, it's not a gap. Gap is something that you heard about somewhere.

Q: Well, wouldn't flash have a distinction from stillness? I mean, that you would perceive motion?

VR: Not really, not really. You see, there's stillness, then there is a flicker. When there's a flicker, then you don't perceive stillness, you perceive flicker. But because that happens, you begin to remember that there was stillness, and then there was flicker, and then you start thinking there's existence. Something abrupt happens in our life, you see? Always, something abrupt happens. Just like that. Just very much like that. Or [snaps fingers], something like that. Very fast. And then there's a kind of juxtaposition of memory, memory comes in at that point. That first there was this [snaps fingers] and then there was [makes whooshing noise], and you try to

figure out what's the relationship between the two. Then you get ego and the whole thing.

Q: So it's like a double take?

VR: Pretty much, pretty much double take is the right word actually, at that point. Because first there was this, then there was that.

Q: So the flash just occurs spontaneously? It just—

VR: Well, even spontaneously it's a little bit begging the point. It just occurred.

Q: Thank you.

QUESTION: Did I hear you correctly saying that the sort of the ultimate extension of ego mind was Yamantaka? Did you say something like that?

VR: Mmm-hmm.

Q: Okay. I have trouble getting that. There seems to be some contradiction, where that would be going the other direction, actually, that the, you know, as ego mind became more and more manifest, that there would be a progressive kind of cutting off and solidifying and dimming, whereas Yamantaka is terrifying and vivid and fierce.

VR: Yes, yes, that's right.

Q: Well, so how is Yamantaka the extension of that cutting off process?

VR: Well, the more you progress, the more it becomes like endless, death.

Q: The more you progress in what sense?

VR: In the sense of solidifying your existence. See what I mean?

Q: No.

VR: Well, look. Let's take a simple example of how you approach our life, you know. You want to get a job, right? You walk into the employment office of wherever you are, and you did your whole thing, you know, you just made yourself look as best you could. And you confront the first secretary who says, "Well, I don't know if we need you." And suddenly you begin to go "ummp". Then they transfer you to the next one who says, "Well, what are your qualifications?", and you're not sure about the whole thing, you know, and suddenly you go, mm, mmm. You're down about two, there, you know. And they transfer you the next one who says, "What can you do? [laughter] And by that time you're completely, and say, "Well, see you Charlie." Now what are you talking about, what was the question again? [laughter] Existence, or nonexistence? Or what? I forgot.

Q: Well, it seems like maybe what we have is a case of the two flip sides being the opposite, being opposites of the same thing, I mean creating each other?

VR: Really? I don't understand what you're saying.

Q: I don't understand what you're saying. [laughter]

VR: Well, I just said it very simply, when you go to the employment office, right? And you walk in and you've really got your whole thing together, and the first defeat that you get, you suddenly don't believe in yourself. Right? And the second one you get, you believe less in yourself. And the third one you get, you don't even know if you exist or not. That's what happens all the time, I think, all the time.

Q: Okay, what I was saying then was just suggesting that maybe the feeling of falling apart is relative to the feeling of having previously puffed oneself up to walk in there and act real cool—

VR: Really? You think so? Well, maybe so, we'll see.

Q: I don't know.

VR: Maybe so, it's possible. But where did all that come from anyway? Why did you puff yourself up to go in anyway?

Q: Yes. Thank you.

Well, I guess that's the end of it for tonight. Ooh, what a shocking experience, to be alive and wonder if aliveness is actually it. Eh? Being a good, smart practitioner, being so good as we know we are. Well, from my point of view it's completely open from here on, what we do. From the point of view of our relationship and what we are studying it's okay, quite open. On the other hand, we were talking about experience from the point of view of whether it's solid or not. We're talking about the whole creation of the moment-to-moment confused world or not. Whether it's possible, whether it actually is true that we create confused world or we don't. Well, it's good to be here in Boulder. Thank you very much.