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VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN
Public Seminar: The Wheel of Life

Karma Dzong
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VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN:

Continuing our discussion, we are talking about becoming from the point of view of how we perpetuate bewilderment, how we continue to believe in the notion of existence out of fear and panic. We talked about bewilderment giving rise to passion, and passion giving rise to aggression and ignorance, and beyond that, the basic notion of preservation, giving rise to the different strategies of how we continue our bewilderment, that is to say, existence in the six realms, the six modes of continuing or perpetuating our bewilderment. Now, those six realms are very immediate in the sense of, their immediacy is like how we respond to our projection, how we continue to respond to our projection, from the point of view of hungry ghost, or jealous god, or whatever we have.

But there's something further than that. How to complete the whole picture of the notion of I, ego, self. We need a whole background for that notion because, as far as the realms are concerned, and living in a realm, it's basically on, off, on, off, and back and forth all the time, and it needs an environment, or we seem to think it needs an environment in order to sustain itself, ourselves. We need an environment, we think. And that environment has to do with the concept of future: what we are going to do next, or what's going to happen next. You see, we can't really sustain the whole process unless we have a scenario, a scene, an environment. If we didn't have the environment, there'd be too much room for experiencing bewilderment all over again. You recall we were talking about the speed of how we continue to reinforce our ignorance. But that speed can't be sustained continually without some further reference, and that further reference is the future, how we relate to what's in our future.

So at this point what we concern ourselves with is efficiency: how to perpetuate our ignorance and bewilderment, and that involves the notion of *karma*, what we call volitional action, the desire to, the impulse to continue to survive. Karma as volitional action is action depending upon a cause, or something preceding it, which gives rise to the next moment, and that moment is the cause

for the next one. So what we're talking about here is how we sustain the notion of self from moment to moment. We're talking about the process of completely confusing everything, overlapping everything so that it blends, so we think, blends together in some kind of continuity. So that we can have some memory, and that memory assures us that the next moment has something to do with the last one. Fundamentally, we're not sure at all, but because we have built up such a strong sense of who we are, by passion, aggression, ignorance, and jealousy, hatred, stupidity, all the rest of it, to fortify that notion of continuing existence, then we can actually proceed further with our version of the world, our projection, in terms of thinking of life-life as existence.

Of course, we have one flaw in the whole thing, and that is death, as we talked about earlier on, as a kind of a threat to life. And so the whole notion of living is putting off death, somehow, camouflaging it by activity, camouflaging death by the continual overlapping, continual progression of our notion of life, our memories and our future.

This process is called the chain of existence, or the *nidanas*, the outermost ring of this wheel of becoming. I'm not going to go through all of them tonight; the study group leaders will, and how they proceed from one to the other. My basic point tonight is the essence of that proceeding. You should study the description of the twelve *nidanas*, but you should also recognize how that occurs. Both are very helpful. Why so? Because everything is so blurry to us, really blurry, until we look at each moment, until we actually see how we perpetuate our ignorance, and therefore, it's very helpful to study. So how we do that? Or do we do that?

This chain of existence, or *nidanas*, is also referred to as codependent origination, which means that we continually give rise to the next moment by memory or dependency on the last moment. In that sense, each successive moment is a consequence of the last one. Now, what we're talking about is karma, and the perpetuation of ignorance into the future, so it becomes a real picture and a real life, our notion of "our life."

Chain reaction. The whole chain reaction of life is based on what we studied before: bewilderment gives rise to passion, aggression, ignorance, gives rise to styles of manifesting oneself, gives rise to perpetuation of the whole thing, completely, as life, which is basically some kind of fortification of warding off any kind of threat, such as death. Death in this case means the death of the notion of life, not so much physical death, but it could be the same thing. We're talking about the same thing, but death of the notion of life, death of the notion of perpetuating what we call ourselves. So karma, or volitional action, in this case, is constant dependency on the last moment, and therefore, continual consequence of depending on the last moment.

If you feel angry, the next moment will be the consequence of that; if you feel happy, the next moment will be the consequence of that—depressed, jealous, prideful, whatever—and they start to feed on each other, overlap each other, so that we have one big continuity of our life. And we say, "Well, I feel great these days; things are going well for me. My job's okay, family's good; it's a lot better than it used to be." I mean, when we think about it, "I mean, last year, it was awful. I didn't have any work. My family was crying. My husband, my wife, bugging me.

Now things are great, and I can look to the future. I look ahead." You know, "If I can only keep it up." [Laughter]

So what we're talking about is that urge to continue that notion of existence, compulsion to continue the notion of existence. So we could say that all of us have a permanent job from that point of view. We're continually occupied, we have a real occupation. I remember when I was in school in the early grades, they asked us to write, "What is your career? What would you like to be?" I think it was about seventh grade, or something like that. "What would you like to be?" And I had no idea. So I looked through a book, and I found something, and I made my project out of whatever I found in the book. [Laughs] It's pretty much all the same all the time. How we develop our occupation is completely haphazard. Some sense of demand, which is itself create a demand, and some sense of having to fulfill that demand. So we make our booklet,, our project, fill the whole thing out and present it. "So what do you think if this?" "Hey, great," we're reinforced. Later on, we don't want to be that any more; we try to be something else.

So we're talking about this whole notion of perpetuation, chain, one thing leading to another leading to another, leading to another, and the whole thing being pushed from behind by impermanence or death, the whole thing being pushed from behind. So we find ourselves, at last, at the mercy of life and death. We find ourselves completely at the mercy of coincidence. That everything we set up to do, strategize it so completely, we find as we begin to grow older, has nothing whatsoever to do with what we planned, and then we get disappointed. We're old, our body starts to decay, and we die. But then again, we revive ourselves of out of dissatisfaction, out of unpleasantness and pain, and we start all over again. That's the whole notion of nidana, that the whole thing always starts again because of the beginning.

You see, we actually start at death and go through life, wind up at death, and go through life again. The whole thing is self-perpetuating because we started off with the notion of death. Therefore, we wind up with that very same notion. Inescapable coincidence: we made the whole thing that way, and there's no way out. We have such pregnancy-hoping to give birth to the next moment-and such dependency on the last one that we eventually do give birth to the next moment, and then we are completely freaked out that we did so, because we begin to realize that the whole thing is all over. I panic and look back; I want to grasp and then go forward at the same time. So we're pushed from behind, and the future's uncertain, so we continue to roll around, roll around, roll around and say, "Well, that's life."

So we are driven by death from behind and life in front, and death in front of life, and life in front of death. Now there are twelve different stages which are listed, and I trust the study group leaders will go over those with you: birth, death, old age, sickness, and craving, and all the rest of it, sensation, consciousness, how we actually go through that, step by step. But the basic notion here is that the strategy of existing starts to expand and begins to fool itself. That's what we do. Our strategy begins to fool itself, and it becomes a whole scenario, which we call life, and then we become totally ignorant, totally ignorant, and we say, "That's life." Basic, flat ignorance. Hope and fear. Dependency on the last moment, hoping for the next one, and they continue to overlap in such a way that we dress up, have

our hair cut, walk to our jobs, get married, have children, relate with our parents, relate with our friends, get old, sick, die, and start all over again.

Every moment that happens. It's not—you see, the whole trick, you see, is that we've convinced ourselves that this life is our life, failing to see that we live and die every moment, failing to see that we have such dependency on the past and hope for the future, because our notion of ourselves becomes so solid that there is no other way to think about it.

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

QUESTION: You said karma proceeded from volitional action? And volitional action implies to sort of free will of some sorts, but karma sort of seems to overrule that. Is there any conception of free will in Buddhism?

VR: Volitional action means action based on "I".

Q: Not free will then?

VR: What do you mean by free will?

Q: Well, it seems you're ever marching in this procession towards more and more limited and narrow scope. If karma keeps, if everything is interdependent on the next succeeding thing, everything becomes more and more limited.

VR: And more and more claustrophobic, yes.

Q: So isn't there some escape, I mean, is there just going to a point at the end, and death or whatever?

VR: That's what it seems like.

Q: Isn't there some little escape clause in Buddhism or something. [Laughter]

VR: Yes, but it's not a clause. It's a break out. Escape clause is very nice. That's the same thing we always think: "Isn't there some sort of *hors d'oeuvre*?" Or, "Isn't there some sort of desert?" Yes, there is actually a way out. But there is absolutely no way out unless you see what's happening. You can't get out by jumping off the hot seat. That's not Buddhism, to think that ooh, the whole thing is so miserable I got to get out of here. That's what's most people thought. In fact, Buddha thought himself, when he saw, you know, he walked... you know the story? He left his palace and he saw people dying, being born, getting sick, the whole thing, and he thought, "I've got to get out of this. This is going to happen to me." You know. That's really honest, you know. That's very honest thing. He saw all that, and he said, "This is going to happen to me." So he tried to escape. And then finally, after so many years of doing all those kind of escape mechanisms, hard core, he said, "Wait a minute. I'm not getting anywhere. I'd better just sit down." Yes, there is some kind of way out, I think. But it has to go that way, you see.

Q: So you're saying sitting practice is the way to see it?

VR: Yes, that's what I'm saying, yes. [Laughter]

Q: Okay. Thank you.

VR: But not in itself. Not sitting practice in itself. If you believe in sitting practice as the way out, then you're going to have a really terrible time. It comes to every one of us that eventually we have to sit down. Sitting practice or not, that's just a name. The whole notion of sitting down with ourselves, finally. Okay?

Q: Okay.

VR: Well, we have to do it. Gentleman in front of you?

QUESTION: You used the phrase that at a certain point, we're at the mercy of coincidence. I wonder if you could say more about that, sir.

VR: Wait a minute. [Looking at his notes] Likewise, myself. [Groans]

Q: Right after the story of who you're going to be when you grow up, and we make our project-

VR: Well, that's not on here. That's not on here [referring to his notes; laughter]. Wait a minute, wait and minute. Hold on. Inescapable coincidence did you say?

Q: No, you used the phrase-

VR: That's what I said, didn't I?

Q: You used the phrase, we're at the mercy of coincidence and then we die and start again. We start with death, and end with death.

VR: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: And it winds up in a pregnancy that you can't get...

VR: Then it winds up in a birth.

Q: And so on.

VR: Yes. And then it winds up in death and yes.

Q: But the notion of karma seems like, and the nidanas seems to have a kind of logic, an inescapable logic to it, that you're trapped by, like pregnancy. Seems like you have to go through with it. But being at the mercy of coincidence seems to be a more helpless situation in way, also a more open situation in a way.

VR: Well, it could be. Could be.

Q: If you're really at the mercy of coincidence.

VR: No, not that. Come on, Stanley, that's kind of soupy. Not if you're really at the mercy of coincidence.

Q: Well, to use another phrase, we fail to see we live and die every moment. That seems to be close to the idea of being at the mercy of coincidence.

VR: Yes, yes, yes. "At the mercy of coincidence," means totally confused. Totally confused. Totally confused. So confused that it seems healthy. "I can buy yogurt and jog tomorrow morning. And then you know, I can go to the conference in San Diego. Things are going well." Then, "I can't do what I used to do. I'm forty years old, and the joints aren't, you know, I can't run the marathon any more." And then, further on, "My life is meaningless since I can't run the marathon." I mean, what are you talking about? I'm talking about, you know, kind of the inescapable quality of the coincidence of birth and death.

Q: What I'm trying to get at is the notion of coincidence doesn't really seem to have a compelling logic.

VR: Coincidence is accident.

Q: Oh.

VR: Yes, accident. That's just what I mean by one moment overlapping the next is purely accident. And we think that everything is okay. But it's so haphazard, just happened one after the other.

Q: Well, in relation to the idea of accident and haphazard, how does the notion of responsibility arise?

VR: Same way, just as an accident.

Q: And one takes the same attitude towards ...

VR: One usually does. You talking about real responsibility?

Q: No legal responsibilities, things like that...

VR: Legal?

Q: Paying your telephone bill and...

VR: Yes, yes, sure. You mean real responsibility. [Laughter]

Q: You bet, well, yes. Sure.

VR: I wouldn't bet on it. Yes, well, maybe we should just lie down on the street and die. Don't pay our bills, just let the water wash over us.

Q: That doesn't sound so good.

VR: No, the whole thing doesn't sound very good. Well, what do you mean by real responsibility, I mean, what's responsibility?

Q: Well, literally, I meant being involved, let us say, in a legal contract.

V: [Laughs]

Q: Where, you know, you have a certain deadline to meet-

VR: How did you get in there?

Q: Well, I blundered into it.

VR: Yes, really, that's the whole point of nidanas. We find ourselves in legal action. How in the world, why in the world should we be involved in legal action?

Q: Well, I mean, you open your mouth at the wrong time-

VR: Yes, and suddenly it happens.

Q: Yes. [Laughter; laughs]

VR: And you sign your name, and you got to pay. Yes.

Q: And that's coincidence at the same time.

VR: Sure it is.

Q: But the consequences are solid. Seem solid.

VR: Oh, no. Consequences are absolutely impermanent. Changeable, always. Consequences give rise to something else, you know. Like when you don't pay your alimony. Then there's another consequence, and then you skip off to Majorca, and then you meet a lovely lady there, and she has two children, and then... I mean, it just goes on, you know.

Q: Yes, I know. [Laughter]

VR: Yes, and that's life, you know. That's what we call life. Isn't it great?

[Laughter] It's terrific. We can just live, you know, just go along. Well, you see, there's no point in carrying the past. That's what we do. We carry it on our back, and that's how we create the future. I'm not saying everybody should just, you know, take off their clothes and roll on the floor. That's, you know, a kind of terrific thing that happens with certain great teachers around the world. They advocate people taking off their clothes and rolling on the floor, and then you are actually free, once and for all. You got rid of the past, which is your clothes, what about your skin and your bones and everything like that? Well, here we are.

QUESTION: I was wondering about the use of the word coincidence. It always struck me, and I always had some difficulty reconciling it with my original notion of the nidanas. The question is if it's purely coincidence or accidental, then how do you explain the definite pattern? There's always a definite pattern that follows the sequence.

VR: That's right. Well, coincidence means that the past and the future seem to arise together. They overlap from the point of view of hoping so much that we could continue this way. Why is that definite?

Q: Why is that accidental? Where is the accidental?

VR: Well, the whole thing started by accident, and it became so completely solidified it became Cecil B. DeMille: the greatest story ever told. [Laughter] Which is complete accident. Just like the Bible. Or any other bible you can think of.

Q: So it seems that within the chain that there isn't that sense of accidentalness, but actually the whole ground that that chain is on is accidental.

VR: No, no. Every stage is accidental.

Q: Well, why does it always follow that order if it's purely accidental?

VR: Who knows?

Q: I thought maybe you did.

VR: Nooo. Who knows? This big "why" in the sky. That's what we say, you know, "Why does it always happen this way? I know better, but why does it keep happening this way?" But it seems to keep happening this way, doesn't it? There seems to be a certain pattern of our repetition of ourselves, and it seems to be always the same. When you were a kid, when you were growing up, you're a little older, and still you do the same thing, you know. Seems to be rather definite. But why? Doesn't seem to be any reason for it. Is there any reason for it? Say, for instance, asking the question. I mean, honestly. If there is, let me know.

Q: Well, I guess you could say confusion.

VR: Yes, right. The basic reason is that I don't really know.

And getting back there. [Whispers] How do you pronounce that again?
[Referring to next questioner's name] Yatsik? Yatsik? I'm getting it.

QUESTION: Well, so we got it, and...

VR: What did we get?

Q: Well, karma. It's happening to us, we believe the whole thing.

VR: Really?

Q: Well, that's why it's happening to us, apparently, because we believe it.

VR: Okay, go ahead, go ahead. It's happening to us.

Q: What do we do with it, besides sitting and meditation in action?

VR: Eating and walking and...

Q: Yes.

VR: Well, the whole notion is it's happening to us. That's where the whole joke comes in and the whole sense of coincidence. Haphazard, inescapable coincidence...that's what we think. It's happening to us. It's not happening to us. We're doing it.

Q: I can understand that.

VR: Good!

Q: But...

VR: Then? [Laughs]

Q: Then, what do we do? Do we become monks...

VR: Well, then we stop doing it.

Q: And roll around the floor? I...

VR: Well, that would be continuing to do it.

Q: That would be continuing to do it...

VR: I don't mean stop doing it by doing anything, particularly. We just stop doing it.

Q: I guess I'm asking about the idea of having a karmic debt.

VR: Karmic debt? Well...

Q: You know. Whether there's something that lags over when we start sitting which keeps going on.

VR: No, no. There's something that does lag over for sure. Yes. There's past karma, previous life, there's that, for sure. Then there's current karma, then there's future karma...it's all the same thing, though, you see? It's all the same sense of volitional action of perpetuating the notion of "me". So whether you have past karma, present karma, future karma, we can actually cut through the whole thing by realizing that it's not happening to us, we are doing it. Every moment.

Q: So we realize it and then pay our bills? Or we just play with the whole thing somehow? [inaudible words]

VR: Which one would you like?

Q: I prefer playing.

VR: I think it's better to pay the bills.

Q: Thank you.

QUESTION: Sir, would you say samsara is nirvana?

VR: Sure, I could say that. [Laughter]

Q: Is samsara nirvana?

VR: Yes. So? Would you say that black is white?

Q: I think so.

VR: You would? Really? [Laughter] Hmmm.

Q: Not sure if I'd say that, but black could be white.

VR: Not could be... you asked me is samsara, nirvana. And I asked you is black white? Is black white?

Q: Is nirvana samsara?

VR: Yes. Is black white? Don't jump your gun, eh? Don't jump ahead of yourself. Don't be silly.

Q: Well, if samsara is nirvana-

VR: I don't want to play parlor games.

Q: Not at all. I'm just asking-

VR: Well, what's the difference if I say yes?

Q: Well, we're talking about the wheel of becoming, the process of becoming, and studying the whole ...

VR: Let's talk about black, okay? That's what I'm talking about the last three days...

Q: Emptiness, black...

VR: Black. You see, everybody would like to get, jump over to the other side. Get to the white part, or if you're on the white part, get to the black one. Whichever it is. Not so fast, please, not so fast. Don't let your mind jump ahead of itself. That's what always happens.

Q: Well, how much of this wheel of life can we actually see without...

VR: All of it. When you see all of it, then black becomes white and white becomes black, but if you don't see all of it, it's haphazard, you see. Always haphazard. You're always holding out something. And creating something further. I mean, we have to be honest about the whole thing. I mean, we can talk and talk and talk,

you know. Another ITS, another dathün, another nyinthun, another study group, another book to read, but unless you actually see through the whole thing, it's still...

Q: Once again, studying the wheel of life is understanding our patterns, how we relate to situations, ourselves. When you see this, what else is there but just doing that?

VR: Doing what?

Q: Any given situation, just dealing with it, who knows.

VR: When you see that, there's only one choice, that's to sit down and practice. There isn't any other choice at that point. It's so thick. That's why we do these seminars, the whole thing. I mean, it's just, you know, trying to talk to each other about it, you know, about how we do it. How we continue to do it. We don't want to do it, but somehow... so we talk about it. Look, we do it this way all the time, all the time, don't we? And everybody says, "Yes we do, yes we do." And then we say, "Well, is it so that ... is it...don't we really mean by... isn't it so that...?" Sure.

Samsara is nirvana.

Q: S & N.

VR: Well, pain in any case.

Well, ladies and gentlemen. I think we've come to the end of tonight's discussion, and thank you very much for your, again, your patience and fortitude. Such good Karma Dzong people, that managed to brave the warm weather [laughter] to come out here to our own beloved shrine hall and sit with each other and talk about these things, and talk about these things and natural good humor. Tomorrow's a nyinthun day. We should continue our humor tomorrow as well. As you begin to think about the ongoing result of your sense of who you are, you should smile a little bit, and just go out with the breath. Very simply, let it go out. Don't hold on to it, just let it go out. And when you think about it, just label it thinking, and then let it go. You see, I think probably people have tremendous trouble with that labeling process, and you don't quite understand what it's all about. So if I could tell you for a moment before you sit tomorrow. That labeling process means instant recognition of being awake. That's what you miss. When you actually label thoughts, "thinking", then you automatically come back to the breath. So if you don't label thoughts, "thinking", you sort of fuzz around. In thinking that you don't have to label thoughts, "thinking", because that's really kind of immature, and you know better than that because you've been practicing a long time. But really, the whole sense is that once you label thoughts, "thinking", you have immediate awake and sense of out. That's what the whole process is all about, that labeling process. It's kind of the thing you would like to do if you could imagine that you were awake all the time. So please practice it that way. It's just like learning to walk. It's very simple.

And as far as the breath goes, please, you don't have to do anything about your breath, it's not even yours, it's just breath. As far as out goes, how far does out go? It goes as far as it goes, then it dissolves.

So practice that way tomorrow, okay? Let's not give in to the perpetual nonsense. Even when you sit, the nonsense of believing in your self as a practitioner, as a human being, as Mr. So and So, as Miss So and So, Mrs. So and

So, as nine to ten, or two to five, as dinner. You know, you believe in yourself as dinner while you're sitting, you know that. [Laughter] You believe in yourself as tomorrow, you believe in yourself as what you're wearing and whether your knees hurt or not. All of that is sense of belief. Do you see? Just let the whole thing go, let it dissolve, let it disperse in space. Comes back. Why? No why; it just comes back. You didn't tell it to come back. You don't have any vote in the whole thing. Just comes back, goes out again. Very simple, straightforward. If you start to think, "thinking", back. You see? "Thinking", out, dissolve. So just do that tomorrow, okay? Everybody.

We waited a long time for the dharma, and it's worth it, every moment of it. Good night, everybody.