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The Lonely Journey: Devotion in the Kagyü Lineage
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VAJRA REGENT:

Continuing our discussion. We were talking about need and feeling incomplete, not whole, missing something, and that experience of pain. Now when we talk about pain, we should be quite clear that we're not simply looking at it in terms of physical pain, but obviously, psychological pain. So there is a process which we go through of trying to locate, identify, some greater, either greater person, greater philosophy, greater situation, so we can feel better, some journey, some kind of search, looking for that object of devotion. We feel lesser. There must be something greater. So having explored our world in terms of what is greater, physically and psychologically, we come to what is spiritually greater, simply because we have not been satisfied with either a physical pleasure or psychological pleasure. So we come to this kind of speculative thing called "spirituality," and the subject of devotion is very central to that theme of spirituality.

The general approach of the theists is that we, as wretched little human beings, are by nature incomplete, and therefore we must unite ourselves with Big Daddy or Mommy, as the case may be. That there is some whole, complete being, or if not being, then principle, which we are separate from, and the only possible way we could achieve that totality is to be sucked up, immersed, [illegible word: diluted?] into the big "we." That is our alternative, to make ourselves stupid, to ignore our intelligence and just be a drop in the big ocean. "Once I drop my drop into the ocean, then everything's going to be okay. I'll merge with the great, mystic, wonderful cosmic 'me,' 'it,' whatever." This attitude, according to the Buddhist approach, is the creation of and sustaining factor of confusion. Basically, what we're trying to do is to dump our garbage on somebody else's lawn, get rid of our mistakes on somebody else. Even though we might feel good for a time, we might actually convince ourselves that there's absolutely nothing wrong with that, that's what we actually should do. Let's not worry about this negativity and feeling of uncertainty, feeling of pain. If dump it all into the big garbage heap, then we're free of it. [Singing:] "I am a bubble, Make me the [inaudible] ... [Laughter]

So we have to think of ourselves as a bubble. Isn't that degrading? I mean, not only degrading, but somewhat ridiculous. What we actually do is to create some sense of bubble because we're frightened of not surviving. So if we say: "I'm a bubble," that makes me something, so therefore it's possible to merge into the great ocean of cosmic bliss. True devotion. Hardly, at least from our point of view. Why does that attitude create further confusion? If we feel like a bubble, then we should endeavor to get ourselves into

the ocean. In doing so, we create the world of passion and aggression. Passion meaning that at all costs, including my intelligence, I'll throw myself into that ocean because after all, my intelligence is simply an illusion, or intelligence itself is an illusion. There's just the great cosmic One. In doing so, I must actually ward off, push off, any kind of threat to that dropping into the ocean, to my path of getting closer to the One. From those two attitudes, passion and aggression, we have our entire, complicated world of suffering and pain. This is the common attitude of devotion. So what happens if we have aggression? Oh, that's okay, it's merely, purely divine play. If I'm actually aggressive to somebody, that's his doing, or hers, not mine, so I don't have anything to say about that. Just let the divine work through me.

Passion and aggression, continual patterns, continual patterns of avoiding who we are as we are, which is called ignorance, ignoring the basic situation. Which is what? We don't know. We would like to be devoted to something, but we have no idea what that means. We just feel anxiety. Ignorance, or ignoring the basic situation, is the root of confusion. Not actually being able to look at our state of mind as it is, without any filter whatsoever, without any image, any pie-in-the-sky image of who we should be, who we can be. Rather who are we? Ignorance. What are we ignoring? According to the Buddhist teachings, we are ignoring the facts, and the basic fact is that there's no such thing as "you." "You" is made up of a series of events, strung together very rapidly, which creates some sort of hope and fear, cycle of hope and fear, hoping that we will be eternally who we are, fear that we won't. So if I merge myself with the great eternal one, then I too, I will be eternal as well, then I won't have to worry. According to the Buddhist teachings, this is what is called the "ego." The idea that such a thing as a permanent self which continues throughout eternity. From the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, there is no such thing. Egolessness. That's the basic state of who we are.

In talking about the path of devotion, we should understand at this point that it is impossible to begin perfectly. Somehow we seem to believe in something. No matter how fine you feel your intellectual approach is, or how deeply in tune you are with your body, how generous you are with your world, we have some subtle belief which is based on nothing at all. It's what we call "a mistake." When did we begin to believe that we are so-and so? If you try to find that point, you can't find it. You look and find the first moment when you recognized that you were John Doe. Belief. If we are about to practice the path of devotion, we should understand at the beginning of our journey that real devotion has no sense of self at all whatsoever. Real devotion, true devotion, has no sense of cure or betterment or reaching for the highest at all. Real devotion is the state of things as they are, without corruption, without filter of any kind. Awareness of things as they are. But again, we have to start with our belief. We would absolutely like to jump the whole cycle and say: "Well, yes, I understand that. Just drop it." Good luck. We have to take this belief and use it to uncover itself. We have to use ignorance, passion and aggression in order to come to experience of things as they are. Garbage is garb age. It is not beautiful. In our world, it's garbage, it stinks, and it's thrown somewhere else. What we are suggesting in terms of our practice of devotion is not to throw it anywhere, but that garbage and beauty can be together in a true, honest look at the world.

How to do that is very simple. First of all, just hearing about it is a beginning. Second, think about it. Think about habitual patterns and how they create confusion again and again. Third, meditate in the simple, uncomplicated way, not with a sense of betterment, not with a sense of being the most devoted person, the expert, but rather, just sit and see how it is. Is there any origin to this feeling of pain? Is there any origin to feeling a lack of something or other, we don't know what it is? What's the origin of that? Buddhist would say that this ego, what we call "ego," never happened at all, it's purely our mistake. If that's the case, who is going to be devoted to whom? That's a very basic point in our journey together. Let's look at that. Who is devoted to whom? If we think of devotion in terms of a dumping process, then

we are merely creating pollution on pollution on pollution. Who is devoted to whom? Let's first find out the "who." Who is feeling this sense of separate, sense of incomplete, sense of lacking something? Without that experience of egoless[ness], there is absolutely no point in talking about devotion. It just becomes another grand scheme which results in uncertainty at best.

If you have any questions, we could have a discussion.

QUESTION: In the first part of your talk you seem to be equating, to use the terminology, spiritual materialism, you seem to be equating theism with spiritual materialism.

VAJRA REGENT: That's correct.

Q: Absolutely?

VR: I think so.

Q: Which is to say what? There are no theists that aren't spiritual materialists?

VR: If they call themselves theists, they are.

QUESTION: So what if we have experienced this egolessness occasionally, what then? What kind of dialogue can take place, what kind of relationship?

VR: All kinds. Tremendous possibility.

Q: It seems so.

VR: Tremendous possibility, as long as we continue in terms of practice. See what I mean?

Egolessness might be a shock, but our basic practice is to lean into that shock, find out exactly what that is, if that's possible. What?

Q: What?

VR: Exactly. What? What? No conclusion.

Q: It doesn't seem to be a conclusion, but yet, there –

VR: Yes, well, we come along with that. Yes. That's very good, extremely good. That's basically what we have. We have what, big what, and then [sighs] some palpitation, some outbreath, whew. So what to do with that? Practice. Sit down. Don't try and change it. Don't do anything with it. Don't manipulate it. Just feel the sense of "aha." What?

Q: Just keep doing it, and when that shock happens and you go – just keep doing it?

VR: Yes, just keep doing it. That's what makes it non-goal-oriented. In true devotion, you just keep doing it, including the shock, including the garbage, including the fear. You see, to do that, you have to somehow have some sense of confidence, otherwise you wouldn't do it at all, you would say: "Take me, oh great one." [Laughter] "I am just a little flute. Play me." [Laughter]

QUESTION: To go back to the question of theism.

VR: Hello there. Here we are again.

Q: Is there no way that a Christian, a Jew, or a Hindu could be enlightened, and do we as Buddhists have a spiritual monopoly?

VR: Who do you mean, "we"? [Laughter] Buddhists?

Q: The Buddhists, yes.

VR: What's a Buddhist? Well, let's make it rhetorical or non-rhetorical, any way you want to do it. What's a Buddhist?

Q: Basically, what I'm saying is that I tend to feel a little uneasy about the kind of mockery or condescension that goes towards these other disciplines, which maybe have something we could respect.

VR: This is not condescension. Absolutely not. Respect what you want. Find out. I want to talk about what I know.

QUESTION: I've wondered about this question for a while. All the good Buddhist teachers seem to lay the groundwork that egolessness is the case, and then, to prime this, they say we must find out who we are. Those are the words used. In that sense it almost presumes that there will be a "who" at the other end, which sounds like primal therapy, or "Yes, I'm really going to discover who I really am and why I wet my bed, and I'm really going to discover who I am." Of course, whether we know or we don't know, what we're taught is we're going to find nonego at the other end.

VR: Undoubtedly.

Q: So I always have wondered –

VR: Who the "who" is?

Q: No, no. Why the question isn't asked or proposed that we'll find out what we aren't, or who we aren't.

VR: Well, let's not get too technical. Our basic point is "who," in any case.

Q: Well, if nonego is the truth of the matter, what is a "who"?

VR: That's the point. [Laughter]

Q: Okay.

VR: But we have to start from somewhere.

Q: Well, would you say, can you say anything about that "who"?

VR: Not at all. [Laughter] Just that it's a question: Who?

QUESTION: You've been talking about lack and need, basic lack and need, and then tonight you were discussing conventional devotion, which is a dumping process, throwing out. Is it possible that that lack or need is created because we throw it out, but that actually what we need is what we are throwing out? Is that what you're saying?

VR: Something like that. The point is that what we have been conditioned to think from beginningless time – nobody can figure out when it started, nobody here – but somehow we believe that we should get rid of something or other, and then it will be okay. What we're talking about in the practice of meditation is to collect what you have and sit with it, look at it.

Q: I think I know what you mean, but I wish you could clarify just a little bit. You made the statement that ego is a mistake.

VR: What did I say?

Q: You said that ego was a mistake. Could you just clarify that a little bit more?

VR: Mmm. We somehow had an echo, which we thought was something other, and got frightened and then tried to protect against that echo, which is our own echo in any case. Would you like to know anything else? I'm full of answer tonight.

Q: I think it's similar to what the other guy was saying about the "who."

VR: I can't hear you.

Q: It's similar to what – I think it was one of the first questions about "who" –

VR: How did the "who" come to be?

Q: No, that's not what I was going to ask. It's –

VR: What is it exactly? Give me exactly the question, okay?

Q: How do you deal with when you're into the situation of dealing with the egolessness, that I don't exist – I think I've asked this before [laughs] –

VR: [Laughs] Yes, we all have.

Q: – there tends to be a real sort of lax attitude, or you sort of get very lethargic –

VR: Yes, Wait until we stop. Stop. You've gone too far. How do we deal with the fact of dealing with egolessness? Well, egolessness is no dealing at all.

Q: Okay. I can make the question better.

VR: Okay. Let's start again.

Q: I don't exist, supposedly. There is no ego –

VR: What do you mean, “supposedly”?

Q: Okay. I don't exist. I –

VR: You don't.

Q: Which is – right.

VR: You're saying that, right?

Q: I'm saying it.

VR: You –

Q: Me.

VR: – are saying that you don't exist. [Laughter]

Q: Right. Yet we have to continue.

VR: Yet. Yet we have to continue – what? [Laughter]

Q: I'm trying to say it.

VR: Please do.

Q: Okay. Yet we still have to continue throughout our daily lives, doing what we do, whether it be looking for a job or making some kind of –

VR: Wait a minute. I have to interrupt because somehow I'm trying to understand little bits and pieces of things. “Yet, we have to continue throughout our daily lives.” What's stopping us?

Q: The battle of ego, I suppose you could say.

VR: What's stopping us from continuing? We're going to die, sure. We could take a lot of health food, vitamins, whatnot, and try and live for longer, but we're going to die. So we have to continue with our daily lives, you say, we have to continue. What's stopping us?

Q: What I'm saying is that it seems to be really tricky, and that on one hand, the acknowledgment of, you know, that there is no “I” or “me” or anything –

VR: Who acknowledges that?

Q: Oh, no! [Laughter] It's sort of on an intellectual level, I would say, on an intellectual level, the acknowledgment.

VR: Yes, but what we're talking about is the experience, you know. Experience doesn't mean watcher, particularly, somebody to remember that there's no “I,” “me.” It's some sense of constant awareness without reference point of me. So if we're trying to approach it from the back door, saying, “How am I going to continue?” we're not going to continue it at all. We're going to be frustrated every inch of the way. Turn it around completely, switch your mind completely. Do that, and have real devotion. Can't do it just like that. If you can, okay, no problem, no problem at all. Just like that. There is no problem. Maybe. Okay, so we get continuing, or how do we continue our daily life –

Q: Well, there's just the tendency to become so, I think, engrossed in thinking that way that, you know, when your habitual patterns are coming up, and you're seeing that, and seeing the transparency of it, to, I think, take it a little bit too far.

VR: How?

Q: So then there's – that's why I say it becomes very lethargic, and that at one point, you're feeling the egolessness of it, and yet you're trying to also keep pushing and just go through the daily whatever you do every day, and it becomes very tricky.

VR: Yes, yes.

Q: Almost to what's the point of continuing doing these different things, like, for instance, dealing with the ambition you might have in a career of some sort.

VR: That's great.

Q: That's what I'm basically talking about.

VR: That's great. That's exactly what we're talking about tonight, that every time this point sticks up, basically, we always feel a sense of gap, all of us, doesn't matter how long it lasts or how frequent it is,

but there's some transition between "this" and "that." And then something sticks its head up, experience of some kind, and we say, "Well, that's what to deal with, latch on to." That's right, that's basically what we're trying to do in terms of the practice of devotion. In devotion, we're not talking about that as soon as something comes up, we have to grab it, particularly. We don't have to grab it. That's a very subtle and very real experience all the time. We have some space where nonego is absolutely revealed as it is, and we can't do anything about it. There's no "us" to do anything about it at all, just space, and then something pops up. I'm not talking about how long you can measure between "this" and "that." It's very fast sometimes, very fast. Then something pops up, and you say, "Let me grab it. This is –." The point here is, in the practice of the path of devotion, we just leave our hands off. Let it be there. Dealing with the world, continuous, habitual patterns, let them be there. Real devotion does not have any sense of self.

QUESTION: You were talking before of taking belief and allowing it to uncover itself, and in an earlier lecture, you were talking about ego and having ego build the snare for itself to bring itself down. And we talk about ego is such a powerful force that it takes everything in the world and pulls everything into it to make into itself, it's such a strong fortress. How do you con such a powerful general into destroying itself?

VR: Very simple: the practice of meditation.

Q: I was afraid you were going to say that. [Laughter]

VR: It's the most simple, direct and uncomplicated approach, which drives any kind of sense of confusion crazy. [Laughter] There's nothing to do at all. I'm just going to sit here and breathe. [Laughter] What's he going to do with that? Nothing. Everything. Brrrrm, brrmm, brrmm.

Q: Thank you.

VR: Our dream's come true, huh?

QUESTION: You said something in your response a couple of questions back about – I think you said something about devotion taking care of itself. Does that ring a bell?

VR: I said something like that?

Q: You might have. Okay. Given that [laughter] – if you'll go that far with me –

VR: Sure, okay, let's do it.

Q: Okay. [Laughter] Is there any point then in kind of playing at devotion, in the sense that when we start meditating, we pretend we're meditating. Is that how we start working with devotion, by just kind of acting devoted and feeling like total idiots? [Laughter]

VR: Aha! Two points: acting devoted, and feeling like total idiots. If you can do both, fine. [Laughter] That's real devotion coming through. But basically, what people do is act devoted and dump the garbage on the side, which is feeling like total idiots. Yes, if you're going to be devoted, you're going to be devoted with your whole trip, you know, whatever it is, whether you're the best or the worst, or mediocre or aspiring, or less than mediocre, or whatever you think of yourself. Put the whole thing. So?

Q: I'm unclear about the idiocy issue. [Laughter]

VR: Why?

Q: I just – well, you were just saying if you've got both, okay. I don't – could you clarify that again?

VR: Yes, sure. Basically, what the approach is always, is that the idiocy issue should be shoved in the back somewhere so we can present ourselves as the devoted one. But what we're saying here is that you can't really shove it in the back at all, because out it comes, and you bend over and it falls out of your pocket. [Laughter] Plop. [Laughter] It doesn't matter who's on the other side at that point.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

QUESTION: Why does the theistic approach necessarily have to be spiritually materialistic?

VR: Because you have “this,” right, which is the little, stupid one, and you have “that,” which is the greater one. “If I can get rid of this stupid thing, then “that” would love to eat me up.” It’s purely silly talk, you know. I mean, it’s just silly talk. Where’s you god here? If somebody says –anybody – “I don’t believe in your divine principle,” then what happens? You say, “What? You don’t? You silly –,” and therefore we begin our little cycle of war and confusion and the whole thing.

Q: Why is that necessarily so?

VR: I really don’t know. It seems to me that it’s a silly idea to begin with. [Laughter] I mean, really. If you believe in some sense of divinity all around you and flowers and whatnot, and heavens, fine. So what? Have a good time with your world. But somehow, we start to lay that trip on other people. You can’t help it. Somebody comes up and says, “Well, I didn’t feel that.” You say, “You didn’t? Well, come along here with me, son. You tell me when it doesn’t happen.” Like the missionaries in Hawaii. You know what they did? They came to do good, and they did well. [Laughter; applause] I read that once in a book [laughter] when I was in Hawaii. I read it in a book. Anyway, it doesn’t mean anything. [Laughter] That’s the point, that’s the whole point. You go to do good, and you do well for yourself. Who cares? And you have so many converts, four hundred converts into how you think. Great. I don’t want any of you to think like me, absolutely not. I particularly like the way I think, you know, by myself. Just let me think by myself, okay?

Q: I can see how historically in many ways the type of things that you’re saying are true. I just question whether necessarily that have to be true.

VR: Necessarily, they don’t have to be true. As long as we don’t believe in anything, fine. [Laughter] Then they don’t have to be true at all.

There seems to be somebody raising her hand way back there, which seems very interesting. Oh, there’s somebody getting up, which seems also interesting. Hello, there.

QUESTION: You made the statement that real devotion equals no sense of self.

VR: Yes.

Q: Okay, if there’s no sense of self, and you also made the statement that there’s no cure.

VR: You looking at me over there, or – hello? [Questioner is looking at the video monitor]

Q: I’m just sort of being pulled this way, actually.

VR: How sweet. Come over here. [Directing questioner to look at him]

Q: Okay.

VR: Good, No sense of self?

Q: Yes, no sense of self, and there’s also no cure, or no betterment, why be Buddhist at all?

VR: Why do we do it?

Q: Why do you become Buddhist? There’s no cure, there’s no betterment, there’s no self, why can’t we just go off and do whatever trip we’re involved in? Why become Buddhist?

VR: That’s all we do. [Laughter] That’s what we do, anyway. That’s what Buddhism’s all about, It’s saying, “Hey, that’s what you do.”

Q: But there’s a whole organization here.

VR: You’re tremendous. [Laughter] Directors, sub-directors, administrators, lower administrators, accountants, and student fund raisers and student liaison, and the whole thing, and here we are anyway. [Laughter] So what?

Q: That’s what I’m asking, so what?

VR: That’s what I’m saying. [Laughter]

Q: So it doesn’t make any difference if I’m here or not. Yes, you’re right, I suppose so.

VR: Except you happen to be here. So here we are. You, Naropa Institute student, me, co-called teacher, and here we are, asking our little thing together. This and that, question, answer, in a big space. Plenty of room for all the hierarchy you could possibly imagine.

Q: What is the purpose of all this lineage, then, for 2500 years, all the teachings?

VR: It's just a simple purpose, to say, "Hello, are you there?" [Laughter]

Q: Well, in a relative sense I'm here, in absolute sense, I'm not.

VR: What do you mean "absolute"? Absolute, then we don't have anything to say. Relative, you say "Hello." [Laughter] That's fine, here we are. Relative sense makes Naropa Institute, eight billion courses, six billion teachers, six hundred billion deficit [laughter], and here we are, rubbing our hands together in this world, with devotion, which has nothing to do with how hot it gets when we rub, we just rub.

Q: Then there's devotion to nothing.

VR: Well, I suppose you could say there's devotion to nothing, but that's no real devotion. We could say devotion is nothing.

Q: I don't feel like the question's been answered, actually.

VR: What's the question?

Q: The question is, if there's no sense of doing anything for oneself, no sense of betterment because there's no self anyway, why do people take on the path?

VR: Because they're confused.

Q: And Buddhism alleviates the confusion? Or creates more of it?

VR: What do you say?

Q: Creates more of it.

VR: If it creates more of it, then if it creates enough of it, then hopefully, it will explode in your face, which is the best, most compassionate, gentle thing anybody could do. Instead of keeping the game going of who we are and what great schemes we have until we drop dead.

Q: So Buddhism exposes the games?

VR: You trying to trick me?

Q: No, I'm not, sir.

VR: Well, then, you find out for yourself.

Q: Okay, thank you.

VR: Chicago? Does it say "Chicago"? What does it say? [Trying to read what is printed on the questioner's shirt] Curacao, on very good. Okay, let's see what happens in Curacao.

QUESTION: You mention that some people chose to unite with the Big Daddy, drop everything and merge. [Laughter] If you have –

VR: Yes, I think I said that, yes. [Laughter] Verbatim.

Q: If you're this type of person, or you have this element in you, is it better not to take on a guru, since the guru situation is most likely to bring out the big daddy merger in you? [Laughter]

VR: Let's try to find out what our stock is worth before we get into the merger. [Laughter]

Q: Let me just think about that for a second before – [Laughter]

VR: Time's up. [Laughter] Anybody else?

QUESTION: You discussed the sense of confidence before. Does that come from the knowledge of that there's no problem?

VR: No, that comes from the knowledge that there's tremendous problem. That's where confidence comes from. When you see the suffering, then you have confidence.

Q: What's to prevent that confidence to be ego-rudra, or "I'm going to save the world"?

VR: Nothing. It can happen any old time.

Q: Then why cultivate the confidence?

VR: Who said anything about that?

Q: You were discussing confidence earlier, as far as –

VR: Something that happens. I wouldn't cultivate it, particularly. If you recognize it, then there it is.

Q: Thank you.

QUESTION: There's often talk about being a carrot in the big soup.

VR: Yes, celery, carrot, potato.

Q: How does that differ –

VR: *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism?* [Referencing the book by VCTR]

Q: Yes. How does that differ from being a drop in the big ocean?

VR: How does it differ? It differs in one sense, that in the sense of drop in the big ocean, we feel great as we submerged. In the sense of a carrot, somebody hits you down with a stick, shouts, "Shut up"! Get back in the stew." [Laughter]

Q: At that point, where is dignity?

VR: Dignity is going down for the third time. [Laughter; applause]

QUESTION: I've been trying to make a connection between what you've been saying tonight and some of the readings you assigned to us, specifically the reading in [*The Life and Teachings of*] Naropa, and I was thinking that when Naropa was looking for the guru, and he had something very special in mind, and he tripped over this dog that had all these maggots in it, what came to mind is fifty thousand dollars is a maggot-infested dog.

VR: That's what came to your mind?

Q: Yes.

VR: Well, in that case, you should trip over it. [Laughter] Don't try and jump over it. Connect with it. Connect with your maggot-infested trip. Trip. Yes. Naropa didn't particularly get away from any of those experiences, did he? According to the text, he got it like a pie in the face. So is fifty thousand dollars worth of pie of maggots in Naropa Institute's face, wherever Naropa Institute is. Is it here in the Sacred Heart [School], or is it in your mind?

Q: That's very well put, actually.

VR: Not bad. [Laughter]

Q: Thank you.

VR: Well, ladies and gentlemen, I can't resist. Up on the top. When it comes from the top, how can you resist?

QUESTION: You spoke earlier this evening about an object of devotion, implying that there was a devotion to something –

VR: That's right.

Q: – and my question is that if there is in fact a devotion to something, doesn't that create the same duality that we're trying to avoid?

VR: Well, the point, simply speaking, is that we should recognize the duality that already is. [Laughter]

Q: All right, I'll try.

VR: Okay, you do that. So will I.

Well, with all of us trying people, there's not much more to say tonight. We have until next Tuesday, which makes me very lonely, that we come together again and – carrots, onions, celery, whatever, swimming around. The point is that we're swimming around together in a boiling pot, and we stick our heads up as if somebody was pushing us down. No such luck. Don't hold on to that. There's nobody with

a big wooden spoon. Just the fluctuation of the water and the temperature. See you next Tuesday. Thank you.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]