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The Lonely Journey: Devotion in the Kagyü Lineage

Naropa Institute

Talk 4 of 9

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VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN:

We are embarking on the path of devotion having studied and looked into the ground work, the basis for our particular journey. We have discussed goal, in this case the wearing out of expectations. But it's necessary at this point to talk about practical things. We have looked, contemplated, seen what our situation is, but we have to begin walking along on the path. This particular path of devotion, the jewel of the Kagyü teachings, the precious gem of the Kagyü teaching, is a long and arduous path as we have seen and as we ourselves are beginning to experience, and as I myself have been taught, and which I speak about is the path which has been handed down and practiced by journeyers for 2,500 years.

In the Kagyü teaching we talk about the three-yana approach, or three-yana path. Yana means vehicle. And we are unique in that sense, and we are extremely stubborn as well, and we are not about, at this point, because we are in the USA, 1977, to cop out in terms of goodies and candies. We present what has been presented and what has been experienced. In terms of the three yanas, the first being Hinayana, is the path of discipline and renunciation, the second, Mahayana, the path of compassion and meditation in action, and the third, Vajrayana, the path of accomplishment, attainment. Everybody would like to jump the gun. Every student would like to get to the end at the beginning. And because of that, we have the burning questions, in terms of the path of devotion is, "How can I possibly get to see this guru in person? There's so many people, hundred and thousands of them. I'll never get to see him, her. How is it possible that I could reach this person? It's impossible. You're proposing something which is absurd. There are 400, 500, 6,000, 10,000 people."

There's a basic problem here if we're talking about the path of devotion. Path of devotion is not interested in what we can get for ourselves, but rather completely surrendering to the guru's world, completely surrendering to the environment of devotion. This is no small task. Nobody expects, at least nobody on this side of the fence, expects a student to be completely open and surrendered all at once. As we said. We brought our baggage along, our neurosis along, and the key, the heavy weight in that bag is "what can I get for myself?" The path of devotion has nothing whatsoever to do with that.

Students, to begin with, have a lot of funny ideas about how they can attain omniscience. They are very astute intellectual people who love to pick and choose, who love to walk down the aisles of the supermarket, seeing which brand is on sale, or which brand is new, unique, which guru has the best techniques, which guru can actually deliver what I want. I have the absolute freedom to just walk down the aisle and pick and choose which is the most delightful looking one, which one creates the most

ecstatic vibration. Some students would like to possess the guru, the teachings, because those teachings are really well known. They've been in the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *Whole Earth Catalogue*. (Laughter) Very famous. "If I could possess that, then I would be one of those famous people, enshrined in the *Whole Earth Catalogue* as the disciple of so-and-so. Maybe we can actually steal the teaching, run in very quickly, take it, get out. Five weeks at Naropa Institute. Good deal. We got the 2500 year-old teachings in five weeks. Oh, maybe this guru person, this teacher, should understand that I have studied very hard before I came here and have read a lot of books and studied under so-and-so and so-and-so, and therefore I shouldn't have to do any fetching. I've got enough qualifications already. Look around. Some of these people, they have never meditated, never done anything before, but I have done the whole lot. I have been recognized. I should get the first seat."

So many ways of continuing our sense of security, our own territory, whether it's possessing or shopping or what. Basically what we're involved with is some sort of clinging to our own perceptions, to our personal idea of how things should be. This is not the path of devotion. No matter how we try, there is no way that the guru or the teacher is going to be possessed, is going to second our projections. In fact, quite the opposite can occur and does occur. When you try, the teacher, the guru, becomes much larger than our projections, terrifyingly so, impossible to find, can't get an interview, impossible to hold on to, not nice. As far as ego's territory is concerned, the guru will never be nice.

So we begin to walk this journey. How? Not by recognizing the guru as a fantastic celestial being who can fulfill all our dreams, not by putting the teacher on a pedestal and becoming a devotional maniac, but simply by recognizing that we are in a tight spot and in trouble, that we are in need of treatment. Just like a chronic illness, we've been carting around this mess of confusion, samsara. The real student who walks on the path of devotion feels tremendous need to have the physician prescribe the right medicine right now. It has nothing to do with what we look like or what we're going to be. It's very critical right now. Where are we? What are we doing? Sense of being sick, not in the sense of putting ourselves down but just actually recognizing confusion and, quite honestly, not knowing how to get out of it. This is the beginning student, the Hinayana student, who looks for the medicine, tired of shopping, wants the medicine right now, and he or she approaches the Hinayana teacher, the guru in the Hinayana form, and that teacher prescribes the medicine. And that medicine is the practice of meditation, and that diagnosis is ignorance, ignorance of things as they are. We don't have to think about whether or not this is the right specialist and this is the greatest medicine, and whether or not it's renowned in one *Time* magazine article or another, but simply has said that this is the proper medicine to undo the ignorance and confusion of passion and aggression, sitting practice of meditation, and has done so, this particular physician, without fanfare and with confidence that it has been done before.

How to proceed. What type of devotion, to begin with, is described as devotion to the three jewels, devotion to the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha? To begin with, devotion to the Buddha is very simple, that a human being like ourselves who felt exactly the same confusion and exactly the same sense of being out of synch, took the medicine, the medicine of sitting meditation, and took it by himself, sat down by himself and achieved enlightenment, without need for fanfare, without need for confirmation by whomever, but did it absolutely like a rock, by himself, This is devotion to example.

The second form of devotion at this point is devotion to the dharma as path. Path as we have discussed it, not kicking your neurosis out the door, saying, "This is evil, bad stuff. Get rid of it," but rather commitment to work with what is, commitment to actually be alone, by oneself, with one's own preconceptions, expectations, whatever, and work with those in the practice of meditation.

And the third is devotion to the sangha. Taking refuge in the sangha means some sense of inspiration that other people are also doing so, people in the same boat, that it is possible to stand alone, to sit by oneself. It is possible to not keep running from here to there and back again in terms of “Am I? Am I not? Should I? Should I not? Will I? Won’t I? When will I?” Taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha has nothing to do with security in the usual sense. It is security in knowing that this journey we are embarking on is a journey into no-man’s land, is a journey which has no promises and therefore it is straightforward, without deception. It is a journey which only we can do, walk on, ourselves.

So the attitude of devotion is a matter of practicality to begin with, not a matter of philosophy or analyzing or recognition or signing on the dotted line. It’s a matter of practicality. We have this situation, and we have some medicine. We should take it and see what happens.

Any questions:

QUESTION: The first question that comes after hearing the statement “You have to join the guru’s world,” is “Who is the guru?” And you ask people around you, and you find out all these different interpretations. They say this and they say this, and ultimately you wind up with thousands of different interpretations, and your own mind, your own ideas, and maybe one’s own direction is just to sit. And it feels like that’s the only thing you can rely on, or is there anything else?

VAJRA REGENT: Well, the guru at this point is the Buddha, dharma and sangha. The Buddha meaning innate intelligence, awake. The dharma meaning the practice, uncovering awake. And the sangha meaning the company of those people who are doing so.

QUESTION: I’m a little unclear as to when standing on your own feet is being part of the sangha or being a pratyekabuddha. Would you talk about that?

VR: Well, the point is to actually find out how to stand on your own feet first, rather than wondering about pratyekabuddha or whatever. How is it that we stand on our own feet?

Q: By sitting?

VR: Well, that’s what’s suggested. That’s the suggestion.

Q: Doesn’t seem to be much else to do, though.

VR: Well, you’d be surprised how many things come up, how many possibilities there seem to be. But the suggestion is to sit, not particularly to worry about at this point whether or not we are on the right track or the wrong track, or whether or not we’re becoming pratyekabuddha or Buddha himself, but just to sit. Some sense of basic health and sanity, that if we feel sick, we look for some medicine, not in the sense of medicine being celestial medicine, but just a very practical one, human medicine.

Q: Human medicine, what do you mean?

VR: I mean your mind, your thoughts, your emotions, your body, your world. And the prescription is to sit with all of that. Don’t try and get away from it, but actually look at it, see what it is. Be with it one hundred percent. That’s human medicine. Has nothing to do with divine or hellish or anything like that. Just what we are right now.

QUESTION: Ösel.

VR: Yes.

Q: I’ve been sitting, and through that I’ve been realizing the meaning of things as pain and impermanence and egolessness and whatever, and it just leaves me just there, just alone, kind of, and I want to know what I am getting myself into.

VR: Yes, that’s a very good question. We’ll talk more about that as we go along. Not so much that I have the answer to what you’re getting into, but together, in that particular frame of mind, which is the

same basically we all have that state of mind: What next? What are we getting into? Together we can have some sort of communication about that. In other words, we don't know. That's the whole point. It's not necessary that we second guess everything. That's what got us here to begin with. So we're going to take it from square one, hopefully, that's what we'll do here. Square one: we don't know. We're not particularly qualified to have a crystal ball and forecast the future. But with some sense of renunciation of that. Renunciation is very simple. It's not selling your guitar or actually giving away your guitar and your favorite shirt, that little thing that so-and-so gave me ten years ago. It has nothing to do with it. Nothing at all. Renunciation is simply that we don't know. And discipline is sticking with that, sitting with that sense of openness, sense of shakiness. We don't have to be great soldiers in terms of marching out with our certainty at this point. "Nothing can stop us now." Hardly. Anything could. Anything might. We could walk out of here, get hit by a car – psst – there goes the great search [laughter]. Feeling tenuous, inquisitive, that's the Buddhist sense of courage, not marching out with our "Right is right, and I am what I am." The world could care less. We might make a big stink for a while, but –. So some sense of a tenuous quality in practice, of real open-minded sense of looking at what's there. That's how we go along. Is that depressing?

Q: Yes, it is.

VR: We have a lot of old habits. Tremendous accumulation of thinking A plus B equals C plus D equals blah, blah, blah. And here, whew! Not quite. A plus B equals C is totally our imagination at this point, totally our imagination. So that sense of being slightly frightened, afraid to proceed, on the other hand, not knowing what else to do, is an ideal state.

Q: Is another of way of seeing things as they are through drinking?

VR: Through drinking? [Laughter] You tell me.

Q: I don't know. I haven't had the experience yet. I don't know if it fogs your brain or clears your brain. I've been told both.

VR: Well, anything you do fogs your brain and clears it, alternately. Eat food – eat too much, fog. Eat little, fog, eat too much, clear. Eat too much, fog. Anything, anything that all that happens in our life.

Relationship: love too much, fog. Love too little, clear. Vice versa. Sitting: think too much, think too little.

Technique: I'm doing good. I missed it, I'm losing it. [Laughter] It's a very personal journey. There's no particular formula that way. But it has been expressed by the teachers of the past up to the present that sitting practice is very good, and indeed has less reference point than anything else we could do. It has just basically one reference point: enlightenment. Which we have no idea what that is, which is the best reference point of all, since we can't figure it out.

QUESTION: I'd like to know what your definition of aggression is.

VR: Well, it's trying to push away anything that threatens our sense of identity.

Q: Do you see Naropa as being aggressive in any way?

VR: Naropa who? The Institute?

Q: The institution, yes.

VR: As aggressive?

Q: Yes.

VR: Well, I see Naropa Institute as passion, aggression and ignorance all thrown into one big soup [laughter] with the cauldron of lineage and the fire of meditation. So we cook the whole thing. Unless you jump out.

Q: I have one more question. [Laughter] A drink of water. Can I have a drink of water?

VR: Sure.

Q: Thanks. Cheers!

VR: Three – for the Buddha, dharma, sangha. Yes, three. Just one more [laughter; applause].

QUESTION: I always wonder, on the one hand, the path of devotion has nothing to do with getting anything for yourself, on the other hand, the first thing you do is you go to the doctor and say, "Give me some medicine." How do those two things go together?

VR: Well, one is very organic. You have no time to think. The other is speculating, "Is this doctor actually qualified to give me" and "Is this medicine the most beneficial medicine?" On the path of devotion, it's very immediate. Sure, you can have a lot of thoughts, but basically those thoughts go down the drain. The practitioner on the path of devotion is quite eager to get down to the practice. It doesn't matter about this and that, in other words, how hard it is to get to sit, and "How am I going to get my time scheduled properly, and I can't push myself into the meditation." All those things are somewhat secondary to the basic point, which is that the student feels some sense of real, genuine medicine, not fake. Doesn't have any catches to it at all, it's very simple. Castor oil, whatever. It's not organic vitamins or inorganic vitamins, nothing like that. Very simple.

Q: So you mean it's like a feeling that it's just the right thing to do.

VR: Well, even more than that. It's the only thing to do.

QUESTION: I found it very interesting that you said the path of devotion is to completely surrender to the guru's world. I was expecting you to say to completely surrender to the guru. Is there any difference between the guru and the guru's world?

VR: Yes, our expectation. The guru's world includes our expectation. That's why we have Hinayana, Mahayana, Vajrayana. In other words, in the e Hinayana we bring all the expectations with us.

Q: So then in a sense you surrender to your own, to the expectations, as well?

VR: That's correct. Especially in the Hinayana, that we're not particularly concerned with the person at this point, the person of the guru, and whether or not this person goes to bed at a certain time, gets up at a certain time, that's not important. The important thing here is that we actually receive teachings and the instructions on how to practice.

Q: Is it later on, in the Vajrayana, that you surrender to the guru instead of the guru's world, or does it stay the same?

VR: Well, the point is that the two things come together.

Q: Okay, I have to [inaudible words] with that.

VR: That's what you say.

Q: Let me see if I can phrase it so it's clear. If the patient can approach the doctor in a really spontaneous way, without having all those thoughts between him and the doctor, does he really need the doctor after all?

VR: Well, the point is that the patient is not concerned with spontaneous or not spontaneous at this point.

Q: I'm not the patient that is not spontaneous. I mean, that's spontaneous, obviously, because I'm not, at this point. But in a hypothetical situation where the patient is spontaneous, does he need the doctor at all?

VR: Hypothetically speaking? [Laughter] Hypothetically, I have no idea. [Laughter] I haven't met anyone who could answer that.

Q: So there's really no answer to that question.

VR: Not hypothetically. Practically, sure.

Q: So practically then, if the patient is spontaneous, does he need the teacher, the doctor?

VR: Practically speaking, the patient does not worry about spontaneity or not. Patient means somebody who's sick.

Q: Yes, but I'm the one that's worrying about the spontaneity, not the patient that I'm talking about. [Laughter]

VR: In that case, you should seek the medicine for worry. [Laughter]

Q: Okay.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, we should close at this point. And again I would like to suggest what has been suggested, that if we are going to continue our discussion together, which is very opportune, in fact, it is auspicious that we could be gathered together here discussing these things and a very rare opportunity that we have, we should have some sense of ground of communication, how we're going to talk to each other, how we're going to continue along this path together. And in doing so, we have to have some sense of environment, or shall we say mutually accepting and working with our neurosis, whatever that may be. We should have some ground to do that, and that ground is the practice of meditation. We have ample time, in fact, we're here for that reason. We have Naropa Institute as shrine room, which is dedicated and put together for that reason. We have Karma Dzong shrine room not far away, with the same dedication, same purpose, same reason. And we have this big weekend coming up, which we could spend whole lifetime sitting with ourselves, which is nothing more than three days. It doesn't help if I make big speeches and turn fancy phrases, and you ask cute questions, and I give more cute answers [laughter] and we go on like that for five weeks, having a wonderful time and going back to whatever we came from feeling that we were entertained. It makes very little difference how much we're entertained and how much satisfaction we personally get. Very little difference. It makes a great deal of difference if we can actually sit with our entertainment and our lack of it, even for one hour. It is the most worthwhile and heroic and absolutely meaningless thing we can do. Our world is built on a castle of meaning based on a preconception to begin with. We feel that we're hardly grains of sand, but we're actually sand castles, and further, we feel that those castles are solid and permanent. We should look into that more clearly. We have the opportunity to do so. Basically, no one can say more than that. So I request on the part of all of you who are taking this course that you sit continually throughout and practice very hard with strenuous discipline, without thought of who's going to recognize you. There are no degrees, PhDs, MAs, BAs of great meditators, but there is a genuine sense of real sanity that radiates without exception. That is our heritage, that is our birthright as human beings. We should take advantage of that now. So sit this weekend and throughout the course, and let's continue on our journey together. We'll have a great time, and we'll have a horrible time, and we'll have a totally full time together. Five weeks is very short. We can blink our eyes and it's over. So see you next Tuesday.