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

When the smoke settles, we are still faced with our emotions, and whether we feel sane or not doesn't seem to matter. We are discussing – [laughter] – are we? – discussing devotion as path and the workability of that path and – that's one of our favorite words around here, “workability” – and that workable situation involves hesitation and doubt and criticism, which we bring to the spiritual friend. And to our astonishment, he welcomes our hesitation. Not only does the spiritual friend welcome that hesitation, but in a sense he encourages our emotional scene. We go to the spiritual friend with our sense of being cured and also with our doubt about our emotional life, and we lay that trip on the spiritual friend, and he embraces that trip, in fact he invites our concern, which tends to agitate our emotional considerations, our emotional response. And there is a kind of intimidating quality about that in relationship to the spiritual friend, we feel slightly intimidated that he feels so open to us. We invent all kinds of busy situations in regard to the spiritual friend, “Well, I have my job, my little thingie, you know, my project.” But at some point we find the spiritual friend is calling us on the phone saying, “Where have you been? How are you doing? How's your job? How's your project?” And we feel very embarrassed.

Relationship with the spiritual friend is a relationship with a real sense of other, a real sense of our longing. The spiritual friend actually manifests a world, an existence beyond our projections. In relationship to our mother, our father, sister and brother, friends, acquaintances, lovers, we have always a sense of trying to fulfill our expectations. But the spiritual friend is outside of that habitual pattern, completely. We involve ourselves with the spiritual friend hoping that he will confirm, hoping that the spiritual friend will confirm our neurosis, which he doesn't do, hoping that he will recognize our problem. At the same time he accepts our neurosis completely. He welcomes it, and in fact, he's delighted that we can exhibit all this emotional stuff. He's not put off by our arrogance, our resentment, our hesitation, our doubt. And that very fact is shocking to us.

So we are drawn to the spiritual friend because the spiritual friend presents some new dimension, presents openness, warmth, presents Buddha nature to us. This Buddha nature as displayed by the spiritual friend is the sense of encompassing both positive and negative emotions without hesitation, without doubt, with complete certainty. This spiritual friend seems to have an indestructible interest, a lively interest in so many people, so many things, so many situations. We are drawn in spite of ourselves, in spite of our hesitation. We approach the spiritual friend with criticism and a critical mind. We would like to

acknowledge our problem, so we actually lay that problem on the spiritual friend and say, "That's his problem, her problem. He couldn't understand us, so he must have a problem." But the spiritual friend says, "Come back anyway. Sit down. How are you? How's your life? How's your project? Are you successful in your business? How's your wife? Are the children okay?" And we're very suspicious.

Buddha nature is no different than inquisitive mind, that inquisitive samsaric mind which we have all the time, except that without some sense of warmth and openness toward ourselves, we cannot recognize that inquisitive mind as having the qualities of enlightenment. Only through relationship with the spiritual friend do we actually get a glimpse, do we actually come in contact with real relationship, real sense of coming in contact with our ideal. Buddha nature is potential in us, potential of awakened mind, clouded by hesitation. The spiritual friend mirrors back our hesitation, and we cannot deny that experience, as much as we would like to invent some busy quality of not having that relationship, still, echoes come back to us. How is it possible that a human being can be gentle, intelligent, creative, which at that point is simply our own intelligence which the spiritual friend is talking to us. We bring our own sense of garbage, and the spiritual friend is telling us that that garbage itself is Buddha nature, a possibility of enlightenment. So we have some timidity, we have some reluctance to admit our own intelligence. But the spiritual friend is very heavy handed at this point. He refuses to acknowledge our neurosis as such. Although he accepts it, brings it in, he mirrors back sanity continually, in fact, he encourages our own sanity. He is very heavy handed in the sense that he displays himself as he is, without apology, maybe outlandish, maybe totally confident, maybe emotional. He confronts our perfection model continually with real true emotion and Buddha nature coming out. And we are seduced. And we are suspicious at the same time.

The point here is that true devotion is not based on pancake-batter mentality of just pouring some liquid on a plate and letting somebody else fry it for you. But if we are to actually ignite the flame of devotion in the Mahayana path, it is necessary to bring to the spiritual friend our whole bag of tricks. I'm not particularly suggesting that the spiritual friend is going to confirm our existence as neurotic individuals in saying that, "Oh, everything's okay. It's okay." In terms of accepting our neurosis, that also means rejecting any kind of ego fortification, any kind of sense of congratulation. The spiritual friend is the only real friend we ever have, because that friendship is not based on conditions of any kind. We are seduced by our own desire, but we are not confirmed as proprietors. As we go along in our relationship with the spiritual friend, drawn back again, regardless of our embarrassment, regardless of our awkwardness, regardless of our resentment, as we are drawn back again, we begin to experience some sense of Buddha nature in ourselves. We begin to feel that it's not so important that we exhibit the perfect qualities. We begin to realize that imperfection and perfection have sparked together, which ignite the flame of enlightenment, intelligence.

And we begin to feel some sense of awe, some sense of real inklings of devotion towards the spiritual friend. We begin to feel that it's not so necessary to hold on so tightly to our secure position, in fact we realize that it's hopeless with the spiritual friend. There's no point at all in holding on to that position, that sense of ourselves as being sane. We begin to relax. We begin to feel some sense of excitement, some sense of a spark in seeing the spiritual friend again and again and again. We begin to believe, in some sense, that it's possible. Because of our experience, we believe it's possible that good and bad, love and hate, can actually coexist. In our own experience with the spiritual friend, love manifests as a continual sense of opening and not holding on, admitting a soft spot, admitting a sense of real genuine warmth toward somebody else. And our sense of hate or negativity is the impulse to shut that off, close it down, and we see that both those qualities have total room to breathe in relationship with the spiritual friend. The spiritual friend never shuts down, and he has no axe to grind, and he confirms continually the potential of awake mind.

We embark on a real love affair for the first time in our lives. We begin to feel that the object of our devotion is not all that far away as we thought, and there is some sense of actually being energetic, actually being interested, some sense of nearness, of gentleness, some sense of nearness of creativity, which we have long labored under the headings of doubt and criticalness and hesitation. There is somebody outside of our projections who does not fit into our habitual pattern at all. Maybe very painfully, maybe haphazardly, maybe jagged, maybe smooth, we find ourselves in a love affair whether we like it or not, and we find ourselves actually settling down, being honest for a change, actually feeling that there is a possibility that our miserly little concern can be opened up completely.

In a real love affair there is mutual growth and mutual expansion and mutual delight, not based on who's on top, who's on the bottom. There is a sense of generosity to ourselves and to others. Through the devotion to the spiritual friend, in relationship to the spiritual friend, we begin to feel real generosity, real sense of relationship to our world. We begin to have patience with our own neurosis and others. We begin to feel energetic and disciplined. We begin to experience meditation, meditation in action. We begin to experience a real throbbing heart, a real sense of a heart filled with blood, a real sense of extending our arms and allowing the pleasant dream and nightmare of our search to come in. Without the spiritual friend there is no real sense, there is no definite sense of the transcendent quality of human beings. And as we settle into this love affair, we have a feeling and anticipation, a delight which is no longer a sense of deprivation, but rather an excitement that Buddha nature or enlightenment which we seek is very dear to us and not foreign at all.

Any questions?

QUESTION: In a student and teacher relationship, in the case of Milarepa to Marpa, Milarepa went through a lot of tests and ordeals, and I just see the spiritual friend as warm and kind in the sense of not really testing, in the sense of Milarepa to Marpa –

VAJRA REGENT: Yes.

Q: Milarepa went through a lot of ordeals and tests before he got to meet the spiritual friend.

VR: That's the same thing as the guru or spiritual friend accepting our neurosis, which is Milarepa's experience of wanting to grab Marpa's knowledge.

Q: But in a sense I don't feel any testing, like Milarepa went through a lot of tests.

VR: You don't feel that?

Q: Not really, in a sense of – I just see the teacher as being –

VR: Well, we have a lot of time together. [Laughter]

Q: Hm. It will come along then, I guess.

VR: Well, it will come along if you start to grab for it.

QUESTION: You said something toward the end there about seeing the transcendent quality of human beings. Kind of associations I have with the word transcendent seem to be caught up in a lot of notions that have to do with having a soul that's somehow trapped in the body, and freeing it, and all this kind of stuff. I'm pretty sure that's not what you're talking about, that meaning of the word "transcendent."

VR: What? A soul without wings?

Q: Is that what you mean? Soul without wings?

VR: Sole of shoe. Stepping on the ground. Transcendent. Transcends your last footprint.

QUESTION: It seems like the process of the feeling of hesitation can last forever. Can you get **cough** **tin** that feeling of the cycle? It seems like a cycle to me, that I get caught up in, and it goes over and over again. Is there any way – there's no way to break out of that cycle?

VR: Sure. Relate with a real genuine spiritual friend and break out of the cocoon of oneself.

Q: Is it necessary to directly talk about your emotional garbage to the spiritual friend?

VR: [Laughs] Well, I don't think it's necessary to plan it out. It'll happen anyway. Either way, whether you plan it or you don't plan it, it's going to happen anyway, so, "Well, I didn't have anything to say, but ..." [VR Laughs]

QUESTION: In terms of the love affair you start having with the spiritual friend, we usually talk about – I mean, there are many different kinds of love that are talked about, love for your parents, love for your brother, love for a friend. From the student's point of view, what kind of love is that?

VR: Well, it's kind of a sense of being at home with oneself and an other, which is very rare. You know, it's kind of – when you're with the loved one, there's always a sense of "Give me something more, give me that little bit you didn't give me."

Q: But that's not there in this relationship you're talking about?

VR: No, not after a while. Once you exhaust the possibilities of what you're going to get out of it and the fact that you don't get what you thought, but still spiritual friend is there anyway, even though your little dreams of great success didn't come true, spiritual friend is there. "How's the wife? How are the kids? Have a cigarette. Have a drink. Sit down. How's your mind? How's your practice?" "Don't ask me that. Tell me where I am." Doesn't happen that way. So in other words, the conditions of our relationship are broken down, and there's a sense of one to one, person to person, eye to eye, in a pregnant space.

Q: It sounds like, then, if you didn't feel comfortable in that situation, you couldn't blame it on anything else.

VR: You could try. That's what generally happens. In the relationship with the spiritual friend there's a long period of trying to blame either on the spiritual friend or on oneself. "He doesn't understand." "I didn't say it right." Back and forth. Finally, there's a sense of some humor coming in. There's some warmth, and the students say, "Well, you've heard this before, but I'm going to say it again anyway," and a kind of felling of being together, regardless of neurosis or confusion. It's part of it.

QUESTION: As a student of Naropa—

VR: Naropa Institute, you mean?

Q: – Naropa Institute—

VR: [Laughs; laughter] Yes.

Q: – there's some pussyfooting going on around here, to me, which is maybe creative maybe not, but essentially *you* are the spiritual friend. We're not talking about some – well, we are talking about anybody – but you, there, up there, we're talking about *you* as a spiritual friend. [Laughter]

VR: Yes.

Q: I just want to know about the pussyfooting. [Laughter]

VR: Whose?

Q: Yours, or ours.

VR: Good. Yes. Well, I'll pussyfoot if you will. [Laughter]

Q: I would prefer to ask the question simply.

VR: Okay.

Q: In this bathtub, *you* are the spiritual friend.

VR: Is that a question?

Q: No, this is not a question.

VR: Okay.

Q: It's an implication, but I think –

VR: What is the direct question you'd like to ask?

Q: Naropa Institute –

VR: Right.

Q: – you’re teaching about the potential of the spiritual friend and the friend of the spiritual friend.
VR: That’s right.
Q: In this situation, you are the spiritual friend. [Laughter]
VR: That’s not a question.
Q: It’s not. I just don’t like pussyfooting. [Laughter; applause]
VR: Give him the microphone back. Now ask the question.
Q: I think I asked it before, what it meant to you personally, and you answered it.
VR: No, no. Come on. Do it again. You said you would like to ask a direct question.
Q: All right. Within this bathtub of Naropa Institute, we can study Gampopa, we can be aligned with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.
VR: That’s right.
Q: We can have Sufi interests, or any others. [Laughter] Within this bathtub, *you* are the spiritual friend.
VR: What is the question?
Q: And my question is, you’re –
VR: What is the question?
Q: – right. Well, I try a little bit. [Laughter] Will you say to the students of Naropa Institute that at this moment, you are the spiritual friend? [Laughter] That is my question.
VR: Yes.
Q: Thank you. [Laughter; VR laughs]
VR: If anybody asks me, that is. In the back.

QUESTION: With regard to the last question [laughter], if you are the spiritual friend, then why are you talking about yourself in the third person?

VR: Am I? Are you asking if I am?

Q: Yes.

VR: Could be.

Q: Unless I misunderstand the rules of grammar, you seem to be speaking about yourself as though you were another person, as though you were describing –

VR: I think you misunderstand the course at this point. I am talking about devotion in relationship to the spiritual friend. This is what we are studying.

QUESTION: How does the process of mirroring work?

VR: [Laughs] How does it work? Well, there’s nothing to hold on to on the part of the spiritual friend in terms of his own reputation or his own greatness, then whatever you present is quite delightful, comes right back to you.

Q: Why does it come back?

VR: Well, there’s no sponge on the other side. Generally, when we engage in our world, there’s two sponges, one on either side, called “you” and “other,” and you say, “I love you” and the other side goes “Slurp.” [Laughter] The spiritual friend doesn’t do that. You say, “I love you,” and he says, “That’s nice, [laughter] I love you too.” Ping-ping. [Laughter] [Referring to next questioner:] Oh, he’s warmed up.

QUESTION: I’m a little confused about something here.

VR: What is it?

Q: You say in normal relationships we’re always trying to fulfill expectations, and yet the spiritual friend exists beyond expectation or projection.

VR: That’s right.

Q: In an earlier talk we talked about the necessity, the inevitability of expectation and the enlightened quality of expectation.

VR: Yes, that's right.

Q: How do those tie in?

VR: Well, I think we talked about that it's the attitude of questioning and inquisitive mind, the attitude of being at a loss and wanting to be fulfilled. In the relationship with student and spiritual friend, wanting to be fulfilled bounces back, and some sense of awakening happens at that point, that the whole process has been happening so long. It's been happening again and again.

Q: So that's the enlightened quality of expectation?

VR: You bet.

Q: But at the same time, the spiritual friend exists beyond expectation. Your expectations are irrelevant.

VR: Enlightened quality of expectation is beyond expectation. [VR laughs] You see, it's right there in the goodies that we got already. You don't have to look any place else for your enlightenment, it's right in here. Who's who? Who's on top? But [VR laughs] we still have some sense of reach, which is fine, you know. Absolutely fine. There's more to it than just neurosis, there's more to it than just saliva dripping down from fanged teeth. There's a sense of real warmth, openness, like to reach out. "Will you be my friend?" [Laughter; VR laughs] "Will you be my friend? You should be my friend?" All the rest of it. Spiritual friend doesn't mind that whole bit that you do. Really doesn't. [Laughter]

Question: One of the ways that we think of friends is in kind of a more one-to-one situation, and this seems like it might get rather lonely being you up there all by yourself and here's all of your friends – are we your friends also? Can we, how do we, how else can we manifest friendship, other than a very public situation?

VR: I don't know. We could go out for a drink or something like that, look at the rose garden.

[Laughter]

Q: When?

VR: When?

Q: Are you asking me? [Laughter]

VR: I don't know. Are you asking me? [Laughter]

Q: Yes. Sure. This is just very, you know, these other questions about –

VR: Yes. I understand what you're saying. [Laughter; VR laughs] I didn't say I was your spiritual friend.

Q: Will you be my spiritual friend?

VR: Will you be my valentine? [Laughter] Would you?

Q: What?

VR: Would you?

Q: Be your valentine?

VR: Yes.

Q: That's a good question.

VR: Send me a love letter, and I'll send you one back.

Q: Oh, that brings up another question. How do you do that?

VR: Well, I'm not going to make public. [Laughter] Some imposter might send a love letter, and I'd think it's you. [Laughter]

Q: It probably wouldn't be.

VR: Oh? It's very simple. Just continue on the path. We'll meet again.

Q: Thank you.

VR: You're welcome. More or less.

QUESTION: At what point do you feel that Western psychology and psychotherapy, in mirroring our neurosis, at what point do you feel that that takes us, and where would we depart to find a spiritual friend?

VR: I don't know very much about these things, Western psychology and what did you call it? – Western –

Q: Psychotherapy.

VR: Yes. I don't know very much about it. There are some resident experts here in the Psychology Department who probably could do better at that. Basically, I know this, that what takes us in our desire, what stops us, is our preoccupation with "that." No, I don't know anything about it, really. I haven't had any therapy. [Laughter] Nobody believes me. Never did.

Well, friends – and I do mean friends – [VR laughs; laughter] we have been put through a long wringer tonight, and still there's moisture. We have to be hung out to dry. [Laughter] Commitment, practice, inquisitiveness are necessary. Don't be frightened by little mirage, little phantoms of identity. You may think that you made a heroic effort to come to Naropa Institute, but it's just begun. Devotion to the spiritual friend is just an appetizer, only a taste. Hearing about it is a beginning. Meditating provides the ground. Experience comes and goes. Hang yourselves out to dry. We always think that we've been plucked, we've been pushed, we've been salted, peppered, cooked, finished. "I don't have anything else to give." But the spiritual friend has some inclination that there's humor in that and also has some inclination, be very stubborn about the whole thing. It doesn't matter who you are in terms of the spiritual friend, what credentials you have, whether you're from here or fro there, or whether you have or have not, spiritual friend still demands much more. Spiritual friend plays hard to get because the spiritual friend knows that what he's got is good.

See you next week. Good night.