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The Lonely Journey: Devotion in the Kagyü Lineage

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VAJRA REGENT:

We should start tonight about the process of transmission, which is the realization of awakened mind, which occurs between the guru and disciple. Having already established a bond of trust with the samaya vow, there is a possibility that transmission can occur. When we talk about trust, it is necessary to distinguish trust from the belief in salvation. Trust occurs when there is some recognition between the teacher, between the guru and the student, of the quality of shunyata in one's life, shunyata here meaning the emptiness of content, emptiness of origination. In making a samaya vow with the guru, there is some sense of mutual recognition of the quality of emptiness, which means that both the guru and the disciple acknowledge impermanence. Therefore there is a wide-open field of action, which is possible between the two. In any relationship we have a set pattern of how we deal with the world, not only in the samsaric relationship, but also in the relationship with the Hinayana teacher and the Mahayana teacher, there is a set pattern. That pattern is based on achievement of good, achievement of the qualities of nirvana, goodness. In terms of the relationship with the guru in the Vajrayana, there is no set pattern. Because there is wide-open trust and pervasive feeling of shunyata, the relationship with the guru is not subject to prediction. The point is, we have been desirous of this precious knowledge that the guru possesses, this precious gem of knowledge, and we must ask for it. We would like to have it. In reality, our asking for it is based on ignorance, and that ignorance is that we already possess the precious knowledge that we seek. But since we do not think that this is so, the guru has to create a situation in which we can realize that. That situation cannot be based on any pattern, cannot be based on any preconception or expectation. The guru has to catch us off guard. So, we ask and we wait. In catching us off guard, without expectation, we realize, and recognize the guru's mind as our mind, in a moment. But, this process cannot be accomplished, and this achievement cannot be accomplished without surrendering that which we have been talking about. That surrendering is painful in the relationship with the guru because the guru does not seem to acknowledge how much we have surrendered. And we surrender more and more and still the guru doesn't seem to care very much about what great sacrifices we made. We begin to think, "Perhaps there is a big hoax going on." We begin to think that maybe there isn't such a thing as enlightenment or spirituality. We might think that the hoax, the big joke, is on us. But, we don't think that for long. It's much too frightening. Then we look around, we look in space, we look at the world, the trees and the people we see and the planets in space, and we look to find the origin of that hoax, that joke, and we can't find any origin. But we have this deadly feeling that the joke is on us. We have a drastic, deadly feeling that there is a punch line to this joke. We devote and we surrender and we surrender and there is no

acknowledgment. And the guru goes along with the whole thing. Perhaps the guru is our dream. Perhaps there is no spirituality. We are hanging on by a thread, and that thread is our devotion. And the awful truth is that the guru goes along with the whole thing. The point is that the situation must be created where there are no preconceptions of any kind, where there is a possibility of experiencing unconditioned space for a moment.

Naropa followed Tilopa for twelve years, and basically he said, "If you would like to be a doormat for me, I'll take you on, but I don't have anything to tell you." And Naropa said, "Please give me the teachings." In a moment, as Tilopa slapped Naropa with his sandal, he realized mahamudra. What did he realize? It's not as if in a moment he learned everything there was to be learned. But the point is, all along, as the process went on between the guru and the disciple, the teachings were being given and being absorbed. Without that flash, however, without that sense of openness, no teaching came alive in him. In one moment the whole of the teaching came alive in Naropa. All that he had heard, all that he had asked for, made sense. And Milarepa built that building, tore it down, put it back up. Finally he said, "There's nothing left for me to do but commit suicide." And then Marpa said, "Come in, you're welcome here." Before that he wouldn't let him in.

We carry our self-deception to the last, to the very last. We sink deeper and deeper into the mud of our goal, what we want, what we would like to achieve. And the Vajrayana guru lets us do it, sink deeper and deeper, get closer and closer to what we want. These consequences of self-deception are explained, warned about, we have them. We have them in the lives of the great teachers. We carry it to the last. Self-deception, which is the very thing we would like to get rid of. In a moment there is no self-deception. There is simply the world of the guru. The message of the guru is the world. In a moment there are no preconceptions. Maybe there is no spirituality. Maybe there is no guru. Maybe we are about to come across the punch line. Maybe the fact is that we are indeed alone. Aloneness is the culmination of our journey. Aloneness is the fruition of our love affair. Aloneness is the culmination of our separateness, our loneliness. This is the kindness, which can never be repaid. This is the devotion without ego. Do you have any questions?

QUESTION: When one feels that loneliness, that aloneness, what is the source of the feeling of wanting to relate to other, to students?

VAJRA REGENT: Same thing. Aloneness is the motivation.

Q: The motivation to teach?

VR: The motivation, period.

QUESTION: You started by talking about trust of the student for the guru and then described the relationship as completely unpredictable, and I don't at all understand what trust is in that sort of thing, since it sounds as though trust would be the same thing.

VR: Yes, trust and not trust are the same thing, which makes trust, big trust, capital T-R-U-S-T, trust, which has no basis whatsoever. Hard fact. Nobody likes to cop to that.

Q: Can I survive without optimism?

VR: You?

Q: Yes.

VR: No. [Laughs]

Q: Is the arrival at suicidal despair inevitable? Can you get an easier ride? [Laughter]

VR: Well, our despair in this age is not the same as Milarepa's despair in terms of what he had to do, but as far as easier, no, same thing.

Q: It seems that when you read the histories of any of the teachers, they all reach this point at some stage. It's a rather daunting prospect.

VR: Very shocking. Very shocking. Maybe there is nobody at all. It's not all that good, you know. It's not a matter of accumulating, at that point, how good we've been and how we deserve, simply not that at all. Just shocking. Maybe there is no such thing.

Q: Is that what the essence of the despair is?

VR: Sure. You can try to think about it. Is the joke on us, on me, or is it on them? Seems like there's something fishy. The only thing we have is devotion. We don't have anything else.

Q: Didn't Milarepa quit Marpa at that stage? He was so pissed off with the whole thing?

VR: No, that was earlier on. Earlier on he quit Marpa, and he went to see Marpa's disciple, but Marpa found out about it and said, "Don't you give him anything," and he came back and he tried again and again. Finally he said, "This is it. I might as well kill myself. He's never going to accept me." Then Marpa said, "Come in here, my friend. Everything's okay. Why are you troubling yourself so much? You can have the whole thing if you want." You see? We go in with this business of expectation all the time, and the Vajrayana teacher is not impressed.

QUESTION: On the Buddhist path, why is such a strong connection and relationship made with the guru if in the end he's just going to drop you on your ass anyway?

VR: Well, the point is that we would like so much to be dropped on our ass.

Q: He's the only one who'll do it?

VR: The only one who'll do it. Everybody else will make excuses.

QUESTION: I was wondering if it's possible, if it's a danger, to use that sense of loneliness as a nest so that you don't relate with other people, kind of hide in it?

VR: Loneliness as a nest? That is a most uncomfortable nest, but I suppose you could go on with it for some time.

Q: Does it wear itself out?

VR: No.

Q: I mean not the loneliness, but that –

VR: Nesting quality?

Q: Yes.

VR: Oh, sure. You tell me.

Q: Well, it seems to be lingering on at this point.

VR: Well, don't have such a shortsighted view of the whole thing. Give yourself time. Experience your own loneliness as much as you can. See what happens.

Q: It's worth a try.

VR: At least. [Laughter]

QUESTION: What does it mean when it says, "Loneliness becomes a companion"?

VR: Well, then loneliness becomes alone, and you realize the alone quality of the whole lineage and the whole of reality. Then it becomes totally alone. See, there are no more qualifiers, no more asterisk or anything else. By your self, alone, is the guru's world. That's so monumental that it's everything.

Q: I just wonder, right now, who is experiencing that loneliness. Who's experiencing that loneliness, that aloneness?

VR: Yes.

Q: I asked you.

VR: [Laughs] You?

Q: Yes. So? So what?

VR: More than that.

Q: But still, on that stage, I mean, I'm feeling pretty dummy now because I'm feeling somebody's there experiencing that loneliness, but I wonder whether, on that stage, it's kind of a self-answered question.

VR: Well, if there's a possibility that in a moment, in a brief moment, there's nothing at all, then I suppose it's a self-answered question.

Q: So not even aloneness?

VR: Not even. [Laughs]

QUESTION: I'm wondering why the end of duality is described as aloneness rather than some kind of togetherness.

VR: Well, there are two kinds of ways to talk about the end of duality – one is aloneness, and the other is luminosity. I suppose the closest thing to our ordinary experience of luminosity is called togetherness. In other words, when all the lights go on, there's no more darkness.

Q: I was wondering if a sense of humor – is that mainly in the Mahayana? Because it seems just the complete despair that Milarepa and Naropa got to, it seems – is there a sense of humor there that I'm not seeing, or does it not matter? It just seems that that's so important most of the time.

VR: I don't think it matters at all. A sense of humor means that you like to make some –

Q: No, no. Not that. The way Rinpoche uses it.

VR: How does he use it?

Q: Oh, come on.

VR: No, no. Come on. [Laughter]

Q: Okay. The light touch, the –

VR: The light touch. There's no light touch here.

Q: – well –

VR: Well, what?

Q: – it didn't seem that there was – I guess basically what I'm asking is that it seems that things couldn't get any worse than they are, but they must be going to. [Laughter] It's just – working with your sitting meditation, there's supposed to be some lightness and air in it. It drops off at some point? Or it's not important anymore? Is it that things have to – I thought that was really important to the whole thing, and it doesn't seem to be at the very end, with the flash?

VR: Ho-ho- ho. [Laughter]

QUESTION: What sustains devotion to the point that Naropa could stay with Tilopa for twelve years and have leeches and –

VR: The punch line. [Laughter] You see, Naropa's not a dummy. Neither is Milarepa. They have the feeling of the self-existing joke all the while, but they don't quite get the punch line, which is themselves. We're the punch line. [Laughter]

Q: It's a long joke.

VR: [Laughs] Yes, I suppose so. It's a long way to Tipperary. [Laughter]

QUESTION: It seems like, and I could be wrong, but it seems like the flashes of shunyata experience, which are bringing you along on the path are the same thing as the guru, the message that the guru is the world in a moment. But I don't know about that.

VR: Well, I don't either. That's kind of philosophical.

Q: No, You see what I mean, like, one minute, like, it's universal guru, and the thing that's happened to you is really a message, and the next minute you find yourself angry about something and you don't even see the quality of the guru in that whatsoever, nor could you ever, for the time being.

VR: Yes.

Q: But the same thing with shunyata, like, you can see, or you're meditating, and emptiness or some quality of emptiness could happen and experience to you, and you don't, the next moment you're out of meditation and you don't see this quality whatsoever.

VR: Yes, that's right. That's very good. Well, the point is, there, the quality of luminosity is not experienced in terms of holding on to anything. In terms of practice or non-practice, whichever way you turn, we're holding onto something.

Q: Then it's like holding on to – there's absolutely nothing to hold on to.

VR: Oh, we could hold on to nothing. We could hold on to absolutely nothing.

Q: That's what happens all the time. Isn't that what happened to Naropa and Milarepa?

VR: Sure. Holding on to absolutely nothing.

Q: But how did it break?

VR: Just in a moment. [Laughter]

QUESTION: Your teaching style is different than Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Your teaching style is certainly different than, say, Professor Guenther. Nonetheless, in the last however many lectures – three, four, five – suddenly, last week you spoke very directly about samaya. The questions that were asked after that from whoever indicated, I think, in your words, a lot of people were flirting with the Vajrayana. I think those were your words. The speed that you, that this Naropa class, this second session, has taken, from spiritual friend to samaya, and now to whatever the hell this is – I promise this is my last entertaining question – is astounding. How do you go so fast? Because suddenly, uh-uh, samaya as delivered in your last lecture is a heavy, difficult, dreadfully difficult subject, not to think about. And now we're past that somehow, not personally, but in terms of your teaching style. Can I check my notes?

VR: Sure.

Q: It is all about devotion?

VR: Yes. Also, we're coming to the end of the course. [Laughter] Goes by very fast. Yes, I know.

Q: I mean, one day there's the friend, then the next day there's the rude guy, and there's the samaya death, and then there's the end of the class. [Laughter]

VR: Do you know what happens next?

Q: I ask you – what?

VR: You're dead. That's what Milarepa said. We don't know how fast it goes.

Q: Well, he didn't have five weeks.

VR: He didn't even have five seconds.

Q: [Inaudible]

VR: That's what we think. He had that kind of five-second mentality from the beginning, that we don't know how long it's going to take for us to be dead.

QUESTION: At that moment of despair, is devotion also gone at that point?

VR: Well, I think that at that point we have some sort of explosion into real devotion, which is nonego devotion. When we realize alone quality, then the whole thing becomes devotion.

Q: It's no longer a goal?

VR: No – absolutely not. It's just what it is. It is what is.

Q: Does separate and devotion become alone in transmission?

VR: Yes. That's pretty good. Yes.

QUESTION: Following up on the question before, if at that moment of despair where Milarepa nearly killed himself, why was it necessary, if it was nonego devotion for the guru to come and ask him in?

VR: What?

Q: Why didn't Milarepa kill himself if, at that explosion, devotion is moving into some quality of nonego?

VR: Why didn't he kill himself?

Q: I guess the question in my mind is the tendency to suicide at that point –

VR: Oh, there's lots of space. Don't worry about that. There's lots of space. That's the whole point is that you begin to dwell in the nondual space.

Q: Was he going to kill himself or not?

VR: Sure. But it takes some time, you know. [Laughter] The whole point is that greedy quality, "I want to kill myself," which is pure greed, just spaced out in a complete funk. That intent to kill him self spaced out into complete funk couldn't do anything, really. Last thought.

Q: That's the beginning of nonego?

VR: Which?

Q: That he's so totally spaced out and into complete funk that he's going to kill himself?

VR: No, you got it wrong. The kill himself came first. The funk came later. [Laughter] Don't try and second-guess the whole thing. We can't read the whole truth and just imitate it, you know. It doesn't work that way.

Q: I resist you as my guru, and I wonder where that is along the spiritual path?

VR: It is probably Hinayana. [Laughter] Well?

So much for our brief interlude – in a moment it's all over. We have to actually try and catch it, grasp the moment. In our attempt to do so, we fail, and failing completely might be very interesting for us. Hmm.