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The Lonely Journey: Devotion in the Kagyü Lineage

Talk 9 of 9

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VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN:

So where are we, at the end? In this case the end is the beginning, so we look back briefly on our experience and we find that devotion needs a sense of discipline, needs discipline, and that discipline is relating with tradition and lineage. Without an ongoing sense of lineage we cannot follow the path of devotion. And that lineage must be embodied. There must be a human being who is the spokesman, who is the example of the lineage, who embodies the qualities we seek as human beings, and we see that we also must communicate with a human being, with the teacher, and that in order to communicate, we must have a sense of trust, and that trust is not only in the lineage of teachers and the lineage of those who have experienced, accomplished, what we are talking about, but also trust in ourselves, in our own intelligence, a basic sense of friendship to ourselves. Without that sense of trust, without trusting our selves and our own inspiration, there is no openness. The basic obstacle to openness is expectation, ambition, and preconceptions. We want to relate to the teacher. We feel a bursting sense of being magnetized by our own desire, and that desire, in essence, is to be open.

To be open, it is necessary to have a glimpse of reality. Reality in this case is without preconception, without hesitation. That glimpse is not different than our desire, but in order to fulfill our desire, we must have discipline. If we did not need such discipline, then there would be no need for teaching or teacher. We could close the book, so to speak. But since we do, discipline becomes the most important factor in our path, in the path of devotion. One moment, one glimpse, produces enough inspiration to continue along the path. But this inspiration cannot be kindled properly without intellect. Intellect becomes the moving part in this machine, in this journey, in this express train to enlightenment. Real intellect is not involved with facts and figures, and interpretations and analysis. Real intellect is the same as our heart. Intellect and discipline are strongly linked. The point is how do we continue from this moment onward? Intellect is seeing clearly. Intellect is precision. True intellect of human beings goes beyond emotional fog, goes beyond our clinging. How to proceed and sharpen that intellect? Do not discard what you have learned. Do not discard what you have experienced. At the same time, do not build castles of sand. At the same time, do not be puffed up and full of yourselves.

Seeing clearly begins with the Hinayana simple practice of meditation. Simple relationship, me and my thoughts, my bodily sensations, my environment. Simple devotion. Seeing clearly involves stepping beyond embarrassment in the Mahayana and relating with the spiritual friend. Seeing clearly involves regarding that friendship as a learning process. Therefore there is nothing to hide. There is no secret place. Seeing clearly involves leaping beyond expectation, involves a relationship with the vajra master, the guru, who trains a student to become a master.

In our work together in these five weeks, some point for all of us, there's been some glimpse, some opening. It is not possible, so it seems, to begin completely perfect. But it is possible to kindle a small flicker of openness. It is possible to train our minds and bodies, our speech. It is possible to attain supreme victory. If we discard even the smallest gap, the smallest hole in our universe, then we have missed the point. Devotion is a total commitment. Without devotion there is no possible way to proceed. Take whatever small spark there is and fan it with devotion and discipline. Produce a great fire. Produce a tremendous bonfire of energy and dignity. Produce the dream of human beings. Fulfill our own dream. Devotion is not different from our selves. It is not something we must dig up, chase after, and possess. It is a throbbing heart, clear precise intelligence.

In our practice, in our personal journey, here are so many obstacles, so many difficulties. We get confused, we get stimulated, we have insights, and we have depressions. The point is to practice without hesitation. To practice is Milarepa's message to Gampopa. He said after their time together, "Now you must go and establish your teaching." And as they were walking along, which is the custom, to walk along to a certain point with the person who is departing, he said, "I have one precious teaching which I haven't given you." And he left it at that, and Gampopa thought, "Well, he won't give it to me", and he crossed over and was walking at a distance, and Milarepa yelled back to him, "Wait, come back", and he came back, and he said, "If not for you, who else should I give it to?" And he lifted up his robe and showed the signs on his body of tremendous practice and he said, "This is the real teaching, to practice." This is the essence of Buddhism.

Do you have any questions?

QUESTION: Can you talk about obstacle as opportunity?

VAJRA REGENT: Well, that's the point of not excluding anything from our lives as being inconsequential or negative or foreign, our emotions, our thoughts, our experiences all fit in, all are allowed to be in the path of devotion.

Q: But what about when you feel like saying "Fuck it"?

VR: Include that as well. That's the whole point, you see. Who said that? Who said that? Who said it? Who said it? You have to be devoted to the "Fuck it".

Q: It seems real tricky.

VR: Well, let's say that it's so tricky that we don't have any choice.

Q: You out-tricked me.

VR: Hmm. Anytime.

QUESTION: How do you cut through spiritual materialism in that case?

VR: What case?

Q: From what she was saying.

VR: What?

Q: That it's so tricky that you don't have any choice, what is cutting through spiritual materialism?

VR: Well, that's basically it, that you don't have any choice. Spiritual materialism is thinking that you have such a leisurely time to fool around. I don't think we do. Let's not be sad.

Q: Miss out?

VR: Let's not be sad about that.

Q: Oh. Okay. [Laughter]

QUESTION: What's the relationship between doubt and devotion?

VR: Well, I suppose if you keep beating your head against the wall, eventually you realize that it hurts. In terms of doubt, if doubt has no protection, then there's no problem.

Q: Doubt has no protection, did you say?

VR: Hmm.

Q: Well, in what sense can one begin to trust himself and at the same time devote himself to the unknown?

VR: Well, if there's anything known for sure, I'd like to hear about it.

Q: What I'm talking about, of course, is skepticism about this whole trip, and I don't know how to put together what you've been saying with trusting my own feelings about it.

VR: Well, that's exactly the point. Stick on that point. Don't get off it. Don't jump off. Stick on that point. There's a presentation of our projection about the world. Is it true? Is it not true? We feel we have to make a choice. The point is to stay on the point.

Q: Well, that's a kind of silly-sounding tautology to me.

VR: Well, whatever you say.

Q: If one is to surrender, one has to have something to surrender to.

VR: That's right.

Q: Now it seems that the guru's function would be to tell an individual that he's nothing but the guru himself, if only he would see that.

VR: Oh, really? Who's talking to whom?

Q: How do you mean that?

VR: Whose function is whose? Guru's function is his own function. You have your ideas.

Q: Yes, everyone has his version.

VR: Except the guru.

Q: Well, are we not all potentially the guru?

VR: As you say.

Q: That's a question for you.

VR: It's also a question for you. [Laughter]

Q: Thank you.

VR: Any other human being want to talk? [Laughter] There is a human being in the back.

QUESTION: How does ambition become an obstacle in the course of devotion?

VR: If you try and really be with somebody, talk to another human being, if you have all kinds of story lines ahead of time, it's very hard to communicate. All you hear is your own story line back again.

Q: I believe I missed the whole point.

VR: Well, in terms of ambition, whether it's with the teacher or just with an acquaintance, if we have all kinds of preconception, what we're going to get out of it, then we don't communicate. We just repeat our little story.

Q: Well, I didn't mention preconceptions. I was just talking about ambition.

VR: Same thing, same thing. Our version likes to fulfill itself. I wasn't talking about ambition; I was talking about preconception. [Laughter]

QUESTION: You mentioned that desire and reality were the same thing. Could you say a little bit more about that?

VR: [Laughs] What's your heart's desire? Aside from the blah-blah-blah, you know, just a sense of throbbing intelligence, alive, vital, genuine. Heart's desire doesn't mean that there's something that you have to get particularly. It exists for itself.

QUESTION: What did you mean by discipline when you were talking tonight?

VR: Sitting practice of meditation to begin with, relating to the spiritual friend, practice of the paramitas, those kinds of things we talked about during the last five weeks. Discipline. Practice.

Q: I'm still confused. I mean, beyond sitting practice. I mean, in one's living situations with other people.

VR: Hmm. What is discipline in the living situation? Well, I suppose that once you have some sense of egolessness and impermanence and suffering, then it is possible to be generous, and patient, and energetic, and – what's the rest [laughter] – meditative and knowledgeable and spacious, non-territorial. Discipline means not putting the cart before the horse, in this case.

Q: In this case. [VR laughs]. Thank you.

QUESTION: If we're not these elaborate egos or these "I" or "me" or personal selves, then what are we?

VR: [Laughs] Who knows? [Laughter]

Q: A lot of times, I know, it must be hard doing what you're doing there [laughter] but you give, like, theoretical answers to practical questions and practical answers to theoretical questions, [laughter] and I guess this was more of a specific kind of question [laughter]. Is there anything that – anything specific [inaudible] to tantra?

VR: Oh-ho! Let's see. That means that I can't answer theoretically or practically [laughter] so, nonspecifically [laughter] who knows? [Laughter]

Q: Do you know?

VR: Absolutely not. [Laughter] Of course I do. No, I don't know. [Laughter; applause]

Q: Does Chögyam Trungpa know?

VR: Listen: who cares? Who cares?

Q: I don't.

VR: You do?

Q: No. Not really. I don't think. [Laughter]

VR: [Laughs] Well, I do. [Laughter]

Q: This is really mathematical.

VR: [Laughs] Musical, artistic, philosophical, or whatever. Who's who here? Somebody tells you who is who, well, that's something you could listen to, you know, be interesting if somebody here knows the answer to that question. On the other hand, that doesn't preclude trying to find out. We can try and find out. As long as we have a question, we have to seek the answer.

Q: If someone had the answer, would there be no one there to believe him, if he had it, no "I" to believe it?

VR: If someone had the answer? Well, theoretically [laughter] that's impossible. Someone can't have the answer.

Q: Okay.

VR: You let me off easy on that one. [Laughter, VR laughs]

QUESTION: At the early stages of the path, like, in the beginning –

VR: You mean now?

Q: – like right now, how important is proximity to the teacher?

VR: Very important. It's always important.

Q: You were talking about devotion in the beginning, like right now, as being devotion to the three jewels. Is that proximity to the teacher?

VR: Yes, but you have to have a physical teacher, you know. Human body, teacher, yes. And you have to be as close as you and I.

QUESTION: Could you say something about how the fear of death is a motivating factor on the path? Or – [laughter] I'll explain a little. Personally, lately, I feel that a lot of the fear of death is a kind of an abstract gnawing –

VR: Yes. I think that the real motivating factor on the path is the reality of death, not fear of it particularly. But it's basically the reality of death that is the motivator, rather than the fear. You could say that the fear of death means death of relationship. We think we've established a real relationship with the world, but it breaks down. We get frightened. The whole point of devotion, path of devotion, is to make a real relationship.

Q: Which includes the real relationship with death?

VR: Sure. If you talk about real, you have to talk about life and death, obviously.

QUESTION: Sometimes being on the path of discipline and devotion can be painful to those who are close to you who are not on the path, when it takes a concrete form. How do you handle that with compassion?

VR: Well, I think, basically, you never try to push your trip on anybody else.

Q: Nevertheless, they have expectations about how your relationship should deal with them.

VR: In that case, you shouldn't retreat from being who you are, but you should actually be who you are. I think that in a real relationship, if we're honest with what's going on, that there is no obstacle that is deadly, but everything is workable. But when we try to mix our sense of reality and our sense of projection together and try to strategize how to figure it out, then we get into deep water rather than simply being what we are, doing what we're doing. That doesn't mean going anywhere particularly, saying, "Oh, now you're different than me. You've found this path. You're different than I am," and immediately we say, "Maybe that's true, maybe I should run to my different-ness." We're still human beings, you know. It is very simple. Here we are. So we sit with this business and walk around, and read some funny books, but very basically, human beings: emotion, body, thoughts, environment.

QUESTION: You were talking about discipline a while ago, and you said that as far as discipline is concerned, we shouldn't put the cart before the horse. I wasn't quite sure what you meant by that. Could you talk a bit more about that?

VR: Well, we have, first of all, in terms of discipline and devotion, what we have is our feeling, our desire to achieve some sense of clarity, some sense of freedom. And what we have to work with, to begin with, is our thought process and our body and our environment. So to begin with, we sit down on a cushion and practice meditation. What I said about not putting the cart before the horse is everybody talking about a lot of things before they sit down and just see what's happening here.

QUESTION: I'm having a hard time figuring out how to ask you this exactly. You talked about giving up bodhisattva credentials when you start tantra. Boulder seems pretty safe to me, and I feel haunted from behind about what I know about other people's pain, and I wonder if I belong here actually. Rinpoche told me to come. I said I would come, and my husband was willing. He was willing and I came, but I still remember and feel haunted by the pain that I was working with before. Am I being clear?

VR: Mm-hmm.

Q: Well, I mean, should I go back there? I don't feel like that's right particularly, either, but it seems very safe and easy to be here where you can practice and where you don't have to confront that cutting all the time, of death, insanity, all of that.

VR: Pain is outside. Then it comes closer. It's in your pocket. Then it's your clothes that you wear. Then it's a cement block that you're encased in. Without discipline, how can you go back?

Q: Because I wouldn't – I couldn't go back because I wouldn't know enough to be useful? Is that what you're saying?

VR: Something like that.

Well, my dear friends, we have finished our journey, at least the coming attractions. We had a short little blink together, which has been very invigorating and confusing and sparkling and dull and crystal-clear and muddy. Well, I suppose we have to split up and go beyond our cozy nest of Naropa Institute and actually practice devotion. I feel energized and willing to do that. Maybe it's my trip, maybe somebody else's. But as I look around and try to understand what we're doing here as human beings, it seems to me the only thing to do. If you are willing to join us in walking along this narrow dirt path, highway, desert, we would enjoy the company for as long as it lasts. So since I have the opportunity, I would say practice and find your way, and maybe we'll meet again sometime.

Thank you all very much.