

Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin

Theory and Practice of Meditation

Talk 4: The First Bhumi

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Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin: To a beginning practitioner, hearing about the theory and practice of meditation may become somewhat bewildering. It sounds so good, it sounds so right, but somehow our life situation does not quite coincide with what we hear. At this point it is necessary to remind everyone that in hearing these talks and in studying about meditation practice and the path, it is not necessary to understand everything all at once, but it is necessary to develop the kind of attention which creates a relationship to the teachings you have heard.

Hearing these talks, becoming acquainted with the Dharma, is like learning about the traffic signals and the signposts along the highway, a road on which we are traveling. But it is only through one's own practice that these teachings become real, understandable.

So, in developing this kind of attention to the teachings, it is necessary at this point to be introduced to the notion of a journey. So far we have been concerned with freeing ourselves from confused thinking and from self-fulfilling prophecies. In doing so, we have heard about shamatha practice, vipashyana practice, and mahavipashyana. But we should understand that we have been concerned with personal liberation, “so so tharpa,” as we heard about last class. And that personal liberation can, in itself, become some kind of bondage. So we introduce, at this point, the notion of journey—journey without destination.

This idea, this notion of journey, is the cornerstone of the further expansion of mahavipashyana. Without a notion of journey we become rigid, stiff. We make our meditation practice a fortress of our own. Why so? Because up to this point, the Dharma is not fully integrated in our lives. We try to be so good, so right in our practice, that we create a sense of separation between our meditation practice and our everyday life.

Without the sense of journey there is no freedom. Without mahavipashyana expanding beyond one's personal practice, there is no freedom. Freedom can never be a personal accomplishment. But it is necessary, in order to make this journey, to accumulate the supplies necessary. Accumulating that good storehouse of supplies is the practice of shamatha-vipashyana in mahavipashyana.

Now, this notion of journey is extremely crucial. It is like a dot, seemingly obvious. Even to students who have practiced for a while, this notion of journey is still mysterious, because we cling to freedom in a personal sense. When we talk about journey, we are talking about journey without any predictable end. We are talking about traveling, a sense of motion without destination. When the practitioner has committed himself to a personal liberation—when the practitioner has seen

that the practice of meditation is good and sane—at some point he or she comes to a vast desert with brilliant sunshine illuminating an endless, continuous ground of sand. This is the experience of mahavipashyana expanding into a journey.

This desert of brilliant sun and sand offers no further entertainment. It is a desert of real commitment. It is a desert of true boredom. Now, this boredom is not conventional boredom. It is the boredom which does not create further impulse to resort to memories. It is the boredom which does not create further impulse to cause confusion to one's self and to others.

This vast desert is clean and hot and it is made up of incredible, intense activity. But at first, when the practitioner arrives at the edge of this desert—it is like an actual desert—we cannot see anything happening. There is no sign of activity. But, at the same time, this experience is the beginning of turning one's mind away from habitual confusion.

Approaching this vast desert is turning one's mind toward Dharma completely, entirely. Because, in approaching such an experience, there is a sense of the absence of struggle. A sense of absence of aggression of any kind. There is simply clear, white boredom, which is the first real experience of being completely at one with the teachings, of recognizing that there is no further need to recreate fantasies of the past.

This experience is called “great joy.” It is the discovery of the possibility of awakening continually. That we have turned so far from the world of confusion that it is no longer a possibility, or even an impulse, to return to that world.

And we look out in front of us at that vast expanse of desert and we begin to feel it is possible to walk. Previous to this experience in meditation practice, we have struggled very hard, taken several breaks, come back again, taken some more breaks, thought we were with it, thought we weren't with it. But when that experience of commitment to one's life, to one's world, begins to expand further, then there is that undeniable sense of truth, understandable sense that we are actually on the right path and that the personal journey is expanded into a cosmic journey or universal journey.

Where do we get the impulse to move forward? How do we move forward in our practice? We can only actually be totally committed when we have the absence of struggle, absence of aggression. And that is called the discovery of bodhicitta, the possibility of awakening, the possibility of journey. Journey is—itself—is awakening. Rather than awakening being at the end of the journey, awakening is the very making of the journey. As we walk along in our desert, there is so much activity, so much which we hadn't expected at all. That inquisitive mind of mahavipashyana, that sense of total mind, vast mind becomes completely one with experience. And so experience is journey. This is the first time when we feel there is no separation between our practice and our life. Walking along on the desert sand, it is possible to hear Buddha's footprints ahead of us. It is possible to hear the crunching sound of our own feet in the sand. It is possible to make a journey without worrying about the price of gasoline.

This experience in meditation is called the first bhumi, and bhumi means level or ground or the entrance into the mahayana path. The path of traveling, path of journeying, path of compassion. Compassion, because one's personal salvation is no longer relevant. It is no longer necessary to dwell on freedom, or the absence of freedom. But our mind is so turned toward the present that whatever happens in our experience is included. Not only included, it is seen as a natural brilliance. Natural sunlight illuminates our way across a desert of real commitment. So there is, at this point,

a sense of practice without struggle, practice which is a delight, which is effortless. There is, at this point, a sense of meditation in action.

Beginning to recognize the meditative state of mind as one's own environment. This sense of great joy turns around completely the confusion of one's mind and makes the sense of journeying a complete delight. Whatever hassles occur on the journey are no longer considered a threat and meditation practice is a completely natural event.

We could have a discussion at this point.

QUESTIONS

Vajra Regent: Jim, all the way in the back.

Question: Vajra Regent, is this true boredom the same as awake. Did you hear that?

VR: Yeah, this is the ground of awakening. True boredom is the ground of awakening. Without that sense of true boredom, the little details and spots of one's life turn out to be another hassle. But with the ground of boredom, those little events become a sense of further awakening, of further practice.

Q: Is it possible to regress from this boredom and even further awake, back into entertainment?

VR: I don't think so. Once you've come upon true boredom, there's no way of inventing anything. We could say that occasionally we could see a tree as something else, or a friend of ours as an enemy, or good food as bad food, but it doesn't last very long. That's why there's a sense of journey. If you have journey, then one's mistakes are also brought back to the path, back to the practice.

Q: Thank you.

VR: Blue shirt

Q: You said that, um, personal freedom makes no sense, or one cannot speak about personal freedom. That confuses me.

VR: When did I say that?

Q: Earlier in the talk, but I may have heard it incorrectly.

VR: [laughs] Well, I said at the point where mahavipashyana turns into further expansion of practice, where practice begins to merge with one's daily life, then personal freedom doesn't make any sense anymore. It doesn't matter.

Q: So there's originally a sense of personal freedom that eventually becomes empty?

VR: Eventually becomes empty.

Q: Thank you.

Q: I don't quite understand the relationship between the journey and the boredom. Because, it seems as if you're still on the journey, it's not real boredom.

VR: Hmm, it's real boredom when you're on a journey without a destination.

Q: Hmm, and that's different from even giving up a notion of journey?

VR: Hmm?

Q: Somehow my connotations of boredom are giving up even the idea of journey.

VR: Well, it's hard to give up a notion of journey before you have one. You see, once you come to the notion of journey, then journeying starts to happen. That's the same thing as freedom no longer is necessary to think about. Same as the journey is not necessary to think about when you're walking. You're simply walking.

Q: Thank you.

VR: In the back.

Q: When you were speaking about the, uh, desert the first time, you said this was the experience of great joy, and what I found myself anticipating was that you were going to say: This was the experience of great desolation. Is there some aspect of this experience which has a desolate quality to it?

VR: Desolate quality? Oh, sure, yeah. That's the great joy of the whole thing. No entertainment. Entertainment as not being necessary.

Q: So is it possible to feel desolation and joy at the same time?

VR: [laughs] Good and bad, you mean?

Q: No.

VR: You mean desolation and joy? [laughter] What do you mean by desolation?

Q: Just a sense of absence, of nothing to hang on to or amuse yourself with.

VR: Absence of nothing to hang on to?

Q: That's a double negative, isn't it?

VR: Yes, it is.

Q: Absence of anything.

VR: To hang on to. Yes, which is great joy.

Q: So, is it possible?

VR: To do what? [laughter]

Q: To feel both at the same time?

VR: No, I don't think so. I mean, there's no point in feeling both at the same time. That's a little complicated. When there's absence of complication, then there's great joy. I mean, why complicate the thing with trying to feel both at the same time?

Q: Well, ah, it's not a sense of trying, it's just that that can also feel like a complete bummer.

VR: Complete what?

Q: Bummer.

VR: What? [laughter] Vomit?

Q: Something really awful.

VR: Something really awful. Well, I suppose there are moments when one feels completely awful, but those moments can actually be understood or experienced in terms of practice—that moments of feeling great awfulness in themselves have no reference point, no sense of owing anything because you feel awful. If you feel anything, it doesn't mean you have to owe anything to anybody, which could be great joy.

Q: Thank you very much.

VR: Huh.

Q: When you were just answering that question, were you saying that moments that would otherwise feel very awful come to feel very fine?

VR: No, moments that feel very awful are very fine because they're so awful that there's no need to owe that awfulness to anybody. It doesn't belong to you or to anybody.

Q: So you just kind of get off on the sensation? [laughter]

VR: You could, you could.

Q: I don't understand. Say that your mother dies and you feel really horrible. Are you going to feel good about that somehow? I don't understand what you're saying.

VR: Well, that means... then you have to tell me what you mean by "get off." You mean good?

Q: Yeah. "Like it," rather than not.

VR: No, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about great joy, which means that there's no separation between you and your experience. "Like it or not," doesn't matter. But you are so totally there.

Q: Thank you.

Q: I'm a bit confused about your notion that we have to come to the desert. It would be my understanding that this is the desert. That from day one that you put yourself on a pillow, it's the desert—or even before you've done that, that the desert is here. But the notion of coming to it? And also the fact that the desert is a place of great joy?

VR: Well, simply because when you've come to it, you don't realize that you've come to it. You think that when you sit on a pillow for the first time, you've come to it, but you haven't. You just imagine that you have. So, that's why we have talks.

Q: Okay. But can you distinguish between many of the principles you've outlined as being characteristic of arriving at this desert? I can relate to it. I'm not boasting that I've achieved any great insight. It's simply that I can relate to it. Uh, to give an example: I don't see a distinction between my sitting practice and my everyday life. I liked your comment that the meditative mind becomes one's environment. Many of the things you've said I relate to in my present position now. And I'm sure that most people in this room who've sat for a while or have, um, uh, are familiar with these practices could relate to these statements.

VR: I hope so.

Q: So, again why the notion of coming to it, or something, which is ahead of us, for some of us.

VR: Because it is.

Q: Yeah, but by the same token, it could also not be.

VR: Well then, why ask the question?

Q: I suppose because I want you to confirm what I wanted to hear, which you haven't.

VR: How would I know if you came to the desert or not? I'm walking alone myself.

Q: Okay.

Q: In this analogy that you made to the desert, does the concept of shunyata mean anything?

VR: Shunyata?

Q: Yes. Is this a concept which works in with the desert?

VR: Yes, I think so.

Q: How about the idea of void? The... is this, uh, I've often heard people speak of buddhist philosophy about the void.

VR: Well, they're probably Englishmen who translated buddhist texts. [laughter]

Q: Yes, uh, that explains it, yeah. [laughter]

VR: Bob, in the front.

Q: You just said in an answer to a question that great joy means no separation between you and your experience. And, in another talk, I once asked Rinpoche what it meant to see dharmically and he asked me what I thought it meant, and I said something like I thought it meant the seeing the pattern of reality. And he said, "No, it means there's no separation between you and what you see." One of the marks...

VR: Whew! [laughter]

Q: ... of the desert that you said was a certain sense of intense activity...

VR: Yes.

Q: ... I'm interested in that kind of intense activity that one feels. And the way you described it implied clearly that before one arrives at the desert, one does not feel that kind of activity...

VR: That's right.

Q: ... that kind of intensity?

VR: That's right.

Q: ... and that it seems that one of the conditions for arriving at the desert is, um, dropping one's need to be entertained and coming to terms with one's confusion...

VR: Mm hmm.

Q: ... and to say that the desert has great activity in it, a kind that isn't there before you were in the desert, seems to mean that what we think is great activity in our confused life full of hassles and identification isn't that kind of identity at all...

VR: No. It's complete frustration.

Q: So, does that great activity have something to do with being broken open or broken away from one's kind of confusion?

VR: That's right. It has a sense of turning completely toward the present moment. Turning toward dharma, we could say. Dharma means things that happen. Ordinary dharmas are what happens—heat, cold, fire, hot—whatever you want to say. And also higher dharmas are things that happen in one's mind, which is the same thing. So, in terms of this sense of intense activity, it is a matter of we never had the energy even to pay attention to what's going on in our life until something happens and we click to the sense of boredom, which is vast. And we realize that this boredom is the same as our mind, but in that space of our mind, things happen like thoughts, which is like seeing animals in the desert and the flowers blooming and all kinds of things happening all the time. But we're intensely, passionately there, interested in it, because it doesn't have to do any more with any sense of personal owning of the thing. But it's happening...

Q: Personal what?

VR: Owning—our own. It's happening in the huge desert which is our mind.

Q: Good.

Q: Does the first bhumi, does it come in glimpses, you know, off and on? Or is it definite, wham, experience?

VR: Well, I don't think it's anything like wham.

Q: I've read in books and stuff how it's called like the most joyful bhumi because...

VR: It's called the bhumi of great joy. Yes. Stage of great joy. But like all the rest of it, there's no wham—just dawns on you that it's happening.

Q: Is it knock, knock kind of dawning? Or is it definite?

VR: Well, I think it's kind of definite. It's like going downhill. You definitely realize you're going downhill because the speed picks up. [laughter]

Q: Okay. Um, another question. You said the path isn't really predictable and I heard a metaphor that said the path was like a spiral staircase.

VR: I didn't say the path. I said the destination wasn't predictable...

Q: Okay. Okay.

VR: I said that it didn't have a predictable end.

Q: But the path itself does have predictable patterns?

VR: That's the way we're talking here.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

VR: Yellow tank top.

Q: As you were talking about this experience of sitting at the edge of the desert with the sun shining on the sand, it made me think of drug experiences that I've had, oh...

VR: In the desert?

Q: Not necessarily in the desert, like, more the metaphor that you were using, Okay? And I was wondering, as a person with a lot of acid trips in my background and as a beginning practitioner, when I hear of this experience, I tend to relate it to my acid experiences and to the states of mind I've reached on drugs. And I was wondering what you can... and, I mean, I don't want to try to obtain that same kind of state through my sitting and I was wondering if you could say anything towards that?

VR: [laughs] Well, I think as human beings, the point is we always try to relate whatever we hear to something we've experienced before. The point of this particular desert—it has no relationship to anything we've experienced before, none whatsoever. That's what makes it great joy. It doesn't have the burden of a memory.

Q: Thank you.

VR: Nick, way back, is that Nick? Yes, it is. All the way, in the back.

Q: In relation to, uh, Vajra Regent, in relation to the point about intense activity, occasionally you talked about, well you talked about it being like seeing animals in this desert and being involved passionately with it. But occasionally, it becomes very claustrophobic.

VR: Too much space.

Q: Pardon me?

VR: Too much space.

Q: Huh. But does desire for intensive practice come up as well, because of that, or out of that? I wonder about that.

VR: Hmm.

Q: Uh. The question being...

VR: Yeah, sure. Intense activity which could be claustrophobic to a conventional sense of space is no longer claustrophobic because that practice of mahavipashyana already has introduced environment. Space of the environment. So the activity within the environment also reflects the space of the environment. So you're not exactly hammering on a point, but a point has a space around it. So, you could say that intense claustrophobia produces a sense of practice, which is space. Spacious. Sure.

Q: But what about the desire to do practice alone, for instance, retreat or whatever?

VR: Alone... together...

Q: So, that's part of the whole thing?

VR: Well, I mean, there's no particular bias in this desert. Everybody's sort of self-existing.

Q: I just wondered about the idea of like drawing back and taking care of your own state of mind, in that sense of individual practice?

VR: Well, if you draw back—right?—you draw back to take care of your own state of mind and then you look around at your own state of mind, and it reflects what? Desert. And so you're

thinking, well, what can I take care of here? There doesn't seem to be anything to take care of. It's very vast and dry and bright. So then you walk again and little things pop up, cactus and what-not, thoughts. This is the idea of journey. The whole point of journey is that, in terms of practice, how to do practice beyond one's personal concern is that whatever pops up is further journey, even if you try to go back, it's further journey because you go back on... desert, which is still warm.

Q: Thank you.

VR: In the back again, couple... in the back... all the way in the back is a little man. There he is... no, he's bigger than that. Hand up. Used to be blond. [laughs] [laughter]

Q: Why do you use as the basic description the word, "boredom"? Because, what you described, doesn't from my experience, I wouldn't relate to it with boredom. Boredom is the state from which you want to get out. To do something, or to think something... entertain. What you describe doesn't convey this sort of state of mind.

VR: That's correct. But that's exactly why I used the term boredom. And we have used the term boredom. Boredom is the state of mind which transcends boredom. This boredom we're talking about has nothing to do with exactly what you're speaking of, the desire to fill up the desert with buildings, things and highways, whatever. This particular boredom is so bored that it is completely content to walk along on the desert by itself. That's the kind of boredom we're talking about.

Q: [laughs] But why do you call it boredom?

VR: Because...

Q: You call it joy or light... what's wrong with that?

VR: We call it boredom because it relates to everybody's experience here. Everybody here who thinks, we think, that boredom is bad news. What we're trying to say is that boredom is good news. When you're bored, you're on the right track.

Q: So it is... sort of... you rehabilitate the word.

VR: The words are correct. They're not just thrown in because of some convenience or cultural reference. The word boredom is used specifically to relate to a state of mind. You see, that state of mind which we call boredom without practice is very terrifying. But with practice, to relate to that same boredom, same neurosis as boredom, becomes vast, spacious desert of brilliant sunshine, becomes a possibility of awakening because we can't invent anything else to do.

Q: So...

VR: So bored... so bored.

Q: Maybe.

VR: Even maybe.

Q: The problem... I'm striving with this problem of "cool boredom" from the very beginning. I have trouble with...

VR: This is "hot boredom" tonight.

Q: Is it?

VR: Tonight it is.

Q: I don't feel any boredom. Neither hot nor cold.

VR: You don't what?

Q: I don't feel any boredom.

VR: You don't feel any boredom?

Q: No! I mean right now.

VR: Right now.

Q: No.

VR: No.

VR: Well, you must be thoroughly bored then.

Q: That perhaps may be the case. I don't really know.

VR: Well, that is the case. When you're thoroughly bored, you don't feel any boredom particularly and you also don't feel any desire to entertain yourself. Freedom, no freedom. Sane, insane. Neurosis, sanity...

Q: ... sounds...

VR: ... doesn't matter.

VR: Sounds great?

Q: Yeah.

VR: [laughs] Now you're getting bored.

Q: Ah ha, Okay. I understand.

VR: Ah ha.

Q: Thank you.

VR: Your welcome.

Q: Can you tell me please if the feeling of great joy and a feeling of awakening is similar to a feeling of independence and freedom from habitual ways of thinking that have not worked well? What relationship does that have...

VR: Not exactly. This feeling of great joy that we're talking about is the absence of both a sense of freedom from habitual patterns and not having habitual patterns. In other words, it's just a plop down on the desert. Like a baby, like a child. You hear, smell, taste. You're involved with the total activity of the world. Not from a personal view.

Q: Well, it seems to be the contradictions that bewilder me a little bit. And I took, for the past questioner, grasp maybe a little better since you talked about boredom, the boredom plus the intense activity. I still have to grapple with that. I suppose I'll have to listen to a little more explanation of about what boredom is. Thank you.

VR: There's another gentleman coming along Monday. I suppose he'll have a little more to say

about these things. We can, at this point, as far as what we've discussed, have boredom and intense activity at the same time. White shirt.

Q: Is the freshness we experience in the things we come across in the desert due to the no investment in the things we come across?

VR: That's right. You don't have any sense of reference point there. It's not your desert, particularly. It's not your meditation practice.

Q: Right, right.

VR: Yeah.

Q: Thank you.

VR: You're not practicing because you're going to get anywhere. You're practicing as a journey. Along the journey, things arise.

Q: So we don't lose any experiences of emotions that we have experienced previously? We simply experience, for the first time, we truly experience them. We have nothing invested in them so they're real.

VR: [laughs] Ohhh... [laughter]

Q: Thank you.

Q: Um, to bring this analogy of the desert to almost a painful point...

VR: You mean almost?

Q: Almost. If, when we approach the desert, it seems like a desert...

VR: Oh, come on.

Q: Well, when we step in...

VR: Yeah?

Q: There's this something else happening which we didn't expect. How do we know that it's a desert anymore?

VR: Your question's completely off the track.

Q: Well, how do we know...

VR: We don't step in, we don't approach. It happens.

Q: Well, what happens to what we thought the desert was?

VR: There was no concept of desert before you reached the desert. That's the whole point. You think you meditate, but you don't.

Q: Then, what is the significance of the, um, metaphor at all?

VR: Well, just to make a little good time here tonight. [laughs]

Q: I'm having a terrible time. [laughs]

VR: You see, that's the problem. Still drinking the water, eh? Too much water. It's gotta be more

dry.

Q: Well, what happens to what we think?

VR: It becomes an intense flowering in the desert: cactus, yellow flowers and all kinds of things. Turns towards dharma—what we think turns towards dharma. Things as they are are not particularly in question. They are what they are.

Q: Thank you.

VR: Well, ladies and gentlemen, that's enough of that, eh? My goodness, all this desert and everybody fanning away. [laughter] Somebody could make a great concession. Maybe Naropa Institute should serve orange-aid—or something like that—at this point in our meditation practice. [laughter]

In any case, I would like to second Mr. McKeever's appeal to all of you to support our mutual journey. I suppose it may seem rather dry on hearing about it. And a little bit tedious. But on the other hand, if you actually get into it, when you start walking, it's extremely exciting. So many things are going on. This is not meant as a kind of PR to get you excited and seduced into licking envelopes and all the rest of it. But it is meant to reiterate what we've been saying all along, that our world is much greater than this particular room. At the same time, without this particular room, our world is very small. We can generate some real great joy in the world by our effort and our practice. And part of our practice involves a legacy. We should provide a trust fund for those who follow us. And that is that these teachings—and this particular vehicle of transmission called Naropa Institute—continue in the future. It has done for us, it should do for others. So please do your best to make it so. Thank you very much. Good night.