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THE LONELY JOURNEY: DEVOTION IN THE KAGYÜ LINEAGE

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*TALK TWO: EGOLESS DEVOTION*

*In this talk, the Vajra Regent continues the exploration of the lonely journey of devotion by examining the approach theism. The theistic point of view is that we can escape pain and uncertainty by simply dissolving into an ocean of cosmic bliss. However, this only creates further confusion because our struggle to merge with the "great cosmic one" is marked by passion, aggression, and ignorance. From the Buddhist point of view, real devotion has no sense of self-betterment. Real devotion is unfiltered awareness of things as they are. We look at our habitual patterns of passion, aggression, and ignorance through the practices of hearing, contemplation, and meditation, which leads us to the experience of egolessness.*

We were talking about need, and feeling incomplete, not whole, missing something, and that experience of pain. When we talk about pain, we should be quite clear that we're not simply looking at physical pain, but also at psychological pain. We go through a process of some kind of journey, some search, trying to locate and identify some greater person, greater philosophy, or greater situation so that we can feel better. We feel lesser, and therefore there must be something greater, so we look for that object of devotion. Having explored our world in terms of what is greater, physically and psychologically, we come to what is spiritually greater, simply because we have not been satisfied with either physical or psychological pleasure. We come to this speculative thing called "spirituality," and the principle of devotion is central to the theme of spirituality.

The general approach of theism is that, as wretched human beings, we are by nature incomplete and therefore must unite with Big Daddy or Big Mommy, as the case may be. There is some whole, complete being or principle from which we are separate, and the only way we

could achieve totality is to be sucked up, immersed, diluted into the big We. Our approach is to make ourselves stupid, to ignore our intelligence and just become a drop in the big ocean. "Once I drop my drop into the ocean, then everything's going to be okay. I'll merge with the great, mystic, wonderful Cosmic Me or It—whatever."

According to the Buddhist approach, this attitude is both the creation and sustaining factor of confusion. Basically, we are trying to dump our garbage on someone else's lawn, get rid of our mistakes on someone else. We might convince ourselves that there's absolutely nothing wrong with that; that's what we should do. Let's not worry about this negativity and feeling of uncertainty, feeling of pain. If we dump it all into the big garbage heap, then we're free of it. [Sings:] "I am a bubble, make me the sea..."<sup>1</sup> So we have to think of ourselves as a bubble. Isn't that degrading? And not only degrading, but somewhat ridiculous? We create some sense of bubble because we're afraid of not surviving. If we say, "I'm a bubble," that makes us something, so therefore it's possible to merge into the great ocean of cosmic bliss. True devotion? Hardly, from our point of view.

Why does that attitude create further confusion? If we feel like a bubble, then we should endeavor to get ourselves into the ocean. However, in doing so, we create the world of passion and aggression. Passion means that at all costs, including my intelligence, I'll throw myself into that ocean, because my intelligence is simply an illusion, or intelligence itself is an illusion. There's just the great Cosmic One. In doing so, I must ward off, push off, any threat to dropping into the ocean, to my path of getting closer to the One.

What happens if we have aggression? Oh, that's okay; it's merely divine play. If I'm aggressive to someone, that's his or her doing, not mine. I don't have to do anything about that; just let the divine work through me. From those two attitudes, passion and aggression, we create our entire, complicated world of suffering and pain. This is the ordinary attitude of devotion.

Passion and aggression, the continual pattern of avoiding who we are as we are, is ignorance, ignoring the basic situation. What is that? We don't know. We would like to be devoted to something, but we have no idea what that means. We just feel anxiety. Ignorance, or ignoring the basic situation, is the root of confusion; not being able to look at our state of mind as it is, without any filter whatsoever, without any pie-in-the-sky image of who we should be, who we can be.

Rather, who are we? What are we ignoring? According to the Buddhist teachings, we are ignoring the facts, and the basic fact is that there is no such thing as me. "Me" is a series of

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<sup>1</sup> Before meeting the Vidyadhara, the Vajra Regent was a student of the Hindu teacher Swami Satchitananda; this is a line from one of the traditional scriptures his students would sing according to the Kirtan practice of group singing and chanting.

events strung together very rapidly, which creates a continuous cycle of hope and fear—hope that we will be eternally who we are, fear that we won't. So if I merge myself with the great eternal one, then I, too, will be eternal, and I won't have to worry. According to the Buddhist teachings, this is what is called the ego: the notion that there is a permanent self which continues throughout eternity. From the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, there is no such thing, and egolessness is the basic state of who we are.

In discussing the path of devotion, we should understand that it is impossible to begin perfectly. Somehow we believe in something. No matter how fine we feel our intellectual approach is, or how deeply in tune we are with our body, how generous we are with our world, we have some subtle belief based on nothing at all. It's what we call a mistake. When did you begin to believe that you are so-and-so? If you try to find that point, you can't find it: try to find the first moment when you recognized that you were John Doe.

If we are to practice the path of devotion, we should understand at the beginning of our journey that real devotion has no sense of self whatsoever. Real devotion, true devotion, has no sense at all of cure or betterment or reaching for the highest. Real devotion is the state of things as they are, without corruption, without filter of any kind. Real devotion is the awareness of things as they are.

But again, we have to start with our belief. We would like to jump the whole cycle and say, "Yes, I understand that. Just drop it." Good luck! We have to take this belief and use it to uncover itself. We have to use ignorance, passion, and aggression to experience things as they are. Garbage is garbage; it is not beautiful. In our world, it's garbage, it stinks, and it's thrown somewhere else. What we are suggesting in terms of our practice of devotion is not to throw it anywhere, but that, in a true, honest look at the world, garbage and beauty can exist together.

How to do that is very simple. First, just hearing about it is a beginning. Second, think about it. Think about habitual patterns and how they create confusion again and again. Third, meditate in a simple, uncomplicated way, not with a sense of betterment, not with a sense of being the most devoted person, the expert; but rather, just sit and see how it is. Is there any origin to this feeling of pain? Is there any origin to feeling a lack of something or other, and not knowing what that something is? What's the origin of that? A Buddhist would say that what we call ego never happened at all. It is purely our mistake. If that's the case, who is going to be devoted to whom? That's a very basic point in our journey together.

Let's look at that. Who is devoted to whom? If we think of devotion as a dumping process, then we are merely creating pollution on pollution on pollution. Who is devoted to whom? First, let's find the "who." Who is feeling this sense of separateness, of incompleteness, of lacking something? Without the experience of egolessness, there is absolutely no point in

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talking about devotion. It becomes just another grand scheme which at best results in uncertainty.

If you have any questions, we could have a discussion.

STUDENT: In the first part of your talk you seem to be equating theism with spiritual materialism.

VAJRA REGENT: That's correct.

S: Absolutely?

VR: I think so.

S: Which is to say what? That there are no theists who aren't spiritual materialists?

VR: If they call themselves theists, they are spiritual materialists.

STUDENT: If we have experienced this egolessness occasionally, what then? What kind of dialogue can take place, what kind of relationship?

VR: All kinds. Tremendous possibilities.

S: It seems so.

VR: Tremendous possibilities, as long as we continue to practice. Egolessness might be a shock, but our basic practice is to lean into that shock and find out exactly what that is, if that's possible.

S: What?

VR: Exactly. What? No conclusion.

S: It doesn't seem to be a conclusion, but yet—

VR: Yes, well, we come along with that. Yes. That's very good, extremely good. That's basically what we have. We have *what*, big *what*, and then some palpitation, some outbreath—whew! What to do with that? Practice. Sit down. Don't do anything with it. Don't try to change it. Don't manipulate it. Just feel the sense of [inhales and exhales]—what?

S: Just keep doing it, and when that shock happens—you just keep doing it?

VR: Yes, just keep doing it. That's what makes it non-goal-oriented. In true devotion, you just keep doing it, including the shock, including the garbage, including the fear. To do that, you have to have some sense of confidence. Otherwise, you wouldn't do it at all. You would say, "Take me, oh great one. I am just a little flute. Play me." [Laughter]

STUDENT: To go back to the question of theism, is there no way that a Christian or a Jew or a Hindu could be enlightened, and do we as Buddhists have a spiritual monopoly?

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VR: Who do you mean, we? Buddhists?

S: The Buddhists, yes.

VR: Well, let's make it rhetorical—or nonrhetorical—whichever way you want to do it. What is a Buddhist?

S: Basically, I tend to feel a little uneasy about the mockery or condescension towards these other disciplines, which maybe have something we could respect.

VR: This is not condescension. Absolutely not. Respect what you want. Find out. I want to talk about what I know.

STUDENT: I've wondered about this question for a while. All the good Buddhist teachers seem to lay the groundwork that egolessness is the case, and then to prime this they say we must find out who we are. Those are the words used. In that sense it almost presumes that there will be a who at the other end, which sounds like primal therapy, or "Yes, I'm really going to discover who I really am and why I wet my bed." But whether we know or we don't know, we're taught that we're going to find non-ego at the other end.

VR: Undoubtedly.

S: So I have always wondered—

VR: Who the who is?

S: No, no. Why the question isn't asked or proposed that we'll find out what or who we *aren't*.

VR: Well, let's not get too technical. Our basic point is who.

S: Well, if non-ego is the truth of the matter, what is a who?

VR: That's the point.

S: Okay.

VR: But we have to start somewhere.

S: Well, can you say anything about that who?

VR: Not at all. Just that it's a question: Who?

STUDENT: You've been talking about basic lack and need, and tonight you were discussing conventional devotion, which is a dumping process, throwing out. Is it possible that lack or need is created because we throw it out, but actually what we need is what we are throwing out? Is that what you're saying?

VR: Something like that. The point is that from beginningless time—no one can figure out when it started, no one here—we have been conditioned to believe that we should get rid of

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something or other, and then it will be okay. What we're doing in the practice of meditation is collecting what we have and sitting with it, looking at it.

STUDENT: You made the statement that ego is a mistake. Could you just clarify that a little bit more?

VR: We experienced an echo, which we thought was something other, and got frightened. Then we tried to protect against that echo, which is our own echo. Would you like to know anything else?

S: I think it's similar to what the other questioner was saying about the who.

VR: How did the who come to be?

S: No, that's not what I was going to ask.

VR: What is it exactly?

S: When you're dealing with the egolessness, that I don't exist, there tends to be a real lax attitude, or you get very lethargic—

VR: Okay, wait a minute, stop. You've gone too far. How do we deal with the fact of dealing with egolessness? Well, egolessness is no dealing at all.

S: Okay. I can make the question better. I don't exist, supposedly. There is no ego—

VR: What do you mean, supposedly?

S: Okay. I don't exist.

VR: You don't.

S: Right.

VR: You're saying that, right?

S: I'm saying it.

VR: You—

S: Me.

VR: —are saying that you don't exist.

S: Right. Yet we have to continue.

VR: Yet we have to continue—what?

S: I'm trying to say it.

VR: Please do.

S: Okay. Yet we still have to continue throughout our daily lives, doing what we do, whether it be looking for a job or making some kind of—

VR: Wait a minute. I have to interrupt because I'm trying to understand all the bits and pieces of your question. "Yet we have to continue throughout our daily lives." What's stopping us?

S: The battle of ego, I suppose you could say.

VR: What's stopping us from continuing? We're going to die, sure. We could eat a lot of health food or take vitamins and try to live longer, but we're going to die. So you say we have to continue with our daily lives. What's stopping us?

S: What I'm saying is that it seems to be really tricky, the acknowledgment that there is no I or me or anything—

VR: Who acknowledges that?

S: It's sort of on an intellectual level, I would say, the acknowledgment.

VR: Yes, but we're talking about the experience. Experience doesn't mean watcher, particularly, someone to remember that there's no I, no me. Experience is some sense of constant awareness without the reference point of me. If we try to approach it from the back door, asking, "How am I going to continue?" we're not going to continue at all. We're going to be frustrated every inch of the way. Turn it around completely, switch your mind completely. Do that, and have real devotion. If you can, no problem, no problem at all. Just like that. There is no problem. Maybe. So how do we continue our daily life?

S: Well, there's the tendency to become so engrossed in thinking that way, that when your habitual patterns are coming up, and you're seeing that, and seeing the transparency of it, to take it a little too far.

VR: How so?

S: That's why I say it becomes very lethargic. You're feeling the egolessness of it, and yet you're also trying to keep pushing and just going through whatever you do every day, and it becomes very tricky.

VR: Yes, yes.

S: Almost to what's the point of continuing doing these things, for instance, dealing with the ambition you might have in a career of some sort.

VR: That's great.

S: That's what I'm basically talking about.

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VR: That's great. That's exactly what we're talking about tonight—that every time this point sticks up, basically, we always feel a sense of gap, all of us. It doesn't matter how long it lasts or how frequent it is, but there's some transition between *this* and *that*. And then something, experience of some kind, sticks its head up, and we think, "That's what to deal with, that's what to latch on to."

That is basically what we're trying to address in the practice of devotion. In devotion, as soon as something comes up, we don't have to grab it. We don't have to grab it. That's a very subtle and very real experience all the time. We have some space where nonego is absolutely revealed as it is, and we can't do anything about it. There's no us to do anything about it at all, just space, and then something pops up.

I'm not talking about measuring the time between *this* and *that*. It's very fast sometimes, very fast. Then something pops up, and you think, "Let me grab it. This is—." The point is, in the practice of the path of devotion, we leave our hands off. Just let it be there. Dealing with the world, with continuous, habitual patterns, just let them be there. Real devotion does not have any sense of self.

STUDENT: You were talking before of allowing belief to uncover itself, and in the previous lecture, you were talking about having ego build the snare to bring itself down. And ego is such a powerful force that it takes everything in the world and pulls everything into it to make into itself, such a strong fortress. How do you con such a powerful general into destroying itself?

VR: Very simple: the practice of meditation.

S: I was afraid you were going to say that. [Laughter]

VR: It's the most simple, direct, and uncomplicated approach, which drives any kind of confusion crazy. There's nothing to do at all. I'm just going to sit here and breathe. What's he going to do with that? Nothing. Everything.

S: Thank you.

VR: Our dreams come true, huh?

STUDENT: A couple of questions back I think you said something about devotion taking care of itself. Does that ring a bell?

VR: I said something like that?

S: You might have. Given that, if you'll go that far with me—

VR: Sure, okay, let's do it.



S: Okay. Is there any point in playing at devotion in the sense that when we start meditating, we pretend we're meditating. Is that how we start working with devotion, by just acting devoted and feeling like total idiots? [Laughter]

VR: Aha! Two points: acting devoted, and feeling like total idiots. If you can do both, fine. That's real devotion coming through. But basically, what we do is act devoted and dump the garbage on the side, which is feeling like total idiots. Yes, if you're going to be devoted, you're going to be devoted with your whole trip, whatever it is, whether you're the best or the worst, or mediocre or aspiring, or less than mediocre, or whatever you think of yourself. Put the whole thing. So?

S: I'm unclear about the idiocy issue.

VR: Why?

S: You were just saying if you've got both, okay. Could you clarify that again?

VR: Yes, sure. Basically, the approach always is to shove the idiocy issue in the back somewhere so we can present ourselves as the devoted one. But what we're saying here is that you can't really shove it in the back at all, because out it comes, and you bend over and it falls out of your pocket. Plop. It doesn't matter who's on the other side at that point.

S: Okay. Thank you.

STUDENT: Why does the theistic approach necessarily have to be spiritually materialistic?

VR: Because you have *this*, which is the little, stupid one, and you have *that*, which is the greater one. "If I can get rid of *this* stupid thing, then *that* would love to eat me up." It's purely silly talk, you know. Where is your god here? Whose god is here? Whose divine principle is here? If anyone says, "I don't believe in your divine principle," then what happens? You say, "What? You don't? You silly —," and we begin our cycle of war and confusion and the whole thing.

S: Why is that necessarily so?

VR: I really don't know. It seems to me that it's a silly idea to begin with. I mean, really. If you believe in some sense of divinity all around you, and flowers and heavens, fine. So what? Have a good time with your world. But somehow, you start to lay that trip on other people. You can't help it. Someone says, "I didn't feel that." You say, "You didn't? Well, come along with me, son. You tell me when it doesn't happen." Like the missionaries in Hawaii. You know what they did? They came to do good, and they did well. [Laughter] I read that once in a book when I was in Hawaii. Anyway, it doesn't mean anything. That's the whole point. You go to do good, and you do well for yourself. And you have so many converts, four hundred converts to how you think. Great. Who cares? I don't want any of you to think like me, absolutely not. I particularly like the way I think, you know, by myself. Just let me think by myself, okay?

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S: I can see how historically in many ways the things that you're saying are true. I just question whether they necessarily have to be true.

VR: Necessarily they don't have to be true. As long as we don't believe in anything, fine. Then they don't have to be true at all.

STUDENT: You made the statement that real devotion equals no sense of self.

VR: Yes.

S: You also made the statement that there's no cure, or no betterment. If that is the case, why be Buddhist at all? There's no cure, there's no betterment, there's no self. Why can't we just go off and do whatever we're involved in? Why become Buddhist?

VR: That's what we do, anyway. That's what Buddhism's all about. It's saying, "Hey, that's what you do."

S: But there's a whole organization here.

VR: It's tremendous: directors, sub-directors, administrators, lower administrators, accountants, student fund raisers and student liaison, and the whole thing, and here we are anyway. So what?

S: That's what I'm asking, so what?

VR: That's what I'm saying. [Laughter]

S: So it doesn't make any difference if I'm here or not. Yes, you're right, I suppose so.

VR: Except you happen to be here. So, here we are—you, Naropa Institute student; me, so-called teacher—asking our little thing together. This and that, question, answer, in a big space. Plenty of room for all the hierarchy you could possibly imagine.

S: What is the purpose of this entire lineage, then, for 2500 years, all the teachings?

VR: Just for the simple purpose of saying, "Hello, are you there?"

S: Well, in a relative sense I'm here; in an absolute sense, I'm not.

VR: What do you mean by absolute? Absolute, then we don't have anything to say. Relative, you say, "Hello." That's fine, here we are. Relative makes Naropa Institute, eight billion courses, six billion teachers, six hundred billion dollar deficit, and here we are, rubbing our hands together in this world, with devotion, which has nothing to do with how hot it gets when we rub. We just rub.

S: Then there's devotion to nothing.

VR: Well, I suppose you could say there's devotion to nothing, but that's not real devotion. We could say devotion is nothing.

S: I don't feel like the question's been answered, actually.

VR: What's the question?

S: The question is, if there's no sense of doing anything for ourselves, no sense of betterment because there's no self anyway, why do people take on the path?

VR: Because they're confused.

S: And Buddhism alleviates the confusion? Or creates more of it?

VR: What do you say?

S: Creates more of it.

VR: If it creates more of it, then if it creates enough of it, hopefully, it will explode in your face, which is the best, most compassionate, gentle thing anyone could do. Instead of keeping the game going of who we are and what great schemes we have until we drop dead.

S: So Buddhism exposes the games?

VR: Are you trying to trick me?

S: No, I'm not, Sir.

VR: Well, then, you find out for yourself.

S: Okay, thank you.

VR: Chicago? Does it say "Chicago"? What does it say? [Trying to read what is printed on the questioner's shirt] Curacao, oh, very good. Okay, let's see what happens in Curacao.

STUDENT: You mention that some people choose to unite with the Big Daddy, drop everything and merge. If you're this type of person, or you have this element in you, is it better not to take on a guru, since the guru is most likely to bring out the Big Daddy merger in you?

VR: Let's try to find out what our stock is worth before we get into the merger.

S: Let me just think about that for a second before—

VR: Time's up. [Laughter]

STUDENT: You discussed the sense of confidence. Does that come from the knowledge that there's no problem?

VR: No, that comes from the knowledge that there's tremendous problem. That's where confidence comes from. When you see the suffering, then you have confidence.

S: What's to prevent that confidence from becoming ego—Rudra—or an attitude of "I'm going to save the world"?

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VR: Nothing. It can happen any old time.

S: Then why cultivate the confidence?

VR: Who said anything about that?

S: You were discussing confidence earlier, as far as—

VR: Confidence is something that happens. I wouldn't cultivate it, particularly. If you recognize it, then there it is.

S: Thank you.

STUDENT: There's often talk about being a carrot in the big soup.

VR: Yes, celery, carrot, potato. Trungpa Rinpoche talks about that in his book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*.

S: How does that differ from being a drop in the big ocean?

VR: It differs in one sense. In the sense of being a drop in the big ocean, we feel great as we submerge. In the sense of being a carrot, we're swimming around together in a boiling pot, and we stick our heads up as if someone was pushing us down. Someone hits you with a stick and shouts, "Shut up! Get back in the stew." No such luck. Don't hold on to that. In reality, there's no one with a big wooden spoon. Just the fluctuation of the water and the temperature.

S: At that point, where is dignity?

VR: Dignity is going down for the third time. [Laughter]

STUDENT: I've been trying to make a connection between what you've been saying tonight and some of the readings you assigned to us, specifically the reading in *The Life and Teachings of Naropa*. I was thinking that when Naropa was looking for the guru, he had something very special in mind, and he tripped over a maggot-infested dog. And what came to mind is that fifty thousand dollars is a maggot-infested dog.

VR: That's what came to your mind?

S: Yes.

VR: Well, in that case, you should trip over it. Don't try to jump over it. Connect with it. Connect with your maggot-infested trip. Yes. Naropa didn't particularly get away from any of those experiences, did he? According to the text, he got it like a pie in the face. So is fifty thousand dollars' worth of maggots a pie in Naropa Institute's face, wherever Naropa Institute is. Is it here in the Sacred Heart School, or is it in your mind?

S: That's very well put, actually.

VR: Not bad.

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S: Thank you.

STUDENT: You spoke earlier this evening about an object of devotion, implying that there was a devotion to something—

VR: That's right.

S: —and my question is that if there is in fact a devotion to something, doesn't that create the same duality that we're trying to avoid?

VR: Well, the point, simply speaking, is that we should recognize the duality that already is.

S: All right, I'll try.

VR: Okay, you do that. So will I.

Well, with all of us trying people, there's not much more to say tonight. We have until next Tuesday, which makes me very lonely, until we come together again—carrots, onions, celery, whatever—swimming around. See you next Tuesday. Thank you.