

VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN

THE LONELY JOURNEY: DEVOTION IN THE KAGYÜ LINEAGE

NAROPA INSTITUTE PRESIDENT'S COURSE

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*TALK THREE: EXPECTATION*

*This is the third of nine talks that the Vajra Regent gave between July 19 and August 18, 1977 at Naropa Institute (now Naropa University). The first and second talks are published in previous eBulletins and subsequent talks will be presented in future issues.*

*In this talk, the Vajra Regent presents the teacher-student relationship in terms of the goal: enlightenment. The guru uses the student's expectations to create the conditions for the surrender and commitment that allow the student to proceed on the journey.*

So that we don't fall into any kind of spiritual materialistic trap, it is necessary to continually lay the groundwork for the path of devotion by examining our intention. We have already discussed the fact of pain and suffering as a sense of separation: me and myself, me and my world, me and the object of desire. We have also discussed the cause of that suffering being belief in an individual, continuous self, or ego. So it is only fitting that we should talk about the goal at this point, which is the attainment of enlightenment. And since we're extremely simple-minded people, we could simply say that enlightenment means the discovery of the obvious. I don't think it would do at this point to talk about enlightenment in philosophical language, but rather to simply say that enlightenment is the discovery of what has been here all along.

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However, as we have noticed, that particular statement does not alleviate our sense of struggle, or our journey. If that were the case, we could instantly attain the state of awakened mind on the spot, right now. But somehow we don't believe that. There must be something more to it than that, so we think. And since we think that way, we have a path and practice. We have journey. Journey, in this case, in terms of devotion, is getting what we want—getting what we want from that, her, him, world, whatever—from “other.” From our ordinary neurotic point of view, we feel that there is distance between our self and the attainment of our desire, which is “other.”

We live in a world of experts. This is the world we have created out of a sense of poverty, a sense that we are not capable of understanding the fine points, and perhaps someone else—a specialist—is. We have to see a specialist, an expert, because we have a very special problem, an individual problem. And if we see that specialist, most likely it's going to take visit after visit after visit to cure ourselves of our disease. In this case our disease is confusion, and the expert is someone who has transcended confusion. We could say that the highest, most sublime expert is the spiritual teacher. Our poverty mentality taken to its ultimate height is the desire to achieve enlightenment, freedom from confusion. So therefore we seek out the expert, the one who has done so, the one who can actually show us the way to do so ourselves.

The Kagyü lineage is full of experts, and its special teaching is the path of devotion, and its special treatment is the relationship between the guru and the disciple. The point here, from the Buddhist approach, is using the disease to cure the disease. When we say that there is a whole lineage of experts and specialists that simply means we use neurosis—confusion—as the fuel to undermine confusion. The fact that we have a particular longing to be “there” instead of “here,” the fact that we have great desire to accomplish supreme happiness and peace, is the very fuel we use to undermine that notion.

So the Kagyü guru, beginning with Tilopa and continuing to the present day, is the expert who uses the fuel of confusion, and the particular characteristic of that fuel is expectation. Expectation is the fabric of our whole search, our whole journey. We expect that just around the corner is enlightenment, and maybe in my next sitting practice something's going to happen. Just as in the lineage stories we've read, I myself am going to sit down myself, tomorrow maybe, and achieve unsurpassable, perfect, great

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enlightenment, between five and six. Expectation is the very heart's blood of the journey, and the guru is the expert in manipulating your expectation. He or she is the perfect master of continually undermining any sense that you finally got it. When you think you've finally got it, as you've heard so many times, you haven't got it. Well, I think that's quite true.

In the Kagyü lineage, there is a history of the unbroken transmission of awakened mind from guru to disciple up to the present day, and there is also a history of expectation. This expectation is based on the path of devotion. This path of devotion is very special and hard to follow. It involves our complete emotional life. Devotion to whom? Devotion to the teacher, to the guru who understands. Devotion to the one who can actually give us the key, the secret to unlocking the doors of confusion and letting free, fresh air come in. We march into this relationship fully expecting that on our first meeting with the teacher, it will be resolved. If we meet the wise man, at our first meeting all doubts will disperse and clear sunlight will come through. And this is our expectation from the beginning to the end, as we have seen reflected in the lives of the lineage holders. Naropa, the disciple of Tilopa, spent twelve years, day after day, with expectation, and Tilopa would time and time again pull the rug out from under him. Then Naropa would think, "Ah! Now I've got it. He means this. This must be what he means." And Tilopa would say, "What are you doing there? How come you're doing that?" And Naropa would feel completely dejected, terrible, and try again.

On the path of devotion, there is no particular set formula of how the teacher works with the student, but there is always an underlying principle, which is working with expectation. Expectation is a microcosm of our whole world, of our whole planet and the people on it and how they live: with continual expectation. Tomorrow will be better! Tomorrow will be better. A better world, a better society, a better life, more money, great success, scholarship—whatever. In a one-to-one relationship with the teacher, this expectation and sense of always projecting, always laying our version on the world becomes very apparent. We have heard so many stories of these gurus and teachers and how they did mean things, outrageous things, and were playful, kind, hard, or soft. The point is that we each bring our own neurosis, our own baggage to our relationship with the teacher, and it has a particular twist, a personal idea of who we are, what we are, and what we expect, and that could be slightly different from everyone else.

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The accomplished teacher knows how to work with the student's particular slant on what he or she wants to be, wants to accomplish, and what his or her idea of enlightenment is. We can see that each one of the holders of the Kagyü lineage is different. They share the same principle, the same complete commitment, but each one has a different manifestation according to our projections, our expectations of what *we* should be. Naropa is a great scholar; Marpa is a farmer and householder; Mila is a recluse; Gampopa is a renowned monk; and so on. The point of devotion is not to take on the guru, the object of devotion, as your image and then reproduce yourself in that image, but rather to discover the enlightened quality of your own expectation, your own neurosis. The important point here is that we don't leave our baggage behind, but we bring it with us, we bring our expectation with us continually.

When it comes down to the wire, there is a necessity for absolute obedience to the guru's word; but coming down to the wire might take a very long time. Absolute obedience is necessary simply because the sense of preserving our identity as a singular ego is so strong and so intense that in the long run there is only one possibility: yes or no. But getting down to the wire, as I said, might take a long time. However, in the lineage we feel that the teachings should be thoroughly explained and thoroughly presented so there's no hocus-pocus. We should not encourage expectation because there will be enough of that by itself, but rather we should tell the story straight out. Surrender, commitment, devotion—all these words come down to absolute yes and absolute no, come down to letting go of any personal sense of ongoing survival as to who you think you are.

So having cleared the ground, it is necessary to proceed. Not only is it necessary, but also we are drawn to the object of devotion, we are magnetized, and we struggle with our own sense of intelligence—how could I possibly not know all the obvious? But some little doubt creeps in, and as long as we have such doubt, we have a journey.

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

STUDENT: I don't understand—you said that we should drop the self-identity and at the same time bring our garbage along with us. It seems really dangerous to say that. How do you now make sure that it's not—it seems like it could be improperly used...

VAJRA REGENT: Would you say that again?

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S: You said to drop the self-identity, to surrender. And at the same time to bring along your garbage with you, to use it somehow. I don't understand how you use your garbage at the same time.

VR: Well, you don't. The teacher uses it on you. You bring it along no matter what. If you try to think about bringing along your garbage, it's impossible. This is simply a message, you know, like a news broadcast.

S: It still seems dangerous just to state that.

VR: Extremely dangerous. Ego might actually lose its grip.

STUDENT: You said that when it comes down to the wire, it's a question of yes or no. I don't understand—yes or no what?

VR: It's very much like the story of Naropa and Tilopa. Naropa said, "Do this," Tilopa thought, "Okay, that must be right." So he jumped off the roof. Actually, at that point Tilopa wasn't even saying yes or no. But that's our expectation, and it comes down to the wire.

S: Yes, I'll do it, or no, I won't?

VR: Yes.

S: So no is hanging on, yes is letting go?

VR: I wouldn't say that. You could switch it any way you want.

S: Okay, thanks.

STUDENT: Ösel, could you say something about not creating expectations, but working with expectations? I see the aspect of working with them, but there also seems to be a dimension where there is no expectation, which seems to be purely the relationship between those two aspects of expectation.

VR: What we would like is to completely merge our mind with the mind of the teacher, the one who knows what needs to be known, so therefore we will know exactly the same. A meeting of two minds, a transmission, is what we would like. But the teacher is saying that as long as you persist in believing in your own deficiency then you have to struggle and go on a journey. We hear that message so many times and in so many different ways, yet still we're not quite certain, so we keep going.

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S: Thank you.

STUDENT: What's the difference between blind faith and complete devotion to the guru?

VR: I suppose pain, perception of pain. Intelligence is the same thing.

S: Would you say more about that?

VR: Sure. We could have the kind of devotion where we have a picture in our mind of the guru, and we recreate that constantly so that we begin to feel we are the walking picture ourselves. Generally, what happens is a sense of total joy, like we discussed last time. It doesn't matter what happens—if someone says something aggressive, or if there's something aggressive or depressing or exciting in the environment, we say, "Oh, it's all just joy. It's all his doing." In other words, we create such a strong thought pattern that it blurs everything, and everything becomes heavenly.

STUDENT: Ösel Tendzin, is not our neurosis our expectation, but we don't realize it until it comes up as such, as expectation?

VR: Sure.

S: Then it's only through finding the guru who can mirror you and show you your expectation that you find out that you actually have neurosis? Is that right?

VR: No. We still feel uncomfortable, even without any idea of a guru or teacher or anything. We feel uncomfortable anyway.

S: You're talking about getting what we want? Devotion is getting what we want?

VR: That's what we think, yes. Our motivation is the fulfillment of desire. In this case, when you have spiritual motivation, getting what you want means to be completely awake.

STUDENT: You're talking about examining our intention, which is seeing that desire to attain enlightenment. But I'm wondering, what do you do with that? Do you just see it, or just let it sit there?

VR: Well, you can't let it sit for too long. Eventually, you have to do something. That's what people think. That's why this particular path of devotion as practiced by the Kagyü lineage is a very potent one. We don't say, "We see the fallacy of expectation, and it's completely hollow; and since we know we can never get exactly what we want,

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therefore just sit here, and keep it over there.” Eventually, we can’t hold to that. It breaks, and we get up from the cushion and immediately, like a robot, go to the object of desire. On the path of devotion, we bring our expectation with us. In other words, from the beginning we know clearly that, while expectation is a delusion, a deception, at the same time the possibility of working with it in terms of the object of devotion is quite real.

S: When I look at that, there’s a tremendous urge to shove it aside—the urge to get out of this mess. I see that, and my immediate reaction is “drop that.”

VR: I think people do that for a long time—keep it in a side cupboard. Eventually, it begins to stink.

S: Thank you.

STUDENT: It seems that at a certain point people tend to find that what they want in their relationship to the spiritual journey is to be left alone and get out of it.

VR: Not yet.

S: Well, occasionally you hear that sentiment expressed, and I wish that the buddhas and bodhisattvas and gurus of the lineage would leave me alone. I was wondering how you work with that, or how one would work with it.

VR: In the next seven talks we’re going to try to walk through the mud together, and part of that journey is some sense of resentment, or of being hassled, which we’ll get into in more detail. But basically how you work with it, I suppose, is just to let yourself be hassled—which means, I guess, trying to escape.

S: So people should go ahead and try, so to speak? What?

VR: What? What, what?

S: Thank you very much.

STUDENT: It seems like the world does a good-enough job of pulling the rug out from under you. But there must be a difference between what the guru does and what the world does.

VR: That’s what we think, yes.

S: Is there a difference, or is it the same?

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VR: I don't think there's any difference. We have such a conceptual version of the world that it becomes centralized in the figure of the teacher. In other words, the teacher becomes our monumental projection, our monolith of expectation, all centered in one dot, in one person, the one who can actually show us how to get out of this.

S: So you end up expecting more of the teacher than you do of the world? From my experience the world is falling apart as much as or more so than my relationship with my teacher.

VR: Yes.

S: Well, you're saying that you centralize your expectations on the guru.

VR: Yes, just like you said: "The world is falling apart, but not the teacher." The teacher is dying too.

S: It doesn't seem necessary for the guru to manipulate the world so it feels like it's falling apart—

VR: The guru doesn't manipulate the world at all.

S: Well, you said that the guru manipulates your expectations—

VR: Your expectations; not the world. The world is what it is.

S: Yes. But it doesn't seem necessary at this point.

VR: That's a good one.

S: Is that possible?

VR: Sure. As long as it lasts.

S: Okay. Thank you.

STUDENT: I'll try to repeat what I think the last question was, which is why is it necessary to have devotion to the guru rather than devotion to some other projection of the world? Therapists offer views of many schools, and one could be disappointed in that, or come to that realization and not have to have a particular guru of the Kagyü lineage.

VR: Well, it's whatever looks best, you know.

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S: But people are being disappointed in their obsessions and their projections all the time, and they don't get enlightened.

VR: That's true, they don't. So? Why the guru?

S: But they could be.

VR: Any time. Try now.

STUDENT: Is there a point where you decide to go to see the guru, or does it just happen? Does it just overwhelm you to the point where you have to?

VR: I think basically, to begin with, it's a matter of feeling in need of particular teaching and particular medicine, like going to see a doctor.

S: So you have to feel real sick.

VR: I think so. Confused. It doesn't mean that you vomit all the time or anything like that. It is just a general sense of not being with it.

S: When you do give in to that urge to get cured, there are doubts that maybe you're just causing more sickness or something. Is there any—there's no "when," right?

VR: No, there is no "when." Not that I know of. Just pure coincidence. In the Buddhist teachings that is called the force of karma. In other words, your particular thought patterns are so strong that they make your mouth move and words come out, and then your legs [mimics walking stiffly]—

STUDENT: With respect, how do *you* feel?

VR: Fine.

S: And about the problem of getting clear teachings, it would be nice to know how you felt personally—

VR: About the teachings?

S: About giving good teachings, clear teachings.

VR: Teachings are good.

S: And how do *you* feel, because one reason you're very inspiring to me and a lot of other people is that you're just like me and a lot like a lot of other people.

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VR: Yes. That's how I feel. The teachings are so good, so true.

S: You feel good.

VR: I feel fine. The teachings are very good and true.

S: I did not suspect that you felt bad.

VR: [Laughs] The teachings are very good and true.

S: I mean because you are like me or like us, it is a very inspiring situation.

VR: Well, that's what I feel, you know, that the teachings are so true, they strike right to the core.

S: Could you say anything more intimate than that?

VR: Well, let's see. Sometimes I'm depressed; sometimes I'm happy. Sometimes I'm tired; sometimes I'm sad; but the teachings are really true.

STUDENT: This rug of expectation that is being pulled out from under you through your instructions from the guru—from what I heard from the man before, anticipation of this rug being pulled out from under you would tend to make you want to put that aside. "I know I'm being set up, he's told me to do this, he's going to pull it out from under me again." He said he wants to put that aside. You said that starts to smell. So it's still there, coming out. What do you do with it at that point? It smells.

VR: Well, you try to clean it up.

S: It's still an intellectual understanding—

VR: No; you try to clean it up.

S: How?

VR: Well, you get washcloths and this and that. You go back to the teacher and say, "Look, what did you mean by that?" So he tells you something else. And then you say, "Aha!" Another rug. Then you go back and put it in the closet again. But you don't have to do it that way. I mean, it's not necessary to do it that way, but it happens that way.

S: Yes. It seems there would be a point where you would give up that intellectual rug altogether and just jump.

VR: There seems to be that point, according to the histories.

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S: Where intellect has to be worked through completely to the end, you give up—

VR: Completely to the end, yes. You see, we think there seems to be a point when that should happen. Somewhere out there. I'll tell you what: every time you get caught, it's a big surprise, right?

S: Yes, sure.

VR: You never thought you'd be caught on that one again. There's something—

S: But you start anticipating being caught.

VR: Yes, but even so, you get caught.

S: You get caught anticipating getting caught, yes.

VR: Someone wants to play an April Fool's joke on you. They've done it for five years in a row, and in the sixth year you say, "This time I'm going to set up everything so that I don't get caught." Then that person plays an April Fool's joke on your friend, and you start to believe what your friend is going through, so the joke is on you at the same time. So even though though it's not played on you and you set up your defenses fine, you get caught.

S: Thank you.

VR: That's expectation.

STUDENT: You said if there's no doubt, there's no need for the journey.

VR: There would be no need at all for the journey.

S: But it seems that the path encourages doubts or encourages you to look at the deficiencies. Like in everyday life people don't doubt ego, but the path encourages you to doubt whether things are really so.

VR: Well, that's why I said the teachings are good and true, because they don't let it rest in a slumber, Forest Lawn of Ego, Slumberland, waiting for the next shock. Someone dies and suddenly, "It might happen to me," and then back to sleep again. So the teachings turn on the lights all over the place. "Hey, wake up! You can't sleep. No time."

S: So is there a function to doubt in the teachings? I mean, is there a necessity for doubt?

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VR: I don't think there's a necessity for doubt at all. It just happens to be there, and from that point of view we don't look at it in terms of, "Well, let's look back to see what my mother did to me and my father did to me and how come I have this doubt; and am I so neurotic because the dog bit me when I was three," and that kind of thing. The point is that we have this doubt right here. It doesn't matter about history at all; it has nothing to do with history. It's simply a matter of uncertainty on the spot. So these good and true teachings decide to make use of the opportunity and trick you into waking up.

S: Thank you.

STUDENT: I stopped meditating around this time last year because I found that as my meditation got deeper it began to precipitate such extreme experiences of the discontinuity or the unreality of my normally solid self that they are experiences of real terror for me. It was such deep fear that I really thought I couldn't pursue it any further at the time. And I've just begun meditating again in the last couple of weeks. My understanding of Buddhism always was that if I were to engage in a relationship with a guru, he would push me further down that road, and I think my own sense of path has always been feeling that I have to take that gradually, that I can't abandon that fiction instantaneously. Maybe it's feeling that I don't have the strength for that, or that I don't know what's on the other side of that. I think many people probably share this problem—

VR: Raise your hands.

S: [Laughs] I'm vindicated! Okay.

VR: Good. Whew! [Laughter]

S: This is what I mean. I don't feel like I can abandon that self-justification game.

VR: That's why we have journey.

S: Right.

VR: Yes.

S: Now, I'm not asking for reassurance [laughs]—

VR: That's good.

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S: —but do you feel your technique is really one of pushing a person through the other side of that experience?

VR: Mine, particularly?

S: Well, yes.

VR: Hmm.

S: Would you encourage that experience even though it entailed that fear? Would you say that normally this fear is increased as a person begins to experience more and more?

VR: I wouldn't give away my secrets. [Student laughs] You'd have to try it and see.

S: Is this a common experience for people to turn away as I did, for that reason, do you think?

VR: I don't know.

S: Thank you.

VR: Oh, I suppose it's a common experience to turn away, yes. Sounds like it.

S: One more question?

VR: Sure.

S: For myself, that leap would be an act of total faith, and I felt in my own experience perhaps that wasn't justified at the time. There wasn't the intelligence to justify —

VR: I think the point is that you come to a narrow passage, maybe—or it appears to be narrow, so your thought is, "That's too narrow for me to get through, so I'll just rest here."

S: Yes. But I think there is the fear of madness, too, that rather than having a state of greater clarity, there will be a state of greater disorganization and chaos.

VR: Well, in this particular case, the fear of madness is delightful.

S: I'm sorry —

VR: Delightful. Fear of madness is delightful. Anything for a change. [Laughter]

S: I wonder how many people feel that's true in their actual experience.

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VR: I think it's true that people feel that if I take one more step, I'm bound to fall off the edge of this cliff, and that would be the end of me.

S: It would be.

VR: Well, that would be delightful. [Laughter] Think of all the things you wouldn't have to maintain.

S: But it's giving up everything for the prospect of something unknown.

VR: Well, in this case, "everything" isn't even known. [Laughter]

S: It's partially known.

VR: It's hinted at. It's not even partially known, it's simply hinted at, that there is a real world.

S: Maybe there's the appearance of a real world, there's the appearance of a self.

VR: Yes. That's what we're talking about: appearance.

S: Yes, but having only that appearance to go on, it's understandable why a person would cling to it.

VR: Well, from the point of view of the teachings, that's not all you have to go on. You have intelligence.

S: But intelligence also seems to be linked to that fear mechanism—that at the point the fear becomes really critical, intelligence goes into the service of the fear.

VR: Intelligence goes into perception, period.

S: But don't you think the perception is twisted by the fear?

VR: No. The perception may be the fear. In this case, perceiving danger. But the intelligence is just the actual act of perceiving. In other words, the drop off the cliff is right in the perception itself, and we miss it.

S: Miss it? [VR laughs; laughter] I missed the drop.

VR: In other words, in the actual perceiving there is nonego. Already.

S: If there's no perceiver, then would you say the situation perceives itself, or there's no perception?

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VR: I'm just saying the act of perceiving is nonego already. Just look.

Well, it's time to go to bed and dream and sleep and wake up. Again. We've done it so many times. Begin to dream, fall asleep, and wake up. Well, have a pleasant journey. See you on Thursday.