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THE LONELY JOURNEY: DEVOTION IN THE KAGYÜ LINEAGE

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TALK FOUR: THE GURU AS PHYSICIAN

In this talk, the Vajra Regent presents the first stage of walking the path of devotion. The guru is seen as a physician who can provide the prescription to alleviate the pain of our confusion. We proceed on the path through devotion to the three jewels: Buddha, dharma, and sangha.

We are embarking on the path of devotion, having studied and looked into the groundwork, the basis for our particular journey. We have discussed the goal, which in this case is the wearing out of expectation. But it's necessary at this point to talk about practical things. We have looked, contemplated, seen what our situation is; but we have to begin walking, moving along on the path. This particular path of devotion, the jewel of the Kagyü teachings, the precious gem of the Kagyü teaching, is the path which has been handed down and practiced by journeyers for 2,500 years and which I myself have been taught and which I speak about. It is a long and arduous path, as we ourselves have seen and are beginning to experience. We are unique in that sense, and we are extremely stubborn as well. Just because we are in the U.S.A., in 1977, we are not, at this point, about to cop out in terms of goodies and candies. We present what has been presented and what has been experienced.

In the Kagyü teaching we talk about the three-yana approach, or three-yana path. *Yana* means "vehicle." The first of the three yanas is the *hinayana*, the path of discipline and

renunciation; the second, the *mahayana*, is the path of compassion and meditation in action; and the third is the *vajrayana*, the path of accomplishment or attainment, or as it is also known, the path of devotion. Everyone would like to jump the gun; every student would like to get to the end at the beginning. Because of that, the burning question on the path of devotion is, “How can I possibly get to see the guru in person? There are so many people, hundreds and thousands of them. I’ll never get to see him or her. How is it possible that I could reach this person? It’s impossible. You’re proposing something which is absurd. There are 400, 500, 6,000, 10,000 people who want to see this person.”

There’s a basic problem here: the path of devotion is not about what we can get for ourselves, but rather about completely surrendering to the guru’s world, completely surrendering to the environment of devotion. This is no small task. No one, at least no one on this side of the fence, expects a student to be completely open and surrendered all at once. We bring along our baggage, our neurosis; and the heavy weight in that bag is “What can I get for myself?” The path of devotion has nothing whatsoever to do with that.

Students, to begin with, have a lot of fancy ideas about how they can attain omniscience. They are very astute, intellectual people who love to pick and choose, who love to walk down the aisles of the supermarket seeing which brand is on sale or which brand is new, unique. In the spiritual supermarket, we think, “I have absolute freedom just to walk down the aisles and pick and choose which guru has the best techniques, the most delightful looking one, the one who creates the most ecstatic vibration, the one who can deliver what I want.” Some students would like to possess the guru, the teachings, because those teachings are so well known. They’ve been in the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, the *Whole Earth Catalogue*. Very famous. “If I could possess that, then I would be one of the famous people enshrined in the *Whole Earth Catalogue* as the disciple of so-and-so. Maybe I can actually steal the teaching, run in very quickly, take it, and get out. Naropa Institute is a good deal—we got the 2500 year-old teachings in five weeks. Oh, and this guru, this teacher, should understand that I studied very hard before I came here and read a lot of books and studied under so-and-so and so-and-so, and therefore I shouldn’t have to do any fetching. I’ve got enough qualifications already. Look around: some of these people have never meditated, never done anything

before, but I have done the whole lot. I have been recognized. I should get the first seat.”

There are so many different styles of what we would like, so many different ways of continuing our sense of security, of our own territory, whether it's possessing or shopping or whatever. Basically, we're involved with clinging to our own preconceptions, to our personal idea of how things should be. This is not the path of devotion. No matter how we try, there is no way that the guru or the teacher is going to be possessed, is going to second our projections. In fact, quite the opposite can and does occur. When you try, the teacher, the guru, becomes much larger than our projections, terrifyingly so, impossible to find, can't get an interview, impossible to hold on to, not nice. As far as ego's territory is concerned, the guru will never be nice.

So how do we begin to walk on this journey? Not by seeing the guru as a fantastic celestial being who can fulfill all our dreams, not by putting the teacher on a pedestal and becoming a devotional maniac; but simply by recognizing that we are in a tight spot and in trouble, and that we are in need of treatment. We've been carrying around this mess of confusion, *samsara*, just like a chronic illness. The genuine student who walks on the path of devotion feels a tremendous need to have the physician prescribe the right medicine right now. It has nothing to do with what we look like now or what we're going to be. It's very critical: Where are we? What are we doing? We have a sense of being sick, not in the sense of putting ourselves down but of simply recognizing confusion and, quite honestly, not knowing how to get out of it. This is the beginning student, the hinayana student, who is tired of shopping, and looks for the medicine, wants the medicine right now, and approaches the hinayana teacher—the guru in the hinayana form—and that teacher prescribes the medicine. The diagnosis is ignorance; ignorance of things as they are. And the medicine is the practice of meditation. We don't have to think about whether or not this is the right specialist or the greatest medicine or whether or not it's renowned in some *Time* magazine article. Quite simply, someone has said that the sitting practice of meditation is the proper medicine to undo the ignorance and confusion of passion and aggression. And this particular physician has done so without fanfare and with the confidence that it has been done before.

How to proceed? To begin with, devotion is devotion to the three jewels: devotion to the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. First, devotion to the Buddha is very simple: a

human being like ourselves who felt exactly the same confusion and exactly the same sense of being out of sync took the medicine of sitting meditation, and took it by himself, sat down by himself and achieved enlightenment, without need for fanfare, without need for confirmation by anyone, but did it absolutely, like a rock, alone. This is known as devotion to example.

The second form of devotion is devotion to the dharma as path. Path, as we have discussed, is not kicking your neurosis out the door saying, "This is evil, bad stuff. Get rid of it," but is commitment to work with what is, commitment to being alone, by oneself, with one's own preconceptions and expectations, and to work with those in the practice of meditation.

And the third form of devotion is devotion to the sangha. Taking refuge in the sangha means having some sense of inspiration that other people are doing so and are in the same boat, recognizing that it is possible to be alone, to sit by oneself. It is possible not to continue running from here to there asking, "Am I?" "Am I not?" "Should I?" "Should I not?" "Will I?" "Won't I?" "When will I?" Taking refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha has nothing to do with security in the usual sense. Rather, it is security in knowing that this journey we are embarking on is a journey into no-man's land, a journey that has no promises and therefore is straightforward and without deception. It is a journey that only we ourselves can walk on.

So the attitude of devotion to begin with is a matter of practicality, not a matter of philosophizing or analyzing or gaining recognition or signing on the dotted line. It's a matter of practicality. We have this situation, and we have some medicine. We should take it and see what happens.

Are there any questions?

STUDENT: The first question that comes after hearing the statement, "You have to join the guru's world," is "Who is the guru?" And then you ask people around you, and you find out all these different interpretations. They say this and they say that, and ultimately you wind up with thousands of different interpretations. And your own mind, your own ideas, and maybe your own direction is just to sit. And it feels like that's the only thing you can rely on. Or is there anything else?

VAJRA REGENT: Well, at this point the guru is the Buddha, dharma, and sangha: the Buddha meaning innate intelligence, awake; the dharma meaning the practice,

uncovering awake; and the sangha meaning the company of those who are also doing so.

STUDENT: I'm a little unclear as to when standing on your own feet is being part of the sangha or being a *pratyekabuddha* [Ed.: Sanskrit term meaning "solitary buddha," which is a reference to the realization of the stage of individual liberation.] Would you talk about that?

VR: Well, the point is first to find out how to stand on your own feet, rather than wondering about being a *pratyekabuddha*. How is it that we stand on our own feet?

S: By sitting?

VR: Well, that's what's suggested. That's the suggestion.

S: There doesn't seem to be much else to do, though.

VR: Well, you'd be surprised by how many things come up, how many possibilities there seem to be. But at this point the suggestion is to sit, not to worry about whether or not we are on the right track or the wrong track or if we're becoming *pratyekabuddha* or Buddha himself, but just to sit. If we feel sick, we look for some sense of basic health and sanity, some medicine, not in the sense of celestial medicine, but just very practical, human medicine.

S: What do you mean by human medicine?

VR: I mean your mind, your thoughts, your emotions, your body, your world, and the prescription is to sit with all of that. Don't try to get away from it, but look at it, see what it is. Be with it, one hundred percent. That's human medicine. It has nothing to do with being divine or hellish or anything like that; it is just being with what we are right now.

STUDENT: Ösel, I've been sitting, and through that I've been realizing the meanings of things as pain and impermanence and egolessness and whatever, and it just leaves me there, alone, and I want to know what I am getting myself into.

VR: Yes; that's a very good question. We'll talk more about that as we go along. It's not so much that I have the answer to what you're getting into. Basically, we all have that particular frame of mind: What's next? What are we getting into? Together we can have some communication about that. In other words, we don't know. That's the whole

point. It's not necessary to second guess everything; that's what got us here to begin with. So what we'll do here, hopefully, is to take it from square one, square one being that we don't know. We're not particularly qualified to have a crystal ball and forecast the future. Instead, we have some sense of renunciation of that. Renunciation is very simple. It's not selling your guitar or even giving away your guitar or your favorite shirt, or that little thing so-and-so gave you ten years ago. It has nothing at all to do with that. Renunciation is simply that we don't know.

And discipline is sticking with that, sitting with that sense of openness, that sense of shakiness. At this point we don't have to be great soldiers marching out with our certainty: "Nothing can stop us now." Hardly; anything could and anything might—you could walk out of here and get hit by a car, and there goes the great search. Your feeling tenuous and inquisitive is the Buddhist sense of courage. It is not marching out with "Right is right, and I am what I am." We might make a big stink for a while; but the world couldn't care less. So some sense of a tenuous quality in practice, a genuinely open-minded sense of looking at what's there, is how we go along. Is that depressing?

S: Yes, it is.

VR: We have a lot of old habits. There is a tremendous accumulation of thinking A plus B equals C, plus D equals blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Not quite; A plus B equals C is totally our imagination, *totally* our imagination. So that sense of being slightly frightened, afraid to proceed, and on the other hand not knowing what else to do, is an ideal state.

S: Is another of way of seeing things as they are through drinking?

VR: Through drinking? [Laughter] You tell me.

S: I don't know. I haven't had the experience yet. I don't know if it fogs your brain or clears your brain. I've been told both.

VR: Well, anything you do fogs and clears, alternately. Anything at all that happens in your life. Eat food: too much, fog; too little, clear. Or eat too much, clear; eat too little, fog. Relationships: love too much, fog; love too little, clear, and vice versa. Sit: think too much, think too little. Technique: I'm doing good. I missed it. I'm losing it. [Laughter] It's a very personal journey; there's no particular formula. But it has been expressed by the teachers of the past all the way to the present that sitting practice is very good, and

indeed has less reference point than anything else we could do. It has basically one reference point: enlightenment. We have no idea what that is, which is the best reference point of all, since we can't figure it out.

STUDENT: I'd like to know your definition of aggression.

VR: Well, it's trying to push away anything that threatens our sense of identity.

S: Do you see Naropa Institute as being aggressive in any way?

VR: As aggressive?

S: Yes.

VR: Well, I see Naropa Institute as passion, aggression, and ignorance all thrown into one big soup in the cauldron of lineage and the fire of meditation. So we cook the whole thing. Unless you jump out.

S: Thanks. Cheers! [Raising a glass of water in a toast]

VR: Three cheers: for the Buddha, dharma, sangha. Yes, three. [Laughter; applause]

STUDENT: I always wonder how on the one hand the path of devotion has nothing to do with getting anything for yourself, and on the other hand, the first thing you do is go to the doctor and say, "Give me some medicine." How do those two things go together?

VR: Well, one path is very organic; you have no time to think. The other way is speculative: "Is this doctor actually qualified to give me...?" and "Is this medicine the most beneficial medicine?" On the path of devotion, you can have a lot of thoughts, but basically those thoughts go down the drain; it's very immediate. The practitioner on the path of devotion is quite eager to get down to the practice. It doesn't matter how hard it is to get to sit, and "How am I going to get my time scheduled properly?" and "I can't push myself into the meditation." All those things are secondary to the basic point, which is that the student feels some sense of real, genuine medicine. Like Castor oil—it isn't fake, it has no catches to it; it's very simple. Very simple.

S: So you mean it's a feeling that it's just the right thing to do.

VR: Well, even more than that; it's the *only* thing to do.

STUDENT: I found it very interesting that you said the path of devotion is to completely surrender to the guru's world. I was expecting you to say to completely surrender to the guru. Is there any difference between the guru and the guru's world?

VR: Yes: the difference is our expectation. The guru's world includes our expectation. That's why we have hinayana, mahayana, and vajrayana. In other words, in the hinayana we bring all the expectations with us.

S: So in a sense you surrender to your own expectations?

VR: That's correct. Especially in the hinayana we're not particularly concerned with the person of the guru, and whether or not this person goes to bed or gets up at a certain time; that's not important. The important thing here is that we receive the teachings and the instructions on how to practice.

S: Is it later on, in the vajrayana, that you surrender to the guru instead of the guru's world, or does it stay the same?

VR: Well, at that point the two things come together.

S: Okay, I have to think about that.

VR: That's what you say.

S: Let me see if I can phrase it so it's clear. If the patient can approach the doctor in a really spontaneous way, without having all those thoughts between him and the doctor, does he really need the doctor after all?

VR: Well, the patient is not concerned with spontaneous or not spontaneous at this stage.

S: But in a hypothetical situation where the patient *is* spontaneous, does he need the doctor at all?

VR: Hypothetically speaking? [Laughter] Hypothetically, I have no idea. [Laughter] I haven't met anyone who could answer that.

S: So there's really no answer to that question.

VR: Hypothetically, no; practically, sure.

S: So then practically, if the patient is spontaneous, does he need the teacher, the doctor?

VR: Practically speaking, the patient does not worry about spontaneity. “Patient” means someone who is sick.

S: Yes, but I’m the one worrying about the spontaneity; I’m not the patient I’m talking about. [Laughter]

VR: In that case, you should seek the medicine for worry. [Much laughter]

S: Okay.

VR: Well, ladies and gentlemen, we should close at this point. It is a very opportune and, in fact, a very auspicious and rare opportunity that we could gather together here and discuss the things that we have. So again, I would like to suggest that if we are going to continue our discussion together we should have some sense of the ground of our communication, of how we are going to talk to each other and how we are going to continue along this path together.

In doing so, we have to have some sense of environment, and that environment, as we have been discussing, is the practice of meditation or, shall we say, the practice of mutually accepting and working with our neurosis, whatever that may be. We should have some ground to do that, and that ground is the practice of meditation. We have ample time; in fact, we’re here for that reason. We have a Naropa Institute shrine room, which is dedicated and put together for that reason. We have the Karma Dzong shrine room not far away, with the same dedication, purpose, and reason. And we have this weekend coming up, which is nothing more than three days, during which we could spend a whole lifetime sitting with ourselves.

It doesn’t help if I make speeches or turn fancy phrases and you ask cute questions and I give more cute answers and we go on like that for five weeks, having a wonderful time and then going back to whatever we came from, feeling that we were entertained. It makes very little difference how much we’re entertained and how much personal satisfaction we get. Very little difference. It makes a great deal of difference if we can sit with our entertainment and our lack of it, even for one hour. It is the most worthwhile and heroic and absolutely meaningless thing we can do.

To begin with, our world is built on a castle of meaning based on a preconception. We think, “Well, I’m hardly a grain of sand.” Rather, we think we’re sand *castles*; and

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further, we think those castles are solid and permanent. We should look into that more clearly. We have the opportunity to do so. Basically, no one can say more than that.

So I request all of you who are taking this course to sit continually throughout and practice very hard with strenuous discipline, without a thought of who's going to recognize you. There are no degrees, no PhD's, M.A.'s, or B.A.'s of great meditators, but without exception there is a genuine sense of real sanity that radiates. That is our heritage and our birthright as human beings. We should take advantage of that now. So sit this weekend and throughout the course, and let's continue on our journey together. And we'll have a great time, and we'll have a horrible time, and we'll have a totally full time together. Five weeks is very short. We can blink our eyes and it's over. So see you next Tuesday.

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