

A story of events surrounding the Emptiness and Compassion Intensive Training Seminar
Karma Dzong, Boulder, Colorado
January 30, 31, and February 1, 1987

The Vajra Regent was scheduled to teach an Intensive Training Seminar entitled “Emptiness and Compassion” at Karma Dzong in Boulder. It was the first full ITS since the Vidyadhara’s heart attack in September of 1986 in Halifax, which had left him incapacitated since then. The party flying from Halifax included the Vajra Regent, his friend Heather Peterson, Patrick Sweeney serving as kusung, and myself serving as secretary. We were going to fly through Boston, where we would change planes. The Vajra Regent, Patrick, and I were flying to Denver; Heather was flying to New York. When we got to the airport, we were told that a snowstorm was moving east toward Halifax. It was already snowing heavily in Boston, so all flights to and from Boston was cancelled for the night. The Vajra Regent said, “Let’s go back to the house, we’ll make some spaghetti and clam sauce, have some dinner, and try again tomorrow.” Heather is a six-foot tall blonde from Texas, used to taking charge, who said, “Go back? Ah’m not goin’ BACK! We already left there!” I found out that there was a flight were going to Montreal, which the storm has already passed through. It was taking off soon, the last out before the storm hit. So she got in the first class line, to rearrange our flights. The line was moving slowly, so she sweet-talked the gentleman in front of her, asking if she might go ahead of him. He thought she was alone, traveling only with a carry-on, so he graciously agreed. Then she whistled and yelled, “Over here, boys!” Patrick and I pushed a huge luggage cart with a half-dozen bags to be checked in for her and the Vajra Regent, as well as one each for Patrick and me. We all had our tickets changed to get routed to Montreal, and on to Chicago the next day; then Heater to go on to New York from from there, and the three of us to get a flight to Denver. It took forever, much to the shock and dismay of the gentleman who had let her go in front of him.

Before we got on the plane to Montreal, the Kasung have been alerted as to the change of plans. They made preparations to pick us up at the airport, and reservations for us to stay at the Canadian Pacific Railway Hotel. Since the storm had already passed Montreal, the flight hopped over it. When we got there, everything was very quiet; the whole city was covered with a thick blanket of snow. We went to dinner at the Ritz-Carlton, where the meal evolved into what was clearly a vajrayana feast-like atmosphere. The Vajra Regent remarked that it felt as if we were four yogins gathered on a beach in India, performing a ganachakra. Except we were at the Ritz-Carlton in Montreal eating caviar and fabulous French food, served by elegant but warmly friendly Portuguese waiters. The Vajra Regent was playfully engaging with them and having a great time.

After dinner, we went back to the hotel and the Vajra Regent met with the local Ambassadors and coordinators, and stayed up quite late talking with a couple who were in charge of the kasung. After that, around 2am, the Vajra Regent was still wide awake and not quite ready for bed, so he and I engaged in a spirited bout of “All Star Wrestling,” imitating the fake wrestling that we watched on broadcasts from New York City when we were growing up in New Jersey. It was a routine we got a kick out of doing now and again. Just as the TV bouts were always fixed, the Vajra Regent always won 2 out of 3. Patrick had never seen us do our

routine before, and at first he thought we were really fighting, and his eyes got really, really big. For a long time afterwards, he remarked that he still didn't know what to make of it.

The next day we headed for Chicago, where we would change planes for Denver and say goodbye to Heather. The Montreal airport was pretty chaotic, but we had our tickets and it was straightforward to get to Chicago. That's when it got really crazy. Almost all flights the day before had been cancelled, so they had to try to get bumped passengers and current passengers on every plane out. It was so chaotic that the airline representative handling the boarding said, "The seat assignments for this flight are from a different size and type of plane, so everyone just get on and get whatever seat you can, first come first served!"

Patrick and I were standing with the Vajra Regent in the first class line, and hearing her say that I told Patrick to stay very close to the Vajra Regent and I followed right behind. As soon as we got on the plane, the Vajra Regent sat on one side of the first row of first class, and I pushed Patrick into the first row on the other side of the aisle and got in next to him. Whew! I was so stressed out from getting out of Montreal and then out of Chicago that I asked the attendant to bring me Scotch and keep them coming.

In Denver we were picked up by Marty Moscow, a sangha member who ran a limousine service. It had been a very long day, and I'd had a fair amount to drink on the flight, so on the drive to Boulder I fell sleep. Halfway there, with the limo traveling at about 70 miles per hour, the Vajra Regent shouted, "If my secretary is falling asleep, I'm getting out!" He opened the door and started to get out. Patrick was horrified and lunged to grab hold of the Vajra Regent before he got more than his foot out of the car. It was quite an adventure, and that was just getting us to Boulder!

In Boulder we were staying in the teachers' suite at Marpa House, the sangha group residence. Because of the Vidyadhara's serious illness, everyone wanted to see the Vajra Regent, requesting interviews or meetings. The schedule kept getting bumped and as secretary I was trying to accommodate the requests. I was practically bursting from feeling the pressure from all these people who wanted to see him, so I kept looking for an opportunity to ask the Vajra Regent when he could see some of them. He was doing some exercising, and I thought this might be the time to ask. During his sit-ups, I blurted out, "Sir!" and he turned his head and said "What? ... Owww!" He got a sudden crick in his neck! I felt terrible. He sat there rubbing his neck and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "It's just... all these people want to see you!" He said, "Who do you work for, me or them?" I said, "Ok, ok, got it." Somehow from those few words I knew how to handle things from there on. Once again, his pithy instruction clarified the whole situation and resolved my mind. He had this quality of saying just a few words that cut through to the vital point. There were many stressful situations like this where just a few words would pacify the whole situation.

[One time in Halifax, during a terribly tumultuous time, when people came to me yelling and attacking the Vajra Regent, and me as his representative, demanding all sorts of things. I called him and asked what to do. He said, "Don't fight, but don't move." And although the attacks kept coming, it all became workable. But that's another story.]

The meditation hall was packed for the seminar. The tuition totaled about \$6000. After the second of the three talks, the Vajra Regent called me in to talk to me about the traditional teaching gift presented after the last talk. He explained that Vajradhatu hadn't been able to pay Donna Holm, his editor, for some time. She was working on his next book, and he wanted to be able to get her \$1000. So he asked me to please check on it, and make sure the teaching gift would be at least that.

I told Diane, the Director of Karma Dzong, what the teaching gift needed to be at minimum. Near the end of the seminar, just before the last talk began, she let me know the gift was going to be just \$500. I thought, "This is not going to go well," but there wasn't an opportunity to do anything about it. I asked what the story was, for not meeting the Vajra Regent's needs. She said that David, the Ambassador for Boulder, had wanted to make it only \$200. And she said that Karma Dzong needed the money for all the bills that they have to pay and the tuition that was collected was exactly what they needed to pay them.

After the final talk everyone was happy, appreciating the teachings from the Vajra Regent they had received. Many people were gathered in the suite at Marpa House where he was staying. I was attending the Vajra Regent that night, wearing my pin stripe suit. I said to myself that things were going to go late; that it's going to be a long evening. So I decided I'd better rest for a while. I went into the little side room where staff could rest and lay down on the bed. We had a technique where you pull the back of your suit jacket down so it doesn't wrinkle, then you lie on your back. You smooth your hair back before you lie your head down, so that when you wake up you don't need to brush it. You're ready to go.

I fell asleep for a little while, then was startled awake to find the Vajra Regent straddling me on his knees, his hands on each shoulder, with his face about an inch from mine. He had opened the teaching gift and seen it was only half what he needed to pay Donna. He shouted, "WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MONEY? I WANT TO KNOW!" In my confusion I blurted out, "They were only going to give you \$200." That certainly made things worse. "WHO?" said the Vajra Regent. In a meek voice, I said, "David."

The Vajra Regent was furious, feeling disrespected. He wrote a rather scathing poem and had it delivered to David, who sent an apologetic response. A series of poems and responses went back and forth across town.

The Vajra Regent was in his sitting room at Marpa House as this was happening. Diane and I were in the sitting room with him, as well as one or two other members of the Karma Dzong executive committee. The Vajra Regent angrily, and humorously, described various scenarios of what was going to happen. First, he wanted Diane to bring him all the tuition money collected for the seminar. She said, "We can't get it now, it's been deposited in the bank, and the bank is closed. "Well, when can we get it?" Jim, the finance director, said he could get it at 8 or 9 am. The Vajra Regent said, "We're staying up till then."

Then the Vajra Regent went into the scenarios of what he planned to do with the money. He threatened to just take a trip to Florida and spend it all. Diane tearfully explained that they needed the money to pay the bills. The Vajra Regent then said he would take the entire Karma Dzong Executive Committee to the Brown Derby in Denver and eat and drink until all the money was gone. The basic theme was to spend all of it. This went on and on. As it approached 4 am, poor Diane was exhausted and is whimpering, saying to herself, "I don't know what we are going to do, we're not going to make it." At one point the Vajra Regent heard her and said to me, "Joe, you're a meditation instructor, say something." I gathered my confidence and said, "Diane! Just stop thinking for a minute!" Her whimpering paused for a few seconds, then she took a deep breath and screamed, "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" After this long, long, scream she started whimpering again. The Vajra Regent looked at me and said, "Nice instruction, Joe."

We were still awake when Jim returned with the money, \$6000 in \$100 bills, and a saga of the combination of obstacles and auspicious coincidences he went through at the bank to get it. The Vajra Regent accepted the money, and said he'd see everyone at his departure later that day. We were supposed to fly out that morning, but given the all-nighter that just happened, adjustments needed to be made. I wondered how was I going to get the airline tickets changed for the entire party, just from the morning to the afternoon, especially with some of us flying to different places. I called Phil, a sangha physician and asked for notes that said we had all contracted food poisoning, could not fly now, but could fly later in the day.

Word was sent to Diane and others of the new departure time and we went to bed for a few hours. After we were dressed and ready to leave for the airport, the Vajra Regent asked me to get six envelopes, and to put \$1000 in each one. He had me keep one of the envelopes with \$1000 in it to go to Donna. He told me five phrases to write, one on each of the other envelopes.

At departure time, many sangha members gathered to say farewell, lining the walk from the front steps to the street where the car taking us to the airport was parked. It was very festive; most people had no idea what had happened the night before. As we walked out of Marpa House to leave, Diane was there, and still visibly upset that the Vajra Regent was leaving with all the money from the seminar. The Vajra Regent waved good-bye and put one foot into the car as if he was getting in. Then he stepped back out and I handed him the five envelopes as he had instructed me to do ahead of time. He turned to Diane and began handing her one envelope at a time, reciting what was written on each one:

"From Tilopa to Karma Dzong. From Naropa to Karma Dzong. From Marpa to Karma Dzong. From Milarepa to Karma Dzong. From Gampopa to Karma Dzong. That's what we call generosity in my lineage!"

He turned to the crowd, waved again and said, "So long, everyone," got into the car, and we drove off.

Joseph Parent