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The Lonely Journey: Devotion in the Kagyü Lineage
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VAJRA REGENT:

I would like to welcome all of you who are tasting the sweet-sour juices of Naropa Institute and happy to have your cynical minds here. It's delightful. Some people think they know something; some people think they know a little bit; some people don't think they know anything at all. We are stuck together in this big soup of Naropa Institute this summer, which is hot and dry and has occasional rain which doesn't help. We're going to talk about devotion in the next five weeks, which is the essence and heart's blood of the Kagyü teaching, the teaching of which I myself am holder, and which has existed since the time of the Buddha. It's hot, dry teaching with occasional rain which doesn't help. [Laughter]

If we're going to be together in the next five weeks, we should get some things straight from the beginning. And that is, I'm not particularly content myself with the lecture series, and hopefully, you're not either. I'm not concerned particularly that I should give the right information to you so that you could record those facts in your notebooks and go away from this session understanding devotion from your notebook. I could care less about that. There is some sense that we should have a personal experience, which is redundant, but nonetheless, we should have a personal experience of what we're talking about. This is a subject, devotion, which has a lot of corners, a lot of plops, lot of fizzes, and tremendous expectation, and also tremendous sense of warmth, but we have to begin at the beginning.

It is very important to understand where we are right now in this room, who we are, what we're talking about. Our object and goal is not to create hundreds of devoted people, churn out devotion, and produce sweet, loving, kind, devoted people. That is not our aim or object in teaching this course or in engaging in a discussion of devotion in terms of the Kagyü lineage, the victorious lineage, which does not hold, does not protect itself. So in brief, as has been said, it is up to you. If we try to mould devoted people, then we are falling into the trap of theism, which is not our aim or object. Devotion as a path cannot be accomplished within a five-week period, but we can possibly make some spark together, can create some situation together where intelligence, which is true devotion, begins to awaken.

To do that, we should look at our basic state, who we are, what we're doing, which is a very simple one. Human beings have a very simple intention, and that is, we would like to fulfill our needs. Those needs have been interpreted and expanded into a whole universe, whole world of complications and tremendous puzzle-like, sophisticated, complicated type of existence. But where we live, where we are, is need. We

have some sense of need. It is much too difficult to try to explode, try to uncover in a flash that sense of need. So what is our basic need, what do we need? If we try to do that, we come up empty handed, completely empty handed. We would like to accomplish something. Need. Before we even think, “need,” we need something. This is what we’re stuck in, big Naropa Institute soup of need: “I am here, so-called ‘I’ am here, and everything else is ‘there.’ I’m not particularly content to be here because it seems that ‘there’ is so potentially beautiful. If I could only get hold of that ‘there,’ if I could only just grab some of this, grab it, hold it, then I would feel good.”

This is where we are. This is called the human world. That’s how we live. We live always with a sense of having to get something, having to hold, make part of ourselves, something else. Something. So we’re talking about devotion. Ordinary world. Very basic, ordinary world. Somehow we feel we would like to succeed in the ordinary world, like to be a champion of the ordinary world, a leader among human beings. We would like to reach the top of the mountain. Perhaps we could say that: “Well, we really don’t want to do it. That’s just, you know, not quite, you know, just a little bit.” Or on the other hand: “That’s foolish, who cares about that? That’s only for fools who like to climb up this mountain. We really know that there’s no point in doing that.” Either way. Whether you reject or whether you accept – some sense of ambition, it doesn’t matter.

The basic point in talking about devotion is our state of mind, which is involved with feeling of separate, different. There’s “me” and there’s all the rest of it. Always, without exception, this is how we live. Me, this, that. We’d like to bring it together. If we only brought some of it together, we’d feel better. Separation. In terms of devotion, we can’t even begin to talk about devotion without understanding our basic sense of separation, that we don’t feel connected, therefore we have such an inclination, such a thought that devotion might be the sense of bringing those two things together. Being devoted to “that” might bring “that” over here, so therefore I don’t have to be devoted to that any more. We have a tremendous sense of success and failure in our lives. That’s what we base our entire life on, success and failure, and when we have a success, it leads to further success, further vision of success. If you get just a small success, then maybe we could get a bigger one, maybe bigger one. Same thing with failure. If you drop a little bit below, maybe you could drop further.

What we have to talk about tonight is devotion as a sense of pain. Some people have heard this before. But the point here in our whole journey together at Naropa Institute is we can’t simply talk about it. I can’t produce huge pain for you to experience. But we should actually recognize where we are right now, all of us. Nobody’s up, nobody’s down, nobody’s more, nobody’s less. Where we are right now in terms of our experience, in terms of our trying to figure out what devotion is all about. We come here to talk about devotion. We’re missing something, and we don’t know what it is. That’s the beginning of devotion. We’re missing something, but we don’t know what it is. It would be nice to say that it was something: our family, children, whatever, wife, friends, job, dedication to whatever form of experience we have, whether it’s material, physical, psychological, or so-called spiritual experience, we would like to say that “I am devoted to this.” But that’s completely not true. We’re lying all the time. We’re stuck, trying to find out what’s on the other side.

This is a long journey we have together in five weeks. It’s an incredibly long journey. Talking about devotion, we could say that we don’t have any particular guidelines. Strictly speaking, we don’t have any guidelines. It would be nice if we had a text on devotion and how to be devoted, but we don’t have any such thing. That’s why this journey we have together is an intensely personal one. From this side, I’m not particularly interested in who’s devoted to whom. It’s possible that we could spark some sense of what we mean by devotion together. In doing so, we have to begin with the basic solitary fact: we’re quite alone

together, all of us. If we're sitting next to somebody or we're listening to somebody, still we are by ourselves, one hundred percent. We have a basic, fundamental problem right there, and that, simply speaking, is we don't like it. We don't want to be alone at all. We would very much like to couple on either side, front, back, north, south, east, west, wherever, just bring it in, everything's okay, we're together. We're not. We're not. We're alone together. A sense of pain is the only real reference point we have in our lives. There is no other reference point. Everything else is building castles in the sand, building, building, building, success after success, failure after failure, tremendous heap, which rests on nothing.

So we have our basic state of mind of who we are, with whatever we look like, whatever we dress like, whatever we think like. We still feel alone, and we would like to link up with a bright star. Without our genuine experience of that together here – I'm not saying together means we have to make a big hoo-ha out of the whole thing and sort of, "Did you get it? Did you get it?" Not that kind of thing. Hopefully not. We don't have to make pain into a fraternity or whatever, sorority, college trip. Just individual experience together, that we're actually looking at what the situation is, we're going to look at it. Otherwise we have no reason to be here together, absolutely none. Devotion is not simply a gourmet feast that you should enjoy, we should enjoy, so that we feel satisfied. Who cares? If you feel satisfied and the person next to you doesn't, who cares? So we can't just say, "Did you get it?" Somebody's liable to slug you at that point [laughter], which might be good, depending on the situation.

So here we are. Devotion and lonely journey. What are we going to make out of that? If you have any questions, we could have a discussion at this point.

QUESTION: I don't feel comfortable when you said our sense of pain is our only reference point because I feel a lot of joy in my learning, and I feel a lot of joy in sharing with other people, and I don't feel the pain as much as a lot of people talk here.

VAJRA REGENT: Mm. Isn't that something. [Laughter] That's wonderful. Well, go ahead and spread joy to all those people. See how far you get. [Inaudible words] Somebody's going to say, "Shut up. Who wants to hear that crap." Somebody, basically somebody's going to say that, you see. Then what happens to joy? Poof! Out the bottom. If there's somebody right here, somewhere, that doesn't think that what you're saying is real, what are you going to do with that?

Q: Well, I don't think it's real about the pain part.

VR: Yes, but the joy part is real?

Q: Well, I'm not saying it's any more real than the pain, but I don't think pain is the only one.

VR: Only one?

Q: Only reference point.

VR: I think it's the only reference point that makes us wake up, anyway. You be my guest. Try it out. Try out the joy trip on these people. See what happens. I have a bet, fifteen dollars, it's my standard bet [laughter]. Fifteen dollars, you don't get all that far. We could even think about how many, together. We don't do it now because then I could lose that way. [Laughter] Joy is pain. If you try to build up a sense of joy, say: "Come on, everybody, join together with us. Why do you have to think that silly way about pain? Don't bother with that. Everything's okay. We're going to be here together." And somebody pops up and says: "Dro dead." [Laughter] Then what? You say: "Oh, don't say drop dead. Everything's okay." [Laughter] We have to face the fact, you know. The fact is we're not all together, and we don't all feel that way, we feel separate.

Q: But we're separate and we're together.

VR: How are we together?

Q: We all share our hearts, our heartbeat and blood.

VR: What is it we share. What is it we really share?

Q: Life, energy.

VR: We share that together?

Q: [Emphatically} Yes!

VR: If you died, you think the person next to you is going to die as well? [Laughter] What is it we share? What do we really share? Good point. Absolutely great point. What do we share? Let's find out about that. What do we share? Real devotion. What do we share? Anybody else? Don't be afraid. [Laughter]

QUESTION: I don't understand the relationship of devotion to this feeling of you're stuck and you're trying to find out what's out there. Where does devotion – devotion to what, or where does devotion even come in?

VR: Exactly. That's where we're at right now.

Q: Then how can we talk about devotion?

VR: Exactly. [Laughter] If we don't figure that one out, if we don't have some sense of that, what you just said, then we can't talk about devotion at all. It would just be pure bullshit.

Q: So this is the starting point. We can't really talk about devotion until this point.

VR: That's right. We have be stuck right in the mud of who we are.

QUESTION: How does this sense of loneliness that you talk about relate to open space?

VR: Well, that's basically how it relates. When you're lonely, by yourself, then there's possibilities all over the place.

Q: So it's kind of the same thing then?

VR: As what?

Q: Loneliness and open space.

VR: Yes. Very much the same thing. You're by yourself, one hundred percent by yourself, and there's tremendous – four hundred humans, whatever, here. Eighty-four thousand dharmas. So many kinds of experience you could have. Very open. But some sense of being here alone is necessary. Otherwise we have tremendous reference point, multifaceted, complicated human life. We don't feel any openness, because we refuse to be alone. Therefore, no possibilities. Just a pattern.

QUESTION: Hi.

VR: The same to you.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about how devotion can be nontheistic?

VR: Next time.

Q: Next time?

VR: Let's just sit in the soup together, okay? Let's talk about that. That's how, actually, simply speaking. That's how to be nontheistic. By just not trying to get out of it, you know. Not trying to get out of our basic predicament, that we're lonely and that we would like to have that something on that other side, whether it's hamburger or enlightenment. Doesn't make much difference. It's something on the other side. We feel some sense of loss, and yet we feel tremendous passion. We want to get it, at the same time we feel we lost it.

Okay. Good enough. Who knows? You have your job. If you think that it's possible to just lie down in the mud and therefore feel comfortable, I say it's not possible. Somebody's going to say to you: "What are you doing in that mud?" Then you're going to wonder. Same thing all the time. It would be fine if we lived in a glass case, but we don't. If we're going to communicate with each other, which would be nice, we could see what happens, then you better sit down on the cushion by yourself, which is called the

sitting practice of meditation, which we have no other alternative in terms of this course and how we're going to approach devotion. We have no other suggestion at all, from this side of the fence. This is the only suggestion we have. Sit by yourself. Find out for yourself. Don't think of any kind of spoon feeding at all here. Doesn't work. I don't have the answers, and you don't even have the questions. [Laughter] Maybe if you think of the questions, I'll think of the answers. Then we could have some sense of real pain, instead of just theoretical ones. Real experience of who we are, what we're doing, what this world, so-called world is all about. So that's my first homework assignment. Do your work at home by yourself, right here in this particular room, by yourself. Nobody cares, don't worry. If you're sitting next to somebody, then don't care if you're falling up or falling down. They might get some slight entertainment out of the whole thing [laughter], but then they start thinking about themselves again, and the whole thing becomes rotten. [Laughter] Don't worry about that. Nobody's out to make a gold star meditator here, because we don't have any medals, we don't have any particular proclamations or anything like that. We just have the possibility of being with each other very concretely, really. We have that possibility.

Thank you.