

On Being Right

A personal story about a stupid man saying stupid things to the Regent, while being very convinced that he was right:

At one point, Naropa Institute had some property in Boulder. They wanted to do a real estate syndication with it, make a bunch of money and then buy some land suitable for Naropa. I was a securities lawyer at the time, in Denver. So the Board of Directors asked me to look into it – could they do it in this particular way? At the time, I worked for a fairly prominent law firm that had one of the top tax attorneys in Denver. I spoke to the powers that be at the firm, and then reported to the Board that “We can do this, happy to do this.” I’m very excited, finally using my legal skills to help the Vidyadhara! And we ran up – this is like 1982 or thereabouts– an \$8-9,000 bill that was 100% written off as pro bono. But, it was still a big item. They did this for me even though I was new to the law firm.

And the answer was that Naropa could not do it the way they wished. That was both the tax law answer and the securities law answer. It was the right answer. I’d used my education and experience as a lawyer as well as my connections in that world. I did it! I helped Rinpoche! I was very happy that I’d done something protecting the Vidyadhara, Naropa and Vajradhatu.

I gave the Board the information in time for their meeting that night. At the board meeting, one of the board members who was also an attorney, read what I had sent, and told everybody on the board that I had blown them off completely. He said that I hadn’t done anything, that this answer was just bullshit..a lie... I didn’t spend any time on it... this was crap.... And basically, Lyle’s an asshole. Now, the part about me being an asshole may be true, but the other part was not true. I and several far more experienced lawyers at the firm really did spend quite a bit of time on it.

I didn’t know anything about this board discussion until I got a call the next morning from Alex Halpern. Alex said, “You know Lyle, at the board meeting last night so and so said that you just blew this off, and didn’t do anything and it was all bullshit.” My blood pressure went through the roof, I started screaming into the phone in my office, “He said what!! That fucking asshole, does he know how much time we spent on it? You know me Alex, does this sound like something I would do?” Alex said that no, it didn’t sound like me and that was why he was asking. I said “I can’t believe it – fuck all of you!” And I slammed down the phone.

I got in my car and I drove way too fast back to Boulder. The anger inside was clearly translated to the pressure I exerted on the gas pedal. I was supposed to be on duty with the Regent that night, so I drove to his house, a little early for my shift. I banged on the door, which I never did. And you don’t do that, you don’t ‘bang bang bang bang.” I’m sure steam was still coming out of my ears. I’d been discussing with myself (!) what I would say to the Regent the entire drive from Denver to Boulder, how I’m going to destroy this person who said these things, and the same for anyone that believed him....

So I bang on the door, and, nobody is in there to answer but the Regent... And he opens the door, "Hi Lyle, how are you?"

I said, "I have to talk to you!" in a very aggressive tone, and he said, "Yes, yes, but I have to talk to you first." "No, no, no I have to say something first!" I yelled barely able to suppress my rage. He said, "No, no, no, I have to tell you something." "OK, but I've got to talk to you!" And I'm still outside on the porch screaming at him. Well, if not at him, then clearly right in front of him. I'm not a smart man...

The Regent looks at me and says, "I just want to tell you how happy I am with what you did." And I look at him incredulously and said, "Were you there? Do you know what this asshole said? Do you have any fucking idea how much time the firm put into this..." I never spoke to the Regent like that... It is quite clear that I was not thinking clearly at all... And he looked at me and said, "Oh yeah I was there. It was the first time that person had spoken at a board meeting in five years. That was great. I want you to work really closely with him. Now what was it that you wanted to talk to me about?"

At which point I was like, "What?" And he said, "No, this is really important, you really need to work with him, closely. This is very good. Now, what was on your mind?" I said, "Nothing, nothing's on my mind."

And that was a very direct lesson. When we talked about it a little later when I was inside and had a cup of tea or something, he gave a very specific explanation that I've never forgotten:

"It doesn't matter if you're right if you're not benefiting beings."

And I said, "Got it." And I dropped the whole thing - it was very interesting that I could do that. Because he said it to me that way, after he told me what he wanted to say, and I kind of lost it, how could I drop it? I think it was only because of his blessings. And I thought about it a lot - It doesn't matter if you're right if you're not benefiting beings. There is a cultural neurosis that I have. I am one of those Jews who think it's very important to be right, "Are you right or are you not? Is a critical question."

It was one of many things that he just tossed off, effortlessly. The dharma would just come out. That is such a pith instruction for my life. I haven't always been able to accomplish it, but I think about it all the time. It was such a kind, direct message about me, to me, that you really need to wake up about this and understand something. It was so pointed and right to the heart.