

THE LIFE OF TILOPA, PART 1 - Faith

The first person in the Tibetan Buddhist lineage known as Kagyu was the great Indian master named Tilopa. He was called a Mahasiddha, which means a person of great powers. His powers were quite unbelievable when we hear about them now – they seem like something we see in the movies that we know are not true. But at the time and place where he lived, in India about 1,000 years ago, there were quite a few people who actually had mystical powers. Today there are some too, but they usually don't want to attract attention.

In those days there were many magicians, who practiced sorcery, cast spells, or used spirits or unseen beings to do what they wanted. Some unseen beings could cause great harm, and others could be very helpful and good. Both types of unseen beings could be quite powerful and even frightening, and only some people could see and communicate with them.

There were also people called yogis who had supernatural powers. But they got their powers from their intense Dharma or yoga practice, and used them in good ways to help others. Tilopa was a yogi, who became one of the most famous in the world. This is his story.



In Bengal, the eastern part of India which today includes Bangladesh, more than 1,000 years ago, lived a wealthy family of Brahmins, the highly respected caste of people who performed

spiritual ceremonies and provided spiritual advice. They had a daughter, but they also wanted a son. So they made offerings to the gods, and to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, gurus, and the Buddhist deity Chakrasamvara. Soon afterward, the couple had a son.

The happy parents showed their baby son to astrologers and others who could understand special signs on a baby that might indicate something about his future. When they looked carefully at the baby, they were confused – this child was very unusual. Some of them thought, “Ah, he has the marks of a god!” Others thought. “No, he is some other type of celestial being.” Some thought, “He seems to be a human being, but a very special one.” Still others thought, “He has the marks of a Buddha, an enlightened being!” But they all agreed he was a very special being who should be carefully protected. He was given the name Salyö. Because he was in a Brahmin family, he was called Brahmin Salyö.

When he had grown into a young boy, one day when he was with his mother, a scary looking old woman approached. Her entire face was deeply wrinkled, with strange bumps and white hairs sticking out here and there from her face. Most of her teeth were missing; the few that she had were crooked and seemed too large for her face. Her wispy grey hair seemed stained with brown dirt and hung loosely, blowing around her face. What he noticed most was her piercing black eyes that seemed to glow with a strange energy more powerful than her thin little body could hold.



Mysteriously, she said to the boy’s mother, “There is no place where one can avoid death.”

The boy’s mother worried that perhaps her boy might die soon.

She pleaded, “What can I do for him?”

The old woman looked at the boy and said, “Herd buffalo and read scriptures. There you will find the prophecies of the Dakinis.” Prophecies are wisdom which has been told about the future.

And then she walked away and was never seen in their home again.

The boy did as the old woman advised, and took care of a herd of buffalo, taking them out to graze every day, and reading books to educate himself.

One day, after he had grown to be a young man, and he was taking care of the buffalo and reading as usual, the scary old woman appeared to him again. She asked him his name, where he was born and who his parents were. He told her, and then he added, "I am tending buffalo to earn my living, as well as practicing the Dharma by reading scriptures."

The old woman frowned and said, "This is not how it is." He wondered why she said that – he had, of course, told her the truth. He asked, "Then what is the truth?"

She said, "Your country is in the North. Your father is the deity Chakrasamvara and your mother is the deity Vajrayogini. Your brother is Pantsapana and I am your sister, Giver of Bliss. If you want to find your true purpose, go to the forest of the Bodhi tree. There the pure Dakinis have the teachings that are whispered into the ear."

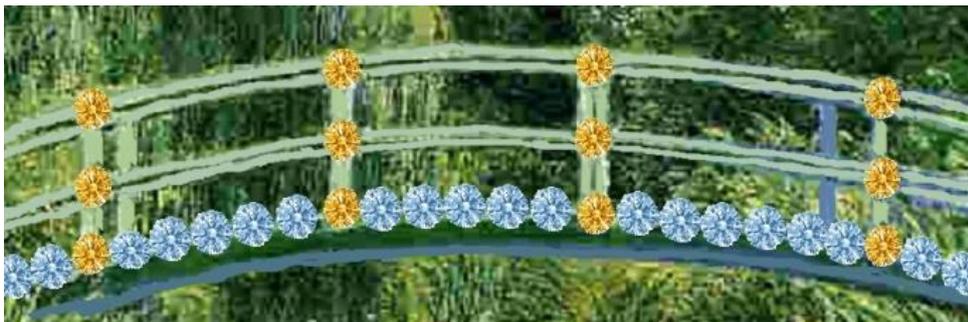
He knew that Dakinis are female spirits who can be angry, or wise deities who help yogis in their Dharma practice. They can be playful, and sometimes make trouble for people. He replied, "If I go there, the Dakinis will make obstacles and prevent me from being successful."

The old woman said firmly, "Yogi, you can get the teachings. You have received the predictions and kept the vows of samaya." Keeping the samaya vows meant keeping the virtues and commitment to Dharma practice.

The young man suddenly realized that the old woman was herself a wise Dakini in human form. She was calling him a yogi, one who seeks enlightenment by meditation.

He said, "The path is dangerous and I don't know how to follow it."

She gave him a small jeweled bridge, a key with a coral handle,





and a crystal ladder, very special mystical objects.

The Dakini named Giver of Bliss said, "I give you my blessings. Go now, don't hesitate."

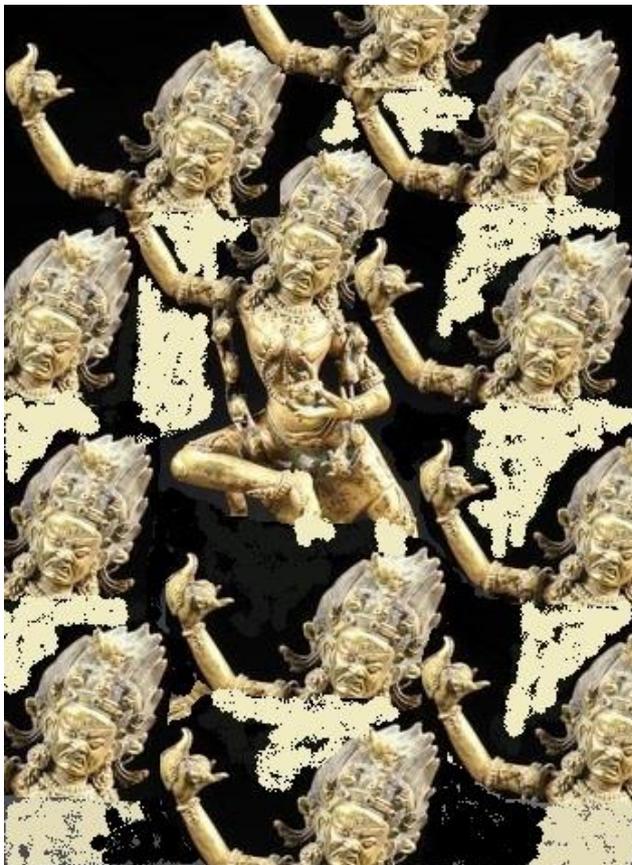
Fearlessly, Brahmin Salyö walked to the North and after some time found an iron wall with a poisonous lake in front of it.

Using the mysterious little jeweled bridge he got from the Dakini, he easily crossed over the lake.

Then, using the mysterious crystal ladder, he climbed the iron wall.

Once inside the wall, he saw a temple with three gates in front of it. Using the key he got from the Dakini, he opened the first gate.

When the gate opened, he saw some frightening female beings who made angry faces at him, terrible sounds, and threatening motions as if to hurt him.



In fearsome aggressive voices they announced, "We are the pure Dakinis, who desire flesh and blood."

But the yogi, Brahmin Salyö said,

"Even your frightening movements and threatening sounds, o fearsome Dakinis, cannot make the hairs of my body stand on end."

Hearing his calm and confident words, all of the Dakinis fell into a faint. When they became conscious again, they apologized.

As Tilopa entered into the courtyard outside the temple, they said, "We hoped to harm you, but you overpowered us."

Then another next group of Dakinis appeared in front of Brahmin Salyö.



They said
in horrible
voices,
“We are
the world
Dakinis,
who eat
flesh and
drink
blood.”

But he was not afraid, and made three mudras, which are special movements of his fingers, which overpowered the body, speech and mind of these Dakinis. He said, “O great fearful Dakinis, even you cannot make the hairs of my body stand on end.”

Hearing his confident words, the Dakinis fell into a faint, and when they became conscious they said, “You have overpowered us.”

One of the Dakinis disappeared into the temple and spoke to the Queen Dakini, who allowed the yogi Brahmin Salyö to enter. Immediately he meditated and did not bow to her.



The Dakinis became angry at him for that and said,

“She is the blessed one, the mother of the Buddhas. Let us beat him for showing no respect to her.” But the Queen said,



“He is Chakrasamvara, the father of the Buddhas. Nothing can destroy him. Therefore I will give him the teachings.”

She made clear that Tilopa was not just the son of Chakrasamvara, but an emanation, or form, of Chakrasamvara himself.

(Picture of Chakrasamvara)

So the Queen of Dakinis have him teachings. But he still was not satisfied. He wanted the perfect teaching of the pure bliss, the great secret, the right understanding, meditation, and actions to become enlightened, free from the cycles of birth and death.

The Dakinis said, “These secret treasures are only for the great yogi who is supposed to come according to prophecy. Though you are fortunate, you may not be able to get them.”

Brahmin Salyö spoke to the Queen, firm in his request for the special wisdom teachings.

The Queen said, “These special teachings are locked and cannot be opened to anyone but the great yogi who is supposed to come according to prophecy.”

Brahmin Salyö said, “I have the keys to unlock it. A Dakini gave me the special keys and told me that I am the one who is supposed to come.”

The Dakinis made fun of him, saying, “The one who told you that is a demon! You were deceived by a demon.”

Brahmin Salyö calmly replied, “This is no lie. It was not a demon speaking to me, it was a Dakini.” He explained the keys that he had, which were the practices which he did, and the deep insightful experiences he had.

Then all the Dakinis were pleased, and gave him empowerments and great secret teachings of what can only be heard directly from a master. They called him Tilo and Chakrasamvara.

He was then known as Tilo, or Tilopa. When he received these teachings, he experienced flying into space like a bird, and could see the heaven worlds.



The Dakinis wanted him to stay with them. But he said that as a yogi, he must go to a monastery and teach others.

Tilopa then went out to villages to teach. People asked him who his Lama was (his guru or teacher), and he said, "I have no human teacher. My teacher is the All-Knowing One."

When the people heard that he did not have a human teacher, they lost faith in him. They thought that he was deluded, crazy, or extremely arrogant, pretending to be like Buddha.

So Tilopa realized that he needed to prove to people that he had a human teacher. He went toward the south in India and served as a shepherd.

The great teacher Nagarjuna was practicing meditation in that area, and Tilopa approached him one day and received teachings from him.

Nagarjuna appointed him as the King of that area, and called him Nada Tilo. Knowing he was a student of Nagarjuna, and that Nagarjuna chose him to be the king, everyone within the kingdom felt strong devotion to Tilopa, who was now their teacher and their dear King Nada Tilo.

But outside the kingdom, people did not believe in him. One day, he rode an elephant and struck all the trees, bushes and clumps of grass in his path with a sword, saying "Enter the battle!" At once, each tree, bush and grass clump became a soldier. Then the people, seeing this miracle, believed that he was a great yogi as well as a good King, and deeply trusted him. Later, when the area was invaded by an army of Persians, he climbed up on a huge tree trunk and held up his shield, which radiated a bright light which blinded the entire army, including their horses and elephants. He raised his sword, and they all fled in every direction. No one doubted him after that.



QUESTIONS (answers in parentheses):

1. What type of family was Tilopa born into? (wealthy Brahmin family, the highest caste)
2. What did the scary looking old woman tell Tilopa's mother that he should do? (herd buffalo and read scriptures)
3. Was she really a human? (no, she was a Dakini)

4. Who did she tell him to go to learn the teachings from? (the Dakinis)
5. When he was worried about the Dakinis making obstacles or problems for him, what three items did she give him? (jeweled bridge, crystal ladder, key with a coral handle)
6. What did he do when he saw the frightening looking Dakinis? (overpowered them with his calm, confident words, and mudras)
7. Why didn't the Queen of Dakinis give him the special wisdom teachings as soon as he asked for them? (they were only for a special yogi who was supposed to come according to prophecy)
8. What wonderful experience did he have when he received the special wisdom teachings? (flew into space, saw heaven worlds)
9. Why did people not believe in him at first? (he didn't have a human teacher)
10. What did Nagarjuna do for Tilopa so they would believe in him? (made him a king)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – FAITH:

“To the Lama, who is like a precious gem, one should have unchanging faith and devotion. One’s mind should be clear as a crystal, and drink the stream of the stainless instructions” (Naropa’s interpretation of Tilopa’s signs, quoted in The Great Kagyu Masters (GKM) pp. 70-71).

When Tilopa received the teachings from the Dakinis, he wanted to help others learn the great wisdoms that he learned. But people didn't believe in someone who didn't have a lama, a guru. They could trust someone who had a good guru, and not someone who might be imagining or pretending he received wisdom from some unknown being. To put your trust in a spiritual teacher to guide you, you must have faith that he or she is a good and pure person who really has wisdom.

But even when Tilopa was known to have Nagarjuna as a guru, people outside his kingdom didn't believe in him. So he had to show them powerful miracles, turning trees and bushes into soldiers and blinding the enemy army that invaded their kingdom, with light from his shield.

Shakyamuni Buddha had to show miracles the people of his hometown after he had left for many years and become enlightened, because they didn't just believe what other people said about him. They had to see a miracle for themselves.

So now we can believe in Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings even now, 2600 years later! And we now have a lineage of gurus from Tilopa, so that we can have faith in the teachings

passed down for over 1,000 years from guru to student all the way to our present day teachers, Chetsang Rinpoche, Chungtsang Rinpoche and Garchen Rinpoche.

Another way we develop faith in the teachings is that we can experience the kindness and compassion of the people we know who are practicing the teachings.

And another way we develop faith is by noticing the kindness, patience, compassion and other good values that develop in us as we practice. We become more calm in stressful situations, we become more understanding and tolerant of other people, and we can cope better when difficulties arise.

ACTIVITY – WORD SEARCH:

Find these words in the word search below:

Faith Chakrasamvara Tilopa Dakini Queen Brahmin

King Buffalo Nagarjuna Yogi Lama Teaching

R A K I Y O G I Z U B Y T O H
H A D P O N V C O F R V E B K
C H A K R A S A M V A R A U L
K O K M Q B O M X L H O C F A
I A I N U Y M U B P M G H F M
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