

THE LIFE OF TILOPA, PART 3 – The Ego and Selflessness

I. Sesame seeds

After Tilopa learned from several teachers, had served as a king for awhile, and developed many yogic powers as a result of his meditation, he took a job pounding sesame seeds. This is where he got his name “Tilopa” – the word “Til” means sesame seed in some Indian languages.



The seeds were very tiny and had to be smashed and pounded for a long, long time until all the little seeds became a soft paste, like peanut butter.

Then after the sesame paste is put into a container, the oil rises to the top and a thick paste settles on the bottom of the container.

A lot of seeds must be crushed and pounded for a little oil to be produced.

While Tilopa pounded the sesame seeds hour after hour, he was contemplating deeply. He thought about how the oil is the most precious part of the sesame seed, because it is very

useful - so many delicious foods can be fried in the oil. But to get the oil out of the seeds, a lot of hard work has to be done. The hard part of the seed has to be broken, smashed and destroyed to get the oil. All the tiny seeds have the wonderful oil in them. He thought about how an ignorant person, who doesn't know about sesame seeds, would not know that there is oil in all of the tiny seeds. Similarly, an ignorant person doesn't know that there is the Buddha Nature in all living beings. Those ignorant people don't have a Lama to teach them about Buddha Nature, and how to experience it by getting rid of the ego, the selfishness.

Just like you have to work hard to break and destroy the hard parts of the sesame seed to get the precious oil, you have to work hard to break and destroy the selfishness, the ego, to experience the precious Buddha Nature.

II. The contest with the powerful yogi

There was a King who wanted to have great Yogis and scholars perform a grand ceremony and feast, to offer merits to his mother. A large number of yogis and scholars were assembled, and a very powerful yogi who was leading the others walked over to a throne to sit.



An old lady appeared among the yogis and pointed to the powerful yogi sitting on the throne.

She announced loudly, "You cannot lead the meditation."

The yogis and scholars stared at her. They didn't know who she was or how she got there.

One of them said, "Then who should lead?"

She answered firmly, "My brother." She seemed to be very sure of what she was saying, and very confident among all the great yogis and wise scholars. They didn't doubt her, as they knew that sometimes powerful spirits can take the form of a human being to guide others on important matters.

They asked, "Well, where is he now?"

She answered, "In the Blazing Cemetery."

It was not unusual for a yogi to be at a cemetery, because yogis can easily meditate on death and not being attached to the body when they are there.

So a group of yogis and scholars went out to the Blazing Cemetery to try to find the brother of the old woman.

They found him at the cemetery, wearing only a cotton cloth around his waist, and with bloodshot eyes. They requested that he come to the feast and ceremony. He agreed, and followed them.

When they arrived, Tilopa sat next to the powerful yogi who was going to lead the ceremony. They each understood that they must compete, to show who has the most extreme yogic powers and therefore who is the most qualified to lead the ceremony.



Each of them built a shrine for worship, and then meditated, and by their yogic powers tried to destroy the other's shrine.

The other yogi thought it would be easy to destroy Tilopa's shrine, but he couldn't do it! He tried and tried, but he was unable to do anything to Tilopa's shrine. But Tilopa easily toppled the other yogi's shrine.

Then they each made several illusions, showing their great powers. Each of them made a more powerful and surprising illusion than the last, thinking that the other would not be able to make a better one.



Finally, Tilopa created the illusion of snow lions. They ran around, and everyone was astounded.

Then Tilopa jumped on one of the snow lions and rode around on it.

The snow lion galloped around and around with Tilopa riding him.

The other yogi could not match that great feat.

He knew that Tilopa was more powerful than he was, so he felt great devotion to the greatest yogi, Tilopa.

The other yogis and scholars asked, "Who is this amazing yogi?"

Tilopa replied, "I am Tilopa, the enlightened yogi, free from effort in whatever I do."

Then Tilopa led the meditation and ceremony. The other powerful yogi apologized for not respecting him earlier, and requested Tilopa to give him Dharma teachings.

III. Beer in a tavern

One day, Tilopa entered a tavern - a pub - where people drink beer together. Just like a regular customer, Tilopa casually said to the bartender, "Bring me some beer."

The bartender, who was a lady, replied, "Give me some money first."

Tilopa, like most yogis, didn't have any money. He drew a line on the ground. He said, "When the sun passes this line I will give you the money."

The bartender wouldn't dare to confront him or ask him to show her the money first.



So she brought him a pot full of beer and a mug, and poured some beer into the mug.

Just like a regular customer, Tilopa began to drink the beer.

Tilopa at first seemed like a normal man drinking beer.

But then the bartender saw that Tilopa didn't look like the same person. He had changed his appearance.

He really seemed to be a different person. The bartender kept looking at him, with a puzzled look on her face. And then he seemed to be yet another person. The bartender rubbed her eyes and looked at him, again and again.



Tilopa kept drinking, filling his mug again and again and drinking the beer quickly.

The bartender brought him another pot of beer, and he drank it. She brought him another, and then another.

He didn't seem to be drunk at all, despite having drank several full pots of beer.

Then Tilopa gave her the shock of her life.

Where Tilopa had been sitting on the chair, suddenly there was a cat sitting on the chair.

Now the bartender stared in disbelief, her mouth wide open.

She wanted to scream, but then she saw Tilopa the yogi sitting in the chair, asking for more beer.

By this time, Tilopa had drank a keg of more of beer. No human being could drink that much and not get drunk. Tilopa acted perfectly normal, as if he was sipping his first beer.

He kept drinking and drinking, and the bartender was so shocked she didn't know what to do. So she just kept bringing him more beer. She had to fill the pot from the beer kegs in the cellar of the tavern.

He was not a normal human being. He must have some incredible powers to drink so much and not fall unconscious and die.



Soon he had finished drinking all the beer in all the kegs that were in the cellar of the tavern.

Tilopa was not even unsteady or tired after drinking all that beer.

The bartender then came to her senses, realizing that he had not paid her and there was no more beer to sell for other customers, so she would lose their family business.

So she asked Tilopa for the money.

Tilopa then went into meditation. Suddenly there were new kegs of beer in the cellar, the same number of kegs which he had emptied, and these kegs were full of beer.

And then a man arrived at the tavern and requested that the bartender sell them to him. The man took out a large amount of money and handed it to her to pay for the beer kegs. So, she received the money from the man in an amount equal to what Tilopa owed her. She was paid the money by the time the sun crossed the line on the ground that Tilopa had drawn.

The bartender quickly ran to her neighbor's house and called her friends to come and meet this great yogi. They all felt devotion to him. The bartender said, "You are a precious being, so please allow us to be your students!"

He then gave teachings to her and her friends, and they became enlightened.

IV. The Singer

One day, Tilopa saw a man who was a great singer, entertaining a large crowd of people with his beautiful voice. When Tilopa approached the man, Tilopa said, "Why are you howling so?"

The man became angry. He knew he was a talented singer. He thought, "That yogi insulted me, and probably knows nothing about singing."



So he said, "Let's have a singing contest."

Then he launched into one of the crowd's favorite songs that had many low and high notes, so he could show his great musical talent. Then the singer showed his talent for singing many different types of songs - fast ones and slow, sad and sweet songs. The people in the crowd sometimes clapped along, tapped their feet, smiled, or, during the sad songs, had tears in their eyes.

Then it was Tilopa's turn to sing. Tilopa began to sing celestial songs – soft and incredibly sweet - that no one had ever heard before. The people in the crowd looked at one another, wondering where such beautiful melodies came from. They suddenly felt extreme peace and happiness hearing these songs of the heaven-worlds. They wanted to just close their eyes and enjoy the scenes of beauty that arose in their minds as they listened to these other-worldly tunes.

The singer had only sung worldly songs, but Tilopa's voice brought all the people – even the singer - into a mental state of joy that they had never known.

The singer felt deep devotion to this yogi singer, and asked to be his student. He also asked, "Where, precious one, do you come from? You have won me over."

Tilopa replied, "I am the singer Tilopa, living in the whole world. I came here as a beautiful singer; now I wander off, not in any particular direction."

Tilopa gave him teachings and he became an enlightened yogi.

QUESTIONS:

1. How did Tilopa get his name? (from pounding "Til" seeds)
2. What is the most precious part of the sesame seed? (the oil)
3. Tilopa thought that the oil in the sesame seed is like what in people? (Buddha Nature)
4. When the old lady told the scholars and yogis to lead the ceremony, where did she tell them they would find him? (the cemetery)
5. What was the final miraculous power that Tilopa showed, that the other powerful yogi could not match? (rode a snow lion)
6. What miraculous powers did Tilopa show the bartender? (appearing like other people, appearing like a cat, drinking many kegs of beer but not getting drunk)
7. What kind of songs did Tilopa sing? (celestial songs of heaven-worlds, soft and sweet, making the people full of peace and joy)
8. What did the powerful yogi, bartender, and singer request from Tilopa after he showed his powers to them? (they wanted his teachings)
9. What happened after he taught them? (they became enlightened)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – EGO and SELFLESSNESS:

*"The ignorant do not know
That oil is the essence of the sesame seed;
Likewise, not knowing the branches of interdependence, they cannot extract their essence.
Just so, the co-emergent wisdom resides in the heart of all sentient beings;
Yet it cannot be realized unless it is pointed out by a Lama.
Pounding the shell of sesame releases its essence;
Likewise, the meaning of Truth is revealed in the Lama's instructions."*

- Tilopa (GKM p. 45)

Some people who have supernatural powers show them to other people to become popular, famous, or make money.

They are proud of their powers and want other people to know about them.

There were many yogis and gurus and even magicians in those days,

and it was difficult for people to know the difference between a real yogi or a good guru, and a person who had a big ego, who wanted to become popular, famous or rich.

It was important for Tilopa to teach people Dharma to help them become enlightened. He had very much compassion for people, and wanted to serve as their guru to bring them out of their ignorance and suffering.

He wasn't selfishly trying to have students.

He was selfless, always wanting others to find real peace and happiness from enlightenment.

So he had to show his extreme powers so people would believe in him, and know that he was a good guru and not just a magician or just another unenlightened spiritual teacher.

Normally, showing off your talents to others, showing the great things you have achieved, involves some ego and pride. We like others to be impressed by what we can do.

But that causes others to feel jealous and competitive.

Like the singer who wanted to compete with Tilopa – he probably felt proud of his singing, and wanted to show to Tilopa that he was the best singer.

He felt insulted and got angry when Tilopa insulted him, asking him why he was howling.

Why do you think Tilopa did that?

Because he wanted the singer to notice his big ego, his pride about how well he could sing.

And then when Tilopa sang so much better, then the singer's ego was crushed.

And that was what was needed for him to learn from Tilopa.

He had to see his own weakness, to see that he needed to learn something.

He would not have been interested in Dharma teachings from Tilopa otherwise.

Similarly, he had to crush the ego of the powerful yogi, so that he could see that he needed to learn from someone greater than he was.

What do we mean by the "ego"? The ego means the pride of being better than others, more important than others, separate from others.

What do we mean by "crushing the ego"?

Showing that the ego is fragile and can be hurt when others insult you, do better than you, or have better things than you.

So, the ego is only a temporary illusion - a false idea that you are great, you are special, you are better.

Showing that the ego is a false view of yourself.

So you will find the real view, your real nature, your real essence, which is the Buddha Nature, which every living being has.

When you experience your Buddha Nature, you see yourself as totally peaceful and happy, with no insecurity, fear, worry, anger, pride, jealousy or competition.

Crushing the ego is like crushing the sesame seed, so the oil, the essence of the sesame seed, can be seen and enjoyed.

ACTIVITY – Meditation on Buddha Nature:

(Students, sitting in circle, each hold a cup of oil at their heart.)

Meditate as a group on mindfulness of breathing to relax.

Then bring attention to the heart, and think of all the beings who are suffering in many ways: Sickness, loneliness, war, losing loved one, injured, worried, scared.

Humans, animals, birds, reptiles, fish, insects, unseen beings.

meditate on lovingkindness to all beings,

then compassion for all beings,

then feeling altruistic joy for all beings,

then a feeling that all beings are doing many different activities, good and bad, and having thoughts that are always changing, but they have the Buddha Nature that is totally peaceful, kind and happy always.

Meditate on your Buddha Nature in the heart, your own kindness, compassion, love for others, patience, tolerance, helpfulness, all the good qualities.

Imagine the Buddha Nature could be held in your hands, in a cup in your hands.

Imagine that the Buddha Nature is like the oil in this cup, held at your heart.

Slowly open your eyes and look at the cup of oil you are holding.

Let's offer the Buddha Nature in a bowl in the center of our circle, each of us pouring the oil into the bowl.

Now, we can't see whose Buddha Nature is whose, they are all one!

There is no individual Buddha Nature.

Our true nature is all the same, all totally beautiful, not separate from each other!

Now, we feel the Buddha Nature back inside our own heart. The wise and totally happy part of ourselves, always with us, there whenever we need it!