

THE LIFE OF NAROPA, Part 1 – Suffering and Compassion

About 1000 years ago in the eastern part of India, lived a king and queen who had a daughter, but no son. So they prayed and made offerings to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha (the community of Buddhist monks and practitioners). Finally, a son was born, and like Tilopa's parents and many other wealthy parents in India, they showed their infant son to wise men who could predict the baby's destiny - what his life would be like.

The wise men said that the baby would be like Prince Siddhartha, who grew up to be the Buddha -- he would either be a very great king, or, if he gives up the worldly life of wealth and family, he will become enlightened in this lifetime.

He was named Prince Kuntu. He grew up to be an intelligent young man, but he was not interested in the wealthy lifestyle of a prince. He saw the peaceful wise monks who visited the palace, and thought, "That is the life for me." One day, he asked his parents for permission to become a monk.

His parents both refused to give their permission. Their son must take on the responsibilities of his father and become the next king!

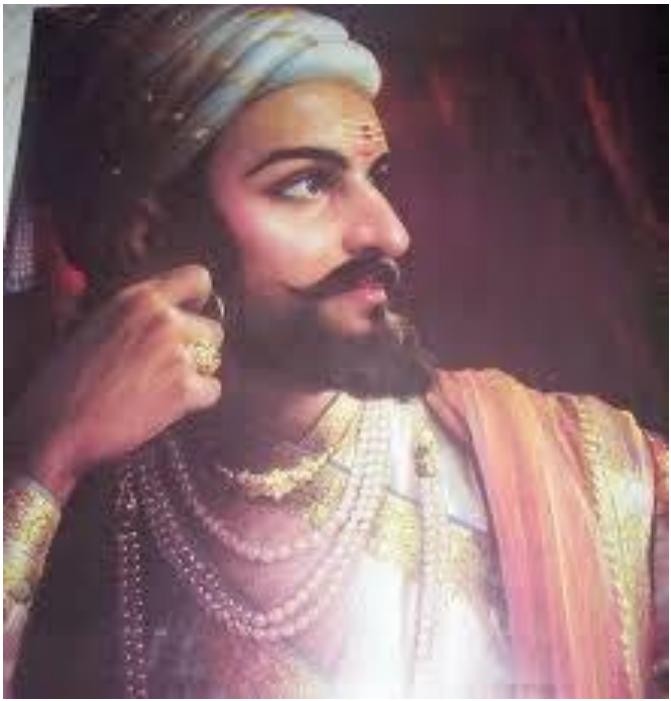
In reply, the Prince said, "Whatever we do, if it is done without Dharma, it becomes a source of suffering. Therefore I will go and receive the precious teachings of the Dharma."

He knew he could not simply disobey his parents, but felt that he must go and stay with a teacher so he could learn the Dharma even if he was not a monk.

So he made a long journey to Kashmir to study with a well-known teacher, who ordained him not as a monk, but as a student of the Dharma. With this commitment to learn and practice the Dharma, the Prince not only learned Dharma, but also the five types of study offered at that time: creative arts, medicine, language, logic, and metaphysics, or the unseen world.

When the Prince came back home to visit his parents, they were not happy about their son having learned Dharma. They were concerned that he was trying to avoid becoming a king so he could live the religious life. His father thought that at least he must get married. Then he might be distracted from his spiritual interests, enjoy the family life and appreciate being a king. And, a good son cannot disobey his parents. His father said,

"What is the use of Dharma if one disobeys one's parents!"



The Prince thought about the millions of past lives we have all had in the six realms as humans, animals, gods, jealous asuras, hungry ghosts, and beings in the hell worlds, and how we have had parents in each of those past lives. He thought about the suffering of all of those beings in the six realms.

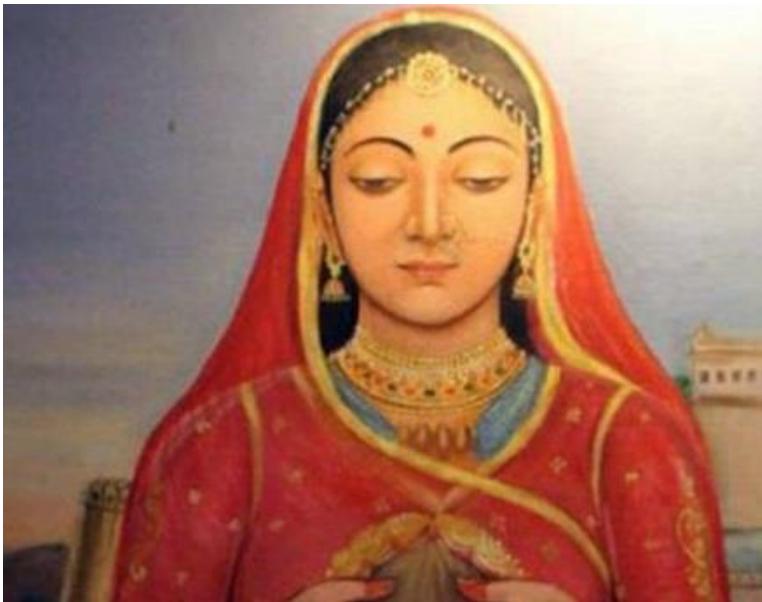
But he knew he could not disobey his parents, because that would not be Dharmic.

He said to his parents, "All the sentient beings in the six worlds are our parents, not just one or two people. But if you find a lady who is wise, pure, disciplined, and who has learned the Mahayana Buddhist teachings, let me know."

The King was pleased that his son agreed to have a wife, so he immediately ordered his advisors to go out and find a young lady with these qualifications. They traveled to many kingdoms, and finally in a far-away kingdom in India, they finally found a young lady meeting the Prince's description. They requested her father's permission for her to marry Prince Kuntu.

But the father, a religious man who was not a Buddhist, would not agree. He said, "We

Brahmins have great compassion, whereas your king, though he is a Buddhist, sometimes engages in evil deeds and shows less compassion than we Brahmins. Therefore I will not allow you to have my daughter for marriage." The king's advisor insisted, and finally the Brahmin agreed.



The young lady was brought to the kingdom, and she and Prince Kuntu were married. But after some time, even though the Princess was very kind-hearted and a good wife, the Prince became very sad.

He said to himself, "Worldly life is filled with endless problems. Therefore I must give up the

worldly life."

He gently told his wife. He did not want to hurt her by leaving her, but he had to explain how he felt. She didn't want her husband to be unhappy, and she knew he was a wise and virtuous man who had great spiritual potential. She didn't want to be an obstacle on his path. So she allowed him to leave her to become a monk. He then went to a monastery, where he was ordained as a monk.

After studying and being trained as a monk, he went to the famous Nalanda University. He was given the honor of serving as a gatekeeper. He had such great knowledge of Dharma, philosophy and logic that he often debated with non-Buddhists, and always won the debates. He eventually became the Chancellor, the top leader, of the University. He gave teachings, gave meditation instruction, and ordained young men to become monks.



One day, an old hunchbacked woman appeared at the University.

She was sneezing and yawning, and crying and laughing to herself. She was limping and leaning on a walking stick. She walked up to the Prince, who had now become a monk and the Chancellor of the University, and who would later be known as Naropa.

She asked him, "Do you know the words of the Dharma, or the meaning of the Dharma?"

Naropa replied, "I know the meaning."

The old woman looked very disappointed, and wept.

Why was she weeping? Naropa thought more deeply about what he had said. He had learned so much about the Dharma. He could win debates with his great knowledge of the Dharma.

But he had only read and studied the Dharma, and not really put it into practice. He knew what was written in books, but not how to apply it in real world situations. There was much about the meaning of the Dharma that he didn't know.

So he corrected himself, saying “I know the words of the Dharma.” The old woman laughed with joy, that despite his great learning, he was aware of his ignorance. This woman was no fool - she knew more about his ignorance than he did.

He wanted to have a really deep understanding of the Dharma. He needed someone to teach him. He asked, “Who understands the meaning of the Dharma?”

She replied, “My brother.” He said, “Please take me to him.”

She said firmly, “Pray, meditate and search.” And then she disappeared.

How was he going to find this Lama, the brother of this wise old woman? He would have to make enormous efforts to find him. He began to ponder what he should do now.

He was overcome with thoughts of how unsatisfactory the world is. The world is like a prison, he thought, like being caught in a spider web, each person going from birth to death full of desires but being disappointed again and again. Whatever we enjoy must come to an end, and life is never fully satisfying. He thought, “Why not look for a Lama, a guru, while I have this precious body that will die one day?”

He gave away all of his belongings, even his valuable Dharma books, and said, “Now I will search for the perfect Lama!”

But it wasn’t so easy to simply leave. His three friends, who also were gatekeepers at Nalanda University, pleaded with him to stay. Then, word got out to the 500 students that their dear Chancellor was going to leave. They also pleaded with him, but he replied,

“Even if one studies all the subjects of knowledge and becomes a great scholar, without a qualified Lama, your mind can’t really be satisfied. You are thirsty for more. Even if one has psychic powers, you don’t really know the ultimate truth. Therefore, whatever happens, I will search for a holy Lama by giving up the meaningless activities of this life.”

Wearing his monk’s robes, carrying a bowl in which people could offer food to him, and holding a long stick to lean on for walking long distances, he set out for a long journey by foot.

Suddenly as he was walking, he heard a heavenly voice saying that there will be a prophesy – a sign of what is to come – about the Lama he is searching for, and that the Deity Chakrasamvara will help.

Naropa decided to build a grass hut to chant, pray and meditate in. He chanted the mantra of Chakrasamvara - “Om Hri Ha Ha Hum Hum Phat” - seven hundred thousand (700,000) times, in response to the suggestion of the heavenly voice to seek help from Chakrasamvara. Then he felt the earth shake, and saw lights radiating around him, and smelled some beautiful scents in the air.



Two Dakinis appeared and said,

"Search in the East for the Lama Tilopa. This great lord and emanation of Chakrasamvara will be found there.

He realized that the Lama that he is searching for is

named Tilopa. He said, "Why not search for this prophesied Lama?"

He left the grass hut and went toward the East to search for the Lama Tilopa. He went from village to village asking for any teacher by the name of Tilopa, but no one had heard of him. He searched for one month, but couldn't find him. He became discouraged, and thought:

"I couldn't find the prophesied Lama Tilopa. I must have been deceived by demons."

He heard another celestial voice, saying "Search for the Lama. You will find him if you don't remain in the delusion of laziness." So he continued his search.



As he was walking along on a narrow path between rocky cliff and a river, standing directly in his way on the path was a woman with leprosy.

Leprosy is a terrible, contagious disease which at first causes terrible smelly sores all over the body, and then causes a person to become disfigured, and lose their fingers and toes. Such people are considered unclean. He didn't want to get near her.

There was no space to walk around her. He said, "Please step aside."

She replied, "Everything is interdependent. All beings have the Buddha Nature, so we are all the same. If you have thoughts that some people are dirty and some people are clean, you cannot find the Lama."

She suddenly disappeared, and Naropa fainted. When he regained consciousness, there was no cliff, and no woman with leprosy.

His mind was clear, and he knew that the woman with leprosy was a vision with a special message for him. We must realize that regardless of how a person looks or behaves, or how impure, or terrible they seem to be, their inner essence is the Buddha Nature - all the pure and virtuous qualities. So we should be loving and caring, and have lovingkindness to all.



Naropa then wandered into a dry desert-like area, and he saw a dog that had been badly injured. There were flies buzzing around the dog, laying eggs in the dog's wounds. The eggs hatched into worm-like maggots, wriggling and burrowing into the dog's flesh.

Naropa was disgusted at this horrible sight, and he wanted to get away quickly. The dog was blocking his path, so he stepped over the dog, who said,

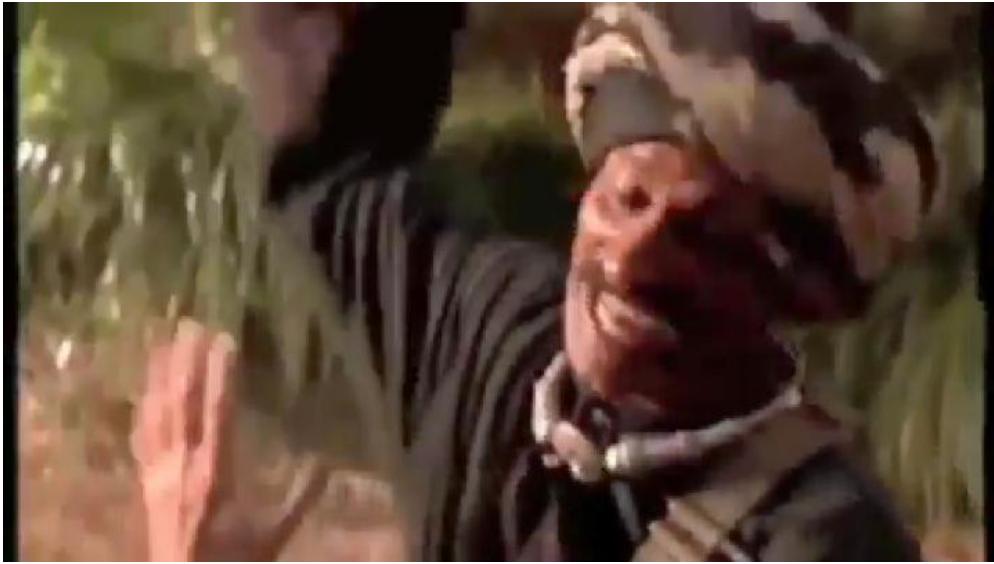
"All the beings of the six realms are like your parents. If you don't develop great compassion and enter the Mahayana path, you cannot find the Lama, even if you search for him."

Naropa said, "How is this true?"

The dog replied, "You cannot find the Lama as long as you think of others as lower than yourself." Then the dog disappeared.

Naropa realized this was another vision with an important message for him. We must not forget to be compassionate to all beings, even if a being looks disgusting or awful, and that we should not feel that others are inferior. Real compassion means that we don't think that another being is less important than we are.

Naropa continued his search.



After some time, he saw a man pounding another man's head. What a shocking sight! But Naropa was thinking about his desire to find his Lama, and he asked the man,

"Have you seen Tilopa?"

The man said, "Please help me to pound this man's head and I will tell you."

That was even more shocking. Naropa thought, "I can't pound some man's head! I am not going to do something violent like that."

The man said, "In the teachings of great compassion, if you don't pound your big-headedness, your ego, with the hammer of selflessness, you can't find the Lama." With a snap of his fingers, he disappeared.

This was the third vision, with the message that to be compassionate, you must not be egoistic. You must think of the needs of others rather than being focused on yourself and your own desires. He had not felt compassion for the poor man getting his head beaten, but had been focused on his own desire to find his Lama.

Contemplating this third lesson, Naropa continued his search for the great yogi Tilopa.

QUESTIONS:

1. What did the King want his son Prince Kuntu to be when he grew up? (a king)
2. Why did Prince Kuntu get married even though he wanted to be a monk? (he couldn't disobey his parents)
3. Why was Prince Kuntu sad when he was married? (he wanted to be a monk, and worldly life is full of problems)
4. When Naropa talked with the old woman at Nalanda University, he realized that he only knew the words of the Dharma, but what had he not yet learned? (how to practice the Dharma)

- how to apply it to real life situations)
- 5. What is the name of his Lama, as told by the two Dakinis? (Tilopa)
- 6. As he was walking along a path searching for Tilopa, what was the first vision he had? (a woman with leprosy)
- 7. What was the second vision? (an injured dog)
- 8. What was the third vision? (a man pounding the head of another man)
- 9. What messages did he learn from these three visions? (to have lovingkindness for all beings no matter how they look or behave (because they have the Buddha Nature), to have compassion for all beings and not to think of others as inferior, and not to be egoistic.)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – SUFFERING AND COMPASSION:

“Whatever we do, if it is done without Dharma, it becomes a source of suffering.”

- Naropa (GKM p. 57)

“Samsara is a vast, sorrowful field of grasping and fixation.”

-Naropa (GKM p. 60)

What is Dharma? The teachings of the Buddha. Naropa was a very wise, well-respected scholar at a famous university. He understood from the old woman that *learning* the Dharma is not enough – it must be *practiced*.

How do we practice it? We think about how the Buddha’s teachings apply to what we experience in our daily life.

For example, how to have lovingkindness and compassion for someone who looks terrible, disgusting or scary, and to remember to be selfless - not to just focus on our own wants and needs when there are others in need.

Naropa had a wonderful wife – why would he leave her to become a monk?

He felt that the worldly life was filled with endless problems.

What did he mean by that?

We are all living a “worldly life” - it means that we live with our families, not as a monk.

But why is a worldly life, living with our loving family, filled with endless problems?

It seems that monks have more problems because they have so many rules they must obey, they must rely on others to give them food and everything they need, and they can’t live with their families, have children, or buy the things they like.

But Naropa realized that family life is filled with desires and disappointments, success and failure, wanting and not getting, worry about the job, family, children, and all the things the family owns.

People normally have so many attachments – things you like and don’t like, things you want and don’t want.

All the disappointments, failures, worries, and fears we feel, even slight ones, are different types of suffering.

When we talk about “suffering” in Buddhism, we mean any type of discomfort, pain or stress, or feeling even a little bit embarrassed, angry, annoyed, bored, jealous, or anxious.

Everyone feels some suffering every day! We don’t feel perfectly happy, peaceful and content all day, do we? That is the First Noble Truth – that life is full of suffering.

Can you think of examples in your own life - what causes suffering for you? How about: Getting sick, too much homework, losing a soccer game, losing a toy, forgetting your homework assignment, getting yelled at, getting injured, thirsty, hungry, tired, being ignored, being accused of doing something wrong, losing a friend, a pet getting sick, broken toy.

A monk learns not to be attached, not to have too many desires and expectations, not to worry, not to be focused on yourself and your things. That way, he learns not to create more suffering for himself or others.

But we don’t have to be monks to learn this! By practicing Dharma, we can also learn to decrease our suffering and make ourselves more peaceful.

And, then we can reduce the suffering of others! How? When we are more peaceful, we’re not worried or annoyed, then we notice others more, wherever we are.

We notice what they need, how they might be suffering in some way, and how we can help.

Naropa was worried about not finding his Lama, so he was only focused on himself, his own needs. That’s why he wasn’t feeling compassion for the woman with leprosy, or the dog, or the man being beaten.

So we can learn from the lessons Naropa got from his visions – to remember to be compassionate to others around us who may be suffering in some way.

ACTIVITY: Bean bag (or ball or toy) toss: Teacher tosses the bean bag to a student while calling out an example of something that causes her to feel suffering, then the student must immediately call out another example of something that causes him/her to feel suffering, and so on. If a student hesitates before throwing the bean bag and calling out an example, or if he repeats an example that someone already called out, he or she is “out.” The last two players are the winners.