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In Footsteps of Naropa

A pilgrimage in Zaskar and Ladakh

By Anne Parker and Tshering Penjor

“It is not only a great honor for me but also an inspiring experience to be able to visit an educational center that is named after the great pandit Naropa who someone like myself as a Buddhist monk who sees himself as following the footsteps of the great pandit Naropa based on profound admiration in the realizations and insights of the great Naropa.

“For the institution that is named after the great pandit Naropa I feel that there are certain responsibilities to be able to really deserve that honor, that title. And the particular responsibility that I see is to be able to impart the insights of Naropa based on profound learning and scholarly understanding of the profound meanings of the scriptures. In addition, you should also be able to impart to the students the glory and also the power the dimension of the heart – good heart – and the altruistic aspiration which would enable the proper utilization of that insight and dimension. And if you are able to do that – to achieve such a harmonious balance and combination – then you, this institution will truly be a “Naropa Institute”.

The Dalai Lama during his speech to Staff and Faculty at Naropa in 1997

“His village gave the wood to build the monastery at Sani that honors the site where Naropa meditated here in Zaskar. They have an agreement that a monk will always be sent from Sani to their village...” I am listening to the stories Tshering Penjor is telling me as we walk through the blazing sunlight in the Zaskar Valley high in Kashmir in the Himalayan region of northern India. He is speaking of Kishan (Jamyang Gyaltzen), a man who is working with us on the long trek that Dean Caroline Hinkely and I are taking for twenty-one days across this sea of mountains and valleys as pilgrimage and practice. I feel that I am walking in stories; the land here is filled with stories. I hear many things in this story of Kishan’s village

I hear a thousand years of commitment not only to remembering the life and story of the great Maha Siddha Naropa, but also to the yogic and meditation practices that he taught. From Kishan's village of Peltor it would take days to carry wood over glaciers and then over the steep 5,300 meter Umasila Pass into the Zaskar Valley. This signifies dedication and a commitment that spans centuries. Naropa came to the

place where Sani monastery now stands some 1,000 years ago and devoted time to meditating in this auspicious place after his awakening and his studies with his teacher Tilopa. Each year there is a festival at Sani in which his statue is opened to the public for viewing. The rest of the year it stands carefully guarded behind closed doors.

Tshering Penjor then loops back in time to tell the story of Naropa's life, stories that he heard as a young monk sitting out under the willow trees in the evenings at Punaka Dzong in Bhutan. The story is alive. It has passed from mouth to ear for a thousand years. The power and intention of great practice is what keep the story flowing like a vital pulse or heartbeat over the centuries. Hearing it, it sinks in. What does it mean to have the kind of understanding of the nature of the body that Naropa achieved? His very presence seems alive as I am listening. It will take us a few more days of steady walking down the Zanskar Valley to arrive at Sani. I have time in the silence, sunlight and hours of walking to reflect on his life and our eventual arrival at the place where he meditated.

Tshering Penjor apologizes for any errors in his story. This opens a path of humility for the story to flow as remembered. Mouth to ear, as remembered. He begins with the past incarnations of Naropa that include Amitabha, the King of Shambala and Srongstan Gampo, an early king of Tibet. I sense a kind a weaving together of the fabric of the universe in the richness of the tale. *“Naropa was born as the beloved only son of a king in north Bengal. He loved studies and the arts. When he completed his studies his father asked him to be king. He tried to refuse, saying that he was only interested in religion. At last he is made to agree. He says that if he is to become the king he requests a wife from a Muslim country. A girl is found and they are married. One day as they are roaming around the garden of the palace he says to the girl “I don't want to be married. I want to go for the spiritual life. You have to understand my problem”. They decide together to make a fiction. He says, “Today I will explain to my father that you don't want to stay with me and that you want to go home. So we have to get a divorce. The girl was sent back and he refused to be king”.*

The sun is blazing hot as I lean forward listening to the story, keeping my eyes intently upon the trail. The story wraps around me like a cloak and draws me along even as the trail gets narrow in places, sometime only a footprint wide with hundreds of feet below it to the powerful and wide Zanskar river, deep brown with glacial silt. I am thinking, have I also refused the plans my family and culture might have liked me to follow? How is it that we find what is authentic for our lives?

“So Naropa left home and went to Nalanda University. There, within a few years, his brilliance as a scholar led him to become the abbot of the University. He had gained the respect of everyone. One day he met a dakini appearing as an old woman by the road. She asked him two questions, one about the meaning of the words he was studying and

one about the meaning of the teaching. Did he understand the meaning of the words she asked? Yes he answered so she laughed and the sun shone. Did he understand the meaning of the teachings she then asked? Again he answered yes, but she frowned and cried out and the sky became dark with rain. He saw that she had penetrated to a deeper level of understanding and he asked her " Why did you come here and what are you supposed to tell me? She answered. You must go in search of the teacher Tilopa. He has the Dharma you need. So he left Nalanda and went in search of Tilopa".

Ah, I am thinking, where do I go in search of deeper understanding? Inspired by others stories we can search not for the form of what they have found, but the essence. *"After searching for five years Naropa met one man who said he had met Tilopa, but five years before. He continued searching. Sometimes he met his teacher in the form of one whom kills animals, sometimes in the form of a person with leprosy. One day he came upon a dog that was afflicted with maggots all over the wounds in his body. The poor dog was licking the wounds running with blood, unable to alleviate his own suffering. Naropa realized that if he took out the maggots by hand he would cause great pain to the dog so he decided to use his own tongue. This too was the form of his own teacher. Naropa had met his teacher many times in all these forms".*

This part of the story really sinks in this time. Meeting the teacher in many forms.

"At last he meets a man fishing by a river. Naropa asks, "Have you seen Tilopa? The man answers, " Please wait for awhile and I will tell you where Tilopa. Then the man brought a live fish and boiled it. Naropa watched with the feeling that he didn't want to eat this food since I don't eat meat. Tilopa then said to him " If you don't eat the fish who will eat it since I have prepared it only for you?". Then he threw all the fish into the sky. Doing so the man himself disappeared. Naropa at this point reached a state of despair of ever finding his teacher. He decided to commit suicide. As he was about to commit suicide Tilopa appeared in front of him in the dress of a yogi. Having met his teacher he followed him".

" It was not any easy task to follow Tilopa. He sacrificed his life to Tilopa many times. Finally one day disciple and teacher were standing above a great cliff. Tilopa said "If there is anyone who loves me he will jump off this cliff and sacrifice his life. Naropa thinks that this is being said to him indirectly so he jumps. By the spiritual power of Tilopa he did not die. Next his teacher has given him bowl of shit to eat. At first he thought it dirty but then his body began to feel purified. Tilopa said to him "From today you have received all the Dharma I have received from Dorje Chang and he sent him back to Nalanda"..

I am following along listening to the partially familiar story and suddenly this point hits me. How often did I walk down the stairs from the second story of the Ginsberg Library and see the picture of Naropa there above the stairs. Walking out from the sea of emails and phone calls and business I would take in a breath, happy to see his form as a yogi with few clothes, liberated and at ease in the world as it is. Somehow it symbolized leaving the University for the life of the yogi to me, my idea of a blessing and relief. So now I hear he went back. It challenges my mind wishing for escape. So he went back.

“It was after this, when Naropa was a great yogi, that he visited Kashmir. He came to Sani in Zanskar and to Lama Yuru in Ladakh. It will take us another nine days over many mountain passes beyond Padum and Sani to reach his cave at Lama Yuru. His story will lead us onwards. He later returned from Kashmir to Bihar and had many students such as Marpa from Tibet, Milarepa's teacher”. And the story goes on to the next generations.

Walking slowly for days and considering Naropa's story he comes more and more to life. I long to ask Naropa's advice for us and our lives at Naropa University. Are we doing okay with our purpose and aspirations

At last we arrive at Sani and we are immediately wrapped in layer upon layer of stories. The stupa here was built 2,500 years ago they say. It is called Kaniska or Sani Kaniska. The stupa has four chains on it. It is said that it will fly away unless it is chained down. In the future there will be a lake of milk there. Guru Rinpoche came some 1300 years ago and mediated here establishing the cremation grounds and many springs. Then 1000 years ago came Naropa who meditated in front of the Kaniska Stupa. His own statue was later placed where he had sat facing the stupa. The annual festival when the statue is open to the public takes place around the first week of August each year. The monastery is built in the tradition of Shabdrung Ngawang Nyamgal's tradition. His current incarnation lives outside Bhutan. Tsering Penjor, Kishan, and Rajen with whom we are walking are all working for him, the ninth incarnation of the man who established the Buddhist culture and customs of Bhutan. We receive special welcome in his name at the monastery.

Walking onward from Sani to Lama Yuru took us nine more days of intense, walking in blazing sunlight over 14,000-15,000 foot passes over narrow trails and precipitous bridges. Caroline and I agreed that we wouldn't have missed it for the world, but we couldn't recommend it to anyone we know. The second day out on this part of the trail was a grueling day of climbing over a pass, descending and then climbing again. On the final ascent a sharp pain took over my left chest and radiated down my left arm. We sent Rajen, one of our guides, on to get the others who were ahead setting up camp to request a horse to carry me. I lay back down; leaning against Caroline wondering if this was indeed the last moment. Tsering Penjor and Kishan came back and said the horses could

not carry a person. It was just as well. If I had seen the trail ahead I would have been to scared to ride it anyway. Tshering Penjor quietly talked me into getting up and walking on. It was possible to somehow haul me along the first part of the ascent, but then the trail became so narrow that it was only one footprint wide with 1,000's of feet slopping below it. Only a single hand could be extended to give me some focus in the pain and the nausea to keep concentration and carry on.

As the heavy-duty painkiller wore off about half way through that night and the pain came back. I just lay there and thought about Naropa and his understating of the energetics of the body in his six yogas. What is this body after all? The next day the pain was receding and we carried on, me no longer carrying a pack. As we walked for hours through some kind of complex landscape with a big hanging valley high above the deep gorges of the Zanskar River as it plunges towards the Indus River. We at last arrived at Hanuma-la, the next pass. I deposited my small stone and my prayer on the pile at the top of the pass thinking. "I am grateful to have made it". That night a vivid dream of Naropa came. In the dream he told me to take back, almost eat backwards, all the projections of the world I had sent out from the different body centers. This felt like a great task. In the dream I tried it out, finding that to do it with the heart center was the hardest. Naropa was starting to become more real.

Onward many passes and days later we emerged from a mountain pass to find Lama Yuru, a vast monastery complex on a steep outcrop of earth. Even just to think that Naropa walked this way, not to mention villagers for centuries, was mind boggling to me. Walking among the many buildings we came to one of the highest spots, the main temple. There inside the main shrine room is a cave where Naropa sat. We sat there for a while outside its entrance to honor his memory before continuing onward on our pilgrimage.

Returning home to Naropa University I am reflecting on Naropa's life again. I found my way to our new offices in 2111, now across the street from the main campus on Arapaho. After such a long and altering pilgrimage, part of oneself returns and part rests in the space of non-time, the space in which the story of Naropa resides. After settling in I explored the nearby offices, meeting new neighbors from BA Psychology and others. To my surprise it is in the toilet that the poster picture of the great Maha Siddha Naropa had been installed. There he was in his graceful, barely clothed elegance. I was happy to find him there right in the middle of ordinary life, perhaps even in a spot that looks on the surface disrespectful. He will be there to remind me of our innate natural awakened state.

Sani Monastery, which houses the statue of Naropa where the annual pilgrimage is held in his honor in Zanskar, is badly in need of repairs. The site was established some 2,000 years ago, the monastery perhaps 1,000 years ago. It is aged and decaying and in need of repairs. The head monk there, Lama Tsering Tashi, asked

us to ask you, the Naropa University, community for help in restoring Sani. Even a few hundred dollars from all of us would make a huge difference to the long-term survival of this monastery. You can call Caroline Hinkley 303-245-4689 or Anne Parker 303-546-3558 with any questions about this. Or just bring us your donations and we will ensure that every penny arrives safely at Sani to rebuild this great monastery.