

Repa Dorje Odzer (Justin von Bujdoss)  
*Everyday Buddhahood: Caregiving as Dharma Practice*  
Week One: “Tilopa's Six Nails and Radical Presence”  
February 5, 2018



Hi there. My name is Justin von Bujdoss, and I'm also known as Repa Dorje Odzer. I'm a Buddhist teacher and chaplain, and I worked for a number of years as a hospice chaplain in the New York City area. Presently I'm the Chief Staff Chaplain for the New York City Department of Correction.

It's a great pleasure for me to be able to offer this dharma teaching series with Tricycle. During this series we'll examine a teaching given by the Indian *mahasiddha* [advanced tantric practitioner] Tilopa, who was active in 10th-century India, and [we'll use this teaching] to explore how caregiving can deepen our dharma practice, and how practice can affect caregiving.

We're going to look at four sets of teachings to see how the Mahamudra tradition and the Tibetan Buddhist Karma Kagyu lineage can help us be more engaged as caregivers. [These teachings will help] us bring all the difficulties that arise when we're caregiving onto the path of dharma. Something as seemingly basic as taking care of a loved one who's sick, or even taking care of ourselves, can unlock a tremendous amount of wisdom and deepen our dharma experience.

The series is called *Everyday Buddhahood: Caregiving as Dharma Practice*—this is the first in a series of four teachings. [Today I'll give] a little bit of background on the mahasiddha Tilopa. As far as we know, Tilopa was illiterate. [As a boy he] was a cow herder. He became very involved in dharma practice and had many spiritual experiences in his life, which some scholars believe led him to seek out wild, itinerant yogans in India. He studied with them and passed his realizations along to the mahasiddha Naropa, who became a teacher and brought these teachings to Tibet.

The root of the Mahamudra tradition is a set of teachings called Tilopa's Six Nails. You can think of these teachings as techniques for placing the mind. Imagine a hook that you put your jacket on when you come home. Placing the mind is an activity as ordinary as hanging a jacket on a hook.

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We must learn to relax our mind so that we can appreciate the particular experiences we have. They can be an incredibly ordinary experiences, extraordinary experiences, or somewhere within these two extremes.

The Six Nails are instructions on how to be. [Being] means not thinking about the past, not entertaining thoughts about the future, not thinking about what's happening, not trying to control anything, but instead allowing the mind to rest in the moment. At first this seems like a very basic thing, but resting the mind is easier said than done. It's difficult to avoid replaying every single thing that's happened to us and thereby getting lost in our story.

It's also important to accept not knowing. By this I mean not knowing what is going to happen next, or what is going to happen tomorrow. I also mean not trying to figure everything out. Can we allow ourselves to just rest in the moment without wandering or becoming consumed by meaning? What does it mean to allow our mind to rest without controlling the moment? What does it mean to just allow things to be?

The next instruction is just resting. [Resting means letting go of] any concept of past or present and letting go of fear. There's an instruction in the tradition to let your mind rest as if it's a bee stuck in honey. [Or think of] a worker who sits down at the end of a hard day of work. It's that sense of rest where your body and mind settle, and you're able to be fully present with the light in the room, the sounds you hear, and all of the physical sensations. These sensations range from the temperature of the room, to the way your clothes feel on your body, to the feeling of hair on your neck, to the in-breath and the out-breath.

The core of the Mahamudra tradition is just allowing ourselves to rest into being. Over the next three sessions [we're going to learn] how we can do this while caring for others. What does it

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mean to not be plagued by our past and future? What's the goal of caregiving? We live in a goal-oriented society where we're always rushing and nothing is never enough. What would happen if we slowed down and were just [present] with the person we're caring for? If we're ill, what would it mean to just be [present] with our own illness? What does that feel like? When it's easy, how is it easy? When it's hard, how is it hard?

The beautiful thing about these instructions is that they can be used by anybody of any Buddhist tradition, and by people who have no Buddhist practice. It's just a reorientation toward simplicity, and it allows us to put aside some of the manic need to spiritualize everything.

This is something that I see as a chaplain quite a bit. [People feel like] everything needs to be transformed into something positive, rich, and meaningful. Sometimes the present moment is not what we want it to be. Sometimes it's sad, boring, or excruciating, but it always changes. If we get lost in it, we start sowing the seeds of discomfort and suffering. We experience the desire to not be present and the desire to disassociate from what's actually happening.

These teachings are a way of reorienting ourselves to what's going on [outside of our heads]. As Buddhists, especially in the United States, we live in our heads quite a bit. If we don't live in our heads, then we live in our our thoughts and emotions. But there's so much else. There's what's going on in my body. There's the way peace feels and the way anxiety arises in my body. There's the way frustration, pain, fear, and all of these other things actually arise.

How can I be alert and oriented to what's happening in the moment? In this particular context we're looking at caregiving, but this is also the essence of what it means to have a sitting meditation practice—to be able to sit, rest, bring awareness to breath, allow thought to happen as it does, and not to worry about it. [Meditation practice] means becoming comfortable and

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familiar with the fact that everything changes. It always changes. Every thought changes. Every physical sensation changes. Every emotional experience changes. We're never stuck with worry forever, or with the experience of loss forever, or with frustration forever. It passes. It's an incredibly compassionate thing that we don't have to be stuck in one experience forever. Much of our practice is about coming back to resting, boredom, questioning, and presence.

I first cut my teeth on this back in 1997. One of my principal teachers was dying. She was a Tibetan Buddhist nun living in Sikkim in northeastern India, which is where I was at the time. As her health declined over the course of several months, I got to witness and journey with her in that experience. Much of that was just sitting together. It was drinking tea together on her patio while looking out over the mountains. It was sitting in the same sunny room as she was in pain, just being together while talking, resting, and being quiet.

In our very fast-paced world it seems like a luxury to be able to do that. I think there's something wrong with that. We can reclaim this reorienting of nature by being present with our lives, our loved ones, the work that we do, and our passions and joys. But [this is not done] by rushed multitasking with an iPhone in one hand and a coffee in the other. [When we rush] we find ourselves unable to go back to our experiences because we were never even there in the moment.

Tilopa had these insights back in 10<sup>th</sup>-century India and they were liberatory. They're radical practices. In fact, you could call this radical presence. It's just being one-on-one, simultaneously experiencing everything that's happening without getting lost in our projections and fears. [We are still] aware of them as they arise, but [we don't let] them take over. We don't hand control over to our reactive mind.

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Tilopa asks us to let our reactive mind relax into the moment. At first that feels great, but we get distracted. The real art of this practice is understanding what it means and learning how to rest in ease. It means something different to every single person. For some people, resting in ease is rooted in the body because experiencing physical ease aids them in experiencing mental ease. For other people, it involves a more emotional, psychological ease. Then for others, it's a mental kind of ease, [associated with] not actively thinking.

When we become accustomed to the practice, we find ourselves able to experience the whole range of psycho-physical, spiritual experience without being distracted. We just allow it to come without feeling like all our wires are getting crossed, and without getting so distracted that we can't concentrate on what's going on. We might feel a lot, but we're not lost in the experience. Then, of course, like weather or traffic or anything else, all of the intensity eventually relaxes. It's never the same thing over and over again. That's what Tilopa's getting at with the Six Nails.

Tilopa developed a tantric approach to the Six Yogas of Naropa [a traditional Vajrayana Buddhist practice], which involves physical yogas and an elaborate series of visualizations to help get us to the experience of rest and ease. But [this approach isn't] actually necessary. It is more conducive for some people depending on how their mind works. You could say [it has to do with] the nature of their karmic relationship to the body, desire, dreams, and how enlightenment unfolds. The core essence of Tilopa's teachings can be contained within these Six Nails.

Though it's been quite a while since Tilopa introduced these teachings, they're still very relevant today. I rely on them in order to keep myself afloat in the New York City Department of Correction as well as when I was a hospice chaplain. I would have up to four people dying at the same time in different parts of the city, and I'd be physically unable to go everywhere I had to

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be. These instructions helped me navigate the anxiety and the difficulty of being a caregiver when I desired to be there for everybody. It was very therapeutic.

It is interesting that in Buddhist practice we talk about how enlightenment is the goal. Indeed, enlightenment is the goal, but it's not really safe to talk about goals because [doing so lets us] entertain this conceptual desire to see the future manifest and thereby takes us out of the moment.

Just allowing ourselves to come back to the moment is profoundly powerful. In that act there is therapeutic healing. I'm not going to say it heals everybody, but it does reduce inflammation related to discursive thought, which is anxiety, worry, and [the tendency to] fight time. We see this in our own minds when we daydream. Sometimes we'll be doing something and then we find ourselves daydreaming about the perfect situation, which is usually not the one we're in. That says a lot about our relationship to the discursive mind.

When we learn how to cultivate radical presence, our body, mind, and emotions settle. [When this happens] there's a little bit more room. There's room to be in relationship. There's room to hear what other people have to say. There's room to experience the needs and concerns of others without getting lost in our own relationships and needs.

I struggle with this often as a chaplain. We want to benefit beings, but going around wanting to have an impact on people is a convoluted way of being. It's rooted in a discursive dualistic ego-based way of being. These practices profoundly alter the way we are in relationship with others so that we can hold space for them. [Holding this space then lets them] experience this same kind of physical, mental, and emotional expansiveness. We're going to look at this in greater detail during the next three teachings.