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*transcending hope & fear, moving from conceptual to experiential, working with depression by learning new way to relate to our experiences especially ones we hoped we'd never have, witnessing union of emptiness and appearance is not unique to the vajrayana, **Carrying Practice**: discover the one piece of Dharma that really sings to us and do it all the time*

Student 1 [00:03:12] You had mentioned something earlier about... what I understood as not... being able to transcend when we're working together or it was something... my question more is... it does appear that these vajrayana teachings are a lot about transcendence. What about embodied practice? We're transcending in a sense, but we're very real and present and in our bodies with this. Can you speak of that? How to work with that? That it's not just about transcendence, but how to bring that transcendence into our everyday interactions.

LMC [00:04:07] So, you also mentioned, if I heard correctly, you mentioned the vajrayana teachings? So... I think it's fair to say, that we're not engaged in those specific teachings... like today. It's a separate study, in a certain sense. So the method of... those practices is a little different than the method that we're working with today. Just to be clear... about that. So, can you rephrase your question in that context or is it just not clear?

Student 1 [00:05:07] I suppose I was assuming when you said something about transcendence, that you were referring to this whole body of teachings.

LMC [00:05:24] Ahhhh, yes. [laughs] Well, so, let's step back into the... when you use the word transcendence. So... I don't think I used, did I use that today? I did?

Student 1 [00:05:39] That specific word.

LMC [00:05:41] Okay. Forget that. [laughter] So, if we're going to have that conversation, we have to ask the question, transcend what?

Student 1 [00:06:05] Exactly.

LMC [00:06:07] My point, too. [laughter] Exactly. Yeah. Transcend what? So, for example, in simple ways, we could say that... the degree to which we are unhappy or we suffer in some way can often be traced, to a significant degree, to our attachment to things, to our aversion to things, to our wanting things that we can't have and so on. And so, transcendence in that case could be characterized as... hope and fear. In other words, transcendence would be... going beyond hope and fear. In other words, giving up our wanting this and not wanting that and trying to avoid things, trying to... manipulate our world in such a way that it meets our expectations. So, transcendence, we would say, would be to... give that up. That would be an early stage of transcendence, to start giving it up. I can't really decide... who I get to spend time with, who I avoid. What I will eat for lunch or who will show up here today. So, the more that I put an expectation on it, the more likely I'll be disappointed. And... when the questions that I hope that people will ask don't get asked, then I'm unhappy, you know. Or if I answer the question and then people say that wasn't clear, then I'm not happy about it. So transcendence at this point is just the *simple* thing of... can I take things as they are, rather than trying to... manipulate all of my experiences in the world in the direction of... what I *think* will make me satisfied. ... My guess is you're not. [laughter]

Student 1 [00:08:28] Well I... don't want somebody to guess where I'm at. I was just... thank you for that clarification. And it's just, again, my understanding, because of being on the path for a long time and my assumptions or understanding were that there is a lot of talk of transcendence. But when it comes down to working in groups and sanghas and being grounded with these practices... yes, I agree... it's really about looking at our hopes and fears and attachments. And so... how are we, how am I embodying these teachings? And your explanation was helpful for that. So, thank you.

LMC [00:09:13] Thank you.

Student 3 [00:11:50] Thank you for taking my question. I only been here a few times, but a longtime practitioner. So, my question is regarding the kind of tension or contradiction between accepting what is... and aspiration or exertion. Because if when we aspire, we exert... we want to change things. The contradiction between exertion and wanting to try to change things and. When we exert. We want to help. We want to practice. We want to pray. You know. ... There's that and then there's also... accepting what is. And my question is especially regarding post-meditation. So, during the day, going about my day, I maybe have some... anxiety or pain or agitation. And so, you know, in meditation, pain comes up. I let it go. It changes, right. So there's not a lot of... to do. In post meditation... it doesn't dissipate, you know, maybe change so quickly. Maybe things are more conceptual. So, my question, I guess, or topic is, could you address this contradiction of just sort of accepting things as they change and evolve... and then... if I do that all the time, of course, then I can get pretty *lazy* and just sort of accept everything and just sort of be a you know, a....

LMC [00:13:44] Most of us are quite familiar with that. [laughter]

Student 3 [00:13:47] Yeah. So, I don't know, that... that's maybe that's enough of the question.

LMC [00:13:55] I want to ask you a question. You used the word contradiction. Can you elaborate on that a little bit? What is the contradiction?

Student 3 [00:14:07] Okay. Contradiction is pride... let's say... I'm feeling happy... and the sun is shining and I'm feeling, oh, I've got good health, I feel a pride, you know. Sense of self-importance, maybe... joy. Various things will come up in my mindstream. To accept what *is*... is to greet these as part of my being. And that... it seems to be in contradiction to, let's say, when pride or arrogance arises or even... selfishness arises... to detect.... oh, this is a small scope. This is really... an inferior way of being. So, there seems to be some contradiction there.

LMC [00:15:00] What the contradiction?

Student 3 [00:15:02] Yeah. A contradiction is... exertion or no exertion.

LMC [00:15:09] If there is a contradiction, there has to be something there that is the contradiction, right? So, is that *your* relationship to it or something else?

Student 3 [00:15:20] I think it's my relationship to it as seeing it as something solid. Yeah.

LMC [00:15:26] I think the contradiction, if I may be so bold, is the conceptual... side of the thing. So, if you experience pride. So far, it's just an experience. And if you don't *do* anything

with the pride and... just notice it... we don't have a problem with that. Even if you experience anger... we don't have a problem with that either. If you just put your awareness on it and rest with it, you may actually see the *nature* of that experience, which would be really quite nice. Even if it was unpleasant to see the *nature* of it... could be... a rather important insight.

Student 3 [00:16:26] So, this is mere energy and emptiness. And to recognize it sort of non-conceptually, you're saying is, is a way to release oneself from that contradiction.

LMC [00:16:41] I wouldn't step into that... conceptual... analysis of it. So, if you feel a particular emotional state and you don't do anything with it, but just *notice* that... there's nothing to do there conceptually. So, we might say... the best thing to do is... *not!* [laughs] Don't do anything. Just... be aware of the experience. So, if I'm feeling like, whoa, it's getting late, I need to move. I need to get going. And yet all you people are sitting here and I can't just get up and leave and I'm feeling really tense about it. That's a problem. And especially if I then start talking about how I don't like all of you because you're not leaving and I want to leave. So, just to make it kind of a *grand* case of how it is that we trap ourselves. That's not a *conceptual* thing. The conceptual thing is easy. If I talk about it from here, you don't feel any emotional thing at all. Except maybe you think, you know, this guy doesn't know what he's talking about. Which would be mostly true.

[00:18:03] But... it's, where we get into problems is where we have the *experience*. And instead of resting our awareness on that experience so that we might actually discover the *nature* of it... we start conceptualizing it. We start talking to ourselves about it. Pretty soon we're talking about who it is that experience come to me when I didn't want it. And then it just grows from there. *All* of that... is immediately subdued, in a certain way, by just... resting our awareness on it. So, we don't do anything with it, in other words. That's an unusual state. Human beings don't do that, normally. We elaborate. And the elaboration is normally 100 percent conceptual and it feeds into... the non-conceptual emotional state. But we don't recognize that *we* did that. We find the person and we know their name! And so that becomes... a big part of our relationships with ourselves and with others. So, the idea of recognizing the experience as it arises, or *anywhere* along while it's arising, not to encourage or discourage... even we want, we have strong attachment.

[00:19:41] Generally, Buddhists say... strong attachment is a problem. But actually... it's only a problem when we *believe* in the attachment as something that's important for us to do something with. But if we merely put our awareness on the experience, that's exactly where we want to be. It'll grow. It'll deflate. It will come to an end on its own. Something else will come. The degree to which we can just leave our awareness on the experiences as they arise and dissipate... that is a *big* aspect of really good meditation... in *whatever* Buddhist kind of meditation, we have so many kinds of meditation. *All* of them... would say... that is a profound method of meditation. And it's so simple to do. In a really short time, it's *really* simple. It's difficult to sit there for *hours*... and not be distracted. But in any given moment, it's like I suddenly feel an itch and that itch... I don't have to call it an itch. I don't have to do anything, just but my awareness on the sensation... it *will* just dissolve. And if I don't do *anything* with it, something very positive has happened... by just being present with it and then it's gone. An itch is an irrelevant one. But the point is, is that these things happen all the time and we end up... being drawn into all sorts of things that later on we wish we hadn't been drawn into. Is that okay?

Student 3 [00:21:35] That's beautiful, thank you.

Student 4 [00:21:50] If one experiences despair, does that mean that one's practice is failing?

LMC [00:22:13] The nice thing about this process is there's two sides to it. One, we learn how to ask questions and to manipulate these things in our minds and work with them in a certain way. And then from our side, we have to also think about them and be clear about what our understanding is, which isn't always accurate also. So if we do it right, it is. It's a learning session for all of us.

[00:23:41] omitted Sally's response

Student 4 [00:27:31] Sometimes the despair is just too big, too thick, too heavy. There's, like no end to it. ... And practice works when there's something you can grab on to. But when the whole world is just blanketed with despair, there's not a whole lot to grab on to.

[00:28:16] omitted Sally's response

LMC [00:31:55] I think [Sally's] answer was good. We actually have the means to *change* our relationship with everything that we relate to... is really the truth. And we don't get to decide whether there's an earthquake or whether it's raining and all sorts of other things. But our relationship to all of those things, including all the people that we work with all the time, we have the *means*. We may not be able to *use* the means. We may not be *skillful* to use them, but we *have* the means... to work with those with those things. And we often... talk about them in a way which feels kind of grandiose. Like... we can come to a conclusion that... it's a black and white situation. I either can work with this or I can't work with it. Or I either can resolve the whole thing or I can't and I'm just sunk. When... almost everything that we do... is a long series of small bites... that ends up with being... a sense of, this is who I am or this is the world that I live in. It is the case that if we have a really serious situation like... deep depression and a kind of a big, gloomy sense of things... there really is no such thing as a big, gloomy sense of things separate from the person who experiences it. So, we have... the ability to work with those things in certain ways which require... a certain amount of effort to work with them.

[00:33:57] If we try to work with them in a big way, like... maybe I have an accident and I lose my legs. Big thing. Now, if I try to work with that whole thing all at once by itself, I may in fact find that that is overwhelming. But with some help, perhaps... I might be able to work with it in smaller ways, if I'm *willing* to. But sometimes also, we're not willing to. We can also get totally attached to the worst situation imaginable. And sometimes, I will say from my own side, that sometimes I actually don't *want* to be out of it. I actually want to be in it. And *sometimes* I want to be in it because... there is something *attractive* about being in it which doesn't make any sense at all. But... I mean, I don't know, I think probably we all have had this situation where we felt like we cannot move from where we are into a place which feels better because we actually... in some weird way, are not willing to do the thing that's necessary. And I don't mean that as a judgment. I mean, that is like... we need to familiarize ourselves with our own minds. And then we can do all sorts of things with them.

[00:35:41] So, starting with small things and recognizing on a regular basis, for example, like Sally said... she's out, she's having a nice morning, a nice walk. Things are kind of looking pretty good. But... the issue here that's helpful is if we can place our *awareness* on that experience. *Forget* the good and the bad. Forget the weather. It's pleasant or unpleasant. Can you put your awareness on the experience you're having? And develop the ability to not judge it, to not come to any conclusion about it at all. Because the experience, as we know... by the time that you

name it, it actually is gone. If it's still there, it's because we continued... turning it on. Most of the experience just... fly by.

[00:36:41] I remember once, I said this before, and I'm going to say it again because I think that it's kind of relevant. If you have a really difficult situation, we find it really easy to put our awareness on it. The problem often is, is that we want to get our awareness *off...* of it... and onto something else. But we can't quite bring ourselves to do that because we're *magnetized* by the intensity... or the duration of it. So, this is why I have to go all the way back to Kalu Rinpoche, back in the early 70s when he was talking about this. And he was talking about the practice of shamatha, and you put your awareness on something like this, [holding up the leaf] you can do that. But it does not have much power. It has so little power that it's hard to keep your mind on that thing. And so, you try to stick the stick. The stick doesn't have any power either. Neither does the rock. And so, you get a statue of the Buddha and maybe you think *that'll* do it. But actually, you don't have a relationship with the Buddha yet. So, it's just a hunk of metal. And it doesn't work. So his statement was... place your awareness on the experience you're having. And in order to really get *magnetized* to it... place your awareness on an experience you hoped you would never have. And *that* will magnetize you. So, we all can name an experience that we hope we never have. That's not so hard to come up with. And then... to put your awareness on *that*... an awful lot of people found that to be helpful. Rather than using this... [holding the leaf] use the experience of remembering someone who you were close to who passed away recently. Put your awareness on that experience and you will not be sliding off of it all the time. You'll be on it.

[00:39:06] But if we try to change the experience... which is what we mostly think we *should* be getting out of it, is a new experience... that's somehow just doesn't play out. It's better if we can get our awareness *on* the experience and watch the experience. The experience will definitely dissolve on its own. That's the nature of these experiences. They are *not* real. They're only real in our experience. Aside from the experience, they have no reality. So, when we place our awareness on the experience and the next thing that happens is... the experience dissolves. It's just gone. If we can just let it be gone, then we would say... so, this was another piece from Kalu Rinpoche... then you have experienced... the thing itself. And you have experienced its dissolution into emptiness. Which is a way of saying that you have *seen* it's a lack of reality. So, when it completely dissolves, you have *seen*... the lack of reality in it. So, in the moment of seeing that, it's important to recognize it. To acknowledge, not in the sense of talking to yourself about it, but just in recognizing... just for the smallest moment... I see it! I get it. It may just come right back, but you can do it again. Put your awareness on that same place. If it doesn't magnetize you to it, if your awareness doesn't *stick* to it... that's what he was talking about when he said, put your awareness on an experience that you hoped you'd never have.

[00:41:02] Now, I suspect that every one of us could come up with something that we hope we never have that experience of. So, it's not that we're hoping we would *have* that experience, but rather that we just are going to put our awareness on the experience as if we were having it. What would that *be* like, that we hoped we would never have? A terrifying experience, perhaps. A terrible illness, an accident, all sorts of things. Imagine that they are there. Put your awareness on that. Your witness will *stick* to that. And when your awareness sticks to it, just let it rest there. Don't do anything with it. And gradually, *inevitably*, the experience dissolves. And we tend to sell that one short, also. Like whoa, I'm so glad that's gone. When *actually*, what we just had was... an incredibly important experience. Something that felt solid. Nasty. Really bad. And it dissolves! We are witnessing the union of emptiness and awareness at that point. The

experience dissolves. So, it's not like that's a way to get rid of the experience. It will come back. It's a way of having a *relationship* with the experience that is not our norm.

Student 4 [00:42:39] Thank you, that's helpful.

LMC [00:42:40] All right? For now. [smiles]

Student 5 [00:43:19] Michael, I've heard you, a couple times now, kind of put, the vajrayana to the side. And I'm wondering about that. I don't know... really where to kind of limit the inquiry? I imagine that there's a good reason for limiting our inquiry here... such that the vajrayana is not explicitly worked with... in these conversations, and I guess I'm wondering about that.

LMC [00:44:28] Well, I think the issue for me is that... this is a mixed group. And there are people here who have a deep understanding of the vajrayana. And there are those who have no understanding of the vajrayana. And then everything in between. And I think that if we... got together with a group who wanted, who were *intent* on *practicing* the vajrayana... and hadn't done much of it before... the beginning suggestion for familiarizing ourselves with it... would be a good place to start. And we could do that. And we have done that. But it's helpful if it's done in its, you know, its ordinary way of beginning it with, with a series of practices that one then engages in. And I would say the first thing then they can see... do I have a relationship with this? Can I *have* a relationship with it? And the questions then that are asked in that context would become more familiar to a group that was *particularly* working on those practices. ... What do you think? I'm just sure you're completely satisfied. [laughter]

Student 5 [00:46:09] It's an adjustment. So, you spoke in the previous question about the union of emptiness and appearance. That feels to me like right there... on the doorstep of vajrayana. So, I was really happy to hear that... speaking about the union of emptiness and appearance, whatever that is right... can still occur in this context.

LMC [00:46:33] What you're saying is in no way... unique to the vajrayana. Those things, the understanding the union of emptiness and appearance and so on... those things are are not specifically unique. The vajrayana is more of a system of methods... for things that are unusual. Not unusual within the context of the vajrayana, but unusual in other contexts that are also part of the whole Buddhist systems of meditation. And in those systems, we also talk about the union of emptiness in appearance and all those of those things just in the same way. But the methods used to approach those things are a little different. It's more easy to get confused than clear. It's more easy to get confused. It's not difficult to... be confused. It's difficult to be clear. So... in that way, I think that putting the two together and talking about them is not actually helpful. It's better to have them and to learn them in their own right... in their own way. And there's more than just those two, also. But generally speaking, though the category could be... the tantric vajrayana practices and the mahayana practices as the two kinds of categories.

[00:48:27] A long time ago, like some decade ago or so, we ran a series of programs at KCC where we worked with what are called the Three Turnings. So, the three kinds of groups of teachings that the Buddha gave over some time. And those things included different categories that the Buddha had given. And so, we separated those things out and actually did teachings on them. And then we did a retreat on each of those three. And that worked pretty good. But... it worked pretty good because the three had been carefully separated. So, going through the three, you then end up working with each one of them and gradually bringing them together. And it makes sense. And then you have an understanding that you wouldn't otherwise have

had. So, that's, that's my only reluctance in... in *not* separating them and just dealing with them openly without some kind of upfront clarity. ... Now, are you satisfied?

Student 5 [00:50:00] Sure. [laughter] You know, we speak from our own experience, right? My experience was I came into KCC and I had absolutely no idea where I had landed or what was going on around me. Absolutely green... you know, in terms of Buddhism and all that. And the vajrayana was... it was always there. But, sure, absolutely. Thank you.

LMC [00:50:33] Yeah. I might add one piece to this. I think that we can become... overly careful, also, in a way which is not particularly useful. So, I quote again from Kalu Rinpoche. It sounds like I really remember a lot of things from Kalu Rinpoche. It's about five things that I remember from back there, [laughs] and they really *stuck* in my mind. And one of them was... this one really *sang* to me... in a way which has been helpful ever since. And that was... along the way, after studying with Kalu Rinpoche, *sort of*, for a while, because it was so esoteric. Everything was esoteric, like, what are we talking about here? All the time. And he said... at one point that... if you can find... *one* thing in the Buddhist tradition, like *one* practice, one view to hold, like any single practice, no matter how thin or big it was, find one thing, and you just thought that really, I really understand that! And I can relate to like... the whole world. All of my experiences and the people in it and every, like... I can really relate to that. And I understand it. He said... you don't need anything else. And he wasn't asking... which thing is it? He just said, *if* there's one thing like that... that's *all* you need. If you can just do that, the *entire* rest of the Dharma... will become clear to you in time. You will discover the whole thing.

[00:52:32] Now... he's not here to ask him, what did you *mean* by that? But I just took it to be the simple, clear thing. We have things in our lives all the time like that. It's like food that you eat more regularly. And it can all be nutritious. It's like, you don't need to eat everything there is. And you don't need to understand every last thing in the Dharma. If you understand just the simple ability to put your awareness on experience and you develop the *habit* of doing that kind of regularly... it's *very* clear that everything else will become clear. And it doesn't mean that you won't ever study anything else. It just means that... it'll be easier because you have a point that you'll relate to that is authentic.

[00:53:31] And once you have that, the rest of it, you may then go into the vajrayana or you may even have *been* in the vajrayana and decide, no, I'm going to do the mahayana or I'm going to go back and do the theravada. All the way back. Buddhism is like virtually every other religious tradition in the sense that... the history includes... *serious* disagreements. Like, we don't do those practices because those practices aren't as good as the ones we're doing. So, Buddhists did that, too. Fought wars did all sorts of stuff around it. We all know what that is. And we know how to do that, unfortunately. [laughs]

[00:54:20] But... I think that the point was well taken. And it was really helpful for me... to have this sense of, okay... I *really* understand *this* thing. I don't particularly understand or relate to this thing over here. And the teacher that I was with at that time would *never* have said, that's okay, that's enough. I mean, he would have said, and did, you need to do *all* of these things. But when I looked at *all* of those things, I thought... I'm in the wrong church. [laughs] It's like, I'm not *interested* in all of those things. And so, I stopped... and went back to the place of, okay, I'm not going to tell anybody. I'm just gonna do that thing... that works *for me*. And then gradually, like, do this thing. That was not considered *cool*. That was actually like breaking the rules. But it worked! Not in the sense of... I'm enlightened or anything. But it helped me to practice because I

had something that I could relate to... that was clear. And little by little, it was easy to add to that and build on that. I *still* feel like... that's it.

[00:55:53] When I get another practice, or when I remember another practice that I haven't done in a long time, sometimes I'll think, oh yeah! *That* excites me. I'm going to go and do that. And sometimes that's *really* good. And I think, I can't believe I left that aside for so long. This is not... magic. This is what we do in our ordinary lives all the time. And I think for Kalu Rinpoche, that's where he was with it. Because he'd just been doing it forever... and probably made all of his discoveries by virtue of... the things that really worked for him. I mean, he was renowned for sitting on a ledge in the Himalayas for 12 years. So, does that mean that he had all of the pieces? That's what most of the great Buddhists say. Well, really, he was the most amazing person. But did he need to do that... in order to do it? Or... would it have been enough to do something... more moderate?

[00:56:59] You don't get books written about you... if you did things more moderate. You get books written about you because you did extreme things that anyone else would *die* from. But that's just... the movies that we see. We don't go to see movies where they don't excite us and get us riled up. This is not about that. Our practice is about dealing with the riled up that we generate internally and then don't know what to do with it. And so, we end up going out and killing people or getting in arguments and ending in divorces and all sorts of things. You don't get books for that. Who cares? Everybody does that. But we are passionate about it ourselves in our own lives. It's important for us to have a means, a skillful way of dealing with those things.

[00:57:59] I have to tell you one story, the... I'm trying to remember the name of the... monk at Gethsemani. Thomas Merton. So, some of you maybe know some about Thomas Merton, but I have to say this one thing, because it was so moving, I thought. Thomas Merton got a request from a monk at the monastery. It's a Catholic monastery, of course. And a young monk, went to see Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton says "So, okay, you're here. What are we gonna talk about?" And the young monk says, "Father Merton, I would like your advice for how to live my life, how to be a monk, how to how to do this?" And, and Merton laughs and says, "Ah! I thought you were going to bring something serious." And then he basically just says. "Practice your whole life to become a saint."

[00:59:21] And that was the whole thing. I don't know what else happened in the interview, but fundamentally, that was the whole thing. And it wasn't like he was saying... your life is *worthless*... if you don't reach that point. The point was... you practice in that direction, always moving in that direction. And then, if you become a saint, you won't even notice that you're a saint. Everybody else will. They'll write the books. You're just a saint. So, it's like you just live your life. And it'll be known as good and others will benefit by virtue of *that*. You did it. But you don't have to notice it. Just live your life like that's the direction you're going in. I think it's great advice for Buddhists. It's exactly the same thing. Do the simple things that you can do that are good and just *keep* doing them... if you can... every minute of the day... and the rest will take care of itself, don't worry about it.

[01:00:29] So, if you're interested in the vajrayana, do the vajrayana. Don't worry about the long-term outcome. And if you get tired of doing the vajrayana... practice the mahayana. And if you get interested in the theravada, do some theravada. [laughs] I mean, there are people who will say, I should not sit here because you shouldn't tell somebody to practice the theravada. Because that's been a big disagreement. But many people have reached great heights by practicing the theravada. And some people, practicing the theravada got into the mahayana by

practicing that. There is no... clear formula. If you can find something that sings to you and is helpful, do it. And do it all the time. Not just when you feel like it. And not just when it happens to make you feel good. And then you kind of use it kind of like you take an aspirin when you have a headache. Use it as a means of living and being in the world. And, wherever you end up at the end of the life was... *has* to have been good. Just do it.

sangha [01:02:08] *dedicating the merit*