

Two Dakini Accounts:

1. WHY TILOPA FLINGS THE 8,000 VERSE PRAJÑAPARAMITA SUTRA OFF THE MONASTERY ROOF

*(In another account
Tilopa never becomes king at all,
but at dakini's behest
leaves home as a young boy
to take up the robe)*

Named Prajñabhadra [“Excellent Discernment”
he matured to an upright monk, meticulously observing
the vinaya, learned in the vast categories of abhidharma,
studious in the wisdom of sutra, moving to the genteel rhythms
of the monastic day, well-trained in logic, kindly & pure
in demeanor.

One day,
bent intently over the *Satasahasrika-*
Prajñaparamita Sutra, a bald, dark-skinned woman
manifested before him as Tilopa stared,
his mind abruptly stopped. Speaking
through her blue mustache: “Want to understand
what you’re reading?” He recognized her
as a dakini: “Please teach me.”

“The philosophical method is the hard path.
Countless lifetimes & obstacles await its perfection.
With the fruition mantrayana, enlightenment
can be won in one life. I will admit you
through its gate.”

She then manifested Chakrasamvara's mandala
in the sky above:
a blue deity, fanged & skull-crowned, in union
with the red dakini
strung in a skull garland
stand on the corpses of ego

amid torrential flame
& light so penetrating it ravishes away the 3 worlds
center
to a retinue of deities, heroes & heroines.
They empowered him
into the secrets of their bliss.

[Marpa says:
*“Granted by the Mother, Subhagini
–A river of continuous blessings–
The four empowerments were transmitted.”*]

Subhagini (the ugly old crone)
taught him how Chakrasamvara & Prajñāparamita
are one in the same,
how visualization of visionary mandalas
purifies fixation on worldly appearance,
& how dissolving visualization into emptiness
purifies fixation on the visualized.

“This is the view of Old Fish Guts;” [“Luyipa”]
she told him, “meditate on it.”
“But my uncle,” he replied,
“won’t allow me to meditate,
& my public schedule
for instructing monks
grows demanding.”

“Tie a rope around the Prajñāparamita,” she advised,
“& climb to the roof...”

*

Following the dakini’s guidance,
Tilo lugged the text to the monastery roof.

Below,
monks in the courtyard paused
to wonder at him.

Sure of his audience,

he began to shout & ululate
like a madman,
doing an unseemly dance
& twirling
the 8,000 verse *Prajñaparamita*
over his head
by the rope.

Commotion broke out
in the courtyard.
Monks rushed from doorways
into a chaos of pointing fingers,
as demands for him to climb down
rose up on all sides.

But Tilopa cranked harder
on the swirling text,
& with an inhuman,
tortured shriek,
released it,
as it arced—
rope wriggling behind
like a sperm—
up into the sky
then down
into the river
that curved
past the monastery
plunging
into the water.....

The aghast monks
scrambled to the roof
to bring him down
& beat him.
“Poor, poor monk!”
they said.
“So kind! So proper!
Such a wonderful teacher!
& now he’s a blathering idiot!
Completely lost his mind!”

Thus, they expelled him.

{The dakini protected the text from damage,
retrieving it from the river,
& restoring it to the room
where Tilopa's uncle
came to chant.}

& so Tilopa was freed
to pursue enlightenment.

NOTES

The dakini's appearance while Tilopa studies makes for an interesting comparison & pre-echo with the more famous dakini encounter scene in Naropa's story. Noteworthy is how Tilopa immediately passes the test & receives the Chakrasamvara transmission on the spot, while Naropa is sent forthwith on a twelve year odyssey fraught with nightmare until every last shred of ego clinging he has is violently broken. The story here describes something of Tilopa's basic training in Hinayana & Mahayana, demonstrating his gifted abilities to practice the conventional teachings, & then shows in a pressing way how he must go beyond this situation in order to attain full-fledged realization.

Subhagini, clearly an expression of the dakini principle, was the human student of Luyipa.

"The philosophical method....its gate." Subhagini is drawing a distinction between the normative mahayana tradition that emphasizes intellectual study of sutras & logic to arrive at an understanding of emptiness & absolute truth (as well as a many lifetime process of accumulating merit) & the immediacy & practicality of the vajrayana (often called "the vehicle of skillful means") which, through direct transmission of the nature of mind by a guru & the method of its meditation practices, can potentially liberate a practitioner in one lifetime.

she asked.

"Grammar, precepts, epistemology & logic,"
he informed her.

"Do you understand them?"
she wanted to know.

"Yes."

"Do you understand the words or their sense?"

"I understand the words."

To this she rocked back on her heels with laughter,
lifted her cane above her head
& began to dance in a circle.

Hoping to make her happier still,
Naropa told her: "-& I also know the sense."

At this, she sobbed bitterly
& threw her stick to the floor with a crack.

Surprised & baffled,
Naropa said: "Why did you laugh when I said
I understood the words,
but wept when I said I knew the sense?"

*"Because when you said you knew the words,
you spoke the truth.
But when you—a great scholar!—said you knew the sense,
you lied!"*

"Who does know the sense?"

"My brother, Tilopa."

Hearing Tilopa's name,
Naropa's hair stood on end
& tears sprung from his eyes—
Spontaneous devotion blazed up inside him—

"Please take me to him!"
he requested fervently.

*"Supplicate him, practice,
& go find him yourself."*

With that,
the hag faded into the air
like a rainbow.

*

Analyzing the hag's 37 ugly features,
contemplating each in turn,
Naropa recognized outwardly
samsara's 37 kinds of dissatisfaction;
inwardly, the 37 impure, perishable
components of the body; & that secretly,
37 subtle channels circulate 37 vital energies.
By meditating on the energies & channels,
co-emergent wisdom can be won.

Then he sang:

*Samsara is to find fault with others,
An intolerable arena of fire,
A blind dungeon,
A labyrinthine swamp of the three poisons,
A ferocious wave of evil births.
Like being stuck in a spider's web,
Or a bird in a hunter's net,
Encased like a silk worm in a cocoon.
Samsara's a hollow tree
Or moon's reflection on water
—without essence—
Like a deer chasing a mirage
& sliding into a pit.
It's like being caught between crocodile jaws,
Like wandering a land of vampires,*

*Like a poisonous snake who strikes any who come near.
It's a merciless hunter,
A precarious footpath,
Subjugation in chains.
It's being cornered by Yama's mangy dogs,
It's living in the shadows of aging & birth,
It's treading the precipice of karma,
Being dragged behind the horse of the eight worldly dharmas,
It's an enchantment, a dream,
An ungraspable fog,
Merriment with sharpened fangs.
It's licking honey off a razorblade,
A tree sprouting poisonous leaves,
A klesha arrow piercing the afflicted.
It's a flame flickering in the wind,
A waterfall of decay & death,
Impalement on desire's iron hook.
While I still have this precious body,
I must seek out the guru!*

NOTES

This is one of the most famous scenes in tantric lineage history. The crone, a dakini called Vajrayogini, Tilopa's "sister," comes as Tilopa's messenger. Naropa's back's to the sun, symbolizing how he doesn't see the truth, but he is facing his books, particularly ones that tie him to his academic life & its styles of thinking, when the dakini's shadow intercedes between his still conventional intellectual realm of concept & language & that of the luminosity of the wisdom mind.

She's an arresting figure for whom there's an epic list of harsh, grotesque features. She challenges Naropa's understanding, pointing out that although he may be able to explain every word in every text, he's still mired in duality. Suddenly unsure of his knowledge, merely hearing Tilopa's name brings him to a profound sense of connection, such that his life as he's known it to this point instantly shatters, sending him on a devotional odyssey of harrowing, epic proportion.

There's much that could be said of this kind of figure in global mythology. She's the

announcement of a chasm eating in from the edge of your path, an encounter with the raw facts of life. Baba Yaga in Russian folklore casts a similar shadow, for example.

STUDENT: Is the meeting with Vajrayogini a kind of archetypal meeting that's universal, that happens to all human beings at the first moment of giving up and letting go? Does that vision happen to most human beings at such a moment?

TRUNGPA RINPOCHE: I think so. It could happen in all kinds of ways. You might have an argument with your landlady or your mother-in-law. Every event like that is meeting the ugly woman. In this case, the ugly woman has nothing to do with male chauvinism. It's a cosmic thing. It's the cosmic principle of womanness. It would have to be a mother who cooks you food, or a girlfriend who bosses you around, or a secretary who minds your business. And every one of them is a cosmic principle and has nothing to do with male chauvinism at all. It's basic womanness in the highest sense.

"But when you a great scholar!...you lied!" In telling this story, Thrangu Rinpoche articulates the dakini's statement like this: "You have not yet achieved the totality of experience and realization. That is why I appeared upset."

"37 ugly features" I've followed Lhetsunpa Rinchen Namgyal's version that cites 37; several other versions cite 32.

Trungpa Rinpoche has this exchange:

STUDENT: Could you say something about Naropa noticing all the woman's marks of ugliness? Is it sort of another mockery of Naropa that he would catalogue that?

TRUNGPA RINPOCHE: I think so, yes. Naropa hasn't reached the tenth bhumi. He's on the level of the sixth bhumi prajña and because his vision is not very clear, the woman is ugly. The less clear his vision, the more ugly the woman. Further on his vision becomes more refined. He has potential when he decides to seek Tilopa, but still his vision is very dull, so the ugly woman sharpens herself into further grotesque images like that of the leper woman and so forth.

Asked about the significance of the ugly characteristics, he says:

Those are the characteristics of samsara. Complete confusion, being trapped, being exploited, having your body torn apart, having parts of yourself eaten up, being stabbed, being dumped in shit, run over by a railroad train, being poisoned to death, and so on...Those are the images of samsara. They say that the worst

thing that could happen to you is being in samsara, that you will be completely annihilated in all kinds of ways intellectually, spiritually, and socially; that you are the lowest of the lowest of the low.

“Samsara is....to the guru.” Rinchen Namgyal’s & Dorje Dze Od’s versions overlap, but also contain unshared material, and lines in differing placements, so I rather freely synthesized the two texts regarding the order of the lines. Trungpa Rinpoche says of the doha, “Each line is connected with a different attribute of samsara. It shows that somehow his sense of imprisonment has been sharpened. He realizes his inadequacy in being able to see the reality of shunyata.”