

Shrink Rap Radio #53, October 7, 2006. Tibetan Buddhist Psychology

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Neten Chokling Rinpoche

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Excerpt: *“Stop the thoughts, not really stopping the thoughts. We never can stop the thoughts, but definitely stop following thoughts, and definitely thoughts not going to make any difference. Thought is just thought, is nothing, reality is there; so once you realise that thought is nothing there, then there is actually nothing to stop, and nothing to create.”*

Introduction: That was the voice of **Neten Chokling Rinpoche**, a 33 year old Tibetan lama who was recently in the San Francisco Bay Area for the screening of his just-released film on the Life of Milarepa. Milarepa was an 11th Century Tibetan yogi, folk hero, and saint who is greatly revered throughout Tibet. Milarepa, who early in his life had murdered to avenge his parents and later reformed through meditation, is considered to be a role model for achieving enlightenment in a single lifetime.

The opportunity to interview Neten Chokling Rinpoche arose unexpectedly and I was pleased to jump on it. This young Rinpoche has not only directed his first feature-length film but also heads up three different monasteries, in India, Bhutan and Tibet. He is hoping that the film will bring in enough money to help him feed and clothe some 40 destitute young boys he has taken in, as well as the many monks he is responsible for.

The Rinpoche became acquainted with the world of film at age 19 when he starred in a feature-length film about young Tibetan monks called, “The Cup.” If you haven’t seen this film, I highly recommend it. You could probably find it at a good video rental store. The actress Sharon Stone has been quoted as saying “what Neten Chokling is doing with Milarepa is fantastic, and I am proud to be able to help him in promoting the film. The film is a path to our own spiritual dimension and his work with orphans a reflection of the larger human values that connect all of us. Neten Chokling has put it all on the line, and now we all need to deliver by helping him.” So says Sharon Stone.

There was a single showing of the film here in Northern California at UC Berkeley where I went to interview the Rinpoche. I was joined by my friend Bert Kaplan from Shrink Rap Radio Episode #10.

After the interview we were able to attend a private reception for the Rinpoche and then see the film, which will soon be available on DVD. You can purchase his film, “The Life of Milarepa” on DVD by going to www.milarepamovie.com.

Now English of course is not the Rinpoche’s native language, and you will need to listen closely in order to follow him. He makes reference to some Buddhist terminology that you may not be familiar with, for example Samsara which refers to the notion that what we commonly take as reality is but an illusion. He also makes reference to two branches of Buddhism: Theravada and Vaisravana. Theravada is thought to be the oldest branch of Buddhism, and is practiced mainly throughout South East Asia by an estimated 100 million followers. Vaisravana is practiced mainly in Tibet and neighbouring areas and emphasises special techniques for achieving enlightenment.

Dr. Dave: Well I’m here with Rinpoche, and with my good friend Bert Kaplan who starred in a previous interview; and Bert is a long time Buddhist meditator and also has a background in psychology as well. So I want to thank you Rinpoche very much for the opportunity to interview you for our program; and in a couple of hours you are going to be screening your new feature length film for an audience at UC Berkeley.

So let’s start with your film: I understand it’s about the Tibetan hero and saint Milarepa, who lived in the 11th Century. And I doubt that most of my listeners will have much familiarity with Milarepa, so perhaps you can tell us why did you decide to make a film about him?

Rinpoche: Milarepa is one of the yogi that all the schools in Tibet, everybody respects. Because his life story, what he has been through, what is his realisation, and then he achieved enlightenment in a lifetime. And because of all those stories I think people are really inspired by his story.

Dr. Dave: I see – he did achieve enlightenment during his lifetime.

Rinpoche: Yes, yes.

Dr. Dave: Ok.

Rinpoche: So that's why, since I was very young I read his life story and it really inspired me also; it's given me a lot of hope for my spiritual path and it's inspired me to do more meditation and more practice. And so many other things in the story that he realised: that revenge and killing and all those things are not really solving problems, actually it's creating more problems. So all those things I thought tend to make a story like this and the movie is really powerful and it can reach a lot of people and it can influence. When I was young my tutor was always stopping me from going to watch movies, because he thinks movies are all about killings, and romance, and all those things. So actually if the movie can be a bad influence it also definitely can be a good influence.

Dr. Dave: Yes, definitely. It occurs to me – I read a little bit about the movie and the story on your website, www.milarepamovie.com – and I guess the story is about initially he was seeking revenge, was it? His father got killed and so he was going to seek revenge and he went to a sorcerer to learn evil ways to put a magic spell on his enemy; but he ends up getting enlightened and choosing a different path. And it occurred to me that – and I'm wondering if this is true – in a way this is part of the example that his holiness the Dalai Lama has set for the whole world. Tibet has been attacked, and grievously harmed, and yet the Dalai Lama has stood for peace in spite of that, and rather than going for revenge has really been a shining example as have other Tibetan Buddhists and lamas for forgiveness and for setting a positive example. Was that at all in your mind when you chose this story?

Rinpoche: Yes definitely, also the Dalai Lama is also doing the same thing; a more compassionate way, a more peaceful way to solve the problem. Because of course Buddha is an enlightened person, and whatever he says should not be mistaken. I think it is quite true, Buddha is like a 2,500 modern years ago, and whatever he teaches and whatever he says, whatever he says is not made up; whatever he says is truthful and natural. So that always is there, there is nothing to change. So the peace way and the compassionate way, if we do those things it always helps and it always is the right way.

Dr. Dave: Yes. So what is the main message that you hope to communicate through the movie. What is the message that you hope people will take with them and keep in their heart?

Rinpoche: So this is the life of Milarepa but this is only the beginning of his life story, it's not his full life story, so in this one there is more focus

and for the general audience definitely that revenge and killing is not going to solve any problems, it is going to create more problems. So this is the main message that I am trying to focus on.

Dr. Dave: And it's a very timely message given everything that's going on in the world right now.

Rinpoche: That's what I'm thinking, and hoping people can get it.

Dr. Dave: Yes definitely.

Rinpoche: From the spiritual point of view definitely there is impermanence and how Samsara from suffering and everything is there.

Dr. Dave: Yes, Samsara. Now I understand that one of the reasons that you have made the film is to raise money for boys who are in an orphanage that you have founded, that you are supporting. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Rinpoche: Yes definitely, if the movie can make some money – but I don't think it's going to make money, I'm not sure. But if it makes money it goes for one year I have 40 kids from the Himalaya region, from Nepal; and some of them their father has died, some of them both the family has died. So I have about 40 kids in my monastery right now, so I am trying to give them an education and also health wise and everything; so definitely it goes to there. Also in my monastery in India, we have about 120 or 130 monks in India. Also I have a monastery in Tibet and also they have more than 100 monks; and all their health and education and everything we have to take care of.

Dr. Dave: Well I hope the film is successful and helps to raise money, and certainly I will put a link on our website to your website so that hopefully people will be moved by the DVD when it comes out and that might help to raise some money too.

Rinpoche: That's really good – thank you.

Dr. Dave: Now it's pretty unusual to find someone who is both a Tibetan lama and a movie director; how did that happen?

Rinpoche: Well I don't know; it is my karma I think. (laughter) Because where I grew up in India there is no film schools, no film makers, there is nothing. That is a very remote place: even six or seven years ago they

didn't even have a TV there; forget about the big movie theatres and movie makers. So the first time I ever saw a film being made was the Little Buddha. Bertolucci made a movie about a live Buddha, called Little Buddha.

Dr. Dave: I saw that movie! Was that the boy in America? I've seen several movies and I'm wondering is that the one where they find a little boy who is in America?

Rinpoche: Yes, it's sort of a true story happening together with the life of Buddha and some other story mixed up. So anyway some of the shooting takes place in Bhutan, and some in Nepal. So when he was doing the shooting in Bhutan I was there also, and so they needed some extras, so then I sent all of my monks to play the actors. That was the first time I had ever saw them making a movie, so I thought it was quite interesting, but still I never thought that I am going to make a movie. (laughing)

Dr. Dave: Yes really, that's quite a big step. And were you in another film? Called Tin Cup?

Rinpoche: Yes, The Cup.

Dr. Dave: Oh, The Cup.

Rinpoche: Made by my friend Khyentse Norbu: The Cup. So he made a movie, shot in my monastery in India, and all my monks acted in that movie. Also he wanted me to act in that movie, so I said OK; and from that I got some experience.

Dr. Dave: So was that the movie in which the monks were playing soccer?

Rinpoche: Yes. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Yes, I saw that movie; it was a wonderful movie. I'll have to go and see it again, so that I can see you it! (laughter)

Rinpoche: It's quite different; I was very young, and keen.

Dr. Dave: How old were you in that?

Rinpoche: I think I was about 18 or 19, something like that.

Dr. Dave: OK, so we will be looking for you there. Now I think the initial way that most people in the West, in this country at least – people of my age and Bert's age, we won't say what that is – got exposed to Buddhism mostly through Zen Buddhism. So I'm wondering, what are the distinctive features of Tibetan Buddhism, say compared to the way Buddhism is practiced in India and Japan. I know that there are a lot of similarities but I think that in Tibet you have your own special approach as well.

Rinpoche: I think all the basics are the same: how we are in Samsara, how Samsara works, because of karma and how it works when we are stuck in Samsara.

Dr. Dave: Samsara means illusion?

Rinpoche: Yes, Samsara means illusion; Samsara means in this world that – yes illusion.

Dr. Dave: Yes, this world seems real to us but it's not the ultimate reality.

Rinpoche: Yes; all those things are the same, just the Tibetan Buddhism has the Vaisravana path, and that is most of the places like Thailand and Japan – I think Japan has some Vaisravana but I'm not quite sure, because I never met any really great teacher in Japan. So most of that area is like the Theravada tradition, and then Tibetan of course has Theravada and on top of that we have Vaisravana, and that is different. So I think basically everything is the same, just the method is different. So Theravada mostly the meditation is the Vipassana and Shamata meditation.

Dr. Dave: Which is? Most of our listeners won't know what those words mean.

Rinpoche: So basically Shamata and Vipassana – mainly because our mind right now is like the water with the dust, shaking and then we couldn't see clearly.

Dr. Dave: It's all cloudy.

Rinpoche: It's very cloudy. So once you don't see clearly, you couldn't see the truth.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Rinpoche: Then once you didn't touch the water for some time, slowly all the dust has gone down, then the water is very clear, then you can see the reality. So our mind is similar, we have so many distractions, so many thoughts in our mind happening; so what that meditation does is to calm down your mind, and your emotional thoughts; all things calm down, and slow, and you can see things more clearly.

Dr. Dave: That's the Vipassana? Calm the mind to get the clarity?

Rinpoche: Yes, then once you get the clarity then slowly, slowly the door is opening and you can see more and more clearly until you get enlightenment.

Then the vajerama path and traditional method is that they will try to show you directly whatever is experienced by the enlightened person. Theravada in their tradition is to take you there by slowly, slowly open up your door. Vajerama path is directly to tell you what the experience of the enlightened person is, and there are many different methods to show you this.

Dr. Dave: OK so the techniques to help one achieve enlightenment in this lifetime.

Rinpoche: Yes, trying to.

Dr. Dave: OK wonderful. In the West in recent years, there has been a tremendous explosion of interest in Eastern approaches to spirituality. For example the practice and teaching of yoga has become really mainstream in much of America and in Europe. Do you have any idea about why that would be so?

Rinpoche: Yes, I think the yoga is very helpful healthwise, and the mind is dependent on the body also, so once your body is healthy the mind also will think more clearly and more sharp, so I think it is very helpful. I haven't tried the Hindu yoga, but in Tibetan Buddhism we have also the yoga but we teach all these yogas only for the spiritual path, not for just the health.

Dr. Dave: Well my question wasn't just about the yoga but about Eastern spirituality in general: meditation and all of it. Do you have any idea why we have so much hunger and interest?

Rinpoche: Yes I think because in the West especially until now they are so busy with the outside things; all the people are the same, they want something that they don't have. So until now they think once you have wealth, you have money and house or whatever we want we have. We think that is the end: we achieve everything, we should be happy and everything should be fine. But now in America and the developed countries most people have everything they want, with no big problem, and still now they realise something is missing and they are looking beyond that. Now I think they found out it is not just the outside but there is something on the inside and they can achieve ultimate happiness.

Dr. Dave: So what do you see as the value of meditation – maybe you have already spoken a little bit to that – but a lot of my listeners are interested in meditation, some people may be on the edge of it but they are asking themselves why should I do this? Why should I meditate?

Rinpoche: Meditation in many different ways is really helpful. For example Shamata meditation; if you do, forget about enlightenment, but right now in your situation sometimes you are emotional in your thoughts, which makes it difficult, and a lot of stress and everything. And through the meditation when you are doing the meditation there is no thoughts and no emotion should be there; and definitely you are released from all that stress. If you are released from that stress it is very good healthwise; very helpful. For the spiritual path it opens up more and more, and you can see more and more clear insight.

Dr. Dave: I have heard from a number of my listeners who have asked me for any advice about how they can bring this discipline into their life. They are so busy, as you say with external life, that they have trouble establishing the discipline and concentrating. Do you have any advice for people who are trying to learn to get started with meditation, or make the time?

Rinpoche: Yes, but definitely you need determination and persistence. Definitely you need that, from when you start you need those things. On top of that the important thing is the mindfulness; that is very, very important. When you don't know what you are doing, if not in mindfulness, then you will just follow your thoughts, you will follow your emotion, and just keep following that and get deeper. If you have

mindfulness most of the time, for example if you get jealous or angry, suddenly you will realise – oh I'm getting angry, I'm getting jealous. So then you didn't have to follow your anger and jealousy because you will know it is useless to follow that, because if you follow that it isn't going to help anything.

Dr. Dave: So you can break your automatic patterns as you become aware of it – and I guess through meditation you learn to watch your mind and to become aware of these emotions as they come up – instead of just going on automatic as we tend to do.

Rinpoche: Yes for example like Vipassana meditation when you focus on your breathing or you focus on your sensation, so once you focus on that there is no thought there, because our mind is always attached to sensation. Everything is a sensation: if you like something this is sensation, if you don't like something this is also sensation. So if you really think deeply it's just your thoughts, so it is really difficult for the beginner to not follow your thoughts, it's quite difficult but definitely you can learn it.

Dr. Dave: You can do it with practice: lots of practice. (laughs)

Rinpoche: Yes.

Dr. Dave: Sometimes I think maybe it is easier if you are in a monastery, where everybody is doing it, than if you are in life, driving cars and having a job.

Rinpoche: Yes, definitely it should be better because theirs is a full time job, only that.

Dr. Dave: In the monastery it's a full time job.

Rinpoche: Yes, so for the normal lives they have other things to take care of too. But if you can do it you will be stronger and more powerful, and able to face more difficulties. So also improve your meditations more.

Dr. Dave: OK, thank you. I'd like to know a bit about your own life. For example how did you become a lama? Is this something you are born into? Or trained into it? Tell us a bit about your early life, and then how you came to this place.

Rinpoche: Some people want to become a monk and want to study Buddhism, and they are interested in the spiritual path. Then some people

like me, in my story they recognised me as a reincarnation of somebody; and that's how they found me. And that's how I got into the monastery.

Dr. Dave: OK so you were how old when they recognised you?

Rinpoche: I was three years old.

Dr. Dave: And I don't know if it was in Little Buddha, or one of the other films, where they brought some objects for the child to recognise from the previous incarnation. Did they do that with you?

Rinpoche: No, because there is a few different way to recognise; that is one way. I think you saw the movie Kundun, about the Dalai Lama and they take some past reincarnation things and they choose the right one.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Rinpoche: In my case I was recognised by some other high lama, for example for me recognised by 16th Karmapa and by my teacher Khyentse Rinpoche. So they gave my father's name and my mother's name and my date of birth, and the place of my country and city; and then they looked for that. They look exactly for that and they go to the country and place, and look for the father's name, and mother's name, and boy, and date of birth. And that is how they found me.

Dr. Dave: And when you say the 16th Karmapa, does that refer to a lineage of 16 generations?

Rinpoche: He is the 16th reincarnation of the Karmapa.

Dr. Dave: The 16th reincarnation – and you are in that lineage now?

Rinpoche: I am not really in that lineage, but their lineage is that Karmapa's lineage. We are all the same, but Karmapa is different.

Dr. Dave: OK I wonder if there is anything that you would like to tell our listeners, that we haven't covered yet?

Rinpoche: Nothing so much, I think.

Dr. Dave: OK, so maybe we have covered it all. Bert, I wonder if there is any question that you have, and if you do just come over here and ask it.

Bert: Yes, I do. I am interested as a practitioner and meditator in a bit more specifically in your practice. How you practice, what techniques you might use; if you could address that to some degree.

Rinpoche: So there are many different techniques there, and most easy to describe basically we are saying everything is by our mind. Mind and thought is actually the same, but different name. Without mind there is no thought, without thought there is no mind; so most of the technique is that we have to go beyond mind.

If you are in the mind state, there is always the dualism: that there is right, there is left; there is right there is wrong; there is good there is bad, always. It's natural, it is like that. So Vaisravana technique is that you have to go beyond the mind. So beyond the mind is that we can't describe the beyond the mind; just that when you are doing the practice and teacher going to teach you through the meditation that how you experience your beyond mind.

So then enlightened person actually recognise natural mind – natural mind actually is beyond the mind. So mind is actually just sun and light. Sun is like the natural mind, and the light is the mind. So that is the main technique that we are trying to do that we have beyond the mind.

Dr. Dave: So to do that, do you try to stop thoughts?

Rinpoche: Stop the thoughts, not really stopping the thoughts. We never can stop the thoughts, but definitely stop following thoughts, and definitely thoughts not going to make any difference. Thought is just thought, is nothing, reality is there; so once you realise that thought is nothing there, then there is actually nothing to stop, and nothing to create.

Dr. Dave: Oh that's a good place for us to wrap this up. That's a good statement.

So I want to thank you once again for the opportunity to have this interview, and again I will put a link on the website to your website – www.milarepamovie.com – so people can find out more about your work and about the DVDs and I really wish you all success with your efforts and I hope this film finds a big audience.

Rinpoche: Oh thank you.