

The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Khepa and Acala of Crazy Cloud Hermitage on Tantric Buddhism

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Crazy Cloud Hermitage is a Tantric Buddhist community and retreat center located in a farmhouse compound on West Liberty, a few miles west of Zeeb Road. In the few years since its founding, the community has grown to include more than 50 members. The center was founded by Katie and Stuart Kirkpatrick, American-born Buddhists, and the Kirkpatricks are the resident spiritual teachers.

Katie (who goes by the name Acala) and Stuart (who goes by the name Khepa) are an engaging and articulate couple. Each is a person of strong opinions. Khepa is outgoing, almost happy-go-lucky at times, a brilliant synthesizer of philosophical ideas and spiritual traditions, generous of heart, capable of mild bombast, someone that likes to hug. Acala (pronounced "a-CHA-la") is quieter and more sensitive, a nuanced conversationalist, a keen observer of people, an involved mom. They both can be very funny, very fierce.

I interviewed the Kirkpatricks at Crazy Cloud on a cold winter's day in February. Crazy Cloud now consists of four houses and a barn, a greenhouse and a small retreat house, set on about 15 acres. The main house includes a meditation room, and construction was about to begin to create a large Tantric shrine room within the main house. The driveway to the compound is lined with five-colored prayer flags, and there's also a prayer flag stupa in the backyard. Small devotional ponds and shrines dot the Scio farmland expanse. Chickens cluck to their hearts' content in the pasture.

Bill Zirinsky: Thank you for both being willing to do this interview.

Khepa: You're welcome.

BZ: I know you both well, but I'll be asking a bunch of questions which I may know the answers to, but the purpose of the interview is for our readers and for other people in the community. So would you tell me what Crazy Cloud Dharma Center is and how it came to be?

Khepa: That's a good question. Crazy Cloud Dharma Center is a sanctuary for teachings in the Nyingma lineage of Tantric Buddhism. We teach meditational practices and methods of what are called the "inner Tantras" and one of the things that Acala and I both have increasingly wanted to begin emphasizing is that we are Buddhist specifically and we are Tantric Buddhist, which is one of the lineages of Buddhism, and we are of the Nyingma lineage within Tantra, and we teach what's called the Ngakpa (non-celibate, non-monastic) style of that.

I used to be less inclined to emphasize lineage names and that aspect is more of an unnecessary trapping compared with the essence of the teachings, but increasingly, I think one of the problems people often have in spiritual paths is they're not clear on what they're doing, and how it fits in the context of a whole path. And there ends up being a kind of "pick and mix" attitude of taking bits of different lineages and paths without understanding how they fit together into a coherent whole, because not all paths teach the same things or go the same place or go there according to the same route. If you think about lineage names, they're like the latitude and longitude pointers on a map. If you have a map which is the terrain of our existence in the world, then what we teach actually is a certain path within that terrain.

Then the names Buddhist and Tantrica, the Tantric path of Buddhism, are like the latitude point and Nyingma lineage and the Ngakpa style are the longitude where they cross-sect, and that's where you would actually find our teaching. Someone could go to a store and find a book on this and they'd have some feeling of who we are.

Crazy Cloud is a center for the teachings of the inner Tantras of the Buddhist path. It's not a Christian teaching or a Jewish teaching or a Hindu teaching. It's not a mish-mash of different teachings. Specifically, we teach the Buddhist Dharma and we teach in a specific style of Tantric practice. And so that's what Crazy Cloud is. And how it came about is through Acala's and my deep desire to share a path which we found of immense benefit from in our own lives, that we found so transformative in our own lives and the urge within oneself to communicate joy and compassion and live it out is really the how of it. Neither of us self-consciously or in a contrived manner set out to be teachers — people asked us about our path and about the practices we did, because they saw effects from those practices in our lives and we shared those practices with them.

BZ: Well, I remember conversations we had when the community first began. And I don't remember having such a precise sense of what the lineage was that you were teaching.

Khepa: There really was a much less precise communication of that in the beginning of our teaching. I and Acala both didn't really understand and feel the importance of precision of communication about the lineage and the actual form of the lineage. And somewhat naively, I believed that the teachings themselves were enough without having to get too trapped in the aspect of where the teachings come from, where they're from historically, what their historical context is. Locating the teachings in the historical stream has arisen from seeing that the more vague method isn't very beneficial to people.

BZ: Six or seven years ago, if you had articulated it, would you have articulated what you were doing within this same latitudinal and longitudinal spot?

Khepa: Absolutely. I mean we'd give talks about specific teachings or ways of approaching meditation without as much of what I then viewed as the trappings, but now I don't think they're trappings; I think they're the very body in which the life-spirit of the teaching takes place. The difference is not in that there's any different latitude and longitude locational point, it's that the difference is in the emphasis.

BZ: One gift that I've felt in what you have to teach, and what you have to elucidate, was your own integration of a lot of different spiritual traditions. You have knowledge of them and you have a sense of how they come together. Are you still pulling in to your teaching your knowledge and intellectual integration and experiential integration of some of the teachings of other traditions?

Khepa: It's a little different for Acala and me. I have lived in communities, Ashrams, Hermitages, of more different spiritual traditions. That was more part of my own personal search than I think it was Acala's. But she has much deeper contact with and understanding of different psychotherapeutic modalities than I do. That was an area that she explored a great deal more. Now I did serious Zen practice, I was seriously involved in Gurdjieff communities, I've lived in Sufi communities, a Rajneesh community, a variety of different modalities of practice. And I think that the answer is yes and no to your question, at least from my side, and Acala can answer it from her side. We don't take a little something from Sufism, and a little something from Zen, something from Tantra and try to mix it together to form a path. And to whatever degree we did that at all in the beginning of the teaching, we now don't.

Obviously, all the experiences I've ever had in my own spiritual search have gone into how I teach, so yes, in that sense. And there are things that affected me deeply that then I convey in the teaching, like the importance of relationship and community. Which are also aspects of the traditional Tantric Buddhist path, but are not perhaps characterized in the way Tantric Buddhism is being taught in our culture right now. Part of being more precise about the location latitude and

longitude of the lineage is a moving away from mixing different paths. I think that the experience is really great for me as a teacher because it allows me to communicate with people from different paths in a more concrete manner, but each path is a complete and total whole in itself. It has a style, a flavor and a system. And the systems of different paths don't work together.

The Sufi path is based on axioms just like geometry. In a sense, we could say the Sufi path is like Euclidean geometry and based on a certain set of axioms and propositions on which all the theorems are based. And the Tantric path is based on the axioms of non-Euclidean geometry. They may both teach us tremendously important things about the universe and how we live in it, but the axioms are so different. On the Sufi path and the Christian path and the Jewish path, one of the fundamental axioms is God. And on the Buddhist path, one of the fundamental axioms is no god. One of the fundamental axioms of all the theistic paths of the god is self, and one of the Buddhist axioms is no self. Everything was characterized by emptiness and so you can't — if you try to mix systems that are based on a theistic model versus systems based on a non-theistic model, you end up getting into serious problems because they don't work.

Acala: And yet, there's something really valuable, especially about your in-depth understanding of all these different paths, which is that it's very rare for a student to show up here not having encountered and incorporated the beliefs of some other system. And so unless we fully understand that system and we really elucidate for them what the difference is between Tantra and the system they've been practicing, then inherently what they try to do is fit Tantra into their previous understanding of some other system. And they can't really approach Tantra until they can understand how not to do that. So if we didn't understand the path that they practiced and what the axioms of that path were, we would have no way of explaining to them why those axioms do not apply in the Tantric system.

Khepa: So that they can then make a choice based on the understanding of the differences. Pema Chodron, the Buddhist teacher, who was one of Trungpa's Dharma heirs, and wrote *Start Where You Are* and *When Things Fall Apart*, has a phrase for this, it's called "stick to one boat." If you're going across the ocean in a boat, if you keep deciding to change boats, you've got to go back to shore, change boats, take a different boat. There's a really important period where people shop around. It's like relationships — it's probably not a great idea to marry the first person you go on a date with. It's good to shop around a little, get to know different kinds of people and find a person that fits well for you. But it also is a sad thing when people never stop shopping around, don't settle down and enter into the intimacy that can only develop in a long-term committed relationship. And the same on a spiritual path — when people come to us they're usually in a shopping phase. They've done a little shopping over at the Zen place, and at the Sufi place, and the Hasidic place, and read a little of this and read a little of that. And so they come to us in that shopping phase, and we present them the teachings, say OK, here's the teachings, here's how they're different from other teachings. You've got to choose a path and then stick to that path so you can have the integrity that comes with the long-term practice of that path.

Acala: To understand and practice and live the view of Tantra is a lifelong endeavor. It's not something that one can hope to do in a short period of time. And to understand the view of Tantra takes so much of one's time and energy that it's hard for me to understand why someone who would make that commitment would want to understand the view of different paths. Does that make sense? I've just kind of lost interest in other paths. I know precisely what my path is and I live from the point of view of that path. I bring every aspect of my life into that path. I can fully understand that other people could choose a different path and live from the point of that path, and I respect their right to do that. But it's not the choice I make with my life.

Khepa: And for them, that path may well be the best path. People ask us sometimes, "You think that all paths are equal, right?" And we say, "No. We think our path is best." If I thought some other path was better, I would be on that path. But we do think that the Tantric Buddhist path is the best path for realization of liberation in this lifetime.

Now someone who's following the Sufi path is obviously committing, their heart is in it, the path of their heart is going to think the Sufi path is best. In a kind of conceptual way, we can say they're all equal, but that's not what one feels; one feels the path that they follow is best. And I can certainly understand why someone else might be a Sufi and might seriously follow the Sufi path. That's a wonderful thing.

That doesn't even mean I don't have to think there are differences between the paths. I enjoy debate. I enjoy understanding the metaphysics and theory of different philosophical and religious systems. And I enjoy arguing them. I think non-theist paths, the non-theist path of Buddhism is more likely to lead one to liberation than the theist path because I think there are fundamental mistakes on the theist path — God and Self being two of them. Because neither one exists.

So, there's a problem as an axiom on the path. Now, I believe that, I love to argue about it with people; that doesn't mean I think someone should strive to want to convert Sufis to Buddhism or something, that I want to stop someone from being a Sufi or convert them from Sufism to Buddhism. But we feel this is the best path. That's why we follow this path. It's a wonderful path.

And it's good to know something about different paths so one doesn't have a rigid fundamentalist and provincial view of existence, and so that you can embrace difference; you can embrace diversity. But embracing diversity doesn't mean that we don't have strong opinions. It just means we don't kill each other over our strong opinions, and we can actually rejoice in arguing about our differences of opinion without thinking that we have to make the other person agree with our opinion.

So, in terms of the original question, I think that the big problem comes when we try to make Sufism be Tantric Buddhism, and Tantric Buddhism be just like Sufism. Because they're not really alike. One believes in God and Self, and one does not. These are pretty fundamental differences. Take Hasidism, the love of singing and dancing as part of communion with God; that's a wonderful thing. We use a lot of music and devotion and joy in our path which is in a way that may not be traditional, let's say, to Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, that it's a style of evolving American Tantric Buddhism. But it's not that we're trying to fit Hasidism into Tantric Buddhism; the theory and structure behind what we do with music as meditation is profoundly different than let's say what the Hasids are doing with music to meditation, though there's some real similarities as well.

BZ: Interesting. OK. Tell me something about this community. It looks to me that you have fifty or sixty or seventy people who are regularly part of your community. Tell me something about the actual evolution of the community.

Khepa: It started much smaller, and it's gotten bigger.

BZ: It started a lot smaller, and it got bigger. And how long ago did it start?

Acala: Almost eight years.

BZ: And how many years since this farm, since you bought the farm?

Khepa: Six years. Acala ran a pre-school over on Huron street for a few years. There was a woman who worked at her pre-school. One day she asked me if I would teach her about the meditation practices I do. And I said OK. I said, "Sure. Let's meet on Tuesday evenings." That's how it started. And little by little the group kind of grew through word of mouth. After two years, there were about ten people. And a group of them decided they would like to live together, so that their shared commitment to meditation and living a life of awareness and kindness could be enhanced and strengthened by sharing a home together and living with common goals. We have no intention of ever being teachers of a large community. We do a lot to impede the growth of the community because it's our belief that...

BZ: That's very interesting that you impede the growth of the community.

Acala: We're very careful. When you're holding something precious in your hands, you have a certain care and respect and a desire to nurture it in the best way possible and it just seemed to us that given the teachings and the community and the whole set-up requires such personal . . .

Khepa: Responsibility.

Acala: Personal responsibility and also just that the relationship that we have with our students is a very personal one. And we need to get to know them. We need to understand who they are and what they're bringing to the community, and we need to actually engage them in conversations to draw out their innate wisdom and address their confusion.

Khepa: A complex path like Tantric Buddhism is not learned from books. It's learned from practice. And the practice has to be practiced by someone who's walked that path before. A couple of summers ago we opened up the community to the public in the summer and a hundred and fifteen people showed up on a Sunday morning, and we closed it up right away. It was too big. You can't teach in big groups. We have no goals of empire-building, having centers all over the world, and being important in some way like that. Our shared vision together as teachers is to transmit the power and beauty of this path. And that takes real care. The path of Tantra is not based on hierarchical structures of authority, it's based on relationship. It's based on authentic relationship and mutuality between teacher and student. And real relationship doesn't take place in big groups.

BZ: Growing fast has been a real pitfall to some of the East-meets-West spiritual communities.

Khepa: Yeah. Absolutely.

BZ: You were saying that it takes time to get to know each new student who comes in. In some communities, when there's a lot of students being absorbed . . .

Acala: Yes. That time is not really available. Our experience has been that it really takes us about three years to get to know any particular student.

Khepa: And for the student to get to know us.

Acala: It's three years with a lot of contact. We have a lot of contact with our students. We not only have group contact in a teaching situation, we have lots of one-on-one personal contact. They call us up on the phone to ask questions about their practice, and we work together on the property, and we have a summer retreat together, and I wouldn't say that I've gotten to know any of our students really well in under three years.

Khepa: We don't get to know a human being very quickly. You know, intimacy and vulnerability are not things you can rush or pretend about. They are based on time and deeds.

BZ: That's nicely put — they're based on time and deeds. That's very nice.

Khepa: Yeah. There's also the factor that if we let thirteen people into the community a year, it changes the entire dynamic of the group as a whole.

BZ: The entire gestalt.

Khepa: Right.

BZ: Their relationships to everybody else.

Khepa: Right. The community changes. It's kind of like what Martin Buber used to talk about: I as an individual am one person, and Acala is one person; well, the two of us together in a relationship aren't even those individuals, we're now a completely different entity. The community now fluctuates between fifty-five and seventy people, and when you bring in ten new people into a group of fifty, you change the entire dynamic of the fifty people as well.

BZ: So you're quoting Martin Buber. So even though your teaching is very focused in terms of a particular tradition, you are still bringing your knowledge and your reading into your teaching.

Khepa: Oh yeah. Well, Martin Buber, his whole theories on I-it versus I-thou relationships are wonderful. In a given talk, Acala and I might talk about Jung, and we might talk about the systems theories and process theories of modern sociologists and physicists. Everything in our life informs our paths, including Martin Buber. Now, we don't take instruction on how to pray and meditate from Martin Buber. That doesn't mean that my understanding of human

relationships can't be immensely enhanced, and has been, by the reading of his works. He's a wonderful writer and philosopher.

Acala: Both Khepa and I are immensely curious people. We read all kinds of things that you might never imagine.

BZ: Well, I know that, because I know that Khepa and I were talking about Monica Lewinsky the other day. [Khepa laughs.]

Acala: And we talk about all kinds of thing, endlessly, amongst ourselves, and with our students, and we've talked about Monica Lewinsky at our programs, in our Dharma teaching setting.

Khepa: The context of our practice is life. Our practice is integrated into all aspects and areas of our life as modern American people. And we should be informed. We're not medieval Tibetans. We're not eighteenth century Tibetans, or even twentieth century Tibetans, we're not Tibetans at all. We don't even practice Tibetan Buddhism, we practice Tantric Buddhism, which is a completely different thing. Tibetans practicing Tantric Buddhism is a subset of all human beings practicing Tantric Buddhism. So yeah, Martin Buber, and Platinus and Heraclitus and Lao Tzu, and all of these people reading them — Rumi, the Sufi poet, or Kabir, all of them can inform us.

BZ: Yeah, I know you quote Rumi a lot. His poetry really moves you.

Khepa: I love it. As Acala was saying a few moments ago, relationship is so profoundly important in our path. The relationship between Vajra master, the Tantric master, and disciple is extremely important and if you want to read about relationships between master and disciple, read Rumi. He's the greatest poet of that relationship ever. Rumi makes me ecstatic because Rumi writing about Shams is writing about how I feel about Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava. So Rumi's wonderful in that way. But I don't do Rumi's meditation practices.

BZ: Will you tell me about those two teachers briefly?

Khepa: Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal were the male and female (Padmasambhava is male and Yeshé Tsogyal is female) Buddhas who incarnated in the eighth century so as to establish Tantric Buddhism in the world. The Buddha Shakyamuni taught Tantra in specific esoteric circumstances, but not in a general manner. The time wasn't really appropriate for it. So Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal are two Mahasiddhas, or "great enlightened beings" who chose to incarnate in the eighth century for the purpose of establishing the Tantric doctrines of Buddhism in a practicable manner. Padmasambhava was from Afghanistan. Yeshé Tsogyal was the daughter of a Tibetan king. The two of them as a couple were really the fundamental forces of bringing Tantra to the world as it's known today. They really are the fountainhead of Tantric doctrine.

Padmasambhava was the ultimate magician and mystic — a fully realized Buddha who could conjure with the elements of the world to display and demonstrate the teachings. And Yeshé Tsogyal incarnated as his disciple to fully display the path of being a disciple, though she herself was a Buddha in her own right. The two of them together, you can't separate them, she as the female represents emptiness, and he as the male represents skillful means and activity, and the two of them dance together. All of the universe is nothing but this dance of emptiness and form — the dance of emptiness and form which gave birth to the flower of Tantra. And we follow in the footsteps of Padmasambhava's teachings.

BZ: Tell our readers something about Tantric Buddhism.

Acala: Tantra is a path of incredible skillful means and methods for encountering one's inherent Buddha nature. The methods and practices themselves would be very complex to delve into, but .

BZ: Tell me - "the interplay of form and emptiness" - what that might mean to an American student on the path?

Acala: One of the real challenges of teaching Tantra in this culture is that there is a whole language that goes with the teaching of Tantra which requires definition. We could talk for half an hour about what is emptiness, and how emptiness manifests in our lives, and what is form, and

what is method display. These are words that our students have come to be quite comfortable with; they understand this terminology as they go more deeply into the path. But it's somewhat difficult to discuss in brief. I have the same feeling when I talk about Tantra that I have when I go to a foreign country, and I'm having to translate everything that I think first in English into another language, and it comes out not sounding quite right. I feel that way when I talk about Tantra with someone who is not a practitioner; it's very easy for me to talk about Tantra with our students because we have this base of language from which we can discuss it.

Emptiness means that no thing has self-existent nature. This is Buddha's definition. There is no Svabhava — self-existence to any thing. That there is no god that is an eternally self-existent creator deity. You know, in Buddhism, there's no self-existent part of me that goes on forever. This concept is delusion, actually; it's a distorted view. Emptiness is the fact that everything is made up of aggregates that come together for a duration of time and fall apart — that everything is characterized by impermanence.

Now in the West, when people first started writing about emptiness as a defining characteristic of Buddhism, especially in the late 1800s, people first studied Buddhism, and there was parochial, patriarchal racism that you see in the gloss on Buddhism from this time period. You see it in Carl Jung's works. And in Rudolf Steiner's interpretation of Buddhism. You see it in the current Pope's works.

Because they were equating emptiness with Nihilism, the idea that there is nothing that authentically exists on its own. How Nihilistic, how terrible. Nihilism is the emotional response to finding out there is no god or soul. Except that's not what Buddhism means, especially Tantra, by emptiness. Emptiness is the dynamic field of pure potentiality from which all form arises. Emptiness is also an ocean of lucidity, of luminosity appearing as all form. Right? Form has no ultimate self-existence, like waves arising on the ocean and falling back into the ocean. The trouble with that analogy is that the ocean actually has an existence, whereas emptiness is not an existent thing. It's a dynamic matrix of pure potentiality, which is anything, then, but Nihilistic. **BZ:** The experience of form and emptiness, through meditative practice, is something else entirely?

Khepa: Right. You can't practice Tantra until you've tasted emptiness. Having a book definition of emptiness won't do; you have to taste emptiness. And this is what Acala said: it's so hard to talk about it unless we go into the journey together.

Acala: You know, often people will say, well I don't believe in a soul, some kind of eternally existent 'self', and then in another situation they'll make a statement that entirely contradicts that. They'll expose some belief, this view of their life or their existence, which implies the existence of a soul. We tend to take things to a very deep level of conversation because most people don't analyze these notions they have very carefully.

BZ: They're superstitions?

Acala: They're superstitions.

Khepa: God and soul as eternally existent things are superstitions, which like most superstitions, when inspected carefully turn out not to exist. To integrate every aspect of the Tantric view into one's life requires a deconstructionism of the view of an eternally existent 'self'.

Acala: For example: Western practitioners who come to Buddhism often come with this idea that, OK, perhaps there's not a God and there's not a soul, but of course reincarnation means that I, Acala, go on living lifetime after lifetime. Our teaching is that the habit patterns of a particular human being may be reborn, but to be reborn is not to be reincarnated. And that habit patterns may go on from lifetime to lifetime, but that the essence of who we are — our personalities, our belief systems, the things we really like about ourselves, that those things are lost entirely.

Khepa: Right. There's not a person that reincarnates; there's just a habit pattern. Reincarnation is not meant to be consoling in the slightest. One of the big differences between Buddhism and New Age thought is that Buddhism is a somewhat gritty philosophical stance based on a rugged

realism, and it takes account of the bad, it takes account of chaos and chance, it takes account of the not-so-pretty side of life. So often you read in various New Age writings and channeled things about how we evolve from lifetime to lifetime, and you know, each lifetime we're learning lessons and we are kind of evolving just like we evolve from amoebas to human beings, and in an inexorable parade to enlightenment in the future. That, of course, from the Buddhist point of view is completely untrue — you can be a human being in this lifetime and you can be a dung beetle in your next lifetime, you can be a hell realm being in your next lifetime. Our thoughts, actions, fears, undealt with issues and habits determine how we will be reborn. You can go up or you can go down. You can go either way in reincarnation. That it's dependent entirely on your actions, what you do. You can have much less good life in your next birth — the set of habit patterns can be born according to all your nasty petty stuff, and you're not just inexorably going forward.

There's this realism about Tantra that we both find wonderful. I don't want everything to be cotton candy, because that's not life. Life is not just a cotton candy floating blissy cloud sort of thing. It's filled with joy and suffering, with hardship and ease, and there's this exploration of what is the real meaning? What is the root? What is the ground of all of this appearance? Reincarnation is one of the places that people put sad fantasies. And we would like to take those fantasies away from people. The spiritual path should be disillusioning. Look at the meaning of the word: "illusion" and "dis," meaning to be disabused or having something taken away. People generally come to a spiritual path with all kinds of hopes.

Acala: And fantasies and looking for consolation, you know, looking for some way to make sense out of chaos.

Khepa: Meditation often is a confrontation with our consolation-based fantasies, and can be very uncomfortable. Ambivalence is a tremendous part of Tantra. If one doesn't feel some discomfort and ambivalence on the path then it's not the Tantric path. This is a razor's edge path. It's a path holding all the joy and all the pain in the world in our hearts at the same moment. And it's very discomfoting.

BZ: Disillusioning.

Khepa: It's very disillusioning. And when all our illusions drop away, then the reality, which might be quite wonderful, turns out to be something we never could have imagined. We never could have projected from the narrowness of our concepts.

BZ: Many people have asked me, "Who are the people at Crazy Cloud?" because they are aware, in some sense, that the Zen Temple is from a Zen tradition, and that Jewel Heart is part of a Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Would you each tell me something about your backgrounds?

Acala: We're also part of a tradition. We're part of the Nyingma Ngakpa tradition, which is a very specific tradition dating back to the eighth century.

BZ: Where did you grow up?

Acala: I grew up in Grand Rapids.

BZ: How long have you lived in Ann Arbor?

Acala: Well, let's see. Khepa and I have been together for fourteen years, so I've been in Ann Arbor for twelve years.

Khepa: And I grew up in Washington, D. C. Actually, I grew up in Bethesda, Maryland. But I did most of my living in Washington, D. C.

Acala: I feel so little identification with anything I could discuss with you about that period of time in my life because my view changed so radically with encountering and taking up the practice of Tantra. I had this feeling, I used to say to Khepa, when I first encountered the path that I felt like my IQ jumped 200 points. I couldn't really explain it any better than that. But there was a feeling for me of, "Aha! I knew I was looking for something! I was going all over the place, trying all kinds of things, looking for something, and here I've found it."

BZ: So you don't want to identify with your lower-IQ self?

Acala: Well, no, that's not it. But since the moment I found this path a radical change took place in me, and it became much more difficult to identify with the person I had been up to that point, because it was as if my life actually began in that moment.

Khepa: But also, obviously, the sum total of all of our experiences make up who we are and how we teach.

BZ: I used to know you by the name "Pranama". What did "Pranama" mean and what went into changing your name to "Khepa".

Khepa: Pranama means worship and it was given to me by a Hindu teacher whose Ashram I lived in. I kept that name Pranama for a long, long time out of tremendous gratitude and respect, but it was not part of the Tantric path. Khepa is not a name; it's a title [Laughs]. Tantric teachers in the West, little by little, started realizing that while we Americans decided in the sixties to throw out all authority, we are actually completely obsessed and fascinated by authority. And so they realized that by putting titles in front of names, it actually gave an air of some kind of legitimacy. There's "his eminence," "his holiness,"...

BZ: Yes, yes, so what does "Khepa" mean?

Khepa: I'm getting to that. So that just, to me, always seemed like kind of a grotesque absurdity, because to be a teacher is not a status, it's a function. And "Khepa" is Bengali and it means, "aimless, worthless beggar." [BZ laughs].

Acala: You like that. Some say "an aimless, stinky beggar."

BZ: So, your students call you an aimless worthless beggar.

Acala: Yes.

Khepa: With cultural and social overtones of it means "someone of a dubious nature who probably smells bad." [All laugh]. Like a street person or a bum. Right?

BZ: So there's some real thrashing of authority, of the instinct to put one's teacher on a pedestal.

Khepa: The instinct to give authority based in titles, based in ideas and concepts, based in almost anything other than the time and deeds of real relationships is the basest instinct of human beings, and has resulted in things such as fascism under Mussolini and Hitler, it has resulted in the grotesqueness that has arisen time and time again and is still arising to this day, in every religion including Tantric Buddhism, in every culture throughout history. It's the denial of personal responsibility, and it makes me want to puke.

If I want to learn to play piano I need to find a good teacher. I need to meet the person, establish a relationship with her, find out if she can teach me. If I enter into a relationship with that person and discover all of that, then I will take her as my guide in learning piano. I will also bow to her authority. If I take piano lessons, and the teacher says, "You need to practice this much a week, and you need to do these specific exercises." If every time she gives me teachings, I have a little adolescent hissy-fit and say, "I won't be told what to do. I'm going to do it my own way." So I go off and I just make up my own practices for that week. Well, after two or three weeks, I would expect the teacher to dump me. Because why bother teaching someone who doesn't want to learn? I would accept her, and she me, based on a real relationship and time and deeds as my authority.

Acala: And based on discovering that you are actually learning to play the piano.

BZ: If you're not learning to play the piano, you're not learning from that particular teacher. You may need a different teacher, or maybe you shouldn't be taking up piano.

Khepa: Right. It doesn't even mean that teacher's not a good teacher, or that you're not a good student. It just might not be a good mix. Right? Not every teacher is for every student. Not every student is for every teacher. And this is a very different thing than authority based on institutionalization and bureaucratic hierarchy. That kind of acceptance of authority is, in my opinion, denigrating to human beings.

BZ: And it's also where a lot of spiritual communities get into trouble.

Khepa: People accept Acala and I as authorities in guiding their spiritual life, based on their relationship with us. Some people accept us and some people don't. That doesn't make them bad people, and it doesn't make us bad teachers, if it wasn't a good connection and mix. But they shouldn't accept us because anybody says we're authorities. We're bringing a teacher to town this fall, Ngakpa Chögyam who we think is a wonderful teacher. Our students shouldn't accept him as an authority because we say so. They should accept him because they meet this man and have actual interaction with him.

BZ: OK. "Acala" - what does that title mean?

Acala: "Acala Devi" is a name that Khepa gave to me a few years back and it means immovable. And Devi is the Sanskrit word that would translate into Khandro in Tibetan, which is a sky dancer.

Khepa: Immovable and unshakable in her commitment to all beings through compassion.

BZ: I've never known you as Stuart Kirkpatrick, though I know that that's the name on your driver's license. You're the son of the former UN Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick and philosophy professor Evron Kirkpatrick. When people have asked me about your roots, one thing that I always pictured from something you once told me was of a boy or young adolescent who would occasionally go and listen to your father's philosophy lectures. The way some people grow up around their fathers in the real estate business or in the . . .

Khepa: The grocery business.

BZ: The grocery business or in the fabric business... You are enormously conversant in philosophy and in different philosophical traditions. The same way that someone who grew up around groceries would know how to converse about canned goods and fresh produce.

Khepa: But I can't tell a kohlrabi from a plum. [Both laugh].

BZ: But you can tell the difference between Heidegger and Buber.

Khepa: Right. And Longchampa. I can tell the difference between Buber and Longchampa. My parents were a huge influence on me, and continue to be. I was enormously lucky to have the parents I had, to grow up in the family I had. Both of my parents had passionate longing for understanding and for truth. And both of them were profoundly interested in political philosophy and my father in epistemology and the philosophy of science, the philosophy of how we know.

But what was fundamental in both of them is a passionate desire to understand life, and the meaning of life, and the meaning of our lives in the social context. While I chose a different route to explore the deepest meanings of life than my parents did, it was their passion for truth that molded a huge aspect of my character. There are two fundamental karmic aspects to my relationship with my parents, and one is that to be incarnated into a family where my mother's profound political impulse and use of her life is to help bring an end to communism is not very surprising. Communism has not been very good for Tibet. And the other karmic tie is the profound interest in truth. Yeah, I used to go to my dad's class on the philosophy of science focusing mostly on the teachings of Carl Popper. But we used to talk Plato at dinner.

My earliest memories are of traveling with my family all around Europe in the summer, driving from Morocco to Turkey and my mother reading Plato in the car to us, and then asking us questions. And it was profoundly impactful on me. They made us feel like we had the capacity to think about the deep questions of life and that our thoughts about them were important to our own personal understanding of existence. They caused us to feel a confidence in our ability to explore the deep meanings of life. And that has stood me in good stead to this day.

BZ: It's interesting to me that though your mother is one of the leading neo-conservative intellectuals of our time, she was a Trotskyite in her youth and then she was very interested in Wilhelm Reich.

Khepa: Actually she was a Trotskyite and interested in Reich at the same time.

BZ: I see. And both of those are really part of a search for truth and a search for meaning.

Khepa: Her conclusions and my conclusions in areas of politics and personal matters may in some way have gone in very different directions but — just what you're mentioning — one of the

things that she displayed to me was this quality of emptiness. Her search went on; she wasn't simply a Trotskyite for her whole life, or Reichian. Her own understanding of life was . . .

Acala: She was a Democrat for most of the years of her life.

Khepa: Right, and then became a Republican. There's a beauty in the fact that she has never concretized herself into an ossified or calcified point of view. And her point of view continually shifts. It's an interesting thing: my mother is known for her extremely conservative foreign policy views, but currently her views have shifted in a way that she thinks we're way too involved militarily in the affairs of other countries in the current world. Her view is in flux and changes, as each of our views should be, as we learn and grow throughout our lives.

Acala: And she's always been a very strong advocate of human rights. Right now she's very active in Campaign for Tibet.

BZ: Which is a campaign I feel very strongly about, too.

Khepa: Her fundamental concern has always been for the suffering of human beings. She's terribly moved by the suffering of human beings. It's funny, in the portrayal of her often in politics as kind of the "tough woman" — it's a very interesting thing — women who rise in politics to the top often get attacked for not being feminine enough. They're too masculine, or whatever.

Acala: Too aggressive.

BZ: As a case in point, Hillary Clinton.

Khepa: Hillary Clinton, my mother, Margaret Thatcher. They're often attacked by women, which is the craziest thing. It's a weird distortion of the feminine. Whatever a woman does is an aspect of the feminine. We may strongly, strongly disagree with their policies, but the truth is that when we vilify people in government because we strongly disagree with them, we demean them as human beings, say that they're less of human beings, they're fascist, they're all just fascist. People who call US government officials fascists are simply people who need to read about fascism. Because the difference between Mussolini and Hitler and Reagan and Jeanne Kirkpatrick is rather enormous.

So it's another area in which her life has impacted me, her tremendous concern for the suffering of others. Plus as a wandering Tantrica wandering over geographical territories and lifetimes, I personally find communism as it's been used around the world, and especially in Tibet, to be one of the most terrible things that's ever happened to humanity. Luckily, as most of our systems do, it's proved its utter complete failure, and it's falling apart. [Laughs.]

BZ: [To Acala] And your parents and your family?

Acala: I grew up in Grand Rapids in sort of a traditionally dysfunctional middle class household. I had a rather conventional childhood in a lot of ways and certainly I had experiences growing up that affected me very deeply. One of those experiences was that both of my parents died before I was thirty years old. They both died of cancer; they suffered terribly in the process of dying, and I was with each of them at the moment that they died. That impacted me hugely.

BZ: A lot of teachings in that?

Acala: Oh, a lot. There was a lot in that for me. That's a classic lesson in impermanence and giving up one's reference points and in being thrown into moments of emptiness and using them as part of the path.

BZ: I'm sure your mother would have liked to have known your daughter.

Acala: My mother would love my daughter. I sometimes think about that because they would have enjoyed one another immensely. But Lily has a richness in her life now that most people couldn't imagine. She doesn't have three of her four grandparents, but she has an entire community who love and adore her and care for her. So there's not much of a hole.

BZ: Did you meet in a Rajneesh community, is that where you both met originally?

Acala: No. We met at college in Ohio. It was a week before my graduation and Khepa had dropped out of school and had come back during that week to visit a mutual friend of ours. He

was a Rajneesh disciple at that time — my curiosity was piqued and then I went out to the Rajneesh commune in Oregon, and then he came out a few weeks after me.

Khepa: Oh, tell them the real story. [Laughs].

Acala: You don't think I would let them put that in the paper!

Acala: Well, I'll tell you, the funny thing is, we had met several times, and we had liked each other immensely each time we met. Khepa had dropped out of school to be a yogi. He would come for short visits, and we might go out for a pizza together with a group of other people, and he would say to me, "Give me your phone number, address and name," and he would write them down in his address book. Then the next time he'd come, we'd meet again — I would remember having met, and I would assume that he remembered as well, but then at the end of the meeting, he'd say, "Give me your name and your phone number." And then I would say, "It's in your book! You wrote it in your book the last time you met me!" This happened twice, and then the third time he came was the week before I was to graduate from college.

Khepa: And one day, I was sitting out on the side of a hill at Kenyon College, and Acala walked by, and she said, "What are you doing?" And at this point I was wearing all red clothes and the mala that Rajneesh disciples wore, and she said, "What are you doing?"

Acala: He was a very goofy looking fellow. And he was just sitting staring at the ground, and I walked by and said, "What are you doing? Hello, what are you doing?" And he said, "I'm watching these ants." There was an anthill and these ants were, you know, going all over.

Khepa: It's fascinating.

Acala: And then I went to class, and I went to lunch, and I went to the library, and I came back and there he was, three hours later.

Khepa: Three hours later, I was still sitting there [Laughs]. She thought it was rather odd because I was still sitting there, and I think, if I remember correctly, what went through her head was, "What a pathetic guy! Three hours later he's still looking at some ants."

Acala: Yeah. I thought he was kind of a sorry excuse for a human being. But I was also somewhat intrigued.

Khepa: So later that evening she was walking to her dorm room through the commons area of the dorm building that she lived in. I was sitting there watching TV. And she walked by me.

Acala: I think you were watching some terrible sit-com. And I walked through, and I said, "Do you know what time it is?" because I was thinking I was late for something. He looked at his watch and he said, "It's four p.m.," and I felt like I had been hit with a bolt of lightning. I felt this kind of shock go through my body that I can hardly explain, and in that moment I said to myself, "Oh my god, I am spending the rest of my life with this person, and he is a kook!" [All laugh.]

Khepa: And she went up to her room and cried about it, because she did not like the idea.

Acala: I was simultaneously horrified and completely surrendered in the same moment. It just was completely clear. There was no question about it. There was no way out of it. And part of why I was crying was because I had no idea where that "kook" was going to take me. I knew I was going on a journey with him, and that it was a lifetime-long journey, and I had absolutely no idea, what it could possibly look like. Anything that I had imagined for myself up to that point was thrown in the dumpster.

Khepa: And it took me several more years to realize it [laughs].

BZ: Sitting at the bar, or wherever it was the first few times where you had a drink together amidst other people, or you had a pizza, do you think you knew he was the one? Before seeing him with the ants?

Acala: I think I did, but I think I was too terrified, Bill, to let that in. What I did experience is, "Wow. It is bizarre how much I like this guy. And that he likes me. It never ceased to amaze me that he would come back having forgotten me completely. How do you have such an intense

connection with someone, and then they return, and you have to tell them your name all over again? I certainly didn't need to be told his name.

BZ: [To Khepa] How do you explain that?

Khepa: At that point in my life, I lived a life of a vagabond, basically. I had only one serious interest in life, starting from the time I was about eighteen. Starting from much earlier — from the earliest moments of my memory, I knew exactly what I was to do with my life. My parents weren't Atheists, because to be an Atheist, you have to care and have an opinion — they weren't Agnostics, either — they just considered the whole spiritual question to be so irrelevant, trivial and obviously stupid, that it's not worth being an Atheist or Agnostic or anything else. I used to beg my parents to take me to church because this longing was there. Finally my grandmother took me to her Southern Baptist church; it's the last time I ever asked to go to church. I never asked to go to church again after that. But this longing was there that crystallized when I was around eighteen. I knew what I was going to do, and from that point forward, for a good decade, I lived very much the life of a vagabond. I worked whatever jobs I needed to, I'd go receive teachings wherever I could receive them, I lived in a Rajneesh Ashram for a while, I lived in a Sufi community, lived in different places, and this was the only interest in my life. Since childhood, I have had a single track mind only. I have only one love, one passion, one interest at the core of my being, and that's been the spiritual search and quest. And so everything I owned could be put in a small duffel bag. I would get up and move anyplace in the country.

Acala: He met lots and lots of people. And he is a very charismatic person who makes connections easily. I am a more reserved person who make connections less easily, so, to me, it was a more dramatic encounter.

Khepa: Well, I felt the depth of our connection, but it wasn't of primary importance to me. I would go back to Washington, or go back to the woods where I was camping out, and do practice.

BZ: But Acala is a great beauty, and I don't know even on that level how you could have forgotten her so quickly.

Acala: He was never impressed with my beauty.

Khepa: Yes I was. Absolutely. It would be a year later, and what I would have done is thousands and thousands of hours of practicing in that time.

BZ: Actually, it was quite a bit of time between the meetings.

Khepa: Yeah. It would be often like a year. And I had a sole focus. I purposely pushed everything else out of my life and mind.

Acala: So what happened was I went up into my room and I cried, and then I decided I had better go and look for him to tell him, because, you know. It seemed very shocking. So I went outside and it was just a beautiful day and I walked around this very small town, and I went to the deli, and into the pizza place, and he wasn't in there, and I walked into the bookstore. And he was standing talking to a group of people, and when I walked into the bookstore, all bloodshot and blotchy, he stopped talking and he turned and put his arms out to me, and I walked into his arms, and we embraced, and we both cried.

Khepa: And we went for a three hour walk.

Acala: Yeah. We went for a three hour walk, and that was it.

Khepa: And at one point in the walk, we stood looking out over the hills of Ohio, where Kenyon College is, and I remember thinking that, it wasn't even a thought, it was just a feeling — this is right. This is perfect. I also then left town the next day to go back to my practice. From my side, also, I knew something was settled. But one doesn't ever have to hurry. Such things will evolve.

Acala: It evolved somewhat slowly. It wasn't as if in that moment, we decided to get married and spend the rest of our lives together but I knew that I would follow him anywhere. I knew that my life was profoundly linked to his.

BZ: I love that story.

Khepa: It's a wonderful story.

BZ: The very first time I met Ruth I knew that she was the one that I would marry. But I've often associated that story with the fact that I knew that I was ready. Somebody might have been there at an earlier time, but the confluence of time and people wasn't right. But I knew she was the one that very night. And I often forget that.

Acala: We, in fact, were entirely un-ready. Neither of us had any interest. I was not looking for a lover; he was not looking for a lover; it was totally inconvenient in terms of what we were doing with our lives.

Khepa: There's a word in Tibetan: "tendröl" — it means kind of auspicious interconnectivities of karma.

BZ: Auspicious interconnectivities of karma.

Khepa: Right.

Acala: Tibetan is wonderful, that there's one word for that.

Khepa: There's all these flowing webs and lines of karma that are forming an interconnected meta-web of existence. And sometimes a whole bunch will flow together and you know it.

Acala: I never had a great love in my life prior to meeting Khepa. I had various short-term relationships, but I always knew that either I would live my life fundamentally as a nun. . . I thought for a long period of time that I would be a Catholic nun because my family was Catholic and I had this intense longing, and I had a very deep spiritual current in my life. I wanted my life to be dedicated to service from a very young age. I remember feeling that from the time I was five or six years old. I had no real interest in having any kind of serious long-term relationship, so that was part of the shock as well. It just never occurred to me that such a thing would happen.

Khepa: The evolution of our relationship has been such a mystery to both of us. I never, from the earliest memories of my life up until the time I knew that I was going to marry Acala, I never planned to get married. I always assumed I was going to be a wandering Yogi. She was going to be a nun, and I was going to be a wandering Yogi. Here we are married with a daughter.

Acala: And loving it.

Khepa: Luckily the mystery of existence is far greater than the paltry little boxes we put ourselves in according to our own conceptions. You know?

BZ: Yeah. Say that again.

Khepa: Luckily the mystery of existence is far greater than the little boxes we put ourselves in. This is emptiness and form. We both had feelings and longing. We had a conceptual construct and feeling construct of the form our life would take, but emptiness intervened. I went in to a period where for several years I lived with Acala in a retreat lifestyle practicing the Advaitic Path of Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj. I received teachings from a man named Ramesh Bolsakhar who is the Dharma heir of Nisargadatta Maharaj, and studied the teachings of Ramana Maharshi which I had a profound connection to. And I was living a retreat lifestyle doing advaitic practice. Acala's mother, unasked and out of the generosity of her own heart, supported us in my living that lifestyle. I still worked but I couldn't have worked as little as I did unless she supported that lifestyle. It was a wonderful gift.

Acala: My mother, obviously, had some kind of connection with Khepa as well. She was incredibly moved by him and had great admiration and respect for the depth of his practice, so she just felt moved to give us financial support and emotional support and really help us to create an environment where he was able for a period of time just to do intensive practice.

Khepa: For several years I alternated between spiritual study and practice often ten, eleven hours a day, months and months on end. In terms of how this all fits with the lineage we teach: I never studied Tantric Buddhism.

BZ: So you didn't really study with a Tantric master.

Khepa: I have never even met one.

Acala: To this day.

Khepa: To this day.

BZ: So you're winging it?

Khepa: Not in the slightest. Not even a little bit. I was doing advaitic practice, and one day during the period that I was doing study, I was walking to the University of Michigan Grad Library, and I suddenly had a momentary vision of this woman floating in the sky. I kind of shook my head, and she disappeared, and I went on in the library to study. And while I was sitting there studying, the whole feel of the world dissolved into emptiness, and I was in a completely different place with a woman dancing in the sky in front of me; she was singing a mantra, and it was the first of a series over three months of very intense visions of Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava in which they communicated a huge number of teachings to me.

In the Nyingma lineage tradition, there are two styles of lineage. One's called Kama, the lineage handed down from generation to generation. The other is Terma. Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal were magicians who were able literally to conjure with space and time in the phenomenal world.

What they did is they hid teachings. Some were hidden in golden jeweled caskets actually buried in the ground in the Himalayan region. Some were hidden in the elements in subtle ways, like in fire and in air and in water. And some were hidden in the mindstreams of their disciples, literally placed like a time-release capsule in the mindstream of the disciple, so that when that disciple reached a particular stage of maturity, the time-release capsule would open up and the teachings would be present again. That's called Terma. A person who discovers that kind of teaching or teachings through pure visions, actual visions of the awareness of beings, like Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal, is called a Terton. I'm a Terton. The entirety of everything we teach in this lineage is from Terma, is from the revelations and visions that I receive. These are not then vague amorphous teachings. I don't wing it in the sense that I don't make anything up. I teach exactly what I was shown in the vision and exactly what I was taught.

BZ: I actually meant winging it only in the sense that perhaps by your reading or your experience, you had understood and imagined what the teachings were without any direct contact with any of the people.

Khepa: The difference is that there was actual direct contact with the Awareness Beings Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal. And if one is able to, through depth of meditation, make contact with that through pure vision, it is no different than me talking to you. It's no less imaginary and it's no less real than that.

Acala: It's not contrived.

Khepa: It's not contrived. It's not a creative visualization.

Acala: It's not channeling.

Khepa: It's not something you channel. It's literally like meeting that being. The teachings that we give then are not at all vague or amorphous. They are detailed teachings of Sadhana text, the complex Sadhana text of Tantra with the mantras, the visualizations, the teachings on the making of offerings.

Acala: They're very detailed, very explicit.

Khepa: Teachings of how to work with the elemental spirits, the Sadag, the earth lords, how to do Tantric practices of the Mahayoga, Anuyoga, and the Atiyoga levels, including the complex esoteric yogic practices, and all of that in great detail. And this is not things you find written in your local bookstore within books of Tantra.

Acala: In fact, you could not find it written anywhere.

Khepa: Right. And so this is an amazing wild thing! This is just unbelievable and its beauty is outrageous and incredible! And I don't expect people to believe this; I expect them to test the validity of my teachings in two ways: one, in the laboratory of their own experience. They take the teachings as hypothesis, they test them in the laboratory of their own life, and they either get results or they don't. And the second way is, I expect them to test them against the traditional teachings because the teachings I am giving them are Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal's

teachings. They are in line with the traditional teachings of the Nyingma lineage in very concrete ways.

And so I send and ask students to go to the best of the traditional Nyingma teachers to test the teachings that I give versus the teachings they give, to find the similarity of them, or not — to actually test that out. I hesitate, and I've hesitated always in the past very much in talking about this at all. It's such a precious thing that one doesn't want to cheapen it.

One of the big differences between, in my opinion, authentic spiritual vision, pure vision and Terma revelation, and when dysfunctional people have real spiritual experiences, they usually go into a state of tremendous ego inflation. Whereas authentic spiritual vision does exactly the opposite; what one sees in oneself is one's potentiality, but also how tremendously you miss that potentiality. What you see are all your faults.

As Dudjom Rinpoche, who is a wonderful Tibetan teacher, said, the point of Dharma is seeing your own faults. When you have an authentic spiritual vision — in the light of Yeshé Tsogyal, what I saw was my own littleness, pettiness, grasping, hope, fear, and all of that, but I also saw the path which allows one to liberate all of that into enlightened wisdom. So our lineage is the Nyingma lineage in its purest form, the Buddhist Tantric lineage of the people who fall in the footsteps of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal. We call ourselves Nyingma or ancient school. And it's a very traditional form of Dharma transmission.

But at the same time the revelation of the Terma and pure vision comes through the vehicle of this young American raised in this culture, and that's a wonderful thing, because it offers a possibility for trans-cultural migration of the Dharma. It's important that profound levels of practice and realization be transmitted in the context of our culture by people in our culture. Tantra is not Tibetan. Buddhist Tantra is not Tibetan. It's not American either. It doesn't belong to any culture, nation, race, gender, anything. Tibetan Tantra is a series of methods for obtaining liberation.

Acala: And one of the reasons Khepa has never had an interest in meeting with Tibetan teachers is because it's very important in terms of our work in this time and place that we not take on some of the unnecessary cultural trappings of Tibetan Buddhism. We're American Buddhists.

Khepa: We are American Tantric Buddhists. We are not Tibetan Tantric Buddhists. So there was a long period where I decided I did not want any contact with any other teachings. I wanted to teach purely what was given to me through Terma and through vision. Now it's been eight years, and our community is very well established. So now I'm entering a completely different phase where I'm actually quite interested in meeting and talking with Ngakpa Chogyam, who's Scottish, but he teaches a very traditional Tibetan line of Dharma transmission.

Acala: And his teachers have all been Tibetan.

Khepa: His teachers have all been Tibetan. And I myself will begin to go and visit Tarthang Tulku and Lama Tharchin and some of these other great Lamas. The form and flavor, the uniquely culturally appropriate form and flavor of our teaching, while maintaining the purity of the traditional Tantric methodologies, is now strong enough that. . .

Acala: It's already been largely established. Khepa teaches from pure vision and revelations. We also teach from dreams of clarity and from memory. A lot of the things that I bring to the community, I bring from memory. Having been a Nyingma Ngakpa practitioner in other lifetimes, certain tunes, certain mantras, certain of the form aspects of the teaching are things that I remember.

Khepa: She was a great old lady up in a cave once.

BZ: So even though you are an American Tantric Buddhist, you have a sense of having previous lifetimes as a Tibetan Tantric practitioner.

Khepa: Actually, not a sense — a detailed memory.

Acala: Detailed memories. Yes.

Khepa: Not detailed memories of perhaps every moment of one's life, but detailed memories of situations, of contexts. . .

Acala: . . . of teachings.

BZ: A while ago, you said that, in terms of rebirth, that what people have are their habit patterns?

Khepa and Acala: Mm-hmm.

BZ: How does that fit into memories of music or of dance or something?

Khepa: Well, there's two different things here. It is possible to incarnate, if one, through practice, is able to hold together the stream of consciousness and memory well enough, it is possible to incarnate rather than simply be reborn. That is a possibility for an advanced practitioner. There are possibilities in life and in death that emerge as we become advanced in the practices of the Dharma. They simply are not there without that. It's an entirely different thing for an advanced meditator to die and reincarnate than it is for someone who doesn't do practice. These are two completely different things.

BZ: So when the young Dalai Lama in *Kundun*, using the traditional method, is figuring out which is his pair of glasses from a previous lifetime and which is his previous dorje. . .

Acala: He is a reincarnation.

Khepa: There is a cohesion to his reincarnation that is not there generally.

Acala: And if one's habit patterns are shaped entirely by the practice of the Dharma, then those are the habit patterns that go into one's next life.

Khepa: It's the Bodhisattva vow, the vow to return to serve all sentient beings that causes the reincarnation of a Tulku. This is why one doesn't go into final Nirvana dissolving every last pattern. There is the patterning of compassion that reincarnates. But it's not as though, in *Kundun*, Dalai Lama can pick his glasses, it's not even so much he's saying, "Oh, that's the pair of eyes," but there are moments he remembers his old teeth in that cabinet.

Acala: And then there are moments where he forgets it entirely. Where he questions whether he's even the Dalai Lama, in that movie. And so it's kind of that one has glimpses, and increasing numbers of glimpses into one's past. But I am still, although I have reincarnated from a particular region, I can tell you what region in Tibet, or who my teachers were, what my practice was, I'm an American. I am not a Tibetan.

Khepa: In my last life, I died in 1959. Shortly after attending a large series of Empowerments in the monastery of Do Drupchen, which was attacked during the final Tsog Feast portions of the Empowerments, by the Chinese, and at that point fled and decided to leave and go to India. Along the way — I was kind of a clutzy, uncoordinated person — I fell off a bridge into a river and drowned. I remember this as clearly as I remember what I had for breakfast this morning. Actually, I don't really remember what I had for breakfast this morning. But I remember that more clearly than what I had for breakfast; it was a big event.

BZ: I'd like you to both talk about the people in your community some, by which I don't mean talk about individual people, but talk about the community. Are there meditation classes in the community, is it each person is on a very different path from each other person? Talk about what it's like to be part of this Crazy Cloud Dharma Center --- what's happening here?

Khepa: Well, it's interesting - we have a motto that we've always had in our community that Hakun the Great Zen Master had written over his dojo, and it was written, "When they come, we let them in, and when they go, we let them out." Our community does not have public programs here at the farm.

The hermitage and the houses of students around it are private property where serious practitioners live and get together to do practice. There's a process whereby people can enter our community, which takes one to three years to come to the point where you can apply to fully enter the community, and in that period of one to three years, one studies the teachings and reads and studies on the tradition, the Nyingma lineage, and one receives teachings from Acala and I, and you do what's called Ngondro practices.

Ngondro is the preliminary practices of Tantra. It's a series of four practices which involve over a hundred thousand enactments of each practice. If you do it an hour a day, it takes three years. It can be done much faster than that, or much slower than that. But it's a long process of preparation of one's body and emotions and mind for the higher transmissions and practices of Tantra. So anyone entering our community goes through a preliminary phase where they're not really members of the community but where they are studying the tradition and engaging the preliminary practices. A lot of people in our culture want to join communities because our culture is so lacking in community that often people want to join our community just to be part of a community and have those social bonds, which are an important by-product of our path and our community.

Acala: We enjoy each other immensely. We have a good time together, but that is definitely just a by-product.

Khepa: So we've increasingly made it hard to enter the community because we want people to solely enter for the teachings, and not for the social aspect or community aspect.

Acala: And also we want people who have a really strong base of psychological integration, and who have the capacity to take on such a challenge. Tantra is a very challenging path. I often say to people when they discuss whether they're interested or not, I just say, "Some people look at a mountain and they say, 'I want to climb that,' and they know that they are mountain climbers. Some people look at the mountain and they say, 'I have absolutely no interest. There is nothing about that mountain that is appealing to me.'" Tantra is somewhat similar. You hear about the path, there's something about the path that challenges you, you're a person who likes to take on a challenge, and then you might find that you are a Tantric practitioner. But it is not a path for everyone and there's an important process of weeding out who this path is actually for and who can benefit from it.

Khepa: And that is in no way a criticism of those who end up not entering the path. It's just not the right path for them. And also some people look at a mountain and say, "I want to climb that mountain," but they don't want to do the exercise necessary to get in shape to climb a mountain. They don't want to buy the equipment necessary for climbing a mountain.

BZ: They just want to take a helicopter.

Khepa and Acala: Right.

Khepa: And Tantra is the swiftest path to enlightenment on the face of the earth, but it's not a helicopter to the top. It requires tremendous courage, integrity, hard work, and perseverance, like all great creative endeavors do. It's said in Tantra that because there's real intimacy in the relationship between Vajra masters (like Acala and I) and disciples, that one wants to enter into that relationship with care. You're careful who you marry, and you should be careful who you pick as a spiritual master, certainly. And so it's a process that benefits everybody if it's done carefully and slowly so there's really that period. . .

Acala: And there may be people who might be Tantric practitioners for whom Khepa and I may not be the right teachers. Our personality display is an aspect of our teaching, and if someone finds that they can't relate to our personality display then we're not the right teachers for them. They have the good fortune of having two teachers with varied personality displays in this community. You couldn't find two people who have more different likes and dislikes.

Khepa: Acala has a sophistication and refinement in terms of Dharma teaching that is wonderful, and I'm just kind of a crude ruffian. I am the Beverly Hillbillies of the Dharma.

Acala: And Khepa likes McDonald's and I like macrobiotic food. There are just endless ways in which we have a very different presentation of the path, but from the point of our experience, that's just delightful. We delight in the differences that we have. We feel that it brings a richness to our students and to the community as a whole that would not exist if one of us were teaching on our own.

Khepa: And we're also both extremely strong personalities. I have both a strong personality and I have a kind of a combination of fierceness, humor, and aggressiveness that is not necessarily good for all people. Our students actually are people who have to have very strong personalities as well because we bump up against each other a fair amount. There's real relationships, so it's not all beautiful. It's not all just nice.

Acala: A real relationship is messy.

Khepa: If someone with a weak personality structure is having a messy relationship with someone with a strong personality structure, they will tend to feel dominated. And that's not beneficial to the teaching path whatsoever. So when we say it's not a path for everyone, we really mean it. Now, for people who can benefit, the same qualities I just described help make this a ribald and joyous affair — the mixture of intense study, intense practice, and intense fun and play.

BZ: That's pretty ribald and joyous.

Khepa: Right.

Acala: We laugh a lot. Our students laugh a lot.

Khepa: We laugh at our students and our students laugh at us.

Khepa and Acala: We laugh with each other.

BZ: These are people who have regular jobs?

Khepa: Almost all of our students. We require that people, to be in our community, be either in school full-time or have jobs, by and large, with certain exceptions; there's one or two authentic Yogis in our community who live an itinerant Yogic lifestyle, who live as Yogis in the traditional sense.

Acala: People in our community are actually quite successful in the world. They're very competent, capable, strong personalities with strong opinions and a kind of a passion for life. I think that those qualities characterize our students.

Khepa: Yeah. And if they don't have that, then often we will suggest to them that they go and get a job, and get a life, and maybe get some therapy to figure out what it is that's holding them back from having a passion in life. Our path, point-blank, is not for people who do not have strong emotions. Ours is not a path for any kind of aloof, everything's on white clouds, spiritual type.

Acala: We're not for the people whose idea of a spiritual being is a person who is devoid of emotional connection or responsiveness or a relationship.

BZ: What are the age range of your students?

Acala: They are really fairly equally divided amongst all age groups between twenty and seventy.

BZ: Are there some husbands and wives within the community?

Acala: Oh, yeah.

BZ: Kids whose parents are in the community?

Acala: Yes.

Khepa: It's kind of across the gamut of society.

BZ: Are there any activities that take place where kids are welcome?

Acala: Kids are welcome to almost all activities. Largely we don't encourage them to do any sort of formal practice because we feel that when they reach a certain age then that's a choice that they can make, and not something that we would like to impose upon them.

BZ: How many members are there now?

Acala: You know, it's somewhat hard to determine because there are people who live in Ann Arbor who come here on a regular basis. But we have quite a few students living in other places who come to retreats or who we teach by mail and over the phone and on the Internet.

Khepa: The way we discover for ourselves how many people are in the community is how many people show up at our summer retreat. There's a week-long summer retreat that is required of all members of this community to attend, and it's kind of where we set the energy for the teachings of the coming year. And last year, there were fifty-six people at it.

Acala: But there were some people missing. And this year we won't be able to determine.

Acala: ...This is the first year that we're opening up that summer retreat to non-community members, and it will be an adventure. We like to shake things up periodically.

Khepa: For two years the community was not open to new students whatsoever. There was no new student class formed. And then it becomes a little too. . .

Acala: Stagnant.

Khepa: We like chaos. We love chaos! Without chaos there would be no possibility of spiritual practice. This is actually what I talked about this morning in the program. If there was only karma, there would just be predestination. There is emptiness as chance slipping through the carefully built walls and barbed-wire fences of our concepts.

BZ: You were talking about chaos today, about the importance of chaos in spiritual practice?

Khepa: We love chaos! The Vajra master is the speeding up of the infinite chances authored by chaos in the life of the disciple.

BZ: Say that again?

Khepa: The Vajra master, the Tantric master, is nothing other, really, than the speeding up of chaos as the open-ended chance offered by emptiness in the life of the disciple — that basically, every human being comes with constructs and structures of conceptuality, and a rationale of their existence, and the master, in a variety of manners, undermines the seeming solidity of that structure, allowing emptiness, this pure potentiality, which feels to the narrow and to the straitjacket of the mediocre and narrow rational mind as threat and chaos — that Vajra master undermines the structure so that the chaos and emptiness, which are actually pure potentiality and lucidity, to sparkle through their lives. So the Vajra master is chaos incarnate.

Acala: Just a couple of days ago, a student of ours came to me and was asking me for help with something that was going on in his relationship, and I gave him some rather unconventional and humorous advice in terms of how to deal with it. He went off and he sort of played with what I had said, and put it into action, and he came back and he said, "Thank you so much for your help with that. You're my Dharma Whack-Pack." [All laugh]. And I thought, "Boy that was a really good summation."

BZ: A real compliment.

Acala: Yeah.

Khepa: And this is also why the Tantric path requires an incredible degree of discipline: because one has to have a very functional and disciplined life — the ability for real discipline, to be able to integrate chaos, chance, and emptiness without just blowing apart, you know? And not in some kind of idiotic manner, but in a manner in which the vitality of emptiness and chance and chaos, the pure potentiality of our Buddha nature is allowed to sparkle through without making us dysfunctional idiots. We don't want that.

BZ: Here's an obvious question: The Americans associate the word "Tantra" with something having to do with sex.

Acala: Oh, thank you for bringing this up.

BZ: Yes. They associate this with something having to do with sex and Tantra means sexual practice -

Acala: Ultimate orgasm.

BZ: Ultimate orgasm. You guys haven't talked about sexuality, you haven't talked about sexual positions, or anything like that. What does this have to do with any of this? [All laugh].

Khepa: Well, you've got to pay the money for the workshop on Tantra and the secret of the extended orgasm. [All laugh].

Acala: Let's respond to that, though, because that really pushes my buttons.

BZ: In very lay language.

Khepa: OK. It's what I call the "new age soft-core porn" version of Tantra. Tantra -- it is taking something that realizes the deepest possibilities of being human -- the realization of unborn and

undying primordial awareness as emptiness, luminosity, Being, blissfulness, and Knowingness and reducing that to Kama Sutra sex positions. It's like reducing quantum physics to first grade mathematics. In fact, Tantra has nothing, nothing to do. . .

BZ: You mean first grade arithmetic.

Khepa: Yeah, first grade arithmetic. First grade addition and subtraction problems with no more than two digits. Though in some of the Tantric sex manuals, we get more than two digits. It is such a sad thing, and it's part of our desire to reduce everything to meaningless drivel, as a culture, and, more importantly, to reduce it to a level which can be marketed in a weekend workshop so as to make money. But the point of Tantra is enlightenment. And enlightenment is not a better orgasm. Enlightenment is not the paltriness of infinite grasping to titillation.

BZ: He's at his most quotable on this subject.

Khepa: [Laughs] But there is this kind of fretful grasping for the better orgasm, and they're trying to market that, that if you were obsessed with the fretful grasping for better orgasms that you actually are like the great Tantric Yogis of the past. They have nothing to do with each other. Tantra is a disciplined path, an alchemical path of spiritual liberation, and to reduce it to sex workshop stuff is grotesque. I'm not against sex workshops.

Acala: There are great Tantric masters who have used sexuality as a skillful means for. . .

Khepa: And do to this day.

Acala: Yeah, for assisting in the liberation of various students. Khepa and I do not have that ability, and we do not make use of sexuality in our teaching with our students. We are entirely novices.

Khepa: Let's make clear, though, what we mean by that is we do not have sex with our students. And we don't run sex workshops for our students.

Acala: We do not have sex with our students. We have a committed, monogamous relationship, we don't teach sexual practices to our students.

Khepa: We teach in depth, though, about male-female relationships, and the energies, which include the energies of sexuality in male-female relationships. It is our view, the view of our lineage, that a committed monogamous relationship is really the only viable option for Tantric practitioners. Mahasiddhas like Padmasambhava or Drukpa Kunlegs, or great realization holders like Chogyam Trungpa have other options as well, but that is not for most Tantric practitioners. A committed monogamous relationship is very important for the esoteric and energetic practices of Tantra. But the big thing is that the buying and selling of momentary experiences doesn't really have much to do with the attempt to discover the deepest meaning of life.

For people who are too uptight and repressed to be able to actually have intimacy in the physical relationship with their lover, they might need some therapeutic help and the help of different kinds of psychotherapeutic modalities to have a better sex life. But psychotherapy is not Tantra. And sex therapy is not Tantra.

BZ: Do you end up having to be therapists to all of your students?

Khepa: We refuse to be therapists to our students. Tantra is not therapy. Psychotherapy is an attempt to be successful within the human realm. And Tantra liberates us beyond all six realms of being into the mystery of enlightenment.

BZ: Could you put that a little bit more plainly?

Acala: Psychotherapy has limits and Tantra just does not. Psychotherapy operates within these certain constructs and there's a belief system inherent in whatever form of psychotherapy one engages that is not consistent with the view of Tantra. They are actually oftentimes in conflict; they contradict one another, and so we really try to help people to move beyond therapeutic modalities and into the vaster view of Tantra, which is far more liberating than therapy could ever be. The best that therapy can do is to teach you to live a functional, balanced life. That is the base of Tantra.

BZ: People are enmeshed in their own psychological issues, and they're in your community. . . ?

Khepa: There are people in our community that we ask to go to therapy. We're not putting down therapy. We're just saying that therapy is an extremely limited modality of work on human beings, that its assumptions, the axioms of therapy, make it very limited.

BZ: Aside from the theory of Tantra, because you've got an assortment of personalities in you community, and they're interacting with each other, do you also have to play a therapeutic role?

Khepa: We try to help them to see their personal problems and issues in life from the Tantric point of view.

Acala: We don't play a role so much as we serve a function, and in that function, we do encourage people to bring all the aspects of their lives into the path and into their relationship with us. It is not unusual for us to talk to people about their parenting, their relationship, their work environment, their relationships with other people of the Sangha. Certainly we talk a great deal about these matters, but we always talk about them from the view of Tantra.

Khepa: Therapy can help you deal with basic issues of anger, but it cannot liberate the root energy of anger into its unborn enlightened quality. It doesn't even know that exists; it doesn't know what it is, and therapy itself is based on a model of the unhealthy human being. Tantra is not even based on the model of the unhealthy human being; it's based on the model of the Buddha.

Acala: But, as a Tantric practitioner, if I find myself in a situation where I feel angry, I say to myself, "I am profoundly deluded." Because from the point of view of Tantra, anger is a deluded emotion.

BZ: It's never appropriate.

Acala: It's never appropriate. And if I go to a therapist, he or she might say to me, "Well, let's talk about your anger. Let's explore how you became an angry person."

Khepa: Now, that doesn't mean it's not good as a therapeutic modality. Cathartic work can be very good in a therapeutic modality. Take someone who doesn't even know he's angry, you may need to get him to explore his psychological habit pattern enough and even go through a bioenergetic cathartic work to even discover the huge pool of anger that's in him. Maybe everyone else he meets knows he's angry, but he doesn't know it. He would need therapy perhaps then to allow him to know himself well enough to be able to use the Tantric methodologies. Anger only arises from fear, according to Tantra.

BZ: And are there some students in your community who have now been practicing for a good period of time who have advanced significantly along their own paths?

Khepa: The students who have been practicing the longest have been here eight years, as long as we've been teaching. There's quite a few students who have been here eight years and they're at different levels. It takes a very long time to work through the paths to the more advanced levels. A weekend, a week, a month, a year won't do it. In our culture, we like weekend workshops, Satori guaranteed, \$350. But it's a lifelong endeavor. So there are people doing what are called the generation and completion phase practices of Deity yoga, in the Tantric Nyingma tradition in our community.

We're riled up about the whole therapy and sex thing because one of the biggest problems for Buddhism in America is the effort to turn Buddhism into a form of psychotherapy. Shakyamuni said that his Dharma would last 2,500 years, and we're in the last 500 years, and it is Acala's and my feeling that what will be the final destruction of Buddhism as a truly liberating teaching, is that it will become a form of psychotherapy.

If we try to say that Buddhism and psychotherapy are doing the same thing, you destroy Buddhism — the final destruction of Buddhism in the world will be a result of a self-help psychotherapy.

BZ: Will be, or would be if that happens?

Khepa: Will be if it happens. There certainly is a powerful momentum in the West to do exactly that. Our culture has so little understanding of the mystery and possibility of existence, and we try

so hard to turn everything into the marketplace consumer mentality of our culture that tremendous pressure is put to transform mystical liberating teachings of Buddhism into psychotherapy. One of the ways we do that is to make it faddish. When our culture wants to destroy something, we make it a fad. All fads - who remembers the war on drugs? Who remembers the war on poverty? The war on crime?

BZ: But Buddhism should be able to survive.

Khepa: But will it survive in its fullness? Or will it survive as a modality of psychotherapy?

Acala: There is a real possibility that it will not survive.

Khepa: Buddha in his own teaching said it will not survive ultimately. It will finally be watered down and watered down and watered down to the point that what Shakyamuni taught in the three turnings of the wheel will no longer exist.

Acala: We sometimes lay in bed at night in a cold sweat just thinking about it. [BZ laughs.] You think I'm joking.

BZ: No.

Khepa: It's scary. I'm scared by it. I think that Buddhism in America will be non-existent in any kind of public format as a viable liberating path in seventy-five to a hundred years. But I think that Buddhism as a profound mystical and liberating path will be very powerful in America in five hundred years. Because I think what will happen is the truly esoteric parts of Buddhism will be found in small, little, tiny communities like this.

Acala: It will be passed on through families.

Khepa: Just look what happened in Tibet. But it could just be nostalgia.

BZ: Thank you both very much. I hope I'll get to revisit the two of you in this community to do this again in five or six years. I've seen tremendous evolution in the community.

Acala: It's amazing to us. It's constantly unfolding in ways we never really imagined.

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