

Q: Don't both hope and hopelessness reveal expectations based on supposed knowledge that is 'transcendent'? Saying or thinking that people base transcendence on any expectation (hope) is at least contrary to standard Tibetan Buddhism, which itself eschews hope or happiness as inevitably based on attachment. This theoretical 'absolute truth', unlike the also theoretical 'relative truth', would seem to meet your entirely reasonable requirement that the 'impediments' be removed. Your resting place is what I see as the path posited by Tsongkhapa and Mipham.

A: Just around the time of my awakening—this was in the 1980s—my friend Bernard Wisser, now deceased, whose brilliant paintings some readers of this page will remember, told me that he was moving to Holland to marry a woman he'd met there. The relationship was fraught because she had another lover. I asked Bernard why he would consider marrying a woman who needed another man in her life. Bernard, who was a Nyingma student, told me that he had compassion for her situation and that was why. Although I never considered myself a Buddhist, I was interested in Buddhism at the time. I told Bernard that in my understanding, he had misinterpreted the meaning of compassion in Buddhism, and I explained in detail how I saw the matter.

Two days later I got a phone call. Bernard was in New York en route to Holland and had stopped off to meet with his teacher, a man called Sonam Kazi, who, as a teenage boy had been the translator in the Dalai Lama's cortege when the Lama was forced to flee Tibet for India. Bernard said that he was with "Mr. Kazi" at the moment and that Kazi wanted to speak with me. A voice came on the line, and after greeting me said, "Bernard told me what you said to him. You seem to have a good understanding. If you ever get to New York, I would like to meet you."

Several months later, I was in New York and found myself sitting with Sonam in a borrowed apartment with large windows high above the street looking out over the cityscape. Sonam was asking me various questions. His tone was gruff and a bit overbearing, like an interrogation, but I decided to go along with it to see what I could learn. After an hour or so of discussing my background, he asked me, "Robert, what do you see out there?" meaning out the window. I replied that I saw buildings, streets, cars, people, etcetera.

"Excellent," he said. "I told Bernard that your explanation of compassion was the best I'd heard from any Westerner, and now I see I was right. I am translating into English for the first time an old text and I want you to be the first reader." He invited me to sit in on his weekly class, but as I was leaving the next day, that did not happen.

Back in New Mexico, our home at the time, I would get an occasional phone call from Sonam, also in the mode of interrogation: "What are you reading? What do you think about . . . ?" and, as that day in New York, I always replied honestly and simply.

A year or two later, Catanya, my wife, and I were in New York for an exhibition of my photographs and Sonam invited us to attend his weekly class. It was on the second floor of a building in SoHo—now a high rent district, but back then an area of rundown commercial

spaces inhabited by artists. The stairs to this loft were filled with students waiting to get into the meeting. We were ushered to the door by a student and entered. Sonam had us sit with him and ordered his assistant to bring tea. He began to speak with us in that same interrogative fashion. After half an hour of that, I said to him, "What about all those people outside?" "Oh them," he replied in a dismissive tone. "They can wait." At last, he admitted the students and the class began while Catanya and I observed from the back of the room.

Back in New Mexico, the periodic calls from Sonam continued until one day I got a call from a student of his from Albuquerque who said, "Mr. Kazi told me to deliver a package to you right away." Two hours later, I had the manuscript of the translation in my hand. I made some coffee and went out into the yard to read.

It was in verse and each stanza ended with the words, "You must cast out all doubt," or something along those lines. I don't recall the exact words nor even the title of the document. That was thirty-five years ago and I was not much engaged by the text anyway. It was in the repetitious style of other Nyingma tantras I had seen before, filled with references to lineages, secret transmissions, obeisances and bowing to ancient figures, and giving instructions similar to the eightfold noble path of the Buddha, but more "esoteric."

A few days later, I got a call from Sonam asking if I had read the text, and when I said I had, he said, "Well, what do you think?" I tried to be tactful but failed. I was tired of putting up with his autocratic style. I ended up telling him that the instruction to abandon all doubt, which occurred hundreds of times in this manuscript, had hit me badly since I considered skepticism to be the essence of intelligence, a virtue that I would not want to be without. I never heard from him again.

So, I can agree that the condition in which I find myself may be similar to the endgame posited in Dzogchen, but the "path" (it was not a path, but only what occurred in an ordinary life without any pretense of sanctity) was not. I did not follow rules. I did not eschew doubt. And any meditations on the void in which I engaged were natural to me and never some kind of routine practice.

That said, looking at it now from my present perspective, I can see the wisdom in Dzogchen, principally in the understanding that perceptions, feelings, and thoughts arise from a non-conceptual flow that most of the time goes unrecognized but of which one might catch an impossibly brief glance, or at least an intuition. Modern cognitive science backs this up. As for never having been a path-follower, my mother told me that I was that way from infancy. I always wanted to find out for myself and never took anyone's word for anything. I'm still that way.

Q: A few notes. Originally Sonam Kazi was a rich kid from Sikkim whose family was from Tibet and had colonized Sikkim in the 17th century. They ruled the area. He was a handsome man in a Hansom cab as it were and privileged so was sent to England to a boarding school. After his schooling he was given a Indian government post of translator to Lhasa. His original name was

Sonam Topgyal and the family's surname was Rhennock, he went by Kazi Sonam and Kazi is a title, like Earl, Count or Baron in Sikkim.

His father's estate was bordered by Tibet, Bhutan and India. The Kazi's were landed gentry and wielded immense power in Sikkim. You get the drift I take it. He left Lhasa and when the Dalai Lama came to Dharamsala he was appointed, again by the Indian government, to translate. He really was a translator who by virtue of his 'craft' was around Tibetan notables.

He was not like the real pioneer and teacher of the Dalai Lama Geshe Lhundub Sopa, who I admire greatly and whom is the real deal. I consider the Count (Kazi) to be an insufferable and mean fop. I am far less forgiving of fake gurus than most. Sopa was a professor at the University of Wisconsin for 30 years and an expert who translated and commented the Lam Rim Chen Mo (Steps on the Path to Enlightenment) in five remarkable volumes, beginning as a farm boy on the Eastern Steppes of Tibet. Sopa had numerous doctoral candidates he supervised and had a regular meeting of students he took through the Lam Rim on his own time. Sopa and his Lordship (Kazi) are night and day. I suspect Kazi was trying to emulate Sopa, who the Dalai Lama loved. Thank you for your analysis, which I wholly agree with so far as I understand you, and I think I do. Anyway, Kazi's background as a young person was essentially the jet set and not devoted to Tibetan Buddhism. His wife, the most beautiful woman in Lhasa was a serious practitioner.

A: Thanks for that information. I never bothered to look him up, and at the time there was no google anyway.

In light of that story, my ordeal with him makes perfect sense. At the time, I had just "awakened," still had doubts about what that really meant, and felt flattered by his attention. He was twenty years older and projected great authority. Just lucky for me that I was able to stick to my guns.

Q: Robert Saltzman Yah like a passing encounter with a serial killer. LOL