

From Brilliant Scholar to Wandering Yogi

Naropa, among the most revered figures in Vajrayana Buddhism, began as one of Nalanda's foremost scholar-practitioners. ELIZABETH MONSON tells the story of his transformation from brilliant pandita to fierce and wild yogi.

THE GREAT MAHASIDDHA Naropa, Guardian of the Northern Gate of Nalanda University, lived during the tenth and eleventh centuries in northern India. The approximate dates he lived, and many details of his life story, can be found in legends and miracle tales, exalted descriptions of this great scholar-practitioner, whose life exemplifies a significant movement in Buddhist development around the turn of the millennium, as the practices of the Mahayana led to the emergence of the Vajrayana ethos and the spiritual techniques for full liberation associated with it.

Naropa's life story serves as a metaphor for this movement in Buddhist history. His example reveals that full liberation requires not only a complete understanding and absorption of the view of emptiness and compassion, but also the realization through direct experience of the essence and clarity of *things as they are*. On a wider historical level, Naropa's life stands as a paradigmatic example of a movement that took place in Indian Buddhism from institutional, scholastic, and philosophical ideals to an emphasis on experiential, contemplative, and transformative skillful means, transmitted from teacher to student, all aimed at a way of being that is free, spontaneous, and in harmony with the truth of how things actually are—an embodied and fully present manifestation of reality itself.

OPPOSITE

Mahasiddha Naropa

Kham Province,
Eastern Tibet,
19th century
Pigments on cloth
Rubin Museum
of Art. Previously
from the Collection
of Navin Kumar,
New York.
C2005.20.4
(HAR 65496)



One key aspect of Naropa's story is his departure from Nalanda University, at the top of his career, to seek out and study with the mysterious guru Tilopa. To understand this radical shift in Naropa's path, it is helpful to understand a little of what the Vajrayana is and how it works. Vajrayana, or tantra as it was more commonly known in tenth-century India, is an orientation and set of powerful practices that move the practitioner from fantasy to reality, from delusion to truth. Tantra's sophisticated spiritual technologies reveal a way of being and living in deep harmony with the truth of reality, the truth of how things actually are, not how we imagine, hope, or fear them to be. Discovering this truth—and learning to abide within it—is not only the *goal* of the tantric path, but also it is the *view* the yogi embraces to travel that path and the *insight* that leads to the realization of that goal: tantra starts with reality; continues with reality; and culminates with reality.

While study, contemplation, and meditation practice lay the foundation and develop the view for understanding liberation, it is through direct experience that tantric practices purify the blockages, obscurations, and reified patterns of thought and emotion that prevent us from accessing reality as it is. Tantra takes the practitioner beyond fixation on concepts and ideas, immersing her instead in the experiential flow of her own being and encouraging her to let go of all discursive grasping to realize her own interbeing with all that is. This is key for Naropa. Although at this time his knowledge, insight, and practice of the most profound Buddhist teachings is exemplary, he has not fully transcended the realm of the intellect to discover the vast openness and clarity of his own awareness, a sphere of vivid wakefulness in tune with the needs and suffering of all beings. To take this step, he must maintain the Mahayana view of compassion and emptiness, and jump into the fire of his own purification, the blazing bonfire of karmic cleansing required to

break him free from attachment, clinging, and ego fixation. So, in a single transformative event, Naropa suddenly realizes what he needs for full liberation. He is thrust out of the warm cocoon of monasticism, scholastic study, debate, and practice into the wilderness of direct experience—the progressive shedding of attachment and ego-fixation under the watchful and sometimes wrathful eyes of his tantric master, Tilopa.

THE DAWN WAS MILD, the sky clear and open. A gentle breeze stirred the leaves of the ancient Amra trees that encircled the ponds dotting Nalanda University's expansive grounds. Naropa sat where he always sat, just outside the gates of the northern entrance on a rise of grassy earth. It was early, the sun's heat still in abeyance, and his cup of morning tea sent up fronds of steam into the soft air.

He had just finished his morning ablutions. First, he washed himself in the waters of the long azure pool that wound around the university buildings, reveling as he did so in the brilliant colors of crimson Kanaka and blue lotus flowers floating on the water's surface. He reveled also in the coolness of the water sliding over his skin, sloughing off the darkness of the night. Finished with his bath, he entered the shrine hall just inside the northern gate. Carefully, he removed the silken scarves and brocades that dressed the golden Buddha statues and rinsed their yellow arms and gleaming torsos. The Buddhas sat, luminous and silent, filling the room with a vivid presence that awed him. Naropa arranged offerings of flowers and lit the lamps and incense as he chanted prayers and supplications. A novice could have done these tasks, but Naropa loved to do them himself. He loved the simplicity of the ritual that required no thought, just presence. As he finished, he bowed and sighed a little, trying not to dwell on the nagging feeling of insufficiency and frustration that seemed to linger just below the surface of his thoughts.

Outside, on a low table, stacks of manuscripts awaited his attention. As usual, he intended to spend a couple of hours reading and studying before turning his attention to examining the eager applicants to Nalanda, who would soon gather nearby. They came every day, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups, anticipation written across their faces like a foreign language he'd come to know intimately. It pained him, sometimes, to see that anticipation, that hope—which had propelled the prospective scholar to this very gate—eventually fade, as, confronted with the challenging questions he must ask them, the students realized what they were facing. Only a very few were capable of correctly answering the questions and engaging in the rigorous debate he put them through. Only a very few would pass beneath the towering gates and into the rarified world of study and practice that was Nalanda University.

Naropa considered his reading options. He could return to the long treatise he had recently begun on Panini's Sanskrit grammar, a topic far more complex than Naropa had ever imagined, or he might refresh his memory of treatises on Madhyamika expounded by the first-century sage Arya Nagarjuna. Most of these texts he knew by heart, but it never ceased to amaze him how every time he reread them, he discovered more that he had not understood. There was still joy in these fresh discoveries of new insight and understanding, and the practices of recognizing emptiness had changed his life. And yet, he could not help feeling that something was missing. He raised his gaze, adjusting the folds in his monk's robes as he did so. Already some prospective students had gathered, awaiting his attention. He grunted to himself. They would have to wait. His morning study time was sacred, ever since he had graduated from Nalanda's rigorous curriculum, attained the title of Mahapandita, and taken up the prestigious posting as the guardian of the Northern Gate.

He flipped through folios concerning the principles of Buddhist philosophical debate and sighed. It was hard to admit, but recently,

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over the past few years, Naropa found himself losing interest in his studies. It was certainly not, he reminded himself, that he knew and understood the whole array of topics taught at Nalanda, everything from weaving and painting to city planning, medicine, astronomy, literature, logic, lexicography, debate, religion, the Vedas, Yogasastras, and, finally, the most profound teachings in Buddhist philosophy, practice, and morality. He was highly trained, educated to the most exalted level possible in his world. He had achieved the much-coveted position of *Dwarapandita*, Guardian of the Gate, and had, by all counts, fully succeeded in intellectually understanding and putting into practice all elements included in Nalanda's rigorous curriculum. He was forty-two years old and at the top of his game. So, why did he feel so restless and impotent? Why did he feel like he had reached a plateau from which he could ascend no further?

"Focus your mind, Naropa," he admonished himself. "You have work to do!"

He turned his gaze back to the folio on Buddhist debate in front of him. But, after a moment, he thrust it aside and rifled through the stack until he found the text he was looking for, the *Cakrasamvaratantra*, a detailed exposition on the deity practices of the *yab/yum* Cakrasamvara/Vajrayogini. As he read, his back to the rising sun, the outer world of sounds, smells, and sights faded away and his attention focused, razor-sharp and clear, on the words and the doorways they seemed to open in his mind. It was always this way with him. When he studied, when he turned his mind to the Dharma, nothing else existed. The words burned into his consciousness, even as that consciousness expanded, hinting at dimensions of experience Naropa could almost, but not quite, taste.



He never knew how long he sat, absorbed in the text, when suddenly, the page darkened and he could no longer read the script. At first, he thought a cloud had covered the sun, but raising his head, he saw that the sunlight was all around him, pouring itself golden and warm over the grassy hillock upon which he sat. Turning his head, he saw a dark figure, silhouetted against the bright light of the sun, standing behind him. Thinking that one of the student–applicants had become impatient to begin the entrance exam, he returned his gaze to his text, saying, as he did, “Go sit down; it’s not time for the exams yet.”

His page remained dark. With rising irritation, Naropa again looked back. “What is it?” he asked, gruffly. He hated being interrupted when he was studying. The dark figure loomed over him, silent and motionless. Naropa turned all the way around, trying to see who was there. As he turned, he felt himself being pulled into the silence of the shadowy figure as if into a vortex. All sounds ceased, his vision darkened, and he lost all sense of his body. The gates and grounds of Nalanda vanished like an illusion or a swiftly dissolving dream. Naropa’s heart pounded as he strained his eyes, trying to see who was standing in front of him. Abruptly, everything shifted and again, he found himself standing on the grass, the high walls of Nalanda gleaming with the early light, the sounds of the birds tinkling in the gentle breeze that wafted over him.

In front of him stood a very old, very ugly woman. Her face was dark blue in color with a protruding forehead. Her bloodshot eyes were sunk deep in their sockets, and her wild red hair exploded from her head in tufts and strands. A large goiter hung trembling from her chin, which was covered with a yellow beard wet with spittle. As Naropa gazed at her with a mix of horror and revulsion, her thick black tongue emerged from her mouth, licking her lips as she made sucking sounds that seemed to curdle the air around them. Her body

was bent, stooped, and twisted, with a large humpback as she rested her gnarled hands on a wooden cane.

“What... who...,” he stammered, trying to formulate a sentence, but the crone interrupted him.

Gesturing with her cane toward the text he had been reading, she spoke in a deep, guttural tone, “What are you studying?”

Naropa whipped his head around to glance at the text, its folios fluttering a bit in the breeze, noticing, peripherally, that the group of student–applicants seemed to have vanished.

“Philosophy, *bodhicitta*, and epistemology,” he informed her, feeling a sense of bewilderment, “but, who are you?”

Ignoring his question, she peered at him intently through red eyes behind which he thought he could see flames blazing. “Do you understand them?” she asked.

Naropa felt slightly insulted. Didn’t she know he was the premier scholar of Nalanda University? But all he said was, “Yes.”

“Do you understand the words or their meaning?”

Unnerved by the old woman’s intensity, Naropa said, “I understand the words.”

Again, with a suddenness that rocked Naropa back on his heels, the phenomenal world dissolved. All he could perceive was a multi-colored flow of light within which the old woman easily lifted her cane over her head and began to dance wildly, her laughter crackling through the air like lightening. As she danced, her bright hair elongated, sending up tendrils like crimson silk, and her form seemed to shift into the slim, elegant shape of a young woman, eyes blazing with fire, lithe form leaping through the air like a circus tumbler. Naropa watched with amazement, his skin tingling, his body filled with energy like an electric current. Hoping to encourage her, he told her, “But I also know the meaning!”

Abruptly, everything stopped and Naropa was blinded by heat and a vivid red light that penetrated all his senses. When he could see again, the old hag was huddled in on herself, her body emitting a pungent darkness that assailed him. She sobbed and muttered, clasping one hand to her chest and plunging her cane into the ground with the other.

Surprised and concerned, Naropa cried, “Why did you laugh when I said I understood the words but wept when I said I knew the meaning?”

It seemed to take a few moments for his words to penetrate the crone’s awareness, but when they did, she sobbed up at him, “Because when said you knew the words, you spoke the truth, but when you, a great Mahapandita, said you knew the meaning, you lied!”

Naropa stared at her in shock. No one had ever called him a liar, not in his entire life. A strong flow of unpleasant energy surged through him, but he caught himself, just before lashing out, wanting to deny the old woman’s stinging words even as something inside him registered the truth of her statement. In a flash of relief, he thought, “This is it. She has hit the nail on the head. This is the reason I feel so uninspired, so blocked in my progression toward liberation. I do understand the words. I understand so many words, but the meaning? The experience? I can feel it, but I don’t know how to actualize it, how to practice it!”

The old woman stopped crying. Her bloodshot eyes peered at him with a peculiar intensity as if she was listening to his thoughts. Swallowing his pride, he asked, “Who does know the meaning?”

“My brother Tilopa,” she replied with a satisfied smack of her lips.

At the instant she spoke the name “Tilopa,” Naropa’s hair stood on end and tears sprang from his eyes. He dropped to his knees as

spontaneous devotion blazed up in him, engulfing him in a longing so deep he bowed his head, letting the tears flow down across his cheeks. The energy surging through him was so strong that his mind could not grasp the depth of what was unfolding. He was speechless, thoughtless, consumed in an energy so powerful he barely knew how to stay present. For an indeterminate time, he knelt on the grass at the feet of the old woman, his face wet with the depth of the yearning that flooded his entire being. Finally, raising his head, he met her blazing eyes. “Please,” he begged, “take me to your brother!”

He thought he glimpsed an expression of satisfaction flash across her face, but all she said was, “Supplicate him. Practice. Go find him yourself.”

As she finished speaking, the air around her began to flutter, to tremble, until it seemed to Naropa that a doorway opened, a channel of rainbow light into which the old woman entered, her form shifting and changing. For a brief moment, she morphed again into that essential version of herself he had seen earlier, a vivid, blazing being of red fire; the flash of an upheld knife gleaming in her right hand where her cane had been; her body smooth and nubile, a figure of light and fire, dancing into dissolution. Within moments, she was gone, vanished, leaving behind only the familiar landscape surrounding the Northern Gate of Nalanda University.

Naropa rose to his feet, stunned and silent, his face turned to the east. It was all he could do not to immediately start walking to find this person, this teacher, this Tilopa, who was the brother of a dakini, because obviously, the old woman was not just any old woman. Naropa recognized her now from his reading and practice of tantric texts as Vajrayogini, the Great Mother of fire and compassion, the sky dancer of insight and love.

Just the thought of Tilopa’s name sent shivers of longing, anticipation, and excitement through his veins, and he wondered at himself, he, who had dismissed the stories of the importance of the guru for actualizing the Buddhist teachings. Even knowing and practicing, as he had, so many tantras, and recognizing intellectually that the core

of tantric practice is the transformation of both the practitioner and the universe of which he is a part, Naropa never believed he himself would ever want or need such a teacher. He believed primarily in the power of his formidable intellect to penetrate the truth, the essence of the teachings, and in the force of the view of compassion, his love for all beings, to enable him to dedicate his life to helping those who came his way. Now something inside him had irrevocably shifted. He knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, that true awakening required not only the view he already possessed, but also the deep inner experience of the nature of reality itself.

From this moment on, Naropa's life completely changes. He leaves Nalanda and sets out to find Tilopa, the crazy mahasiddha, who puts him through a series of brutal trials, each one designed to take him deeper and deeper within the layers of karmic encrustation that have kept him bound and trapped. Ultimately, Naropa's devotion to his teacher together with his dedication to a path of practice that explodes his concepts and ideas set him free. Today, we might liken Naropa's trials to the preliminary practices every Vajryana student must complete before stepping directly into the mandala of reality that will become the ground for manifesting in the world as a realized being.

Naropa's life story echoes down to us through the centuries as a clear instruction that no matter how much time we may spend in studying and contemplating the Buddhist teachings, it is through harnessing the energies of the body and our emotions as the working ground for liberation that we find exactly what we need for freedom. Freedom can be found only in what is right in front of us—our experience in each present moment. While the exact trajectory by which the practices of the Vajrayana became visible in Indian and Himalayan Buddhism may be lost to the mists of history, Naropa's decision to leave Nalanda and venture into the wilderness of his own direct experience under Tilopa's tutelage stands as a pivotal moment in Buddhist history—a landmark event that reconfigured the path to enlightenment for many generations of practitioners to come. *By*