

When I think of lineage I often imagine Bodh Gaya, in India, the place where the Buddha attained enlightenment. People come from all over the world—lay people, monks, and nuns, from Korea, Japan, India, and Tibet. Some monastics wear brown robes, some grey. The monks from Sri Lanka wear saffron-colored robes, while the Tibetans don maroon robes, because at least traditionally, they had access to indigo flowers. The various colors of these robes reflect the herbs and flowers of native lands.

In Bodh Gaya there's a lot of sound: Tibetan trumpets, drums, chanting in various languages. Throughout the day, the Refuge Prayer in Sanskrit blasts over a crackly loudspeaker.

Everyone is enjoying the Bodhi Tree, meditating and praying under the shade of its branches, circumambulating. People are catching the bodhi leaves that fall from above.

What are all these people gathering for? They are celebrating the great potential of being. They are honoring the precise vision, teachings, and training that originated with the Buddha and have been passed down by unbroken lineages to this day. The human condition and longing for wellbeing connects all these people. And this longing naturally expresses itself in a varied and colorful display, like a feast.

[music]

*Welcome to Open Question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, and this is OQ 202: Living Wisdom: Seagull on a Buoy.*

Recently a friend asked me the question “What is lineage?” For over 35 years I have been engaged in a Buddhist lineage of practice and study, and yet I found it challenging to give my friend a concise response. This ignited curiosity in me, and I began to explore lineage—both as an idea and as an experience.

We are going to talk about lineage in this episode. Here is one of my working definitions: “Lineage is the sacred infrastructure that can keep us in the boundary of our intention for wellbeing. Our longing to find alignment with the wisdom of a lineage is a process that animates the dharma and makes it a living experience, living wisdom.”

An image comes to mind as I read these words: imagine a seagull on a buoy in the middle of an ocean. The wind is blowing and the buoy is bobbing up and down on the waves. The seagull is continually searching for balance in the field of gravity.

Finding balance in gravity is not a static process. Wellbeing or wisdom requires movement with life as we encounter it. Aligning ourselves with wisdom doesn't happen outside the rambunctious nature of life. Life will challenge you, it will expose your shadowy corners, and rough up your rigid ways of looking at things. And it will surprise you. When you enter a lineage, you have to be up for all of that.

[ocean sound effects]

I want to speak specifically about my experience of lineage as a practitioner in the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist tradition. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that lineage is a broad topic and an important part of human existence and culture.

What we know and how we see life has something to do with a continuum of worldview and experience that have been passed down to us. We don't live in a vacuum and can't separate ourselves from the world we move about in. We can't escape lineage: the passing down of a family recipe, a painting technique, or a system of medicine—all this expresses lineage.

For many, the preservation and embodiment of the methods, teachings, and vision of a lineage are a way of life. In the context of Buddhism and many other spiritual traditions, the purpose of lineage has to do with finding a deep sense of wellbeing for individuals and communities.

When I asked another friend recently to describe the function of lineage, he said: "We struggle with who we are. We might not like ourselves so well at times, and yet, we're also pretty attached to how marvelous we think we are. We need a proven process to plug into. How else do we work with all that conflict?" The process my friend was referring to here is the supportive infrastructure of a path: the methodologies, vision, and training.

The beauty and function of plugging into a wisdom system is to disrupt the awkwardness and misconceptions we have around who we think we are, expose our sense of specialness, and pacify the confused relationship we have about who we are in relationship to the world we encounter.

My teacher Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche said in his book [\*Light Comes Through\*](#) "We have a saying in Tibetan: 'The qualities of a statue depend on how good the mold is.' One mold won't produce a variety of statues. Thinking that everyone has to be individual or unique is a modern idea. It doesn't embody the spirit of humility and appreciation at the heart of lineage. So, although we may like to think otherwise, the nature of our wisdom—or our ignorance—is not all that unique. In fact, the sameness, or universality of our experience makes the teachings applicable for everyone."

The cultural tendencies we have around wanting to be individual or unique compel us to customize lineage around our own ego. The contemporary mind often wants to create a comfortable spirituality for itself as a way to live around the challenges of life. In other words, spiritual bypassing. Rather than being open to whatever pushes at our tendencies, we want to dismiss the bits of dharma that don't agree with us. There's no opportunity for transformation in this approach. Unfortunately, we see a lot of this these days.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we may have a tendency to clutch onto the path as a dogma or truth. Some people call that "traditional dharma." But that isn't traditional Buddhism at all. Traditional Buddhism is a process of inquiry, open-mindedness, curiosity, and respect. Buddhist methodologies, when practiced authentically, challenge this tendency toward fundamentalism and clinging to views.

"Living dharma" expresses both a sense of deep appreciation and humility for the power of lineage, and a fierce commitment and curiosity to engage the process of releasing these ideas into life by putting them into practice.

[Mahabodhi temple sounds]

The term lineage also refers to an unbroken continuum of realization that has been passed down from teacher to student all the way back to the Buddha. When we enter a lineage, we become part of that story. Will we be able to interface with the wisdom of the lineage in the manner of the great teachers of the past? This is a significant question, and one we might ask ourselves.

When we speak of a lineage of realization we are speaking of a profound sense of wellbeing. We often mistake realization as a victory over the human condition. But to defeat the human condition is not how we arrive at wellbeing. Wellbeing or liberation comes from our ability to accommodate life and to learn what it means to be fully human.

This experience of naturalness is not something we obtain from the outside. It cannot be given to us from a teacher. It is not about leaving an ordinary mundane existence and entering into something sublime. It is not geographical in that way.

Realization comes from opening out of a limited way of seeing things into a more nuanced or expanded way of being. Because the potential of wellbeing is always present, it simply needs to be pointed out. If the student's mind is poised for insight, the living lineage communicates through the teacher.

The way in which wellbeing is communicated can be simple, subtle, or unconventional. The Buddha, through a simple gesture of holding up a white flower, communicated the simplicity of being to his student Maudgalyayana. The Indian yogi Tilopa pointed out the natural state of wellbeing to his devoted student Naropa by hitting him on the head with a sandal.

Wisdom is communicated in many ways: through words, logic and inquiry, and by example. If the student's mind is poised for insight, wisdom is communicated. This happens because the student is simply directed back to their own natural being. The potential for wellbeing is universal.

[ocean sound effects]

The experience of opening up into an expanded way of perceiving the world is often referred to in the Buddhist Vajrayana tradition as "ordinary magic." The more we interface wisdom through lineage, the more we experience an authentic sense of wellbeing. Ordinary magic is an expression of wellbeing; it is not a mystical or trippy kind of magic. What is genuinely marvelous about each of us is the ability to communicate with life without the confusion of specialness and ego distortion.

This brings to mind a moment of magic with my mother. She is now 83 and in hospice. But a few years ago, when she was still walking around, I took her to the nearest town for an eye doctor appointment. Before the appointment we decided to drop off a box of her old clothes at a consignment shop. My mom has never liked to have a lot of things. She's always been simple and has taken good care of whatever she has.

When we arrived at the consignment shop I started to get concerned about time. I planned on dropping off the box and moving on, but mom wanted to go in, and she was moving at a very slow pace. I started to get tense and tried to move her along. But she insisted that we open the box because she wanted to tell the saleswoman about a few things.

She began pulling the clothes out one by one, a skirt, a shirt, a pair of pants—and talking at length about each item. I started to get impatient, and concerned about the appointment and kept reminding her that we had to go. Until she pulled out a particular dress. I remembered that dress...it was very chic in the 70s, and now worn and out of style. But it brought with it a flood of memories.

My mom began telling the woman how she wore this dress when my late father, who was in the music industry, took her to the Grammy awards in the mid-70s. It suddenly hit me that my mom was looking back at her life, her relationship with my father, her memories of that evening with him.

As I listened to her, in a flash it seemed, my heart opened up out of my expedient, distracted, and puny world in which time no longer seemed restrictive. I experienced the magic and the tenderness of the moment my mom was having and felt a deep appreciation and understanding for her.

The three of us were still standing in the cluttered, dark and musty consignment shop, and yet there had been a seismic shift in the way I perceived my world in that moment. I had emerged from a limited way of seeing reality, into a world of possibility. That's what I mean by ordinary magic. Oh yeah, and somehow we actually made it to appointment on time!

[refuge prayer in Bodhgaya]

When you open up a topic you never know where it will go. This is just a beginning. We are always on the edge of discovery...this is the way lineage teaches us to interface life, and that in itself is magical.

Seagull on a buoy.

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*As I said, we're just getting started. Join us next time, when we'll engage Judy Leif as she opens up the topic of lineage from her decades of experience as a writer, editor, student, and teacher.*