



Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche - Teachings

The Skiing Monk

This short movie-clip “Skiing monk”¹ was shot four years ago, during my trip to the US. I made it just for fun because I wanted to learn how to edit a movie. Initially I had no intention of putting it on YouTube or Facebook, but since many people faced great difficulties during 2020 because of COVID-19 I remembered it. People had to face a completely new reality that brought forth fears concerning the virus, lockdowns, financial difficulties, and so on. None of us had ever imagined such a situation, but suddenly we were confronted with something utterly unknown. Learning how to ski, I had to face deep fears, embarrassment, and other unpleasant emotions, but somehow I conquered them. I won’t join the Olympics in downhill skiing, but I learned for fun and to play. Watching the movie caused my feelings to come flooding back to me. I wish to share with you my experiences from that time as a way to discuss how to tackle the unknown and unexpected challenges coming up in our lives.

2020 was also very challenging for me, but fortunately many of my students all over the world donated generously, enabling me to serve nearly a thousand families during the worst times by providing them with food and other types of support. Being active in this way helped me release many of my own fears and increase my internal strength. I witnessed so many people going through situations much worse than mine. Some even had no idea how to get their next meal once they finished what they were eating at that very moment. Compared to them, my life is comfortable. This helped to feel grateful for all that I have and the help I could give.

My initial plan for going to the US was to to learn English by staying at the Upaya Buddhist centre in Santa Fe, New Mexico, founded and run by the Venerable Roshi Joan Halifax. I also taught there sometimes during the weekends. On holidays two of Roshi’s students, Cira and Chas, took me skiing and acted as my teachers.

¹ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= E7FsBIHpHY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7FsBIHpHY)

In the beginning, whilst skiing down the so-called “bunny slopes,” I fell constantly. I was by far clumsier than Mr. Bean! I was wearing my monk’s robes, so everyone on the slope watched me. I felt very out of place, but I needed to deal with that. Then of course I was also quite fearful, imagining I would fall and break an arm or a leg. Nevertheless, I kept on going through the first, second, and third days. On the fourth I was finally able to ski properly. At the end of the clip, you can see that I became quite flexible. I enjoyed it greatly. Gliding down the hills was great fun!

To me this process reflects how life usually goes. A new situation is always challenging at first, but when we face it head on, we can master it. Slowly we learn to relax into it and maybe even have a good time.

My trip to the US was a bit rushed, because my friends urged me to apply for a visa as soon as possible before the 2016 election, since they feared if Trump was elected getting one might be more difficult. Now, in November 2020, the US just held new elections, and I looked back on the “Skiing Monk” clip and was reminded how everything, everywhere in the world, is changing again. Life is like this: full of ups and downs. We need to adapt to new situations and new environments constantly.

Apparently learning the sport in just four days is considered quite fast. At least I was told that I adapted more quickly than most people. This got me thinking about why that might be. I was never interested in skiing before. I never thought about it, and never even had touched any of the equipment. I simply took advantage of an opportunity when it presented itself. I reflected on just how I did it. My first thought was that facing and overcoming fear is key. Fear presents a huge obstacle in learning anything new. In the beginning I had all sorts of scary visions, even though I was still only on the bunny slope, which is not dangerous at all, consisting of fluffy snow and being quite flat. However, I imagined myself breaking an arm or having a similar accident getting on or off the lift or whilst skiing. After completing the slope once or twice, I understood that my fears were unfounded. Even when I fell, nothing bad happened because the snow was so soft. The moment I relaxed was also the moment I realized how much I was sweating, how stiff my body was and that my fingers hurt from all the tension I was holding. Cira and Chas kept telling me to relax and they were right. You can see in the clip that when I was still tense, someone asked if what I was doing was the proper way and I answered “of course not.” Sometimes I was skiing backwards instead of facing forward, but I couldn’t turn, because my body was so stiff.

At some stage Cira asked me: “What is the link between the Noble eightfold Path and skiing?” What a wonderful question! This talk is a great opportunity to elaborate on this. The Noble eightfold Path² consists of:

1. right view
2. right intention
3. right speech
4. right action
5. right livelihood
6. right effort
7. right mindfulness
8. right concentration

Right speech and right livelihood are not directly linked with skiing, but the other six are clearly relevant. Fear impacts right thought and right view negatively. Internal tension fogged my mind so much that I could not think straight. This was dangerous not only for me, but also for others had I caused an accident. All sorts of unnecessary and mistaken thoughts popped into my mind. I could not focus properly on my environment, but only saw what was right in front of my face. Whatever existed in the space to my left, right, or a bit further ahead, was invisible to me. Someone told me to look a little further ahead to gain some flexibility. At that moment I could not. If my thinking was skewed, how could my view be correct? Initially I thought tensing the body and looking only straight ahead was the proper way to ski, but that was a completely misguided view.

The moment I got a grip on my fear, I saw how detrimental my stiffness was. Immediately my body and my mind relaxed, I realised that I did not need to shift with my entire body to turn to the right or left for example, but that small motions brought about the desired effects. Actually, using my entire body increased the chances of falling. Staying flexible was the right view. Facing and consequently releasing my fear allowed for right thought to ensue. Then suddenly I enjoyed what I was doing!

Right view is directly connected to right action. As long as I was trapped in the view that danger was imminent and I could break a bone at any second, I was not grounded in reality. This made me inflexible and sapped any joy from the experience. When I acted based on my fears, the tension caused me actual physical pain. When the fear dissolved, the pain disappeared with it as I could move in sync with my environment.

² For more information: https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Noble_eightfold_path

Right action in turn is intimately linked to right effort. Whilst engaging in right action we consequently display right effort. In my case the effort was not to tense up again once I understood its futility.

I was also embarrassed at not being able to hold my balance properly and by the unusual clothes I was wearing. I wondered what the bystanders thought about the spectacle I presented. Everyone seemed to be watching me. I could not handle the attention at first, but the moment I got a grip on my mind and my thoughts again, I relaxed. People could think whatever they wanted. Even when I fell down, I was no longer bothered. Maybe it even made them happy to watch a funny monk, who instead of meditating in a cave tumbled around in the snow. At least I made some people laugh. They were all there to enjoy their holidays and I could contribute to their good time. May they enjoy the show! In that state of mind, I could concentrate on my skiing and not pay any attention to them.

Flexibility of body and mind was crucial for my learning. It took right effort for sure, but eventually I was on a roll and mastered all four different levels of slopes. During the last two days I skied the highest level. This fast development, I am convinced, was due to my mindfulness, my relaxed mental state, and having released all fear and embarrassment. Through that I created the environment we all need for self-realization. With the term self-realization I mean being fully present with what I was doing, what was going on around me, and therefore in tune with the activity I was performing. I was aware of every small movement of my body and how it translated to the way I skied. When someone else got too close to me I could move out of their way easily, but before, when I was afraid of a collision, I froze and was incapable of avoiding other skiers.

My normal yoga practice and meditation turned out to be very helpful. They provided me with the right concentration or right mindfulness to create space to become aware of my mind, body, and environment. This knowledge made me comfortable and confident as my assessments were based on reality. What kind of reality? The reality of my physical body, my mental attitude, and the environment. This type of confidence engenders deep relaxation. Sometimes we wish to please others and fulfil their expectations, but if what they want and our actions are not realistic, we end up creating more confusion and disappointment than benefit. Sometimes we overthink things and mentally wander off into completely improbable scenarios. Like when I started to ski, I watched the people navigating a bumpy slope, where people learned to jump. It looked like so much fun, but I knew that this was not possible for me yet. Had I tried, I might have hurt myself severely. So, not becoming overconfident was appropriate.

As my skills grew, I took a run down the most difficult slope, as shown towards the end of the movie clip. I enjoyed it immensely and as my body was quite relaxed by that time, I felt a little bump, which sometimes prompted me to take off and fly a little. Around the third day I learned how to move my feet and my legs according to my will, and I intentionally used them to accomplish certain manoeuvres to check out the physical sensations they elicit. That gave me the ability to “read the mountain” as it is sometimes said. I could feel the mountain’s surface, the consistency of the snow, etc. I knew where I could use a bump to take off for a couple of meters or so and then how to land again properly. Enjoying these sensations purely was due to having overcome my fear and my embarrassment.

Towards the end of this talk, I want to delve a bit deeper into the topic of feeling embarrassed. This mental state is not helpful at all. Notions of what is right or wrong; appropriate or inappropriate are entirely based on our culture, our upbringing and so on. These create rigid belief systems we easily get stuck in. They have no validity in and of themselves. Actors like Mr. Bean and Charlie Chaplin play with these conceptual constructs by shattering and making light of them. I bet they think, “You can laugh, but I’m enjoying myself.” Their movies are still watched all over the world, bringing joy to millions. Actors like this are a true treasure! Had they been easily embarrassed or overly concerned about what others thought of them, none of their movies would have ever been made. Prompting people to cry is quite easy, but to make them laugh is hard. I adopted the same attitude. If watching me gliding down a slope with monk’s robes was entertaining, then I was sometimes able to bring happiness to up to 40 people. Had I gotten hung up on not wanting to seem awkward, I would have never learned how to ski. I would have missed my chance. And you would have never gotten to watch this movie. Please do not let feeling awkward keep you from doing anything. Just employ right view, right thought, and right effort.

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