

THE MAHASIDDHA TILOPA
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I have been putting together a little indoor studio these last few days, since winter appears to be definitely serious about coming in and having its season. There are no flowers to shoot outside and the plants too are pretty much gone until spring. Since photography is part of my daily meditation, what to photograph now?

Here is a photo of a rupa (statue) made in Nepal in the Tibetan style. This type of statue usually either has gold and/or silver overlaid or they are just plain like this one. When you order such a statue as this, you have to ask for the 'fine' version. These actually cost more than the ones all decked out in precious metal trim.

This particular statue is of the great Indian Mahasiddha Tilopa who founded the particular stream of the Kagyu lineage I am connected to. Tilopa lived from about 899 AD to 1069 AD in India. Born into the Brahmin (priestly) caste, perhaps even in a royal family, he became a monk and a Buddhist scholar after a vision and visit from a dakini (wisdom being). After some time Tilopa left the monastery existence and became an ordinary person, making a simple living grinding sesame seeds. Regardless of what he did for a living what he really did was to realize the true nature of his mind and started a whole lineage in Tibetan Buddhism that extends down to our time. I am a part of that lineage and practice the mind-training approach of Tilopa called Mahamudra Meditation.

What is the value of having a statue like this one of Tilopa? Great meditation masters (mahasiddhas) like Tilopa are similar to the concept of saints in Christianity. Although they have physically died and moved on, these great beings do not just die and evaporate. Like all of us they drop their physical bodies, personalities, and leave everything of this world behind, but they still exist in a more subtle state. Folks like you and I (who have not taken the time to purify our minds) take rebirth again and again until we somehow manage to train our minds. I am still working on it.

Realized beings like Tilopa don't take rebirth but they do continue to exist in very subtle bodies and work with people like ourselves until we too can tear ourselves away from our distractions and bring our minds to the same realization as these great meditation masters.

I have this statue of Tilopa on my little meditation shrine to remind me of this particular mahasiddha and his teaching. Why this particular meditation master and not one of the scores of other mahasiddhas that have taught? It is hard to say why we are drawn to one individual rather than to another.

I was not attracted to Tilopa because he was a wandering mendicant or because he ground

sesame seeds. I was drawn to him because of his teachings. In particular there is a teaching of Tilopa's called "The Ganges Mahamudra" that when I first read it struck me to the heart. Just by reading it I understood something that I needed to understand and that understanding help to separate me (at least a little bit) from my attachment to habits that were confusing and a waste of time.

That is how I reverence teachers, when they teach me something. And there is a lineage. Tilopa taught the great Indian meditation master Naropa, who taught the Tibetan Marpa, who taught Milarepa, who taught Gampopa, who then taught the line of the 17 Gyalwa Karmapas, which brings us to the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, whom I have met a number of times, both in Tibet and here in this country. I just feel drawn to Tilopa.