

**Vajrasattva Retreat - Winter 2005-2006**  
**Taking The 8 Mahayana Precepts ~ A Teaching on Impermanence**  
**by Ven. Thubten Chodron, December 15, 2005**

So this morning we have the fortune to be able to take the eight Mahayana precepts. Every day we wake up, and we come here in the middle of retreat. Everything seems quite predictable, quite certain; the six sessions are this time and that time, and we think we know exactly how the day is going to go.

Even when we're not in retreat, we have a very solid feeling of who we are and what going to happen, that we're in control of it all and we know what's going on. It's just this fallacy that we have in our mind, [one] of predictability and stability. Even if the unpredictable happened yesterday, we still feel the same today: that everything is predictable and everything's certain and we're in control and it's all manageable, and we and nobody we know is going to die today. We still feel that way. So we're slow learners, aren't we?

Even our own experience, when it clobbers us over the head, has a hard time making inroads against the ignorance. So we see the impermanent as permanent—and even forget subtle impermanence, the fact that things are changing moment by moment. But even gross impermanence, we don't even consider gross impermanence happening today, even though it's happening all the time!

You're in the meditation hall and you're out of the meditation hall, that's impermanent isn't it? Gross impermanence: you're here then you're not here. Something about our mortality doesn't even click. In spite of seeing the gross impermanence of being in the hall and out of the hall, or the gross impermanence of the sun coming up and the sun going down, or the temperature trying to come up and then it going down... In spite of all this contact with gross impermanence, still we never think, "Oh, today something's going to happen, or today I might die or, for that matter, any day, some time I'm going to die." We never even think about that! It's just so clear this layer of permanence covers the mind and lulls us into a false sense of security.

Occasionally we get jolted out of it, and then we go right back in. Yet, those times we are jolted are quite valuable if we use those times and try to increase our awareness when the unpredictable happens.

Often when the unpredictable happens we think it often feels surreal, but what does 'surreal' feel like? Real feels like what we're feeling, but what does 'real' mean? What's our notion of real? It seems like in our notion of real there's this acceptance that there's this big me, that I'm here and everything I see is real, and I'm in control and it's all predictable. That's some real big hallucination!

So I think it's good to use these times to start to question our notion of how things exist, what is our notion of reality. Even the feelings of cold and warm seem very real, and there is an "I" in the middle of it all, and what I am feeling is definitely 'real'. So it's a good time to question how things exist, our assumption about how we think life is going, our assumption about what we think our abilities in all of this are, and our assumption about what it's all about.

Have you ever considered that when you die, in your perception none of this is going to be here? What seems so real to you—for example, if we die tonight—all of what you are experiencing is going to be totally gone! It's not like you're going to be somewhere else looking on at everybody else in the meditation hall. When we leave these aggregates then it's finished, gone! And everything we're trying to build up here, everything we're trying to become: all the ways in which we try and make ourselves and everything we touch concrete, is just like the mist on a mirror, it goes 'poof' and it's gone.

So we might be trying to leave our legacy: we all have some kind of idea that "I want to leave my mark on the world. I want to leave a legacy because if other people remember me then somehow

my life will be worthwhile." I think lots of time people have children for that reason, thinking, "at least I left my legacy, there's somebody who looks like me (or is supposed to)."

Whatever we consider our 'mark' on the world, then we think people will remember us afterwards, and that means somehow that our life will have been worthwhile. But the people we're counting on remembering us—they're going to die too! For sure in, at the most eighty years, we're all going to be gone. And then all the people we think are going to remember us, give another 200 years, they're going to be gone.

Think of your great grandparents or your great-great grandparents. Do you even know their names? Here were these beings with whole lives, you know, who were born, and were kids and adults and had all these experiences. I don't even have a clue. I know the name of one of my great grandparents and that's it. I only know her name because I was named after her. I don't even know her last name, come to think of it. It was some big, long Polish name, which they changed when they came to America. I don't even know what it was!

If we think about that, that all the people we're trying to make an impression on, or all of the people we are counting on remembering us, praising us and everything—they're going to be gone too. So forget any scrapbooks with our pictures in it that people are going to look in and go, "ohh there he was; there she was, they were like this, blah, blah, blah." All that stuff is going to get thrown out!

Or they'll see some picture of the retreat and they'll go, "One of them was my great grandparent, but I don't know which one. Maybe it was that one, maybe it was that one, who knows, I was related to one of them." So everything that was some kind of heritage or legacy: gone out the window!

They will not even remember our name, and meanwhile, even if people here remembered us we're not going to be here to enjoy it! Sometimes there's this idea in the back of our minds, "Well, when I die then they'll finally appreciate me because I won't be there. They'll finally appreciate me; they'll finally realize how much they loved me. Finally they'll going to realize that they loved me."

You know what? We're not even going to be around to enjoy it! And who's to say they're finally going to realize that either? But we're not going to be around at all: we're going to be off having our own experience. And who knows what in the world that's going to be, but whatever our experience at that time is, it's going to seem just as real to us as the experience here seems.

Sometimes people ask "where are the hell realms, where's the hungry ghost realm, where are the god realms?" We can't see them, as if knowing where they were would make them real. Or, "those realms, are they real or are they just like dreaming? They must be just like a dream." But you know when you're born in them they're as real as this is. It's just like we're born into this, and we think this is real and all those other rebirths are a dream; but when you're born there, what you see around you and the other beings around you and all of that, it seems very real.

If somebody would come talk to you about planet earth you'd go, "Planet earth, where in the world is that? You know, never heard of it before, how do I know it exists? Where is it?" And then somebody would take out a telescope and say, "Well, I don't know but see that star way out there? Actually, that star doesn't exist anymore because it took twenty- three million light years for its light to come and reach us. So actually what we are seeing doesn't even exist anymore, but I heard that planet earth is somewhere circling around that star that doesn't even exist anymore. So maybe earth doesn't exist anymore either because it took twenty-three light years to get here, so even if our telescope is powerful enough to pick it up it may not exist now at this very moment."

So to whoever we're born as, this all seems like a big dream. And all of our friends and relatives that are here were born somewhere else, were born in the hell realms, in the god realm. Everybody we know here it's like [we look at them and think], "who's that? Why should I care about them? I'm not related to them. Oh, okay they're part of all sentient beings, I guess I have compassion for them."

Somebody who you are so intimately involved with one day, part of your life, so real, and who you cared about so much... Next day you're born somewhere else, then you don't have a clue who they

are. They may be back here wailing, and even if you have clairvoyant powers you're thinking, "Who's that person wailing like that?" Not even realizing it was somebody that we [once] loved very dearly!

So this is when we think of all sentient beings as our mother at one time or another, in one of our lives. These beings were our mothers and then we get born somewhere else and they get born somewhere else. We don't remember who we are; when we meet somebody we think we're meeting them for the first time. Maybe you see one of the deer walking by and you think, "Who's that stranger?" Or wait until the ticks come, wait a few months when the snow melts and the ticks come! These little guys are crawling up your leg and you pick one up, "What's this guy doing crawling up my leg?"

Maybe that was our mother. It was our mother from one life or another, but we look and it doesn't look like mom. We relate to it as a tick and we care about it as a tick and we don't recognize, "Oh this is my mother, this is the one who cared so much for me." No recognition at all!

It is similar to how we just meet each other in this life; we meet other beings in this life. Who are all these strangers? I guess they have lives. We don't even know their names. We just forget about things, and yet here are beings who play a very important part in this life for brief moments and in previous lives been very dear friends, relatives, even our parents.

Reflect on this and do something about the crust of our ignorance that makes us feel so real and so solid. Especially, as we are taking precepts today, to really recall all these other mother sentient beings who we don't even remember are our mothers. We don't even think about them existing; they may exist in all sorts of realms that to us seem very unreal just as our realm seems unreal to them.

And to think of all of these beings and include them in our motivation because we knew them in the past and they were kind to us and we will meet them in the future and they will be kind to us, and so to aim for full enlightenment for their benefit.