

Vajrasattva Retreat - Winter 2005-2006: Cultivating our Motivation ~ by Ven. Thubten Chodron, December 8, 2005

When I was in Seattle right before leading the Cloud Mountain retreat, I met a lot of people who came to tell me why they couldn't come to the Cloud Mountain retreat. They all wanted to come talk to me and tell me why they couldn't come. I don't know whether they were looking for absolution, or for what. But you know, one couldn't come for one reason, and one couldn't come for another reason; one had this reason, one had that reason. It was amazing how they all had the time to come see me to tell me why they couldn't come to the retreat!

And it really made me think—and I told the people who were at the Cloud Mountain. Retreat this—that it takes so much good karma just to have the opportunity to create more good karma. It takes so much good karma just to have the opportunity to do the retreat. You can see how many of the people wanted to, but didn't have the causes and conditions to [do so].

So, you people are really incredibly fortunate and you definitely did something quite wonderful in a previous life to be able to have this opportunity. So it's good to rejoice at that! Don't get down on yourself; you have this opportunity. Whoever you were in a previous life, thank that person. And just think, when you feel like you need some 'thank you's,' think that whoever you're going to be in a future life might come and thank you. Because you're all in the same continuity of that general 'I' that is merely labeled in dependence upon whatever aggregates happen to be there at any particular moment.

So you're making preparation for your future, dependent upon who you were in the past: a very fortunate opportunity. Especially when you think, with over five billion human beings on this planet, and how many have the opportunity to do Vajrasattva Retreat now? I don't know, maybe a few other people on the planet are doing Vajrasattva Retreat. I don't know how many. Think how fortunate you are. And we have 69 [now, 73] people doing it from afar, and we're trying to get the seventieth one. Isn't that wonderful? And seventeen of them are inmates. So I think that's really something – you have a lot of support from the other people, so really include the people who are doing it from afar. Imagine them when you take refuge. We imagine being surrounded by all sentient beings, of course, but keep those people immediately around you because they're doing the retreat with you. Some of them don't have quite the optimum circumstances that you have. So keep that in mind.

And just have a very strong mind that 'whatever happens, I'm going to do this retreat until it's over. Whatever happens.' Like in Zopa Rinpoche's Dedication prayer: 'I'm happy, I'm miserable, I'm rich, I'm poor, people like me, people can't stand me, I'm loved, I'm not loved, I'm in pain, I'm happy—it doesn't matter.' Just appreciate your opportunity and do the retreat. And be content as you're doing a retreat to create the causes for happiness.

Don't go looking out for when the happiness is going to come. It's like in the springtime, when you plant the seeds: When you plant the seed do you dig it up every day to see if it's sprouted? No. You're content to plant it, water it; the sun's going to come out, rain's going to fall, and it's going to sprout. The flower will grow when all the conditions are there. Similarly, if we just focus on creating the causes of happiness, not on receiving the results of the causes—just focus on creating the causes of happiness, then the happiness will come. We don't have to worry about it. Cause and effect works—we know that. If the effects haven't come as soon as you want them to, it doesn't matter. Get rid of the idea that wants them to come soon. Because actually creating the causes is a very joyful process.

Really, when you think of how much fortune you have to be able to practice, then you think, "Wow, I can say one Vajrasattva mantra." How can you be miserable saying that one Vajrasattva mantra when you think of how many good causes you've had to create in the past to just to have the opportunity to say one Vajrasattva mantra? Think about it.

And think about how many people there are with brain damage. Can they do Vajrasattva practice? It's very difficult, you know. So just being able to say one Vajrasattva mantra is something that you

have the privilege and honor and capacity and fortune to be able to do, which those people can't, not even one. They can't say even one Vajrasattva mantra.

Or if you're born as an animal, like Achala and Manjushri [the two cats at the abbey], who can't say one. Or think of the beings in the hell realms. They can't even say one Vajrasattva mantra—no opportunity. And even some of the beings in the god realms, the ones that are super distracted by all their sense-bliss treasure trips. No time to say one Vajrasattva mantra—too busy enjoying pleasures of the senses. Or even the gods who are zoned out in single-pointed concentration—too enraptured with single-pointed concentration to say one Vajrasattva mantra!

So if you really think about it, just the opportunity to say ONE, how wonderful! Just think about it. It's true, isn't it? So each day when you go in you think, "Wow, I have the opportunity to say not one but many more than one. And all the purification I have the chance to do." It's incredible fortune. The thing about karma is once the karma starts ripening, once the result is coming about, what can you do then to prevent it? You can't.

What we're doing is preventive medicine now. Once the karma ripens to throw us into a lower rebirth, once the karma ripens to have an untimely death, or to get a serious disease or be in an accident, there's nothing to do about it. But if we can purify that karma now then it won't ripen in those unfortunate situations.

And don't think just about unfortunate situations like we normally think about misfortune as being something like a terminal disease or car accident. Think about the misfortune of not having the conditions together to be able to practice the dharma. When you go to Bodhgaya—there's all these people in Bodhgaya and they're there just to make money on the tourists. They're selling all the little knick-knacks and tchotchkes and things like this. They don't have any faith. They're there selling their cups of chai, their knick-knacks. They're in the holiest place in the whole planet, but because of karma they can't realize that. All they see is an opportunity to make money. And how easy it would be to have that kind of rebirth. Because look, we've had all this conditioning behind us: make money, make money. So there you are. Now there are all these high lamas coming: his Holiness, holy beings from all the Buddhist traditions, and in one's own mind the only reason to be there is to sell tea or beg or sell memorabilia.

Or think how easy it would be to be somebody with really horrible, stubborn wrong views. We've all met those people, haven't we? They say, "Oh, there's absolutely no rebirth, just forget it!" Or that "we're inherently selfish, we're animals." "There is no mind, there's just the brain. If we just figure out the secrets of the brain, we'll stop suffering, that's all." Or saying Darwinian theory—"survival of the fittest, we're all selfish. Our whole purpose is just to get our genes in the gene pool; there's no other purpose to life than that."

People who hold onto those wrong views—it's very difficult for them to practice, isn't it? There's absolutely no motivation to practice. The mind is so stubborn that clings to those views. Or if you have a wrong philosophical view, "Yes, there's a soul; I believe in the soul and God's going to take my soul somewhere." Or you have some religion teaching that if you kill 'for the sake of God then God's going to protect you and take your soul to heaven.' You were taught that as a kid, you were conditioned with that belief. It's a wrong view but you believed it. The variety of wrong views there are in the planet is too many to count, and we may have held some of them earlier in our own life. I certainly did. When I look back on the philosophical view I had, I had lots of wrong views and firmly defended them.

For people like that it's very difficult for them to have the opportunity to say even one Vajrasattva mantra. There's zero motivation to do it.

Or maybe you're born in a place with no religious freedom; maybe you were born in Tibet during the time of the Cultural Revolution or in China during the Cultural Revolution. If they caught you moving your lips in Tibet during that time as if you were saying mantras, they arrested you.

When my friend Alex was teaching in Czechoslovakia before the fall of the communist regime, he told me they used to go into somebody's flat and everybody had to come at a different time. There

was no freedom to come together like we're able to come together in this place –we just all came; we didn't think about it. In Czechoslovakia during the communists, they couldn't do that. You just couldn't all come together to someone's flat. Everyone had to come at a different time.

These flats only had two rooms. They weren't big places. So in the first room, they had a card table set up, with beer and cigarettes and the cards all dealt out. Then they went into the back room to have the Dharma teaching. If they heard someone knock at the door, they would all come out of the back room into the front room and it was all set up as if they were playing cards. Imagine having to go through that just to hear a Dharma teaching and living in fear of being arrested! I mean, really dreadful. Yet so easily we could have been born in that kind of situation with no religious freedom.

Or we could be born in a country where there's no Buddhadharmā. Maybe you have an incredible spiritual yearning and you can't meet any religion that makes any sense to you, and how painful that is. Think about it, how painful. I was like this as a teenager. I just wanted to meet something that made some sense. And everybody I asked, nothing made any sense at all. Imagine being born in that kind of country where your whole life you couldn't meet any teachings that helped your mind.

There are all these situations that so easily—with just a small tweak of karma, one small little detail—and we would have been in those situations. I was riding to Dharamsala one time with a friend of mine. Her father had left Ukraine during the Second World War. All four of my grandparents were immigrants to this country. We were talking about how grateful we were—her to her parents and me to my grandparents—because they had gone on a very dangerous voyage of leaving their own country and coming to a new country where they didn't have anything or know anybody. If they hadn't done that, then we wouldn't have had the opportunity to be going in that taxi going to Dharamsala to hear His Holiness' teachings! Just a slight little change of karma and there's no possibility to practice, to have the fortune we do.

It's important to think about this and really treasure our opportunity because it is very special. It doesn't matter whether other people like you or don't like you or approve of what you're doing or disapprove of what you are doing because when you know you have a special opportunity, when you know that in your heart, you make use of it.

If other people like or dislike, it doesn't really matter; they're not going to spend all their time thinking about what we're doing. You might get stuck in the meditation session wondering, "Oh, what are my parents thinking about what I'm doing? What are my children thinking about what I'm doing?" You'll spend an hour and a half thinking about what other people are thinking about you. But let me tell you, they're not spending an hour and a half thinking about you! They're too busy thinking about themselves. They're not going to spend that much time thinking about us. So don't waste time on that.

And I think also an incredible fortune is to have had the fortune to meet the Mahayana and not just the Mahayana but the Vajrayana and to do this kind of practice. I have incredible respect for the Theravada tradition. I was just there [in Thailand] for two and a half weeks, at a monastery. Being there really helped me to understand a little bit more clearly the difference between the two traditions. While they speak a lot about *metta* and *karuna*, love and compassion, there's a slight difference in the way it's spoken of. Just being able to have teachings on *bodhicitta* is so unbelievably precious—you can never, ever, ever even imagine. So anyway we have that great fortune now; it's important to really appreciate it and use it. Everything good in the entire universe comes from *bodhicitta*.

Because when you think about it, how does anybody know even the fundamental thing of creating good karma? How do people even know how to create good karma? It's because somebody else taught them. Where do the teachings on how to create good karma come from? You trace them back and trace them back: the teachings come from the Buddha. Remember, of course, that Buddhas can appear even as people of other religions. I'm not saying you can't create any good karma if you're not a Buddhist. I'm not saying that. But if you trace it back, just the ability to explain to somebody else how to create good karma, that comes from an omniscient mind. That may manifest even as people in different religious traditions. So you see, it comes from the *bodhicitta*, because how does someone get to be a Buddha? It is by the force of the *bodhicitta*.

So having the opportunity to hear those teachings and just thinking even for a minute, "I want to become a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings." Just to have that thought come in your mind for a MINUTE is so incredibly fortunate. Because what I found so interesting is sometimes meeting other people, when you start to talk to them about bodhicitta, the people who don't have the karma to hear it, they'll say, "bodhicitta's too hard, it's impossible. Its better just to get yourself out of cyclic existence because it's too idealistic thinking you're going to lead all others to enlightenment. The goal's too high. The path's too hard—I'm insufficient to practice that." The mind comes up with so many reasons: "it's too scary; you have to give your body like Buddha gave the body to the tigers. I don't want to do that! I don't even like having my blood drawn for a blood test; I don't want to give my body!" Mind comes up with so many reasons.

So just to be able to hear the teachings on bodhicitta and have a positive attitude towards them, much less some feeling of attraction to bodhicitta, some wish to be able to practice that path, some feeling of how wonderful it would be to be able to be like a Bodhisattva or Buddha... Just having that thought come in your mind and having your mind feel good about it, that already is so rare.

Really think about these things. It's quite amazing.

And then when you've had the chance to listen to a lot of teachings on Bodhicitta and really learn the method how to cultivate it—such good fortune! I don't know about you but I was raised with people saying, "Love thy neighbor as thy self" and nobody did and nobody could tell me how to. And here are the Bodhicitta teachings and it's all laid out—it's laid out! You want to develop impartial love and compassion; you want to develop the altruistic intention of Bodhicitta? First you think like this, then you think like this, then you think like this, then you think like this, then you think like this. It's just spelled out; it's like a recipe book!

So all we have to do is do it.

But how incredibly fortunate to have the recipe book that teaches us how. Think about just the initial stage of developing Bodhicitta: developing some equanimity between friends, enemies and strangers. Could you think of how to do that on your own? I couldn't. I had some feeling: 'Well you know, everybody is a human being, they should be treated equally.' So I had that idea. But then I thought, 'This guy's such a jerk, and that one's irresponsible, and that one's an idiot, and that one I don't like, and blah-blah- blah... How am I supposed to love all these jerks?' I couldn't find any way to do it.

There's no way.

And then we see how my mind was so stuck in the wrong view, total one hundred percent believing what appeared to me. Totally overwhelmed by wrong view.

And then you see, when you get to hear the Bodhicitta teachings: and they show you how to overcome that wrong view. It's so precious, so incredibly precious.

So very, very good fortune just to have this opportunity. And especially doing a profound practice like Vajrasattva. Vajrasattva made a vow to help sentient beings purify their negative karma. So, wow, he's on our side isn't he? He's going to help all he can.

And Varjradatu Ishvari is helping, too. If Vajrasattva oversleeps she wakes him up, "Got to help those sentient beings. They're sitting at the meditation hall at Sravasti Abbey at 5:30 in the morning and they are invoking us. We've got to go there."

It is a very, very profound practice and you'll discover that in these three months. Receiving the blessing of a Buddha such as Vajrasattva. So just even to know how to do that practice, again such fortune. So really just think, "I'm going on a three-month vacation to the pure land with Vajrasattva." And just enjoy.