

**VSR ~ 8th Question & Answer Session
with Ven. Thubten Chodron
Sunday, February 5, 2006**

VTC: How's everybody doing? [To one retreatant in particular who was having trouble deciding what to do next in his life] Did you figure out your life?

Retreatant: Sort of. Well, I'm just going to try to be a little less serious. It's becoming more non-negotiable.

VTC: Did other people write out how this life and the next are going to turn out for you?

R: Yes, in one I became a peanut farmer.

VTC: If it's okay, I'd like to read them. I was thinking one can spend a lot of time planning this life and it's not quite certain how long this life is going to be... it might end tonight, right? Do we spend much time planning our future lives? Have you ever spent a whole meditation session planning your future life? Just one, I'm not talking about a lot of sessions, just one! Have you spent one, because you've spent so many planning this life... But have you spent even one planning your future life? What's your motivation for doing this retreat? Can you have a bodhichitta motivation without thinking about your own future life? So if you're not thinking about your own future life, then why are you doing this retreat? Hello?!

R: I have been thinking about that, and it feels clueless for the most part, except who I am doesn't really mean much to me anymore. It's kind of weird, not that it's negative or I'm down, I'm just this person named such-and-such, and I'm doing this now. I'm not sure what all that means but I can feel that [change]; it seems significant.

VTC: Is it significant—in what way?

R: Well, because I'm like everybody else and I'm still pushing away what I don't want and trying to get what I do want, but it's got a different feel to it now.

VTC: So one result that's coming from the retreat is how you feel about yourself and the world has changed. Like you were saying, you're one amongst many now and maybe the self-centeredness has gone down a little bit.

R: Even on a practical level it doesn't make any sense. Not just altruistically. I was thinking about us here: if I would just think about myself, eat when I wanted and all that sort of thing, I'd be feeling guilty. I'd be sneaky. I'd feel awful. Why would you even want to do that?

VTC: That's interesting: even on a practical level, seeing that how the self-centeredness and doing our own trip creates so much discord, but that in turn makes us discordant inside, not harmonious within ourselves.

New R: How I see the retreat is... how I've been watching my mind is that until I start believing in my future rebirths, I have to remove that misconception that this is the most important thing right now—this life. This self-cherishing and this self-centered attitude have got me so boxed in to this present life that it takes me sitting in these retreats and feeling my own level of suffering that conceptually I can even start thinking about not wanting to be here and seeing something beyond this. My self-cherishing spends an awful lot of time telling me that the biggest investment I have right now is this life, and not to even worry about that [future life]: 'that's way far in the future, this is really what you have to be focusing on right now.'

VTC: And that's the big trick of self-centeredness and self-grasping: is that our whole image of who we are in this universe and what our potential is, is limited so much to this body and this life. How can we even think of becoming a Buddha if we can't even think of having another life after this one ends? Buddha is completely like –WOW— and how can we imagine that if we can't even imagine another life in samsara and what's going to happen in that one?

We're so locked into this feeling of I am this thing, completely bounded by our conception of our body and how strong the sense impressions are. Have you noticed in the morning when you wake up; you know when you first wake up the mind's in this kind of clear neutral state, and as soon as you open your eyes... it's like–WHAM! Have you noticed that? It's like this whole concrete thing descends upon you. Or sometimes you don't even need to open your eyes, there's just the thought: "I am so-and-so" or "I have to do such-and-such," and then it's all of a sudden like putting a string in something and it just crystallizes [like in science experiments].

This concept of "I" just crystallizes and we get so stuck in thinking that we're this person that we think we are right now. And so much if it is based on the body— and the body, how long is it going to last? Not so long. And if you think that so much of our identity is based on this body and then, of course, we have a whole mental and emotional identity: "I am an angry person; I am a selfish person; I am a depressed person; I am this, I am that."

We have all of that and how long is that mental identity going to last? All of this is so fleeting and yet our perspective is so incredibly narrow: just thinking about this life. What you said [to retreatant], seeing that who you are right now is really, in one way, quite insignificant compared to the vastness of this universe right now. Then, if we think of the vastness of who we have been in previous lives, and what's going to happen in future lives, then this life –whether I have my chocolate cake tonight or not— is really insignificant.

In another way, if you think about having a precious human life with all the conditions to practice Dharma, this life is incredibly significant. Each moment, each minute that we have is so worthwhile, so valuable. It's like we have it completely upside down: the way in which we aren't significant we think we are, and the way in which we are significant we are completely oblivious to.

If we want to have a stable Dharma practice and we really want to go through some deep spiritual change, this attitude is a big one that has to change. Otherwise, this whole attitude of 'me and my life'— that's what the turkeys think about! This is actually leading into what I was planning to talk about...

What do turkeys think about? What to eat, how to be safe, how not to be separated from your friends, how to be safe from your enemies. What do human beings do? The exact same thing! We think about food. Turkeys, you know, all the little guy turkeys are looking at all the cute little girl turkeys; they're doing their thing. Human beings do the same thing: help your friends, harm your enemies. Human beings and animals are exactly alike regarding that one! Human beings harm their enemies in worse ways and for more insignificant reasons than animals do. I mean an animal will only harm if they're attacked basically, or if they're a carnivore, to eat. But they won't go hunting for pleasure. They certainly don't drop bombs.

But human beings, we have this incredible potential to progress along the spiritual path that animals don't have. Yet, the way in which we are similar to animals we almost do in a more aggressive, horrific way; helping our friends and harming our enemies. I mean the turkey would never do an Enron scandal out of greed so that the other turkeys wouldn't have anything to eat; and they certainly wouldn't go bomb another turkey flock. Look what human beings do. And it all comes because of just this focus on this life.

We have to really ask ourselves: how are we different from turkeys?

I was looking a lot at the turkeys this week; a lot of analogies come to me when looking at nature. Have you watched the turkeys and how terrified they are of being separated from each other? Have you watched that? The incredible terror that they have when most of the other turkeys are somewhere else and they're the only one, or even if there are two of them, left behind? Just terror of not being accepted, not being part of the flock. They come in the yard over here and I was watching them. You know, we have the chain link fence with the gate open and some had gone out of the gate and had started to walk up the meadow and some were still inside the yard.

Have you watched how they can't find the gate? The gate is wide open, it's wide open and what do they do? They run all along the inside of the fence freaking out. They are totally freaked out, feeling confined and feeling like everyone else is going to be somewhere else. But what they do is just follow the boundary of the fence, and as soon as they come close to where the gate is they get scared. Have you notice that? They'll come so close to the gate and then they'll turn completely around and run right along the fence again! It's amazing isn't it? It's like they're so close to liberation and they can't go through the gate.

R: I have a question, because that's it. Like a retreatant said this morning in the motivation: 'it's not enough to have intellectual knowledge only, it's not enough to know the path.' There's this gravitational pull that we're going to occupy another body, that we can't just go for the liberation, we really want to have a body, we want to be confined in a body. It feels like this undeniable gravitational pull in that direction. Even though we live so many lifetimes, even if we know it's just going to be suffering, (my question is) why do we keep doing it, why do we keep choosing it?

VTC: Why do we keep choosing to have a body and keep coming back? It's the same addictive mind. Why does an alcoholic keep drinking? They know that the alcohol is destroying their life. People who are drugging; they know the drugs are destroying their life. Why do they keep shooting up, snorting, smoking? It's the power of attachment. I mean people who go from one romantic relationship to another; again, it's that same addictive mind. They know that they're not getting anywhere.

Why do they do it? The power of attachment. That's why in the second Noble Truth when they talk about the cause of suffering, actually, ignorance is the root cause, but when they talk about the Four Noble Truths it's always attachment. Why? Because of this incredible gravitational pull: even though intellectually we know it goes nowhere, in our heart we don't believe it. We think if we get a body we're really going to be happy. Look at all of our useless behavior in this life that we do, that we keep doing over and over again.

All the times we break our precepts, why? Because we keep thinking that doing the action that breaks the precept is going to make us happy. That's why we keep doing it. Why do we lie even if we have a precept? Because we think somehow it's going to make us happy. Why do we take something that isn't ours? Because we think somehow it's going to make us happy.

It's just this incredible blindness—that's the ignorance—then pushed by the power of attachment: thinking that this is going to make me happy. Not only will it make me happy, but I will exist. And that's the thing that, at the time of death, we're realizing we're slipping away from this body. This whole ego identity that we've created for ourselves: 'I'm this person in this role', and it's all slipping away, and this incredible fear comes and we just grasp.

What's the most solid thing to get us an identity? A body. So you jump into one; the mind jumps into one, indiscriminately, push-button karma, all the karmic visions. "That one looks good"—you run for it. Then we're in our own individual hell again, whether we're born in a hell realm or not.

R: So I've been thinking about why we are so impressed with the stories of the inmates and people who live in caves... it's because they can't run to the usual attachments that we're used to. The ascetics, Milarepa, and all of them, so was that their whole life practice—to get rid of any [every] kind of attachment?

VTC: Yes, and that's the purpose of monastic life, that's why you took monastic vows, too. Actually, they say don't romanticize living in a cave because they say that the hardest thing to get rid of is our attachment to reputation; and you can go up to a cave and spend a lot of time in a cave wondering if the people down in the valley are thinking about you and if they're going to bring you supplies and if you're famous because you're so renounced. (laughter)

Let's come back to the turkeys for a minute. This whole terror that they have about being separated from the flock, this wanting to be part of a group. Several of the inmates, particularly the young ones who are in—and they have written separately from one another—but many of them have said that one of the things in their lifestyle from before that got them into trouble, that led to their incarceration, was that they wanted so much to belong. They wanted to be loved and to belong and to be accepted and to be part of, then, whatever group it was, a group of teenagers drinking, drugging, sex. Adults do it too: they just point at the teenagers more. But anyway, and so you do whatever it is that the group you're around is doing. In the case of some of the inmates that's what happened.

Some people grew up in different situations, maybe the group they wanted to be accepted by wasn't the people who were drinking and drugging and sleeping around, maybe it was the group of intellectuals. So then you have all the peer pressure of belonging, needing to be accepted by your own little group of intellectuals, or whatever your group is as a teenager, as an adult. How we modify our own behavior to become what we think other people think we should be, because of this incredible fear of being on our own.

This leads people to live on automatic, because all you do is figure out what group you want to be part of, adopt their ideals, and then you live it out. I think that was one of the reasons I asked all of you to write out scenarios about [one retreatant's possible] life: you can begin to see how everybody has a different version about how you should live your life.

When we write out our own version, we begin to see how we have internalized many of the people that we're close to, their versions of how we should live our life we've internalized and we have those different lives in our own scenarios that we write out for our self. How often do we even think and plan our life around e.g. what is virtuous? How often is the criteria for choosing what we do, "how can I live an ethical life, how can I develop the Three Principal Aspects of the Path, how can I develop bodhichitta and realize emptiness?"

Those aren't our criteria for making decisions. We're exactly like the turkeys: "How can I live my life so I can be accepted by whichever flock it is that I'm part of." How terrified we become when we do anything that sets us off a little bit from that flock, because then we face all of their criticism and their disapproval and we freak out. So we become just like the turkeys and how *frantic* they become, just you watch them. I looked them up in the encyclopedia: they can run up to 15 miles an hour to catch up with the other turkeys because of that need to be accepted and belong. Incredible! So it really made me think about us human beings too.

And what I was saying about how they just walk around the edge of the fence and get scared when they get to the gate, that's like us too, isn't it? We get a little bit close to the Dharma and WHOA, there's some resistance that comes up, isn't there? "Who am I going to be if I really take this seriously, who am I going to be if I start changing, what are other people going to say about me, are they still going to love me, how will I fit in, where will I be, how will I support myself"—all this incredible fear comes!

So we stay within the little fence of our mentally-created prison because it's secure. We just run along the outside perimeter of it saying, "I want to be free, I want to be free, I want to be free, I want to be free, I'm miserable!" But when we get to the gate we get scared and we turn back. Isn't that just like the turkeys? I notice when I go out there with the turkeys and try to help them. You try and say, "Here's the door, go this way, all your friends are in the upper meadow and here's how you get there..."

What do they do? They go the other way! You try to help and what do they do? They see you as an enemy and they're afraid and they go further away. It's like the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and our spiritual mentors, when they give us advice and they try to help us and what do we do? "Whoa, can't stand you, you're the enemy!" and we go the other way. Just like the turkeys.

I was watching once when they got stuck in the little area by my cabin, so they were in there and a couple of them flew *over* the fence, and a couple went *under* the fence, so most of them were still in that area, just a couple... But maybe the leader had gone out and started running down the road. Well the rest of the turkeys stuck in that area were *freaked out* and were trying every way they could to get out. Of course there was a hole towards the back to get out, but forget about that!

They would even see the other turkeys fly over the fence but they couldn't do that. They kept running around looking on the ground for an out; even when they would see another turkey go under the fence, they couldn't do that. Only when they were so desperate, that they were the last two or three turkeys, so it was incredible— even when they saw other

turkeys go outside the fence, get liberated, and they saw how to do it— actually saw other turkeys do it and they still couldn't do it!

It's like us, isn't it? We see people practice, attain realizations— you know Shakyamuni Buddha— we were probably hanging out with him on retreat a few eons ago but he really became a Buddha and we just kept running around the inside of the fence! (laughter) I think there is a lot to learn from this and really to think about in our own life, what we're doing and how am I any different from the turkey?

Last spring they were hilarious, one morning we were all in here and I think there was one boy turkey and he was chasing all the girl turkeys. They were all just going around in circles, making so much noise and Miles looked at us and said, "That's just like my mind." And he was right. It's just like all of us, isn't it? We run around in circles not getting anywhere, making a lot of noise, just like the turkeys. "I have a problem—cluck, cluck, cluck gobble cluck, I want something—yiiii!"

So that was one thing I was thinking about this week. Another thing I was thinking about this week is a totally different subject: Different ways people have of relating to their bodies. So we've been talking a lot about the body being the principal thing that we're attached to that keeps us in samsara, as well as the whole attachment to "I" which, actually, is the principal one, but the notion of "I" comes a lot from our body.

Various people have commented during the retreat about difficulties with their bodies and some of the inmates have commented about difficulties with their bodies. I was thinking that there are two principal ways in which we relate to our body when we're off balance. Two principal off-balance ways: One way is we are very indulgent, "My little toe hurts, quick call the doctor!" A little bit of hunger: "quick, I've got to eat something!" This beds a little bit too hard: "I've got to get a new bed!" "The room's too hot, the room's too cold, I've got to change something." So this incredible way in which we pamper our body, have to get the temperature of the water just right, have to have the food just right— we design menus in our meditations, exactly what we would like to eat. So there's this whole way in which we pamper the body and we freak out at the least bit of discomfort. So that's one way: very indulgent pampering, and that's off-balance, isn't it?

Another off-balance way people have of relating to their body is that they fight with it. They and their body are adversaries. "My body drives me crazy, I hate my body, it's uncomfortable, it doesn't do what I want it to do. I'm mad at it because it feels bad, I'm mad at it because it's uncomfortable, I'm mad at it, I hate this body!" So fighting the body, getting quite tense and pushing the body: "It doesn't want to do what I want, I'm going to push it. I'm going to sit in this meditation position and not move; I don't care if it hurts so much I'm going to overcome this because I can't stand the limitations of my body!" (laughter) So this an incredibly combative, adversarial role with our body. That's also quite off-balance, isn't it?

Have you noticed how in our relationship with our body, even within one person, we often go to one extreme and then we go to another. We might have one of those two extremes that we go to more often, but often we'll go to both of them in different ways. You can see that both of those extremes are incredible suffering and neither of them bring happiness, neither of them are Dharma.

When we're just pampering the body all the time: that doesn't get us anywhere because there's no possible way this body is ever going to be comfortable. When we're fighting with our body and we hate our body, that doesn't get us anywhere either, because our body is the vehicle we have to practice the Dharma. We need to keep it healthy, we need a certain degree of comfort in order to practice and in that way we need to like our body and not fight with it and not torture it and not yell and scream at it and be afraid of it.

What we need is some healthy way to relate to our body because, on one hand we don't want to be overly attached to it, and on the other hand we need to keep it healthy, we need to keep it clean to the extent that it's possible within samsara so for the purpose of using it for our Dharma practice. If we torture ourselves and get into a lot of mental hatred, that doesn't help anybody. If we go the other extreme and are very attached, then that doesn't help anybody either.

It's this way of finding a balance: "Okay, body, yes, I know you're hungry but it's not time to eat so we're going wait and eat a little bit later and I know you're hungry." So you have a little bit of compassion for your body instead of, "Why are you hungry, go away!" Or there's some pain or discomfort in your body instead of fighting with it. Just, "Oh poor body, there's some discomfort. Yes that's the way it is in samsara. I'll try to make you more comfortable but I can't guarantee anything..." So maybe we just have to accept that this is the way the body is, but it's not going to feel this way all the time. "It doesn't feel so good right now, body, but everything is impermanent and it's going to change. You'll feel better tomorrow."

It's the same as when we cultivate a relationship with another human being: we want to have compassion, but we don't want to have attachment. So the same thing in relating to our own body: to be kind to it, but not to hate it, but also not indulge it so much. So that's really important because you see so many people having so much difficulty with their body and their difficulty isn't the body, the difficulty is the mind.

The body is just the body. What can you expect from a body in samsara? Like I was telling you the first day, you're never going to find the perfect cushion where you're always going to be comfortable. And we're never going to find the right amount to eat; you're never going to know the right amount to eat. You're never going to have the most comfortable bed. The body is never going to be totally comfortable, let's just accept that and do our best to keep the body healthy and clean, to use it as a vehicle for our Dharma practice, but not fight with it. And not freak out: "Somebody took a shower before me and used up all of the hot water and now it's only lukewarm... Ohhh—I'm suffering!!"

We've got to get past that one at some point. Just another thing to do some thinking about, how you relate to your body and how can you have a healthy relationship to your body; how can your mind have a healthy relationship with the body? You see some people when they age they have incredible mental suffering, don't they? I remember hearing when I was still in my twenties one of my teachers was saying that it's always good that you age gradually because otherwise if you woke up the next day and saw yourself when you were old you'd freak out.

I said (at the time), ‘no, I don’t think so.’ But now, I think it’s true! It very interesting just to watch how your body changes, and how the mind is so attached to how the body looks. Then you see people who suffer incredibly because of the aging of the body. They dye their hair because they can’t stand to have gray hair. Or you go and have a toupee made because you can’t stand going bald. Or you have your face lifted because you can’t stand the wrinkles. As the body’s getting weaker and you can’t do as much, it happens gradually... and this freaking out. All the people who were athletic when they were young and then they can’t do what they could do when they were young when they’re older, and they are freaking out.

You can really see the degree of suffering people have when they age is directly related to the degree of attachment they have to their body. Think about this: how can I age gracefully; how can I accept it when my body isn’t going to work so well. Can I accept it when somebody changes my diaper when I’m old, and we’re back to infancy when someone else is changing my diaper because I’m incontinent? How am I going to be when I start forgetting things? Or when I keep forgetting things? You to get a certain age and you see that it’s going in that direction; it’s not starting, it’s going. How am I going to be? Think of Miriam— she just laughs at herself. Can we laugh at our self when we start doing that?

Again, it all relates to how we cling to this body and mind; how we build an identity around them and create a lot of suffering. What we’re trying to do when we generate renunciation and the determination to be free from samsara is— we’re not trying to have an adversarial relationship with our body where we hate it, because you’re just as attached and hooked into the body when you hate it as when you love it. We’re not trying to have a relationship of clinging attachment to it either. This is something to think a little bit about. That was another thing I wanted to share with you.

I talked a lot. Do we have time for *The 37 Practices*? There are three verses here that are about emptiness. Verse Twenty-two:

22. Whatever appears is your own mind.
Your mind from the start was free from fabricated extremes.
Understanding this do not take to mind
Inherent signs of subject and object—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

So when it says *whatever appears is your own mind*, it doesn’t mean that part of your mind became the object. What it’s meaning is that things exist in relationship to the mind; things exist by being ‘merely labeled’ by mind. They don’t have their own objective identity. They exist in relationship to the minds that are perceiving them.

We can get some idea here also when they talk about karmic visions. How sometimes our karma plays into how we label something, how we perceive something. For example, let’s take the example of cat food. Anybody here, when you think of cat food, do you start salivating and have attachment come into the mind? Manj and Ach [the Abbey cats] do; but we don’t. Cat food is cat food. They’re labeling it food. We’re not labeling it food. Depending on how we label it and how it appears to us, we relate to it in a certain way.

I've thought about this a lot. When I lived in Dharmasala one year, I was living in a Tibetan house above McLeodGanj and none of them had toilets. Maybe some of them had toilets, but the one I was living in didn't have a toilet. So we had to go to the forest. Everybody had their own little place in the forest where they went. So you'd go and make your offering and then the next thing you'd come back to the same place and it was gone because all the flies had eaten it. So what we label "poo" and something disgusting, the flies say, 'um, delicious!'

There's a difference in karmic vision here. There's a difference in the labeling process. Things exist in relationship to— they become what they are in relationship to the mind that perceives them. One example that I think we can really relate to is the whole idea of a 'problem'. What is a problem? A problem is only what we label 'problem'. Remember I was telling you last week about an inmate and how he was having all these difficulties? He said 'oh, I could say the retreat's going horribly or I could say the retreat's going wonderfully.' And he chose to label the difficulty as wonderful and it changed how his whole mind was looking at them.

It's the same with 'problem'. A problem doesn't exist as a problem in itself— it becomes a problem because we label it 'problem'. If we label it 'an okay situation' or we label it 'opportunity' or we label it 'ripening of my negative karma so I'm purifying', then the whole situation appears differently. So a lot of the thought training practices that we're doing, that this text is explaining, are very much based on this whole premise: Depending on how we interpret, how we label something, that is how we experience it. So thought training is about changing how we interpret things, changing how we label them. So instead of something being a hassle it can be an opportunity.

But then even below that, not only— on a deeper level, not just to how we relate to objects, but just how we put things together and create objects like the notion of 'self', the notion of 'I'. There's a body and a mind, and we put them together and we say 'oh, there's a human being there, there's a person.' We think of that person as somehow blended into the body and mind, but also something distinct. Like when there's somebody you're really attached to or somebody you really can't stand.

It's not their body, it's not their mind, but you feel like there's a person, a real person in there. It's like, 'This person I just love! I want to be with this person forever. Or this person I can't stand; they're horrible!' We feel like there is something there that's different from the body and mind. But when we investigate, we only find the body and mind. Even though the body appears as something singular, when we investigate the body, we only find parts of the body, and we see the body only becomes a body because we put the parts together and give it the label 'body'.

The same with our mind. There are all these different consciousnesses, there are all these different mental factors, we put them all together and we say 'mind'. So just the bare existence of objects depends so much on how we label it, what things we pull out and put together and make into what kind of objects. So all those things exist in relationship to the mind, they don't exist out there, separate. When it says here *your mind from the start was free from fabricated extremes*, "from the start" does not mean there was a beginning to mind. There is no beginning.

It's referring to it always being free from fabricated extremes, which means here inherent existence. So the mind has always been free of inherent existence, we just haven't realized it. The self has always been free of inherent existence, so has the body. We just haven't realized any of these things.

When we're meditating on emptiness, what we're trying to do is get rid of the fabricated elaborations that we projected on ourselves and on objects that makes everything look like it has its own entity and see that from the side of these things they are free from all the fabricated extremes, like inherent existence, that we projected on them. They exist merely by being labeled. There's nothing findable there that makes anything what it is.

When it says *do not take to mind inherent signs of subject and object*, we always feel there is a subject 'me' and an object out there, do you notice that? Then we have all these different ways of relating to the object: either we attach to it and pull it towards us, or we dislike it and we push it away from us. The turkey mentality.

By seeing subject and object it just gives rise to attachment, gives rise to anger and the whole cycle of samsara keeps continuing on. When we meditate on emptiness we don't see emptiness directly right at the beginning. First we all start out with the wrong view, then we start thinking about the teachings and we begin to have some doubt, 'Well maybe things don't inherently exist.' So we move from wrong view to doubt. Some doubt is inclined towards the wrong view, some is neutral, and some is inclined towards the right view. We kind of go through the three layers, you know doubt: 'Well yeah, maybe things aren't inherently existent.' From there we go on to have a correct assumption: 'Yeah, looks like things aren't inherently existent'.

But that's still very intellectual and if we met somebody from a different philosophical tenet school they wouldn't have any problem convincing us that things really have their own inherent nature. As we keep thinking more and more deeply about emptiness we move from a correct assumption to an inference. An inference knows emptiness non-deceptively, so it is very certain, it's very clear, it doesn't waver back and forth. It can't be talked out of it. But this inference still knows emptiness conceptually because it used a logical reasoning such as, 'the "I" isn't inherently existent because it's dependent'.

So initially the inference is a realization of emptiness, but it is still a conceptual one and at that point you need to really perfect the meditation and have what's called the union of what's called shamatha and vipassana, a union of serenity or calm abiding and special insight. When you have achieved that you still have a conceptual understanding of emptiness but at least you have a mind that is penetrative, that's the special insight, and you also have shamatha, the concentration factor.

Then by continuing to meditate on emptiness using those two, eventually what happens is you decrease, you dissolve the mental image of emptiness through which you perceive emptiness and at that point have a direct non-conceptual realization of emptiness. At that point when there's the direct non-conceptual realization of emptiness there's no experience of subject and object, there's no experience of me being the meditator meditating on emptiness, the object. As long as there's this feeling of me being the meditator meditating on emptiness there's not the direct perception.

This takes a long time to get ourselves to, a few eons. But we might have done some work in a previous life so it's good to do some hard work now. Don't give up, but really exert ourselves and at least plant some seeds in the mind for understanding emptiness so that in future lives we'll have it easier. Really try and as you go through the day and look at different things, look at how they are merely labeled, how they exist dependent on other factors, which are not them, because everything that composes an object, every *part* of an object is not the object.

You take our body: there are arms and legs and eyeballs and kidneys and pancreas and all these things and none of them are the body. So the body is made up of all these things that aren't the body. How do we get a body if all there are, are non-bodies? You assemble all of these no-bodies in a certain form and then the mind gives it a label 'body' and it becomes a body. But there is nothing in there that is a body; there's just parts of a body and none of the parts is the body.

Even when we say "I", what are the parts of "I"? We can say the body and the mind, the five aggregates, you go through each of the aggregates, none of these aggregates are me. None of them are the "I". But in dependence upon them you can label "I". There's nothing wrong with labeling "I", but when we forget that the "I" exists by being merely labeled and instead we think that because we labeled it that it has its essence, that's when we run into difficulty.

It's the same with anything that we see. It's all composed of things that are not it and it only becomes it by virtue of concept and label. When we forget that it only became it in concept and label in dependence upon this base, then we think it has its own essence and then we start fighting with it, either grasp it or push it away. So the next two verses talk about grasping it and pushing it away.

Verse Twenty-three:

23. When you encounter attractive objects,
Though they seem beautiful
Like a rainbow in summer, don't regard them as real
And give up attachment—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

So you see an attractive object, that attractiveness is a karmic appearance, there's no real attractiveness in the object. Otherwise our poo would look really good to us. Or otherwise, you would get sexually attracted to one of the female or male turkeys out there. It's just all karmic appearance, what you're attracted to. Think about that, especially when your mind gets obsessed with sexual attachments, you think, 'Oh this object really has something in it.' Then you go, 'well the turkeys are really attracted to each other, but boy I'm not. Why?'

What's inherently attractive about a human body that isn't attractive about a turkey body? There's nothing. The turkeys get the hots for other turkeys but they don't get the hots for us. It's just karmic appearance, it's delusion. You begin to see how completely silly our mind is. Anything that we happen to regard as real, see it as 'a rainbow in summer'. Or a rainbow in winter— did anybody see the rainbow a few days ago? Incredible wasn't it? Is there anything

there, anything solid there? Can you go and find all those colors? No. Is the rainbow non-existent? No, there's an appearance of colors. Are there colors? No.

When you look in the mirror is there a face in the mirror? Is there a real face in the mirror? No. There's no real face in the mirror. Is there the appearance of a face? Is there a reflection? Yes. And is there a face? No. Have you ever watched little kittens? They'll go up to the mirror and start to play with the cat. They'll try to play with the kitty that's the reflection because they think it's a real one. Just like when we watch TV. We get all excited. We think what we are watching is real. Is any of it real? Are there real people inside that box? No.

Those are analogies, but it's the same thing with anything that we see in our life. Things appear one way, but don't exist that way. There appears to be a real face in the mirror but there is none. It appears but it doesn't exist in the way that it appears. So likewise, all the things that we get attached to, they appear but they don't exist in the way they appear.

It's like in Disneyland when you're going out of the haunted house and you look and there's a ghost sitting next to you. It's a hologram. Do you get all afraid of the ghost? If there were a very attractive person sitting next to you that was a hologram, would you get all excited? If there was a check made out for \$5,000 sitting next to you that was a hologram, would you get all excited? No, because you know it's a hologram. If you didn't know it was a hologram, you'd go for that check, wouldn't you? But if you know it's a hologram, you just say, 'looks nice but not worth my energy.' So, same thing—things look real, like they have their own inherent essence, but they don't.

These analogies are all showing us this deceptive appearance. It's quite interesting. Spend some time—not when everyone's waiting to go to the bathroom—but spend some time looking at the reflection. Or look at your reflection in a puddle of water somewhere— it looks so real. Or how you look at a TV screen and it looks so real. How easily deceived we are. We see each other and we think there are real people there. We see money and we think there's real money. We see food and we think there's real food.

But how befuddled we get when we don't understand that things are empty of inherent existence. It doesn't mean they're non-existent. It just means they're empty of having some kind of inherent essence. That verse tells us how to deal with objects of attachment. They're like rainbows, watch them dissolve. You're sitting there meditating, an object of attachment comes into your mind. Think of all its atoms becoming little Vajrasattvas. Whatever it is that you're attached to, the whole thing in your mind just dissolves into a million-bezillion little atoms of Vajrasattva. There's nothing there.

Verse Twenty-four:

24. All forms of suffering are like a child's death in a dream.
Holding illusory appearances to be true makes you weary.
Therefore when you meet with disagreeable circumstances,
See them as illusory—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

When you lose somebody that you love, what happens? Freak out. If you have a real child—the example here is a child because for most people their child is the one they love the most. It could be your parent, it could be a sibling, it could be a lover, it could be your cat. Whatever it is. But when somebody we love dies, we feel so much distress. If you have a dream—let's say you've always wanted children and you have a dream. In your dream you finally have a child. But then your dream continues on and your child dies.

Is it worth getting all ecstatic because you had a child in your dream? Is it worth getting all depressed because your dream-child died? From the viewpoint of an awake person, it doesn't make any sense, does it? When you're watching TV and something happens on the TV and you get so excited, and then another thing happens and you get so filled with anguish. Does it make any sense? Are there real people in there? No, but we're so addicted to experiencing our emotions that we love to hear stories about unreal people so we can trip out on our emotions. But there are no people in that box. There are no real people in the dream to get attached to or to get depressed about.

There are no real people in our life either—they're appearances of people. There's a body and a mind. There are five aggregates, they come together, we label 'person.' That's all there is. Those five aggregates split up because whatever comes together falls apart. Five aggregates split up and the person dies. Anything to get upset about? There was no real person there to start with. There's no real person there to die. We're creating a person that is not there, and when we think about our self, the strong feeling of 'I' that we have, we're creating a person that does not exist.

There's a merely labeled person that exists by being labeled in dependence upon the aggregates. But that's not how we think when we say, 'I.' Especially when there's a strong emotion. When there's a strong emotion, there's a real ME inside that body, and oh boy, it's the most important thing in the universe. But there's nobody there. Because when we analyze, there's no one there. So why get so upset? So even when we die, why get so upset? There's no real person there who's going to die. Or when we lose the people that we care about, there was no real person there to start with.

Or when there's an object and we lose an object. There's no real one there to start with. You look—now when you see this building, we say "Sravasti Abbey." Three years ago when you saw this building, did you say "Sravasti Abbey?" No. Three years ago you saw this building and you said "Harold and Vicky's house." But now when we see it, the appearance of Sravasti Abbey is so strong that we get this feeling that it's always been Sravasti Abbey. But it hasn't. This building only became Sravasti Abbey because of the label, and the label only happened because we traded pieces of paper. It's a good deal, isn't it? You give other people pieces of paper and they give you a house. Boy! It's interesting to think about those things. It kind of loosens the mind. So those two verses are saying when you have attachment, see it as a rainbow—it dissolves. Dissolves into Vajrasattvas. When you see something disagreeable, see it as the death of a child in a dream. There was nothing really there.

Now for your questions and comments.

R: Where does compassion fit in if a realized person realizes it's all emptiness and they see someone in front of them who's suffering and who's clinging to their reality of suffering, even though suffering is a label, where's the compassion?

VTC: If you have some understanding of emptiness and you see people who are suffering because they are clinging? If you see a little child who's screaming and going hysterical because they can't fly to the moon and this kid's hysterical because they want to fly to the moon and they can't fly to the moon, do you have compassion for that child? Why?

R: Because you realize their ignorance and you want to soothe all the emotional turmoil that's happening.

VTC: Because you see the child is unnecessarily suffering. There's no way to get to the moon so why suffer because you can't go?

R: But the response, 'there's no moon,' does not feel compassionate to me.

VTC: When you're dealing with a hysterical child, you have to be skillful. So that's why people are not taught emptiness right away. That's why you get all the other teachings first that help you deal with your defilements in another way. You can also see that when you're in the middle of some kind of strong emotion, it's even hard enough to apply thought training. When you see somebody who's suffering unnecessarily, you have compassion for them. But the way you act out the compassion isn't to necessarily go and say, "you know, you're suffering unnecessarily. This is really stupid." Because that person is holding on so strong they can't see that.

So you have to go there and talk to them and soothe them in some way and then they see that the whole thing they were getting upset about they didn't need to. So this is a kind of skill a Bodhisattva develops. You don't just go up to somebody and say, "that's really stupid; it doesn't exist anyway." How do you feel when you're bummed out about something or you're all jazzed about something and somebody comes and says it doesn't really exist? (laughter)

VTC: So what's been happening with all of you this week?

R: I've been realizing as I look at attachment, that I'm not losing anything, except for just this wrong conception of things and that's really hard to give up actually. (laughter) It's as if there is something there that's falling away in front of me— it's just this really. I don't know if it's the idea or the grasping, that's so strong.

VTC: That's very well put. It's hard sometimes in the beginning to give up attachment because we think that there really is something there that's going to make us happy, and we're afraid that if we give up the attachment for the object that object or person, whatever it is, that there's no way to be happy. We know intellectually, we're saying there's no happiness there, but inside it hasn't gone from our head to our heart yet.

Especially at the beginning of the Dharma practice, there's much more fear about this and people always go through it: "Well if I give up the things that make me happy I'm not going to have any happiness." It's just terrifying because you can't see any way to be happy without holding onto the things that you think have made you happy until now. So that's why it's so important to really investigate those things that you think make you happy and see if they actually do and play out the whole scenario of getting it.

That's why I had you play out the whole scenario and then say, "is that going to bring me real happiness?"—whatever it is we dream about. Whatever it is we're convinced is going to

bring us happiness. We play out the thing— you want a new car because you're sure if you get a new car that everybody's going to love you. You get your new car and what do you have? You have car payments, you have car insurance, you have people denting it, you've got to trade it in in a couple of years because it isn't so beautiful anymore. You realize this thing that you thought was going to make you happy doesn't.

Or this person you're so convinced, "I can't live without you," and you run the whole scene in your mind and there you are with that person twenty-five hours a day. Are you going to be happy with that person twenty-five hours a day? Uh-huh, even twelve hours a day— are you going to be happy with them? How many people do you know who have a relationship in which they have never had unhappiness with the person they are with? Even think of people who have what we call 'good' marriages. Are they always happy with each other, and how many people have good marriages?

So you look and you play out the whole thing, whatever it is you think is going to bring you happiness. Or whatever career you want to have or whatever the vacation place you want to go to, whatever reputation and image you want to have, whoever it is that you want to praise you— and you play the whole thing out and say, "is this really going to make me happy?" And what else comes along with it. You finally get the job you want— what do you get? Headaches.

I remember Barb was saying, at DFF we had the refuge groups for the new people who were going to take refuge, so she was leading one of the refuge groups and had some of the twenty and thirty year-olds in them. And she said to me one day, "It's so fascinating talking to people who really think they're going to get satisfaction from their career. I gave that up a long time ago. They really think this!"

So whatever it is that we're attached to, the place that you have always dreamed of traveling to, you finally win an expense paid ticket to go there and what do you get? Jet-lag, dysentery! I'm not trying to say that everything's the 'ouch' kind of suffering, but what I'm saying is that with whatever happiness you get you also get everything else that comes along with it. There's nothing that is dukkha-free.

R: The other part of that for me was— I was like even if I get this person. I'm still carrying this mind of attachment with me and until I work with that itself, then I may be with this person but then the mind of attachment will just be looking for something else.

VTC: Exactly, you'll get bored with that person and look for another one.

R: In the meditation hall when there's noise I think, 'okay, once the noise stops then I'll start to meditate.' And then the noise stops and I find a new noise and I think, 'now what's that noise?' And I think this is never going to happen!

VTC: Right!

R: Just trying to be more aware of that mind looking for the next one.

VTC: We're like the little mice standing at the lever and we keep pecking, pecking, pecking and how often do we get food? This is the gambling mind. The people who put quarters in the slot machines thinking, 'the next one I'm going to win'. That's what we do— 'the next one is going to be the one for me'.

R: Throughout this whole retreat I've been having images of people come up. It took me until this week to figure out what that was about. It's kind of convoluted but it seems like kind of a battle going on. I finally figured out this has to do with attachment. I can see what it was. I decided that these images were all looking for some kind of security. It went back to young, young ages. For the first number of weeks there was never any emotion around it, just like images, images, images and now it's different. What is funny to me is that I can intellectualize and even through my own experience, I can see that the security isn't there—that the happiness doesn't last. Things change. When I intellectually think about the Dharma, it's like the only solution really. But I don't know why I keep creating the battle. Maybe it's because this is so new— seeing things this way. Another thought that came to mind— I don't know how to say this well. I was looking for the 'I.' then I realized it was tied up with my sexuality, and then I said, 'where does that come from?' Because you're going around your body, my mind is there? I don't know about this! I realized all the images, all the things you're exposed to— the ads, the things you learn from the time you're small— they tie this together, this package-deal that's so false and you bought into it. I don't know why it becomes a battle though. I think it has to do with fear. It's like the turkeys actually. It's the fear.

VTC: If I'm not inside here, what's on the other side of the fence? The question was asked, 'why do we keep doing these things?' The addict mind.

R: Being sick also has been interesting. You said during a retreat once that the reason we sleep so much is because we have to take all this energy to prop our egos up. That's always stuck with me because I have some things to learn around that. For a couple of days I didn't have enough energy to prop it up. That was kind of nice!

VTC: Yeah, isn't it?

R: It was very nice. It was like when I used to play basketball, which I played for years. Sometimes I would be sick. I always played better then because I didn't think so much. I just kind of went with the flow. If I was sick I always played better. It really reminded me of that. Now I'm sick. I don't have the energy to do these images— I just don't have the energy. Here I'm lying on the floor, I'm standing or I'm steaming. My pride is out the window! This whole retreat's been body, body, body. I don't see anybody else lying on the floor, or steaming every day.

VTC: It's nice— you give up caring, don't you? Then you realize how much freedom there is stopping caring about those things.

R: I need to keep this going, to carry it over. It's a lot of wasted energy.

VTC: It takes time for us to really begin to see that the Dharma can bring us happiness. Before we're so convinced that the external things bring us happiness. We don't really trust that the Dharma will bring us happiness because we've never tried it. We never had that experience. So we're afraid. It seems like if I give this up, it's just going to be awful. So slowly, slowly we start peeling our minds away from those things— we begin to gain a little bit more confidence. "Oh, I'm not stuck on what I was before, and actually it's nice." As you were saying, "I don't have the energy for that anymore. Actually I'm a lot happier." Even if you have one small experience like that, that can give you a lot more confidence that it's possible to be happy without grasping at all those things.

Because we begin to define happiness differently. Before-happiness meant there was this excited kind of emotional rush that we get when there's something new and exciting. But when you really sit and investigate that feeling, that feeling is not very comfortable. It's not very comfortable. Then you begin to see, oh, happiness is actually when you're more calm—

and that's actually a happier feeling. When giddiness and excitement aren't there, actually you feel much better. Slowly you begin to see that there is a possibility for happiness through letting go of these things.

R: In the last days I was remembering about the Manjushri Retreat we did. We were there [in Mexico] for a month. It was linked with another 10-day retreat. The experience was very interesting because when I went back I felt my energy was very different. I felt as though when you put something into the cloud and the battery charges very well. I felt very, very different. What happened was, that battery lasted very little because I went back to the same habits. Now, being in this retreat for a longer time, I feel now after all my turbulences, I'm feeling slowly, slowly better and better. I'm feeling very happy. I feel this is a very big opportunity for me because of my circumstance and all by myself I can do anything in my life. I have a lot of possibilities of deciding whatever I can do. And my age, well, I'm healthy. But I feel, 'ah, not so long! You have to be careful.' So I feel it's a big opportunity. Now seeing a bit like the end of the retreat, how can I take it as the best opportunity and go back and not do the same mistakes—not going back to the same thing, the same habits. And after a half year, I'm stuck again with the old stuff.

I wanted to comment and ask you, for example— well, I know we have to solve our problems for sure—that's my responsibility. How can we conserve, preserve this positive potential or we hold this battery or whatever it's called that we're going to go back with. I really want to try and do my best not to do the same things because life goes and goes. And 5 years ago there was Manjushri and now. . . . I'm still alive. In the [past] days I was feeling like I was dying— it was very intense for me. So that could mean some other perspective. 'Wow, I'm happy; I'm here. I can do many things. I didn't die when I was feeling that 'I'm going to die!'" It was a feeling, I know, but it was so strong! So that was a lesson. Could you give me or give us some advice about how we could care about this person we're going to have with us when we go back.

VTC: I'll talk more about it when it gets closer to the time to go back. Basically, really think how you can conserve it. What kind of external circumstances do you want to put yourself in that will help you to conserve these energies, and what kind of internal circumstance do you want to create, and what kind of habits do you want to create in your life from the beginning that will help you maintain this energy? So give some thought to that. Maybe [another retreatant] can write a story for you about how---[addressing retreatant] you can write about his life after retreat, okay?

R: I had something related to that. One of the stories I wrote was that I left here in a panic on March 9th and went exactly back to life as is was before coming here. I just kept playing out the same mistakes over and over again. Going to a dharma center for a while eagerly— then getting too busy and doing all these things, and I have a big breakdown at 40 or 50 or something.

VTC: You managed to get all the way to 40 or 50? (laughter)

R: I was thinking, "oh, the Dharma is causing all these problems!" Fleeing there in a panic, and just living out the exact same stuff that brought me to the Vajrasattva Retreat in the first place. So I'm going to try to avoid that. (laughter) We'll see.

R: I was thinking during the whole week— I was working basically with two or three meditations on the Lamrim because I kept thinking about what I said last time and what you

said. So I just left open the question about not seeing any contradiction, feeling very open and at the same time wanting to go back home. I just kept thinking about this. It was very clear for me at that moment, but then I said, 'Okay, let's see what's going on'. So what I discovered, actually I knew it but it's amazing how you just don't see. Through your practice and just opening up, opening up— new avenues open up. So I saw that— it's like what you were saying a while ago, I want freedom. I want liberation. But I want it my own way, okay? (VTC laughter) So learn to have freedom and liberation while being secure, comfortable and having fun. (VTC laughter) When I'm feeling lousy, I want it to be very fast, and when I'm feeling okay I don't want it so fast. Yes, I want it, it sounds good. I'm a Buddhist but not so fast--later! (VTC laughter) I was thinking that I didn't want to be so hard on me.

For instance, "I have a lousy job and I don't like where I live and nothing works." And maybe this is one of the problems, I *really like* where I live; I *like* who I live with; I *love* my work. And I feel okay most of the time— most of the time I feel well. I'm quite happy. I'm aging and everything, but I don't feel lousy. I felt lousy before. I was really reflecting on it. I feel much better because of the Dharma. That's all. I remember I felt lousy because I didn't have it. I didn't know what to do. I was feeling terrible two years ago. I didn't know what to do or how to practice. The only reason I feel better is because I've been practicing; I have been doing some purification. But for some reason this is just attachment and self-grasping and fear— that my mind turns that feeling of being 'okay' to 'I really found my real source of happiness'. It's just a question of really thinking about it and that it's not going to last. Even if I really love it, it won't last. I was trying to differentiate.

Some things I'm doing right now and I think they're very good. For instance, the Dharma group and building the retreat center and doing our [Dharma] books— they're positive aspirations. But in the middle of all this, what I found is that there is a big "I" and because I want this, it will happen. It's not certain I will even go back [to Mexico after retreat]. The other thing is that everything is very solid. You know like I am going back home to do this Dharma project and just because it is a Dharma project then it is a positive thing and it is okay and it will have a positive result. But as long as I have this very strong feeling of **me** doing this, there is no freedom and there is no real achievement. It can have a positive result in terms of helping people but it is not like— what if I take the "I" out and see what happens and whatever happens it's okay. That's not in my perspective. That is what I discovered. But the real thing is the very strong sense of "I" doing things, either virtuous, or maybe not virtuous, it is still there and it is very strong. So it's like whatever you do, unless you get rid of that, it's like walking around it [the Dharma].

VTC: Yes.

R: You know talking about all of this I have a question. I felt kind of contradictory with the lists we were asked to make of what we would do when we got back home. It reinforces the "I" and brings us out of retreat. I didn't write my list. I did not feel comfortable about it. The question is why the lists in the middle of the retreat? [Lists of what each retreatant wanted to do after retreat ends.]

VTC: Why did I do that? Because sometimes the mind goes so much around and around and around that if you make this list, if you put it down and put it outside of yourself, you get some space from yourself. Then you look and you say, 'really, is that what my life is about?'

R: It's been so fascinating to realize that my self-cherishing is very, very attached to negative states of mind. You were talking about just happiness, my mind is very addicted to complaining, finding fault, finding insufficiency or inadequacy either in myself or other people, things not going well, obstacles being real obstacles there— not 'challenges', they're not 'opportunities for growth', they are problems! So in the past week all of that stuff has settled down and my self-cherishing has been so bored and it has been having such a hard time sitting. There's like this nice quiet space in my mind this week and my self-cherishing is just squirming, it wants to find something to complain about and to find fault with, and to find inadequacy about, and I have been able to just watch and using that little bit of dialoging that you had done last week about, 'Okay, does this really make you happy picking the world apart or finding fault?' I don't think I ever realized in my life until this week how I absolutely enjoy it in a strange sort of way. People get off on joy and excitement and happiness, I get off on complaining and whining and finding fault! It jazzes me, gets me so excited! (laughter) VTC: I understand perfectly! Who wants to be distracted by objects of attachment when you can try and fix everybody, when you can complain and feel sorry for yourself? I understand perfectly. (laughter)

R: It was like this epiphany and it's so great I'm not feeling all of this shame about it, it's like—Wow— this is a cool insight and then it just dissipated. I needed to know that whatever karma I came in with this life came in just with a kind of nagging, pissy kind of way about it and something's happening because that stuff is really chilling out and self-cherishing is having a hard time. There is another part of my mind that is so relaxed and is having such a wonderful time. I'm seeing everybody just really through the mind of cherishing [others] this week and it's just been so wonderful. It's like I've taken those sunglasses off— that's what Venerable Robina always says— you have these sunglasses on and I've taken them off. I don't think I ever got it like this week. I'm sure they'll come back on, but now I can identify them and it sure doesn't make me unhappy or anybody else and look at how much fun, and what a nicer person I am to be around when I'm like this! (laughter) You had said first to make friends with yourself, which has been my koan for this retreat: making friends with myself. The other one was instead of projecting all of this angst about my life, is to start looking with a curious eye towards myself, start looking at myself with a certain amount of interest, a certain level of curiosity saying, 'well this is kind of strange, why do you do this again?' (laughter) It's the first time I've been able to look with a sense of humor at what I have always considered to be an albatrosses around my neck, these propensities. To see it with a lot more humor and the fact that it has gone away and it's a nice space not to have that mind chewing at me and chewing at everybody else. (laughter)