

**VSR ~ 9th Question & Answer Session  
with Ven. Thubten Chodron  
Sunday, February 12, 2006**

VTC: So last week the question came up: why do we keep doing the same stupid things again and again? Why do we keep revolving in samsara again and again? Well, samsara—we don't even realize what it is. We don't even realize what ignorance is. Even in our daily life—forget about samsara for a minute—but just what ordinary people can see is dysfunctional behavior: why do we keep doing it?

That question came up last time, and we talked about ignorance, we talked about clinging attachment and so on as various explanations. Of course, when we make the picture bigger into why do we keep getting reborn again and again in samsara, it's the same thing—ignorance and clinging attachment.

One of the inmates wrote something that pertains to this that I will read to you. It was very beautiful. He's been in prison for a long time: he's in his late thirties, and he has this very golden, soft gentle heart that he completely masks in prison by being a rough, tough- guy. He got in a lot of fights and he was in Aryan Nation because it was a way of coping with that environment.

Even before that, what he did that got him in there— he had a drug and alcohol problem and so on and so forth; and I think a lot of that was all related to him being a quite a sensitive guy with no way to express it or get in touch with that. So it got taken out in all of this rage and anger and carrying on and substance abuse. Anyway, sometimes there's this incredible honesty about him— he'll just say the truth. It's very refreshing. I had written him that another inmate is getting out and that I had said to him and to the other inmate that was getting out that the most important thing they have to do is to really stay away from drugs and alcohol because once they get involved with that, then they're involved with the people that are involved with that, and the behavior that's involved with that, and the whole scene that's involved with that.

Last week we were talking about how we all have our own little addiction-problem. Some are socially acceptable and some aren't. It's easier to hide it if you have a socially acceptable addiction-problem because then everybody thinks it's okay. But it's still the same mind as when you have a socially-unacceptable addiction problem. We all have something or another that we do to hide our pain.

He was commenting about this. He said [reading letter from inmate]: *“It's like you said about the other guy you write to that is going to get out soon. My biggest problem will be to stay away from drugs and alcohol. Not so long ago I think that was a major setback for me, but I don't think so anymore. I know I'm an addict— that won't ever change, I guess. But I don't really have the desire to be high or drunk anymore. For a long time I would say that I won't ever get drunk again— that I won't use when I get out. But I was just saying that because it was logical—not because I really meant it. I've not been high since '99; not drunk since '98.*

*I guess there are a lot of reasons I don't want to do that anymore. Part of it was that I drank to medicate my problems. Some of those problems I no longer have. Part of that whole scene was part of my identity also. I no longer want to be seen that way. That's not who I am anymore. Another thing is that I know without any doubt that if I get out of here and drink, I will come back, no question about it. Chodron, I'm done with this place— it's not fun anymore.*

*I have a lot of regret for things that I did in my life, but the things I regret the most are the things that never happened— wasted opportunities— the person that I could have been and the people's lives I could have touched in a positive way. I regret having let so many people down. Not because of things I did but what I didn't do. Those thoughts are sobering to me—no pun intended! I want to live life now. I can't do that with a vodka bottle in my hand.”*

So he's talking from the point of view of how he medicated his problems. I think we can all take that and generalize to how we medicate our pain, and realizing, as he said, he wants to live life now and he can't do it with a vodka bottle in his hand. Similarly, when we want to live our life in a very vital way, in an ethical way, to be really alive, then we can't do it with our own version of a vodka bottle, whatever our thing is—if it's TV, if it's shopping, who knows what it is.

Whatever we're doing to mask our suffering is preventing us from actually living and is creating the cause for more suffering. I just love the way he says things kind of clearly and honestly. And that part where he said what he regretted just [Venerable slaps her heart]—Whoa! I just thought I'd share that with you...

I had some other things to share. You've been learning a lot about yourself these past weeks. You had a good view of monkey mind. Hopefully, you've had a good view of Vajrasattva mind. I don't know. Last week we were talking about fighting with our body. Do you fight with Vajrasattva too? Think about it. Vajrasattva's sitting there: the omniscient mind of all of the Buddhas. Your teacher appearing in that form above your head, trying to send this light and nectar into you to purify your negativities. Your negativities are purified by *bliss*: the light and nectar is bliss. It's not suffering and sin and atonement and repentance. It's the bliss that purifies!

But do you fight with Vajrasattva: e.g. “You tried again to put light and nectar into me. Come on! Don't you realize *I'm hopeless!* You're never going to get that into me. I'm just inherently bad. Why do you keep trying to do that? Go sit on somebody else's head. I can't feel bliss; I don't know what bliss feels like. Pain, yes. If you want to shower pain into me—yeah, I know what that feels like—I could get into that really well. I'll do extra mantras sitting in meditation on my pain because I know that one really well. But bliss—that's scary! I'm scared to feel bliss...I don't know what it feels like...I've never felt it before. I'm not worthy— I can't do it!”

Do you fight with Vajrasattva that way? There is the Buddha, the omniscient Buddha who *sees* Buddha nature in us and we're going, “Buddha, Vajrasattva, look you're wrong. Everybody else has Buddha nature but not me.”

We're telling the Buddha he's wrong, aren't we? Aren't we? That's really dumb! (laughter) Maybe we need to give Vajrasattva a little bit of credit for being omniscient, and maybe he

knows something about us that we don't know. Maybe we should give him a break and let him get some light and nectar into us instead of making it so difficult and fighting him. We're like two-year olds, aren't we: kicking and fighting and biting and screaming and throwing temper tantrums. All Vajrasattra is trying to do is make us feel blissful! So anyway, think about it. And maybe don't fight so much with Vajrasattva. Give him a little bit of credit there.

So we have been seeing a little bit of monkey mind. Now it's very easy when we see monkey mind to get really into it: "Ah, there's my monkey mind again. There's my anger, there's my attachment, there's my jealousy. Again and again, I do the same stupid things." We get really into it. We're seeing the monkey mind, and we've already heard—I gave you a warning beforehand that you'd see all this stuff.

So you think, "Okay, I'm seeing it. I'm doing the retreat." No. Seeing it is step one. There are more steps to doing the retreat. We can really get into seeing our stuff and sit there and wallow in it, can't we? "Look at me. I'm so stupid. I'm so dysfunctional. My afflictions are so strong. I'm really hopeless. Look at my life! I do the same thing again and again." We go on and on and on. All it is is self-blame, isn't it? It's just standard self-blame, low self-esteem. Nothing unusual, nothing marvelous about that. We don't need to come here and do retreat to sit and get down on ourselves. We're quite professional at that one already.

So seeing the stuff is one thing, but then what we have to do is to see how all that stuff that we believe about our self is wrong, and how all those emotions that torment us are not us—how all those emotions that torment us are wrong conceptions. It's very, very important not just to say, "oh, I have so much anger." That's easy.

We need to sit there and look at the anger and understand **why** it is a wrong conception; **why** it is an affliction; **how** it causes misery; **how** it's an inaccurate perception or conception or interpretation of what's going on. Because if we just sit there and say, "I'm angry, and I wish I weren't, and I wish it would go away," nothing's going to happen, is it? We have to completely understand why when we're angry it has nothing to do with reality, the reality of the situation.

We have to go back and look at how anger is interpreting everything through the eyes of "me, I, my and mine." And how anger is forgetting about karma: how anger is just focused outward on the other person and what they're doing and neglecting our self and our responsibility. So to really see how anger is limited and inaccurately conceives the situation.

Same thing when there's attachment. You'll have a whole meditation session on attachment. Pick your object of choice. You can spend a whole meditation session— 2, 3, 4, or maybe a few days— meditating on our object of attachment. Then you go, "that's a nice fantasy, nice daydream. Umm, beats the anger meditation." But we have to identify: "oh, that's attachment." We can't just sit there and let attachment romp in our mind and make a mess. But to actually identify, "that's attachment and how does attachment make me feel? Attachment makes me feel dissatisfied."

Look at our own experience. What's the result of attachment? Dissatisfaction and fear, isn't it? Because when we're attached to something we're afraid of not getting it, and if we have it

we're afraid of losing it. Where does anxiety come from? That's the same thing. I'm anxious because I'm clinging and craving it. I'm anxious that I won't get it, or I have my object of attachment and I'm anxious that it's going to leave me or it's all going to be over. So look and see what's the result of attachment.

Attachment's here. This is the result of attachment. Do I want the result of attachment? Do I like the result of attachment? No. I'm perpetually dissatisfied— always wanting more, always wanting better; no matter what I'm doing, feeling like I should be doing something else, that I'm never good enough, what I have isn't good enough, what I do isn't good enough. Really seeing that— seeing the result of attachment for what it is, and saying, "hey, I'd better do something with this attachment because it's making me miserable."

Then also seeing how attachment misapprehends the situation. Why do we get lost in our daydreams? Because we think attachment is apprehending the person or object or situation or idea or whatever it is correctly. But if it were, why are we so miserable? So then we have to look: "Okay, here's this thing, whatever it is I'm attached to, and how am I apprehending it and does it really exist that way? This person that I'm just longing for. Do they exist like I think they exist? This peanut butter sandwich that I'm craving, does it really exist the way I think it exists? (laughter) This job that I want to have or this lottery I want to win or whatever it is we're craving— does it really have the ability to provide me with the kind of happiness that I'm imputing it has the ability to provide me with?"

And look in our life at all the past situations when we've been attached to similar people or objects or places or things or ideas or whatever. Check our past: has that ever brought us lasting happiness? Then when you see that attachment makes you miserable, and you also see that it's a wrong conception, then applying the antidote and letting it go is very good and very easy. It's not a problem then. You're not fighting with yourself.

It's the same thing with anger or jealousy or arrogance or whatever it is that's manifesting at that time. If we clearly contemplate its results, its disadvantages—what happens when it runs our life—and second, clearly analyze how we are interpreting the situation and see if it's true. See very clearly that it's hallucinating. There's nothing to believe in, the stories that our attachment and arrogance and jealousy and pride and so on tell us. They are just hallucinations. Then, when we see that so clearly, letting them go is very easy— it's not a big problem, because who wants to drink poison anyway.

But if we don't see the disadvantages because we're sitting there telling ourselves, "I'm so bad for having this emotion," because when we're sitting there telling ourselves we're bad, we have no time to look at the results of that emotion, do we? When we're sitting there feeling guilty for having that emotion, we have no chance to check up that emotion and see if it apprehends reality correctly. Just sitting and wallowing in our stuff is not practicing.

That whole thing about waking up and, "oh yeah, *I'm* the patient." That's a big realization: I'm the patient. That's a step in the right direction. But some patients just sit there and look at all the medicine on the shelf and say, "oh, that's very nice. I remember the pharmacy where I got that medicine. That pharmacist was very nice. And I remember that bottle. It's a nice looking pharmacy bottle. I remember where I got that." That patient is sitting there

going, “I’m a patient. I’m miserable. I’m a patient.” But they haven’t gotten the point of taking the medicine yet— they’re just looking at the bottles!

We need to really take the medicine, not just look at the bottles and think about the kind pharmacist. “Oh, I remember where I learned about the antidotes to anger. That lama was so nice, and that text was so nice, and we had such a good time at that teaching, and he was so compassionate.” That’s nice but we’re not taking the medicine! Do you think the pharmacist goes through all that labor so that we can look at the bottle? Do you think that our teachers go through all that labor so we can reminisce about when we received a certain teaching? No, it’s for us to take the medicine. Be very attentive in your meditation, and remember to take the medicine.

Also, whatever is coming up, put it in a Dharma context. So let’s say you’re having a meditation session and you’re off on the beach with prince charming. Or you’re off in the kitchen with the peanut butter and the chocolate, or you’re off at your job with your diplomas and degrees and pay raises and a fat bank account—whatever it is, whatever you’re doing.

Again, instead of just feeling bad about being distracted and getting discouraged and beating yourself up, and instead of just psychoanalyzing it, “Oh yeah, I’m feeling anger again, I wonder what the root of my anger is? Well when I was a little kid that happened, and then this happened, and maybe I’m borderline, maybe I’m manic-depressive.” We go through these because we’re all amateur shrinks, aren’t we? If we aren’t psychoanalyzing somebody else we’re psychoanalyzing ourselves. Just drop that! That’s not what we came here to do.

Instead, put whatever distraction or whatever it is into a Dharma context. “Oh, I’m on the beach with prince charming; that’s eight worldly concerns. Oh, that’s what eight worldly concerns is about.” Or, “I’m sitting here being so afraid I’m going to have a horrible reputation, all these people are going to find out how horrible I am, and I’m so filled with fear and anxiety about my reputation and all of this.” Look at it and identify: “This is one of the root delusions. This stems from attachment, oh, six root delusions.”

Or you’re getting really angry because somebody trashed your reputation, so you’re not only clinging onto it but you’re really mad at the person that trashed it. [Identify:] “Eight worldly concerns. Anger: one of the six root delusions. This is what the Buddha was talking about.” Or you’re sitting beating yourself up and then beating yourself up because you’re beating yourself up and then feeling guilty because you’re beating yourself up for beating yourself up. So when you’re in that, look at it: “Oh, this is the laziness of discouragement. It’s part of the obscurations when we teach about Joyous Effort; the laziness of discouragement is one of the hindrances for joyous effort and doing virtue. Oh, this is what that is, this is what the Buddha was talking about there.”

Or you’re sitting there feeling so discontent, so dissatisfied, “Oh, this is one of the six sufferings of samsara. The suffering of dissatisfaction. Oh, that’s what it’s about.” Or you’re all bummed out because something that was really wonderful faded away, “Oh this is another one of the six sufferings of samsara, that of impermanence, instability.” What I’m getting at is this: everything that’s happening in your mind, relate it to a Dharma thing—not to some kind of psychological stuff. That way you will really understand the Lamrim from

your own experience. Are you getting what I'm saying? Then it isn't just a list of six of that, three of that, and eight of this.

Especially when they talk about the suffering of human beings, not getting what you want, losing what you like, getting what you don't want: Wow, that's our life, isn't it? And that's only three of them out of the eight. Every time you see one of them in your mind, "Oh that's one of those eight sufferings, one of the eight dukkhas of being a human being or of samsara, not getting what I want— here it is again."

We can see it in big things in our life, we wanted to do such and such and such by the time we were this age and it didn't happen, we didn't get what we wanted and we can see it every day after lunch because we didn't get what we wanted. And part of it is we don't even know what we want! (laughter) So it has nothing to do with the cooks, because we usually get better than what we fantasized, but in our mind: "I wanted a McDonald's Double Burger for lunch today and instead I got this healthy stuff!" (laughter)

Retreatant: I've realized I have this mind that sort of wants "not this." Whatever is in front of me. I don't know what I want, I just know I don't want this. I don't want to deal with whatever's in front of me.

VTC: Yes, when the Buddha talked about the disadvantages of samsara one is dissatisfaction. That's it, that's such a good illustration. Whatever we have, it's just like 'I don't want this, I want something else.' We don't know what something else is.

New R: Something really shocking is that we don't know what something else is but we know that whatever something else is we can get, it will work. It never is enough. No matter if we really get what we think we need, that's not it.

VTC: Yes, that's exactly it, and that is one of the six disadvantages of samsara: no matter what we get, it never fulfills us. And that's not just this life because they say we've been born in every realm in samsara. So we've been born in the desire realm, gods... If you think a McDonald's Burger is good (it makes me want to vomit!) but anyway, if you think that's good, what they have in the deva realm is way better and we've been born in the deva realms countless times. Everything there is so nice until right before you die, and still it never fulfills us, it never makes us totally satisfied. We've had all of that before.

Really identify when that mind comes up: "Oh this is one of those six disadvantages." Or, when you're sitting there mourning because you lost something that was really good, you had this great job and then you lost it, you had a great relationship and then it didn't go well, you had your health and then your health disappeared, you had some good status and then you lost it. That's another one of the six, of fluctuation, going high, going low, going high, going low—no stability.

If we really identify it in these Dharma terms it brings a lot of understanding of the Lamrim into our hearts. Then Lamrim isn't lists and conceptual stuff, but we see that the Buddha was really talking to us about us. When we see that, that makes our faith and refuge so strong, because it becomes so clear that the Buddha really understood us in a way that we've never understood ourselves. Then we have very strong faith and that's not blind faith, it's faith based on experience, it's faith based on understanding.

When we have strong faith in the Buddha or when we have a close relationship with our spiritual mentor, that makes our mind much more courageous. And it becomes much easier to penetrate deeper in our meditation and expose further layers of garbage because we realize we're not alone in this horrible universe, stuck in samsara with no alternative— but there's the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha right there by us. There's Vajrasattva working so hard trying to get us to experience some bliss, and so that sustains us and allows us to go deeper in the meditation.

Then of course as we see things clearer in a deeper way, that increases our faith because we understand the Dharma more from our own experience. When the faith is stronger then the understanding increases, so the two things go back and forth like that, okay? So the faith here is not faith that we can make ourselves have. We can't say, "I should have faith in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha." If we just do the meditations correctly and really identify things, then we automatically see that what the Buddha said was correct from our own experience and the faith comes without trying.

All that other kind of faith, e.g. "Oh my teacher's a Buddha; I got goose bumps; I saw a rainbow." Five years from now, those people aren't going to be around. Sometimes those people can transform that faith and make it something really, really deep. But usually that kind of faith is not based on understanding—it's Hollywood. It's wanting to get a buzz from the teachings.

Then, some other things [to tell you]: One thing is rejoicing at being wrong. "What are you saying: I should be happy that I'm wrong?" Well, yes. Take our grasping at inherent existence. If things really were inherently existent, that would be really bad news. We'd really be stuck. So isn't it nice that we are wrong? That we think inherent existence exists but it doesn't, isn't it wonderful that we are wrong?

I think that getting all of this samsaric stuff—"it's going to bring me permanent happiness, it's always going to be there. I just have to set my samsaric life up in a certain way. You know, get all my ducks lined up and then samsara is going to be perfect: I'm going to be satisfied. Everything is going to go the way I want and it's never going to change." We think like that, don't we?

Isn't it nice that we're wrong? Isn't it wonderful that that's a totally wrong way of thinking? Because how many times have we worked so hard to line our ducks in a row and they all swim off somewhere else! (laughter) So isn't it nice that our mind that's grasping at impermanent things as permanent— isn't it nice that we're wrong?

Every time that we got angry, if we were really right—imagine that every time that you got angry, you were right. That would be hell, wouldn't it? If every time that we were angry, we were right, that means that how we're interpreting the situation is accurate, and anger is the only response to have. Then we would be stuck in our anger for infinite time because it's a correct response to a correctly interpreted situation. Isn't it wonderful that we're wrong? Every time that we're angry, isn't it wonderful that we're wrong?

Because we're wrong, that means we can let go of the anger. We don't have to be enslaved by it. Similar with attachment, when attachment blows something up: when we're holding

and clinging and fantasizing and daydreaming and wishing and longing and [VTC makes whimpering sounds]... Isn't it wonderful that it's a total hallucination? If this object or person or whatever it is, if they really were like that, we would be stuck in the pain of attachment and longing and craving and fear for eternity because it would be the only correct response to a correctly perceived situation. So it's wonderful that we're wrong!

We have to really learn to rejoice at being wrong. Every time we're bummed out about something, just rejoice: "I'm wrong! Wow! I just have to figure out how I'm wrong and the whole feeling of being bummed out is going to go away. But I'm so happy because I know when I'm bummed out I'm WRONG! Yippee, I'm wrong!" So try that, because it's true, isn't it? It's good to be wrong. It can be hell to be right—very good to be wrong. I'm sitting here worrying about this, obsessing about that, wanting my body to be this way, not wanting my body to be that way. I'm wrong! Yippee! (laughter) Yippee!—this is total hallucination! Yippee! (laughter) Things don't exist the way they appear to be! So glad— appearance is miserable! (laughter)

When we see things we don't like about our self, instead of labeling it, "oh, this is the crappy part of me I don't like. This part of me I wish would go away. This is the part I hope nobody ever finds out about because if they did, they never would like me. So Vajrasattva, I hope you're not omniscient because I don't want you to know about this horrible part of me." That's what we think, isn't it?

But instead of identifying it as 'this horrible part of me that I'm so ashamed of', identify it, label it as 'my dukkha.' "This is my dukkha." That's all it is. It's just dukkha. Dukkha, what we translate as suffering or unsatisfactory conditions. "This is just dukkha. That's why I'm practicing Dharma: to dispel this, eradicate this." If we identify something as, 'oh, that's all these parts of me that I can't stand,' then we feel like we're in union, in oneness with it. There's no way to get free of it. We feel that all that horrible stuff is me, and we're just stuck in the middle of it.

We're wrong! Yippee, we're wrong! If we just see that that's my dukkha, that's my suffering. That's all it is. Buddha talked about samsaric suffering. This is it! The pain I'm having, these parts of me I don't like and am ashamed of— blah, blah, blah. This is my dukkha. That's why I'm practicing. Everybody has their own dukkha, and I'm not the only one that has this!

So whatever it is that we feel is this terrible unsightly part of our self—"I'm not the only one that has this and I'm going to take on ALL the suffering of all the other living beings who have the same horrible stuff, demons that they're fighting with inside. I'm going to take it all on. As long as I'm going through this, I'm going to take all their stuff on myself." Then the mind is so peaceful.

Those were just a few things. But you have to remember them and practice them now. So I think you should put a big sign on your table that says, "Yippee, I'm wrong!" And another one that says "This is my dukkha. I'm going to bear it for the benefit— I'm going to take on all sentient beings' dukkha as I experience this."

R: Another one should say, "This is their dukkha" to all the people that harm you. You can really relate because you can see yourself in them; you can really understand what they're doing. Same thing.

VTC: Exactly. We can see that we're no different than them: our dukkha, their dukkha. When they harm us, it's coming from their own misery. It's very powerful to really see the dukkha of the people we can't stand, the people we feel have wronged us. To really see what their dukkha was and how they were doing the best they could do given the situation they had. It helps us let go of so much resentment.

Should we do *The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas*? Verse Twenty-five. The next few verses are about the six far-reaching attitudes.

25. When those who want enlightenment must give even their body,  
There's no need to mention external things.  
Therefore without hope for return or any fruition  
Give generously—  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

So giving is one of the basic practices of Dharma whether you're on the Bodhisattva Path or not. Giving is one of the basic practices, and giving is just a good quality of a good human being, isn't it? So Togme Sangpo would say, Bodhisattvas give even their body. If we want to prepare ourselves to give our body— although we're not actually allowed to until we have a direct realization of emptiness. But if we want to practice in preparation and think about being able to do that one day, then what need is there to talk about giving material things that 'come-come, go-go'? Do you see what I mean? This cup, this recorder, these glasses. (Looking at the cat) I don't own him so I can't give him. (laughter)

R: Did I tell you he's going to Mexico! (laughter and whimper from VTC)

VTC: No, we don't own animals, we just take care of them. All these things, just to think—they're impermanent, temporary things—give them and how much joy comes from giving. It doesn't mean we have to send our self to the poor house. Just releasing the attachment that has so much fear, that if I give I won't have. That's why in the inner mandala offering there's that phrase, "without any sense of loss." That's very important.

Without any fear that if I give I won't have; and what he's saying here about expectations, when we do give that we'll get some perks. So we might think, "oh, I'll get some good karma." Giving to get some good karma, that's a good motivation. But if we're practicing the Bodhisattva Path, we don't want to give for that reason. We really want to let go of even fruition in terms of next life and dedicate it all to the benefit of sentient beings. But for us ordinary beings even if we get to the point that 'I'll give so that I can have wealth in a future life,' for us that's actually good compared to where we usually are at. Because we're usually at, "I don't want to give. If I give I won't have." Or, "if I give, instead of expecting something in future life, if I give then these people will be nice to me. Then they'll give me things in return. Then they'll do favors for me. Then I'll have something to kind of hang over their head so if they do something I don't like I can say, 'oh I gave you this and this and this' so they'll feel obliged to do things my way." So sometimes we give with a lot of expectation.

Or we give because we want to be acknowledged. When we read the names of all the benefactors out every month, don't we all listen: "is my name on there? Are they dedicating for me?" Whenever there's a list of benefactors, do we always check, "oh, don't worry; it's not ego attachment. I'm just SEEING if the secretary is really efficient and got all the details.

(in hushed voice) Is my name there?” So try to give this kind of expectation up and instead just give for the joy of giving.

There are different kinds of giving: there’s material giving; there’s giving of the Dharma which is said to be the best kind of giving; there’s giving of protection so when other beings are in danger, protecting them, helping the flies or the bugs that are going to get stepped on; giving love when beings are in emotional turmoil, giving love and support, encouragement. So there are different kinds of giving. That’s one thing that I think the Abbey— as part of our practice, what we’re aiming towards is trying to make everything we do in our life a gift.

Verse Twenty-six is the far-reaching attitude of ethical discipline:

26. Without ethics you can’t accomplish your own well-being,  
So wanting to accomplish others’ is laughable.  
Therefore without worldly aspirations  
Safeguard your ethical discipline—  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

This is so true: without ethical discipline, we can’t even prevent our own suffering. So talking about saving all sentient beings is laughable, it’s inane, it’s silly. We can’t even keep ourselves out of samsara. This is a point really to think about because you see lots of people, “oh, I want these high teachings, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, union of bliss and emptiness. I want to do that and a three-year retreat. [Then] You said one of the precepts was to stop drinking. No, I’m not taking that one. You said one of the 5 precepts is to stop lying. I’m not taking that one either. And to stop sleeping around. Definitely not taking that one!”

We want this high stuff but like the basic stuff [forget it!]. So if we can’t create the cause for our own happiness through ethical discipline, which is the foundation in practice, then thinking we’re going to gain enlightenment quickly through these high practices and save all sentient beings from samsara, is laughable, isn’t it? Ethical discipline is so important. When we practice good ethical discipline, then our mind is free of regret; it’s free of guilt; it’s free of shame. Because we haven’t done anything to feel guilty or regretful or shameful about. I think ethical discipline is a very good way to have a peaceful mind, to save ourselves a lot of suffering.

So the precepts are really something to cherish; something very, very precious— to cherish our precepts. There are two lines here that touch something in me because I remember when I first met the Dharma, and I was thinking... This crazy thought entered my mind that “oh, maybe I should ordain.” Then, of course, I heard my mother on this shoulder and my father on that shoulder and my husband above my head and my friends all around me and everybody saying, “you can’t do that because we’ll be miserable if you do that! Think about how miserable we’ll be because we won’t see you and you won’t be part of our lives and dah, dah, dah!” They made up a whole scene that wasn’t realistic.

And then I was thinking, “You know, I could live the life that they all want me to live, and try to make them all happy now. But I’m never going to succeed in making them happy. And by living that kind of life my ethical discipline is going to be in shambles because I won’t have the strength of mind to avoid the ten negative actions. I could live a life that everybody

else will say they're happy with me living, but I'm not going to be able to help those people at all because in the next life I'm going to be born in the lower realms." So it was the same kind of thing. You can't accomplish your own well-being— we can't keep ourselves out of the lower realms, so how are we going to help anybody else if we can't keep ourselves out of the lower realms? Aiming to keep ourselves out of the lower realms, we can be of benefit to others.

It says, *without worldly aspirations, safeguard your ethical discipline*. What does it mean to have worldly aspirations in terms of ethical discipline? It means having this mind that is arrogant: "I keep my precepts so purely. Look at how purely I keep my precepts. I'm very holy." That's why when you took the eight Mahayana precepts this morning— where it talks about ethics without conceit, that's what its referring to: getting a swollen head out of conceit because we keep our morality so purely. So it's saying, let that one go too.

Verse Twenty-seven:

27. To Bodhisattvas who want a wealth of virtue  
Those who harm are like a precious treasure.  
Therefore towards all cultivate patience  
Without hostility—  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Just as when you want to practice generosity a beggar is not a hindrance; when you want to practice generosity, a beggar helps you. I remember this last trip to India, I had some extra bread and I wanted to give it to a beggar, and then I forgot to take it out the time I was going out. So then it was right before I was going to leave Dharmasala. I took it out then. There was this one beggar who always sat in a certain place on the Lingkor (a circumambulation route in Dharmasala), and I went to where he was and he wasn't there. I was like, "but I have this bread!" I looked all around; I couldn't find a beggar. I had been so mindless that I had forgotten the bread in my room in the morning when, of course, I saw the beggars then. When I brought the bread out the beggars weren't anywhere to be seen. It was, "Oh my goodness!" Finally, he came. I was very glad.

So just as a beggar is not a hindrance to generosity, you really miss a beggar when you want to give something. So too, the person who harms us is somebody who helps us practice patience. They aren't a disadvantage or hindrance to our Dharma practice; they're somebody who helps our Dharma practice. So that's everybody who cusses at you, everybody who throws things at you, everybody who cuts you off on the highway, everybody who dumps their garbage in front of your house, everybody who doesn't DO what they're supposed to DO when they're supposed to do it!

This verse is the source of your being able to practice patience. So to really see that to Bodhisattvas who want a wealth of virtue, those who harm are like a precious treasure. So that person—you're filing your taxes and they're supposed to send you a certain form and they don't send it to you: They are a precious treasure. And your kids who do the exact opposite of what you tell them to do are a precious treasure. I'm so glad I didn't have any! (laughter) I missed that precious treasure! (laughter) Whenever I was naughty my mother

would say, “Wait until you have kids. I hope you get one just like you, then you’ll know what I went through!” So I was a smarty-pants. (laughter) I didn’t have any.

So *therefore towards all cultivate patience without hostility*. Patience doesn’t mean sitting there and stuffing the anger in our heart and going, “ yeah, I’m really patient... [Then, as an aside:] This guy’s driving me crazy!” That’s not patience. It’s “patience without hostility.” In other words: “This is the way it is. Might as well relax and be happy about it. This is what the person said; this is what the person did. What to do?”

Some of the inmates tell me that one of the big sources of anger in a prison is somebody cutting you off in chow line. So you’re waiting in line to get your food, and someone else just butts in front of you. You can have a violent fight.

R: It happens here too! (laughter)

VTC: I’m glad you didn’t put that in the e-news. (laughter) Everybody’s so sensitive: “This is my place. You can’t cut in front of me.” From the outside you look at that and it’s so silly, isn’t it? How silly. It’s so childish. I just remember being in grade school. Remember how in grade school people would have fights because somebody butted in front of them in line? After a certain point you just realize, this is so silly; it’s so childish. Then you hear that you can have big fist-fights in prison because of this. It’s so childish.

I can’t remember what it was I was upset about recently—you know things come up in retreat. Of course, I have all these reasons because my anger’s right; I’m not wrong when I’m angry; I’m right when I’m angry because I forgot to practice what I taught you about being happy to be wrong! Then all of a sudden, I thought of the inmates, and all of a sudden the thing I was angry about, I thought, “this is just as stupid as getting angry because somebody butts in front of you in line. I think I have such a GOOD reason for being angry, but actually it’s as good as being mad because somebody cut in front of me. So silly; so childish. You just let go... Then you have patience without hostility.

We’ll do one more verse: Twenty-eight.

28. Seeing even Hearers and Solitary Realizers, who accomplish  
Only their own good, strive as if to put out a fire on their head,  
For the sake of all beings make enthusiastic effort  
The source of all good qualities—  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

So people always get confused about this: Hearers and Solitary Realizers with fire on their head— what’s going on? Who puts fire on their head? Sometimes we talk about three vehicles: the Hearer vehicle; the Solitary Realizer vehicle; and the Bodhisattva vehicle. So a Hearer is working for nirvana for themselves, and they’re called Hearer because they hear the teachings and they teach other beings. Solitary Realizer is also working for nirvana for themselves, but they’re called solitary because the life in which they attain nirvana, they usually manifest in a time period when there’s no historical Buddha alive so they teach but just by gestures and sign language and things like that. But they practice in solitude. They’re said to be like rhinoceroses [a solitary animal]. And the Bodhisattva vehicle that we’re familiar with.

So Hearers and Solitary Realizers have compassion but are not working for the benefit of all sentient beings; not working to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. They're working for their own nirvana, but still— wow, they work really hard! They don't lie around and drink tea. They work really hard at their practice and they develop incredibly good qualities. So even these people who are working for their own spiritual enlightenment, they work very diligently.

About this analogy of a fire on your head... I've noticed that sometimes they have examples, analogies in the scriptures, that just seem really strange to us; or part of the analogy fits, but the other part doesn't. This is an example of this, because if you had a fire on your head, are you going to sit around and watch TV? Are you going to sit and indulge, feeling sorry for yourself if you have a fire on your head? Are you going to sit and have a whole meditation session on attachment if you have a fire on your head? No. If you have a fire on your head, you're going to do something pronto, right? The analogy is like that. You don't have the luxury to do stupidios. You get on the ball and do your practice.

Now we hear the example like this fire on your head and we think, "Panic! There's a fire on my head! AAAAAAAAHH! [VTC is screaming and frightens the cat away]" Sorry! (to the cat) (laughter) Don't worry there's no fire on your fur. (laughter) We think, "Freaked out, panic" and then we think, "Is that how I'm suppose to practice the Dharma? Being freaked out with panic? Is that what joyous effort is? That I've got to push myself. I can't rest and I can't relax because there's a fire on my head I've got to stay up until midnight meditating, fighting my attachment! Ahhhhh!" [With cries of exasperation.]

No, that's not what the analogy is telling us. It doesn't mean panic-freak out. Did that last part get on tape? I'm thinking of somebody who needs to hear it. (laughter)

R: Could you repeat that for a friend?

VTC: You want me to repeat that for a friend? (Laughter) Okay, so "practicing as if there's a fire on your head" doesn't mean that you go into freak-out mode and you push yourself and you stress out, AHHHH got to fight my attachment, got to fight my anger, there's a fire on my head and I'm going to hell, I've got to counteract this! No, it doesn't mean practicing like that because we're going to go crazy before we get any Dharma practice done. It just means that instead of wasting time, lying in front of the TV, we get on the ball and deal with what's going on in our mind. But we deal with what's going on in our mind in a relaxed manner not in a freaked-out manner.

VTC: Okay, your turn.

R: I have something good to report.

VTC: Good!

R: In the beginning of the retreat I think you asked us to pay attention to our disturbing attitudes. Last summer I realized that I had this trio that often comes together; anger, discouragement, and doubt. So I turned them into The Three Stooges at the beginning of retreat. (laughter) The doubt part I think I actually worked something out that I think is going to be helpful. I figured out that I would have this doubt and discouragement going on and then I would get angry because I found that Buddhism is so seamless. It's like I was saying at the beginning of the retreat: "[practice/enlightenment/Buddhism] it's too hard!" One Rinpoche said, "if you start, don't ever stop," and I was feeling really trapped and I would get angry and I can remember doing this a number of times over the years. Then

Dianne was leading a meditation this week, and she said something at the very end... it was like, I finally got my answer.

Which was, well— it wasn't just that— it was over the course of the last couple of weeks, realizing that I think I was doubting the Buddhas or I thought that I was. So then it seemed really unworkable. Like something that I couldn't work out; I couldn't find a key to get out of this. And then I realized that what I was doubting was my own ability to do this. Dianne said something like, "The path that will never fail you," and I realized that I completely believe that: the path will not fail you. Actually realizing it was all self-doubt made it a lot easier because you can do something about that. If you do meditations correctly, results follow. You have to come to these conclusions; if you're not coming to these conclusions, then you're doing the meditation wrong. So you just keep going and work it out. Ven. Tenzin Kacho once said, "it's only your mind that will turn you away from the Dharma." It was a big solution. I'm sure I'll have my little trio [The Three Stooges] come up again, but it is different because the seamlessness that was the enemy is now the friend. I've looked at this quite awhile and every time I come up to this conclusion. The mind is somewhat clear, and at least I can see how things fit in a certain way and [in the past] I would get upset with the seamlessness; but now it's like this strength because 'the path will not fail you'. So that was good. Of the three I felt that doubt was the worst to have because it was the one that could really turn me away [from the Dharma].

VTC: It's good to be able to identify doubt as doubt because usually we don't identify it as the affliction of doubt but instead we believe in it and we think, "oh yes, this is a very good question. I need to check this out: maybe the wrong teaching, wrong path." That's nice to see the path is unfailing, then self-doubt, that one.

R: Yes, I can work with that one.

R: I found this week that the descriptions of the attachment to fantasy and projection and romantic notions that life could be other than it is now, and days were going by and I was totally hooked into the attachment of some sort of idyllic, heroic life that was going to be the fruition of whatever I'm doing here. I got to the point of starting to be discouraged and giving myself a hard time. Then for a dedication one night, Pema gave us that list of all the volunteers who have been helping this retreat [from Coeur d'Alene Dharma Friends, neighbors, Abbey supporters, etc.] and I was sitting on the cushion and I was listening to them. I had the list and so it had the names and what they each did, and it was like for the first time I suddenly realized I was there on that cushion for them. And that they were counting on me.

I mean, I know that they are doing this, that there's this huge support going on, but it was like I wasn't connecting it. When I saw their names, and because I know so many of them personally, that each of them were doing this and how we were literally dependent upon their kindness to be here in this situation! It was also in the part in our offering food about not keeping our vows for these people who entrust their generosity, their food, their time, and their money for us to be here to be able to do this practice. Sitting on the cushion and getting hooked into these fantasies was not serving them whatsoever! So even getting out of, "Well, [self], if you can't hook into this not serving you then step outside your self and see the fact that you are not serving these dear incredible kind human beings who are keeping this place running like a pure land so I can sit here and work on my mind!"

So that whole idea that I depend on every sentient being for my enlightenment... it's the first time that I've ever gotten it really, deep in a place in my heart instead of a concept, and the gratitude that came up for me. To know that they are doing this and we don't even see them, they're like these invisible...

VTC: Yes, it's like the dirty laundry disappears and then it re-appears clean!

R: And then this beautiful food comes out of the workshop and goes into the refrigerator downstairs, things show up: film, deodorant, bandages, nutritional yeast, and deer food. And that they depend on us, they are counting on us, they are doing this because they believe in us, and they have faith in the Dharma and the way that it is manifesting by the causes and conditions that we have created. They are so much a part of the causes and conditions that we have created and we have a responsibility to them. It just took that attachment and blew it right out of my head.

VTC: Good!

New R: This morning I was thinking about all these people that help us and I wondered if I would be able to do all this work they are doing. It's such a nice job they are doing and critical job and they rely on us, they believe in what we are doing. Wow, it would be an incredible experience to help others like they are helping us. I can't imagine myself being in the supermarket with all the lists. I feel very fortunate. I would like to give back to others what I have received here...

VTC: What you said is exactly what Flora's doing. She was at the retreat last year and then year she came to serve the retreat [this year].

R: I realize I need faith, the good faith not the bad faith. I know I have a little, but I need to have more understanding and then I can have more faith.

R: I had an interesting experience this week. One day I became upset and my self-grasping and my big "I" was very strong and for the first time ever I remembered to do the four-point analysis. It was very interesting because I don't think I did it very clearly, but I did it nonetheless. And the thing that was shocking to me was doing that, all of the garbage in my mind just dropped, it just was gone. That was very shocking to me: it was so efficient! Like six or eight seconds, then gone! And something like that usually would stay around for least a few hours, ruminating.

It also brought up that I have carried this notion in my mind— that understanding one gets when one practices would be on the cushion, but it's not— it was there, it was that. Very efficient, that's what amazed me.

VTC: You can see why it's said that's the thing that cuts the root of samsara. Because it is very efficient, none of the afflictions can stand up.

R: Then I thought that's ego not wanting me to do this because it knows it would stop it. One other question: if one develops calm abiding, is that the mechanism that you are able to realize emptiness over time because you keep yourself in a place of not in ego?

VTC: With calm abiding and single-pointed concentration you're able to temporarily suppress the very gross afflictions, but you can't cut them from the root. It's only the special insight, the wisdom, that cuts them from the root. But when you have calm-abiding, when you combine that with the analytical mind of special insight— because the concentrated mind is so powerful— then when you really see that there's nothing there to hold onto, you can see it clearly, and you can stay on 'there's nothing there'. So the calm abiding gives the mind the strength to stay with what you've discovered, and because it's also free of the chatter, it's easier to do the analysis too.

R: So is it the repetition of that over time then that gives you the realization?

VTC: Yes. It's learning, thinking and meditating over time.

R: What does samadhi mean?

VTC: Samadhi means single-pointedness—where you can keep your mind on an object with the ability to concentrate. So we have some degree of the mental factors, samadhi now, but it's undeveloped. So we need to strengthen it. Then the word samadhi is also used like when they talk about the Bodhisattvas have different samadhis that they do. It means different practices they do with samadhi; for example, manifesting many bodies and going to the pure lands and making offerings to the Buddhas. There are always different samadhi practices that they do. That's one usage of it, and another usage is that factor of concentration that we want to be able to perfect so it becomes single-pointed.

New R: I was doing the Vajrasattva practice but I was kind of able to watch myself doing the practice. I have spent some time trying to surrender to Vajrasattva kind of consciously for some weeks. When this different mind state came that also came up because I haven't actually been able to visualize while doing the mantra. So I don't really try to very often. I do a little bit, but I get like I'm juggling. So I just don't bother. I just stay with my concentration; I try to concentrate on the mantra and not the visualization. I do them separately mostly. But when this was happening I thought—I wasn't sure whether I should drop the practice and see where this went. But I just decided to see if I could visualize and stay with the mantra instead. It's hard to know. I wasn't really sure where to go, and I didn't really analyze it. I was just doing the practice.

VTC: It was a more focused state of mind?

R: Yeah, I was really there. I felt kind of full also. My body felt different. I wasn't really thinking. I had experiences like this before when you're just 'there'. It was really direct, but also I was able to decide without it changing the experience at all. I don't know if I can communicate what happened. If that ever happened again. . . . I remember you said once, every 254 sessions maybe something different will happen. (laughter)

VTC: I think something different happens every session.

R: I have had a few times in my life when it feels like it's altered; your experience is altered.

VTC: Just stay with it; just stay with it.

R: Stay with it. Drop the structure a little bit.

VTC: I don't know. Sometimes the structure is what supports that experience from happening—I mean supports it and enables it to happen. So just see; you have to see.

R: [via a translator]: Although she feels that in the outside she might look the same; she feels unknown to herself on the inside. What's she's seeing now is kind of unknown to her. For instance, last retreat she spent most of the time working with her emotions. It was basically an emotional retreat, working in her emotions. This year, because she's more confident [with the practice], she trusts the practice and herself and her ability; she has been more able to work with the practice in a different way. She's more mindful, and she has more concentration, more awareness of what's going on. She feels that she's more able to focus on different aspects. It's like being able to apply the practice, the different aspects of the practice to whatever is necessary in different moments. Like 'this is the moment for me to focus on the visualization or the mantra or what's coming up or whatever.'

My feeling is that I have real confidence in the practice in what's going on. Because of that, whatever comes up, whatever happens, I feel okay. At the end of the practice or the session, no matter if I was not being able to concentrate or whatever was going on, I have the feeling

I really trust the practice. So I'm sure something good was going on. It's that kind of contentment that I didn't know before.

VTC: Good, good.

R: I have something to say that's related to what both R#1 and R#2 were saying. I think the inmate too in the letter. Just looking at my life and seeing how much of it is really involved around control or trying to control things, especially what I was feeling and how the Dharma fit into that pattern for me. I would try to use the Dharma to try to control things. Often when I felt out of control, I would stop practicing Dharma because I couldn't control myself. Then I would medicate my pain with addictions and things like that. And that's not so great!

But realizing that there never was control to begin with—just letting go of that idea of control, and then opening to the Dharma a little, and saying maybe just getting past this denial that I've got everything figured out, if I just push a little harder things will come to place. But letting go of that just a little and trying to apply some of the Dharma and seeing that it works. And it's like, “wait—“ it's disorientating almost. (laughter) “Where did that attachment go? I had it for 10 days and now where is it?”

R: And looking at the kindness of people who are helping us. It took that attachment and literally blew it out of my mind. It's like the Dharma just— phew!

R: I'm still at the stage where it's “I.” If I can't control a session perfectly, it's not as big of a deal anymore. Well, for the last two sessions at least. There was never control to begin with. It's just giving up this idea of control that was just wearing me out. Now there's a little bit more space, a little more room.

VTC: You said something very interesting at the beginning, about using the Dharma to control your mind. A lot of times that language is used, our mind is so ‘out of control,’ we've got to ‘control our mind’. We use the Dharma to control our mind. So you were probably picking up on that and then just putting it into that [grinding sound] control. (laughter) When that wasn't what it meant at all.

R: There were times I would say to myself, ‘I can't meditate now: I'm too out of control.’ I had this idea that meditation, it wasn't just sort of relating to what was going on. It was controlling and suppressing probably more than stopping it or clamping it down. That was the exact phrase. I can remember specific instances where I would say, ‘I'm too out of control to practice Dharma.’

VTC: Kind of like, “I've got to do it perfectly. It says to visualize this; I've got to do that. If I'm not doing it, I'm out of control; what's the use?”

R: Yeah, even just watching my breath...

R: I have one question about one of the verses. This idea of patience and not acting with hostility towards the person that is harmful. This has been in my mind for some time where things have happened in our world. Sometimes we're in different situations where we have to choose either to act or not to act. We know we don't have a pure motivation but something is going on that is really wrong. So sometimes I have the feeling— it must be of course my delusion. In a Dharma context with some teachers it's generally understood (or that's my feeling), that if your motivation is not clear, even if you know that something bad is happening, maybe you don't act. Because you're acting with anger or something. For instance, maybe you'll know why I'm saying this...

I know that right now I'm not angry with a certain person, a certain Dharma teacher. I really know that I'm not angry anymore. I know it, but I know what's going on. I really know what's going on. I know many people are being harmed by that person. Because I saw it, I really saw what's happening. So that's one situation.

I have read for instance the Dalai Lama saying 'when you know that one Dharma teacher is doing harm you should denounce the teacher.' I read it in one book. So that's one example with something that is in my mind. Another thing, for instance, in the world there are some atrocities. I don't like war; I'm never for violence. But there are some situations like what was going on in Afghanistan or in some countries where the girls—they take out the clitoris. All those atrocities that are part of certain cultures that I really find unacceptable for me. So if you have the ability or power to stop that, should you just stay away and let them deal with it? Or you take the responsibility of doing something, knowing yourself and knowing your motivation? But doing something—and then you take care of dealing with the bad karma or whatever. So it's a bit complicated.

VTC: So you're saying, I kind of heard a few different examples. One of them was your motivation isn't—there's some anger or something going on. But you also know that it's harmful. You were giving the examples of different things that happen in different cultures, and should we intervene? You said one thing in there: if we have the power to stop it. I think that's the really crucial thing. If you're somewhere and one person is beating on another. You might be angry, but if you have the power to stop that harm without killing the other person or something like that and you're willing to accept the karma, then you can do it. Accept the karma, and try and let go of the anger afterwards. But that's a situation where you can really stop the suffering. When you gave those examples of those certain cultural practices that you think are horrific, we do not have the power to stop those. One person standing up and denouncing something.

And in terms of practices in other cultures that we may not agree with, I think we have to be incredibly sensitive because a lot of those cultures are facing modernity and threatened. A lot of the good things in those cultures could get wiped out by modernity not only the things that may be unfair or unjust or whatever. So I think in talking and trying to do cultural reform on other cultures, I think it takes a tremendous amount of sensitivity. We could really devastate a whole cultural group by finding one thing that we didn't like about them. They think they have to become like us. Then they lose a lot of the good qualities of their culture. We have to be very, very delicate in how we speak about things. Sometimes it's easier to change things within our own culture because we know how to do it; we know the avenues. Hopefully, we could be more patient. Because one of the things in our culture that needs to be changed is how we try to affect change in other cultures! We come at it in a very imperialistic way: we're this very supreme culture. Forget about what happened in WWII in Europe and all the white people who did the most horrific things that probably have been done on the planet. Forget that! Our culture knows how to oppose it, injustice. Somehow its Euro-American culture ... blah, blah, blah. Its just arrogance. I think often times we really have to work within our own cultural context.

Then the other example about a Dharma teacher and the things that are going on... When His Holiness commented on that, he wasn't advocating 'let's make a big stink.' Like put it in the newspaper and make a big stink duh- duh- duh- duh. I remember after he said that some people did that about one teacher. I thought it was very unpleasant, especially because the people who did it were really angry at that teacher, even though they weren't his students. I think it involves a great deal of tact because there's a lot of karma involved when you

interfere with a relationship between a student and a teacher, even if the teacher is doing some funny things. If they are teaching some things that are beneficial... It's very, very delicate karma.

I asked Geshe Sonam Rinchen about this one time, and what he recommended—and I had asked him more about a personal thing—if you have a very good friend who is going to a teacher and that teacher is doing some pretty weird stuff: Should you tell your friend? Should you criticize? What should you do?

He said if that person is already a disciple of that teacher, you don't criticize the teacher. But you can maintain your friendship with that person and if that person has doubts about their teacher, then they can come to you and you can help them sort that out afterwards. He said if that person hasn't become a disciple of that teacher, then you can say that there's some controversial behavior here that you really need to check into and be careful of. Not in the sense of gossip, but in the sense of just reminding the person that it's always really important to check out the qualities of a teacher and not just go for somebody who looks charismatic or something that looks good. It's very hard because a teacher may be doing something that is not Dharma, but there's a whole group of students who have faith in that person.

If you come and criticize that person, often what happens is people lose faith in the Dharma. So instead of just saying, "oh it's my thing because I overestimated this teacher; I got into idol worship instead of properly evaluating the teacher—" many people, instead of saying that and taking that responsibility themselves, or maybe [say I was] 'being blind or jumping into things or falling for charisma'—what they do is they say, "oh, I thought this person was so great and they turn out to be so lousy. Therefore the Dharma doesn't work. So forget the Dharma!" That's very harmful for people. We don't want to get people in a position where they just kind of abandon the Dharma altogether because of a negative experience with a teacher. So for the people who are very devoted to that person [teacher], there's not much you can say or do because they're very devoted and that's it. You have to wait for them to realize that there's some funny stuff going on. Then you can talk with them some more about it and help them process it and redirect them towards other teachers and so on and so forth.

But if somebody is really doing something that is damaging or is teaching something that isn't the Dharma or being very two-faced about things: pretending to be something that they aren't. Then I think, with people who have not made that relationship with that person, you can definitely say, "Look you need to really check." Because sometimes there are a few groups that are a little bit suspicious and their teachers are suspicious and people will come and say, "what do you think about this group?" and I'll say, "well there's a lot of controversy about this person and if you choose to go there you need to be aware of that and check up or if you don't want to get in that position I can also tell you some other teachers where there's no controversy involved and you can go study with them." So it's a difficult thing.

Same R: Can I ask a question on a similar topic? When I first started studying the Dharma I listened to a lot of his talks online; I've never met him, I've never formally received teaching from him in that way, but I did learn good Dharma. But then, since then some things have happened from his behavior, I don't know, but there's controversy about it, I guess. My

question is I don't know how to relate to him as a teacher. I don't necessarily consider him a spiritual mentor in the sense that I received formal teachings from him or ever met him, but I did learn the Dharma from him, and I don't know how to make sense of what's happening now.

VTC: I think you can just say like you did, when I was a beginner I listened to some things online and they helped me and I'm grateful for that and now there's some controversy about this person's behavior, and so I choose not to develop the relationship in any way. I think that's always the solution, even if you had been that person's student for fifteen years and then you go, "oh boy now I'm seeing clearly what's going on," you can still appreciate how somebody helped you.

When you see faults in a teacher or in any person, it doesn't mean that everything about them is bad and wrong. We're way into black and white then— but we can still look and say 'okay they had some good qualities and they helped me in this way and I'm grateful for that, but here it's going into somewhere where I don't want to be involved, and so I'm not going to be involved.' So you don't have to make it a black and white thing. Even with friendships with people... You might be a friend with somebody and then something happens, and you think, 'I don't know if I want to be such a close friend anymore.' It doesn't mean that you need to throw everything out about them and say everything that they ever did was wrong; you can still say they helped me, and there was some kindness and there was some affection there, but now it doesn't seem beneficial, so I'm not going to be involved.

So it's acknowledging that things are complex. I think, generally, if there's controversy about somebody I think it's better to really keep a distance. If you want to spend a lot of time researching because you're really attracted to that teacher, then do the research and dispel your doubt and make a decision one way or another. But if it's not somebody that you are really eager to receive teachings from, then there's a lot of other people that you can go to. But the thing is, you know, we just can't control the world and make everybody be the way we want them to be in response to your question.

I just had a situation happen, really quite difficult, where a very old friend of mine, who's a student of somebody and wanted to take ordination. But I don't know about the state of that person's vows [who will be giving the ordination]. So I wrote and asked advice from my teachers and I did it with as much good motivation as I can and I don't know what the results are going to be.

R: I think it's a difficult topic and maybe it's pointed for many of us because we live in the West in countries, especially in Mexico where the Dharma is like it was for you 30 years ago or something. We have very little, a very small Dharma group, teachers coming. Even when we come to The States and we see all the magazines with all these teachers and teachings, names and things for sale. Sometimes it's very confusing. Sometimes it's exciting, so many things going on! Sometimes it's bit discouraging, seeing these teachers in the ads in the magazines. Its like a supermarket. You want the real thing, and you would like to have the real thing in your country. But it's so difficult to have real teachers and to have real teachings. I see it in my own experience. It's so easy to lose control and take a different track...

VTC: It's very hard because we live in such a consumer culture, such a materialistic culture. Dharma comes here and we don't know how to relate to things outside of turning them into

consumer products. So you have the ads full of “you need this latest and you need a special cushion and you need a special bell... You need all these Dharma accoutrements so you can practice non-attachment!” Then all the ads for all the teachers: everybody with this beautiful smile. And of course, it’s “the highest teaching that you’ll never get anywhere else with the best teacher who’s optimally qualified!” And everybody’s like that—so the ads say. I don’t know...

I have a lot of doubt about what’s happening too. The way I’ve thought about it is, different people have different karma. I can’t control everything. I can’t make Buddhism be in this country what I think it should be. So all I can do is what I feel is a suitable way with integrity for me to do things, and whoever is attracted to that way will come. The people who aren’t will find whatever or whoever they’re attracted to. At least they learn some Dharma. It’s not saying that the way I do everything is the best way. Even if they’re going to Dharma-Lite, at least they’re learning some Dharma. What it’s doing is putting imprints in their mind, and the in a future life they’ll meet Geshe Sopa or a teacher with more substance. Maybe they just don’t have the karma in this lifetime to meet a real qualified teacher, but maybe somehow if they go to Dharma-Lite, they get some good feeling about Buddhism. Maybe they create some merit, and then in some future life that can ripen and it can be better. I think it’s important for all of us to really do things with as much integrity as we have and not succumb to the concerns over materialistic pressure. But we can’t control. We can point things out to people. Some people will listen; some people won’t.

I remember a few years ago there was a whole group that was doing something quite weird. Doing a practice that His Holiness said was better not to do. There were some people who were not disciples of this teacher and did not do this practice. They asked me about it, and I told them the story. I explained why His Holiness said what he did and duh, duh, duh, and all the controversy. I said, “I recommend that you do not have any connection with those people. Stay away.” One of them was so enthralled by something that was controversial that he went and did all this research and started doing the practice! So realize that some people when there’s controversy— “oh, its something that’s controversial?” It becomes more interesting. (laughter) I did warn them but it backfired. So what to do; what do you do?

R: When somebody is doing harm to you or you feel you’re being harmed by somebody, and you do not react. You do not do anything. Isn’t it that you in that way are developing karma because of your anger or the way you’re being hurt? If you don’t react or do something, you cause the other person to create karma?

VTC: I’m not sure I understand. If somebody’s harming you and you’re angry about it but you don’t react.

R: You’re the kind of person that doesn’t know how to stand up for yourself and defend yourself or react. The other isn’t really conscious or appears not to be conscious of hurting you. If you don’t stop the person, aren’t you allowing that person to create karma because he’s hurting non-consciously?

VTC: Yes, but you have to have a proper motivation in stopping them. It isn’t “you’re creating a lot of karma by hurting me. So I’m going to stop you hurting me because it’s for the benefit of your karma you bleep, bleep, bleep!” No, it’s not like that.

If you’re really calm inside: “oh, somebody is really doing something. It’s causing damage to me, but the real victim is themselves because they’re going to have to experience the result of this.” Then with kindness you can speak with them very firmly, and try to get them to

stop their behavior. But if you're angry about it, then it's just using Dharma to rationalize. You're retaliating.

R: Sometimes in the Bodhisattva practice it goes to the extreme— or to the point that you can say 'even if they kill me'. So I want to better understand this point...

VTC: Right. We talk about giving our body or 'the point where they kill us'. A lot of this will depend very much on the individual and what level of the Path they're at. Like I said, giving your body—you have to be on the Path of Seeing before you're allowed to do that. If you do it beforehand, you're giving up your precious human life and it could be not so beneficial for either you or the others. So the same thing about if someone is doing something harmful. Standing up and attacking back. Also we tend to paint these situations in a very black and white way: e.g. 'Somebody's going to kill me so the alternative is to kill them.' Situations are not black and white. There's a lot of ways to stop somebody from killing you without killing them. If we think about it, there's a lot of creative ways to deal with things that don't cause harm to the other person or cause minimum harm.