

Vajrasattva Retreat - Winter 2005-2006: First Question & Answer Session with Ven. Thubten Chodron, December 15, 2005

VTC: So how is everyone doing? What is coming up in your meditation? Are you enjoying?

Retreatants: Sometimes.

VTC: Are you not enjoying?

Rs: Sometimes.

VTC: Does it matter whether you enjoy or don't enjoy?

Rs: Sometimes. (laughter)

VTC: Does it to your mind? Let's ask, to your mind, does it matter if you enjoy or don't enjoy?

R: No...

VTC: Yes, it matters a lot, doesn't it? We all want to have enjoyable meditation sessions! Should it matter whether we enjoy or don't enjoy?

Rs: No.

VTC: (laughter) Why are we so attached to enjoying our meditation sessions?

R: Because we're caught up in our emotions, and we want everything to be pleasant and nice, so we sit for that.

VTC: Yep. It's that mind that just wants everything to be pleasant, nice, comfortable... So when you find your mind sinking into wanting that, even out of the Dharma, remember impermanence, and how things that are pleasant, they're here and they're gone. We've all had lots of happy experiences in the past. Are they here now? No—we have memories. We've had lots of unpleasant experiences in the past, are they here now? No. Lama Yeshe used to say, "Come, come... Go, go." So the pleasant comes and goes, and the unpleasant comes and goes, and at the end of the day, we're still practicing Dharma. So we might as well just enjoy the fact that we're still practicing Dharma, and not worry so much about the vicissitudes of, "wow, that was a good meditation session!" Because, as soon as you do that, you know what your next meditation session is going to be like? (much laughter) Why? Because you're craving and clinging and trying to replicate a previous experience. It doesn't work. We keep trying, but it doesn't work. So we just need some kind of equanimity in terms of our meditation sessions. Also, we're not necessarily so good at evaluating what a 'good' meditation session is, are we? Sometimes in a meditation session in which we clearly see all of our rubbish—our rubbish is so crystal clear—that in many ways is a very good meditation session. Does it feel good when it's happening? Not necessarily, although you can make it feel good: you can say, "Wow, what a relief. At least I'm seeing it. Now I can change it." But sometimes when we see that stuff it's rather shocking. So it could be a very good meditation session but we experience it as something shocking. But it could be a good one. So we're not always so good at evaluating what is a 'good' meditation and what's not.

R: Could it be bad if you feel that it's very mechanical, and not very many things are coming up?

VTC: It will happen, don't worry.

R: It is happening.

VTC: Where it feels very mechanical, and not a lot of things are coming up, and you really wish there would be some action already (laughter), even if it's remembering something horrible, at least it's better than just sitting there mumbling "Om Vajrasattva samaya..." (laughter)

Again, I think then it's very interesting to look at the boredom. When you feel bored with the meditation, ask yourself, "What is boredom?" When do I experience boredom in my life? What is my usual reaction when I feel bored? What is it that I want when I feel bored? It could be quite good to do a little bit of observation about what boredom is, and the wish for excitement. What are we really wanting? I mean, there's Vajrasattva and Bhagavati, and they're there, and somehow we're bored. (laughter) What is it that we're wanting? So it's interesting to do that.

R: The contrast between yesterday with all the adrenaline, and then today—today felt kind of boring.

VTC: Okay, so all the adrenaline of yesterday, and today, "Oh, it's just Vajrasattva as usual." It's interesting to look at that, the adrenaline, and how we relate to it. And how much in our lives we crave an adrenaline rush, and where do we get it from? I think this leads us also to investigate a little bit about our relationship with the media. Because lots of times when we're watching movies or television, isn't there some kind of not-yet-conscious wish to have an adrenaline rush by watching these various characters do this and that? That's how they make the movies: they have to have something exciting everything few minutes that produces an adrenaline rush or some kind of

physiological something –some emotional something. They test all the movies like this, in fact, because if they don't they don't sell. People want to watch stuff so they get that, "Ooohhh" feeling. So, do a little bit of reflection in our own life about how we relate to that: are we looking for that sometimes? Where do we get the adrenaline rush? Is it from movies, from novels, even from the six-o'clock news? What do we do when we get the adrenaline rush? Why does it seem so exciting and the absence of it seem so boring? Is it always pleasant? The adrenaline from yesterday wasn't very pleasant, was it? And yet there's a very strong feeling of 'I' at that time. When there's the adrenaline rush, there's the feeling of "I'M worried, I'M afraid, I, I, I." There's a strong I at that time. So explore a little bit; do a little bit of observation about how we're sometimes hooked to that feeling of the strong I, even when it's unpleasant. For example, we all know people who love to fight—we might be one of them. There are some people who really enjoy arguing, don't you think? Haven't you met them? Maybe you're one of them, like I said. They just kind of enjoy an argument, enjoy pushing against somebody else, enjoy the excitement of it, of making up after you've had an argument, enjoy the drama, because when there's an argument there's a lot of drama. So at that time there's a big feeling of 'I,' there's a lot of adrenaline, there's a lot of drama. We might feel really alive even though it's kind of miserable and suffering, but we're hooked on it. We're hooked on it.

R: So yesterday it seems the mind was really clear. I could really direct my mind and I did a lot of mantra and stayed on it. How do you take the adrenaline out of that, but cultivate that clarity?

VTC: So you're saying with the kind of adrenaline rush we had yesterday, which was fear and concern, it made your mind very clear. So how do you take the adrenaline out of it, but have the clarity? This is a very good question and I think what it's about is the difference between a Panic Fear and a Wisdom Fear. Because when we have a Panic Fear there is a lot of the adrenalin; with the Wisdom Fear the mind is very bright and clear. But there's not the "nrrrrrrr" of the adrenaline.

R: So is that like, today when I got bored, I tried to think that I could die at any moment?

VTC: Right.

R: So is that a non-adrenaline that wakes you up?

VTC: When we think about death and impermanence ourselves or when we think about the suffering of cyclic existence, do some clear meditation on those points; the mind can get very clear, very subdued and very clear. I found some of the meditations on the mindfulness of the body where you explore all the organs of the body or you meditate on corpses or on skeletons helpful. These things make the mind very clear. Because it becomes quite apparent what samsara is. And that [mind] is a wisdom mind; it's not a panicky, freaked out mind. So it becomes very clear in that sense. I think, similarly, when we have really deep compassion; when our compassion is really able to see the suffering situation of the other being, then the mind also gets similarly clear. When I say, 'sees the suffering situation', I don't mean just the "ouch" kind of suffering. It's fairly easy to see how people have the "ouch" kind of suffering. But when we're really trying to see the other two kinds of suffering, the changeable suffering and especially, the pervading compounded suffering or dukkha. (I think it's better to call it dukkha rather than suffering because suffering is a confusing word.) But when we see that dukkha, then again we see it in ourselves so we can see it in someone else. So the mind gets very, very clear because of the compassion.

R: To me, yesterday happened completely the opposite [of the previous speaker's experience] because for example, the last two meditations were very, very difficult to go through. I couldn't go through the sadhana clearly and when I started the mantras, I couldn't keep going. So I did only one mantra in those two meditation sessions! I felt that my mind was very confused. Like you said in the morning, when everything is in control then we feel we are in a place where we can stay. So yesterday things became out of control. And I felt I was outside of the retreat. So pains I have like when I'm at home, pains and ringing in the ears, started up. And I felt "this is what I am like when I am there [at home]!" And I thought I was kind of getting away from these a little bit, after a week. Then I thought, "Oh, I'm back!" But it was very confusing for me and painful to feel that 'being back [there, in pain]' again.

VTC: So you're saying that through the first week of the retreat your mind was getting calmer and clearer, but after yesterday you got back into an old mind state of adrenaline and worry and this and that, and panic and fear and insecurity, and that that carried over into today, and even into the awareness of your body—you started to have all these aches and pains you thought you had left in Mexico. (laughter) It's interesting. It shows something about how the mental state is related to what you're experiencing in your body. Your mind will calm down again—give it a chance.

R: What happened to me yesterday was that I combined two realities. I was thinking that Vajrasattva and Bhagavati were sending much light to suffering people, and it was the best meditation that I had all week. Miki set a very good motivation before the 35 Buddhas; it was so nice. It was so great. I mixed my wish with the sadhana.

VTC: That's okay. What you did, you took what was happening in your life, and put your life and the Dharma together, and it really motivated you very strongly. That's great. I mean, we're kind of dense, and it takes some suffering to clobber us over the head so that we get some motivation to practice. They say that our precious human life has the right balance of suffering and happiness to enable us to practice: If we have too much "ouch" kind of suffering, then the mind is too stuck in the misery and we can't practice. If we have too much pleasure then the mind is lost in the pleasure and we can't practice. So we have some kind of balance in there. So whenever some difficult situation comes up, it's important to remember to bring it into our practice, and similarly, whenever something good happens in our life, it's important to bring it into our practice. When you're around for a while, you see that the people who don't do this, they get lost. They're practicing really well, and as soon as they lose their job, they stop practicing. Or, they're unemployed, and as soon as they get a job, they stop practicing. It's amazing: any kind of change in people's lives, they hit a bump in their practice, and they stop. Something good happens: "Oh, I'm too lost in how good it feels, can't practice." Something bad happens: "Oh, I'm too lost in how bad it is, I can't practice." We really need to be able to take both those situations into our lives so that we can continue to practice. Otherwise the whole life will go by, and no practice gets done. I think it's helpful when something pleasant happens to remember, "This is a result of my previous karma. I obviously created some positive karma in a previous life to have this fortune now. I have to make sure that I continue to create positive karma; I can't just rest on my samsaric glories and expect everything to go nicely from here on out. I have to really keep on practicing if I want to have good results." Or, you can think, "I have some samsaric happiness now, that's nice, but I've had it also in lots of rebirths since beginningless time and it hasn't got me out of cyclic existence, so this time, rather than getting sucked in by it, I should really aim for liberation and enlightenment." So you can think either of those ways when something good happens. Then when we have a problem, instead of going, "Ohhhh, why me?" We know "why me?" We created the cause for it! Instead, we can think, "Okay, I created the cause through my own actions. What motivated my actions? Self-centered thought. So I have to be very careful now and not continue to let my self-centered thought run the show, because if I do it's just going to bring more and more of these kinds of results like the one I'm experiencing now, which I don't like." So you use either of those situations to reflect on karma and to generate your motivation to practice, instead of letting whatever bubble that is appearing before you in this life pull you completely off course. Whatever is appearing now is just an appearance; it's just a bubble. There's no sense grasping at it as real, because if you wait a little bit, it's going to be different, isn't it?

R: In emptiness meditation, when you're finding the "I" or doing it with an object that you're trying to refute [negate], it seems like that meditation is an antidote, otherwise it's flat. I have to either cultivate compassion or be in a rage and see that there is no inherent I. I try to go through the steps of emptiness. I know I exist functionally and relationally.

VTC: Okay, so what you're saying is... when you have some strong emotion and you meditate on emptiness you can get some feeling of it, but when you just sit and just do the meditation in an average way, it's flat. That's why when they teach the meditation with the four point analysis the first point is to see the object to be negated very clearly. And they recommend remembering a situation in which we had a strong emotion. When you have that strong emotion and you see clearly – when the object to be negated is really strong— then when you go through the things—when you're having that strong emotion, for example, with the I, when you're holding onto the I very strongly—it feels so real, and it's so solid, and that grasping is fueling the whole emotion. So when you do the analysis, and you find out, "hey, there's nothing there," then it's like, "Whoa, what happened?" And you realize the power of the meditation because you realize that something you were convinced was there doesn't exist at all! That's why at the beginning they have you call up a powerful emotion to do the analysis on, because otherwise you just sit there and you don't clearly see what the object to be negated is – it's like it's no big deal. "Yeah, there's no I, what's next." (laughter)

R: I'm trying to use different objects to get a sense of what's being negated, for example, when does a kitchen become a kitchen...

VTC: Okay, you're talking a little bit now about using dependent arising, if you're talking about when does a kitchen become a kitchen, and how do causes and conditions create something. You're saying that you'll reflect on that, on dependent arising?

R: I'm using that as an example to see if I even understand conceptually the process of things not existing from their own side. I'm looking at Mike and see that he's called a human being, but there's nothing Mike about him...it seems like I have to get familiar with it before I can use it.

VTC: Right. You do. You do need to get familiar with the whole meditation. Also, there are different ways to meditate on emptiness. There's one way in which you're meditating a lot and familiarizing your mind a lot with dependent arising. Then, you might do this thing where you say, "There's Flora. Why do I say 'there's Flora?' Because her parents gave the name Flora. Before her parents gave the name 'Flora,' she wasn't Flora. Why else do I say Flora? Well, there's a body and a mind, and in dependence on those we say 'Flora.' Is there anything else in there besides the body and mind? Well, not really, no: there's just Flora that's labeled there."

So you do this kind of thing to familiarize yourself with the idea of things existing by labeling—that's one form of dependent arising. Or you might do it in the sense of familiarizing yourself with how Flora depends on causes and conditions, and on parts: There's a body and there's a mind; if either of those parts are missing you can't say a human being is there. And then you say the body, what are the causes of the body? There's the sperm and the egg and all the baby food, and all the McDonald's hamburgers, all this other stuff, and it all got put together and then there's a body that appears out of that. So you contemplate how things are produced by causes. So that way of just spending some time getting familiar with dependent arising is quite helpful. It's quite helpful to habituate the mind to see things as dependent. So that instead of saying, "Ok, there's the video camera," you automatically start with, "Ok, there's this bunch of parts put together, and in dependence on that we all gave it a label and so it becomes the video camera." That's a way of actually training the mind in mindfulness of dependent arising, whereby you go through everything in your life, everything you encounter, and you just think about how it depends on causes, or on a label, or how it depends on parts. So just familiarizing your mind like that will automatically make a shift in how you feel about things.

R: I feel like I've been doing that all week, and it feels flat. And the other one about me, and I—that's a whole different thing we're talking about.

VTC: Ok, so the other way of meditating on emptiness, with the four-point analysis, where you have this strong emotion, then you say, "if the I exists as it appears, it's either got to be one with the body and mind or separate from the body and mind." And so you find that that meditation makes it clearer for you?

R: Right. The other one just feels like, "I'm labeling all these things, and they're coming into existence—so what?" (laughter)

VTC: At the beginning, when you're just practicing that, it feels like that. But try that when you have a problem, when something comes in your mind that goes, "Oh, I have a problem." And then ask, "why is it a problem?" It's just because I've labeled it a problem; I could label it something else—I could label it 'opportunity.' So try using the dependent arising one sometimes when you have something going on, or when attachment comes up to a particular person, when that person is right there in your meditation—vivid—and just think, "Okay, what is that person? A body and a mind. What's there to be attached to within a body and a mind? The person is just something that's labeled in dependence on this body and mind having a relationship for these few years. So what other person is there that is seeming real to me?" In that way you use the dependent arising to help you deal with a strong emotion.

R: If we label something, and think, "Oh he's very agile: he's good; or, he's bad." The mind is kind of labeling all the time. What if we don't label? The mind is perceiving everything, but we are used to labels and labels and labels. I thought, "well, if I don't label anymore, if I just see, I'm going to feel that I'm not relating to my real me."

VTC: It's real interesting how that is. I know that feeling, when you feel like, "Wow, if I don't label, if I don't have an idea or an opinion or a reaction or a thought about it, everything's going to be so flat." And I realized that because of our education system in the west, we are taught from a very young age that we have to have an opinion about everything. A good deal of our education is basically learning labels. Think about it: what's an anatomy course? It's learning labels. What's a physiology course? It's labels. What's a psychology course? It's learning labels. What label you give

to what symptoms. You take a history class: it's giving labels. There was some event in history and we conceptualize it and give it some kind of label. So much of our whole education that we spent years getting, and who knows how much money getting, is basically learning what other people's labels are for certain things, and what other people's concepts are for certain things. Some of that is useful information—it helps us function in society—but sometimes it clutters our mind. We don't see it as just learning labels and just learning concepts; we see it as "I'm learning reality." Don't we? We see it as "This is what it really is. These symptoms? Oh yes, it's really this disease." You know, the disease is just something that's labeled on a bunch of symptoms. That's all.

Or take history. (I say history because I majored in history.) You've got Napoleon, blah blah blah, Peter the Great, blah blah blah, you give some definition about what was going on, and then you think that's the reality of the situation. There were millions of people who were living at that time, each of whom had their own personal experience and personal life. And we're completely blurred out on them, and we've instead learned gossip from a male point of view and then get a degree in it! (laughter) Excuse me, history professors, but basically, that's what it is. (laughter) If we look at the other things we learn, we're so much learning concepts and words and the more educated we become we get more addicted to concepts and words. Also, because of the nature of our education system, we're always taught to have an opinion about something. In Asia, where when you're educated you're expected to remember what the teacher taught you; you're not expected to have an opinion about it—you're expected simply to remember it. I have some Asian friends, who when they come to the west, say, "Wow, these Americans have so many opinions!" For example, at the first Vajrasattva retreat, the one in 1997 in Canada, there was someone from Singapore, a few people from Mexico, and there were several Americans. And they would have these community meetings—I was doing a separate retreat like I'm doing now, so I didn't go to their meetings—and they would have these meetings about how much whole milk they needed to have every week, and how much 2% milk, and then they would vote on how many people wanted whole milk and how many people wanted 2% milk, and how many people wanted these kinds of beans and how many people wanted this...and the Mexicans and the Singaporean were thinking, "What are these people doing? They have so many opinions, and they're voting on what kind of milk to have!" The Singaporean said, "In my country, if you had a retreat like that, it would be decided by the person in charge, and everyone would just go along with it, whether it was the kind of milk you liked or not. Someone else decided and you went along with it." You weren't taught that you had to have an opinion about everything. And yet, in America, we have to have opinions about everything. They do opinion polls because we're supposed to have opinions. In first grade, in kindergarten, you're supposed to have a favorite color. Or at work, now, as an adult, if you haven't seen a TV program that everyone's talking about and don't have an opinion about what that character did, what are you going to talk to people about? So we get quite addicted to our concepts and labels and opinions, and we get a little bit afraid of not having them.

R: I have a practical question about visualization of Vajrasattva and his consort. In some practices there is just Vajrasattva [single] and I am wondering why the two [coupled]?

VTC: There's just two different forms, single and then couple, and usually the couple is the highest yoga tantra form and the single is usually kriya tantra.

R: In meditation I am thinking about something and exploring something that's coming up while still trying to do the mantra and sort of wanting to explore that thought, or maybe just a way of framing things—for example a very black and white way of describing the situation of something like that—but then dealing with that and also trying to stay focused on the practice, trying to be mindful of the visualization. Sometimes I feel like I'm getting somewhere, but other times I'm planning what I'm going to do later or things like that. So trying to keep a balance.

VTC: So your question is you're doing the mantra you're doing the visualization and then there's all these thoughts and some of them it seems good to think about and some of them you're lost in planning. And how do you put it all together?

I think the first thing is to discriminate what is something that is an issue that you need to think about and apply Lam Rim to, and what is just the chattering, distracted mind. So you can begin to get some feel for that, when you are planning your Christmas shopping and you're planning what you are going to do here, and when you start planning your next retreat—because you can spend one whole retreat planning all the other retreats you're going to do in the future and all the Dharma things you're going to do in the future! (laughter) When you really get into planning then you know that you're way off and you've got to come back to the practice you're doing. When you're lost in

just making commentary about other people's lives and this kind of thing, you've got to bring yourself back. What you can do at those times to transform that into a Dharma practice, is... if you notice that, say, planning is something that your mind is going to a lot, do a little research or review: how much does my mind go to planning in my life? Why is my mind going so much to planning? What in me needs that mind of planning? And then all sorts of other things come up: wanting security, wanting control—whatever planning means to you. Sometimes, when you're having a certain distraction a lot, just say, "Ok, what inside me is feeding this? Why am I going there?" Or, if you're getting guilty a lot —again, a completely useless emotion!— but what is ego getting out of being guilty all the time? Well, it's familiar; or whatever it is—nobody else can tell you the answers to these types of questions. It's like shining a mirror on our self: "what am I getting out of this?" So that's a way to transform it. Then, other things may come up: a certain anger or attachment, and then you know that those things you need to bring in Lam Rim and Lojong (mind training) and bring in antidotes. Also, just watch what your mind is going to a lot as your favorite objects of distraction. It could be favorite objects. Are you going to certain people a lot and making stories? Also look: what kind of emotions do you go to? Maybe some people are attachment-people, and their minds will stray to other people and make lavish daydreams: the beach, and the perfect person, and on and on. And other people, their minds will stray to other people and how much they betrayed me, and how awful they were to me, and how I can't trust anybody. And somebody else, their mind will stray to other people, and they're always so much better than me, and how come I'm always left out, and I'm not as good as them, and they should respect me more. So you might also look and see what are the habitual emotions you experience or the habitual ways of interpreting situations. What kind of habitual story is your mind making? It's very interesting because you see it coming up here—and it's just habit—it's what we're doing in the rest of our life but you're usually so unaware of it. But it's here because there's nothing else to distract us [here]. Then we really see so clearly how often we feel like people don't appreciate us, or how often we are just daydreaming about all the wonderful spectacular things we're going to do, and how much people are going to think about our heroic exploits. We all have our different things. Just look at where our mind goes—the habitual interpretations, habitual emotions—and then just say, "Hmmm, why am I always going there? And is that situation really like that? Is it really true that nobody appreciates me? Are these plans I'm making really going to happen? (laughter) Is there any real likelihood that they're going to happen?" It's important to examine the reality of these emotions, but also to examine: what's my ego getting out of this? How is it keeping me stuck in a certain self-image? Or how is it keeping me stuck in a certain emotional pattern that doesn't let me grow, because so many things I encounter in life I just play out the same old thing over and over again? That's why I think it's so interesting to look at our automatic reactions when something doesn't go according to plan, because that's just what we often play out—what we come to out of habit.

R: I've been thinking about something for about a week. It has to do with right view and wrong view: this thing about a soul. I've been thinking, "who has preferences? Why do I like this food or that food? Where does that come from?" Habit, maybe? The question really is: "What goes from one life to the next? Is it qualities?" You've talked about the mere I, this label that you can't find, but it's so strong.

VTC: No, the mere I isn't the strong one. That's the wrong view I.

R: Where does that come from? What is the mere I and where does this I come from that doesn't exist?

VTC: The one that doesn't exist is the one that our whole life is based on. The one our whole life is based on—me, and I want, and I need, and I believe, and what about me, and I can do this—that real, solid, concrete one, that's the one that is the hallucination, that doesn't exist, that the mind made up and believes in. Our whole life is founded on it! It's total hallucination, but we believe it's true. We're just thoroughly convinced of it. The mere I is just the label 'I' that is given in dependence on a body and a mind. Nothing more than that.

R: What goes on to the next life, then? Why do you do it again? Because it came about through ignorance?

VTC: Why do we do it again? Because of the ignorance; because the ignorance is grasping at this real thing that's really me. And it's terrified of not existing. At the time of death, the grasping at existence is so strong. What's happening is that our body and mind are losing their capacities to function and they've been the prop that's held up this whole feeling of 'I' the entire time. And all of a sudden they're fading in the background, and this craving for existence—craving to keep these

aggregates, and then if we can't keep these, we've got to get some new ones, because as long as we have a body, well, we exist—so that kind of ignorance, that's just craving. That is like an addict craving poison, a poisonous drug. We're so addicted to it, even though it's total hallucination. It's completely like a crazy person who sees an enemy and there's no enemy in the room but the person's totally freaked out and screaming—but there's nothing there. That's exactly what's happening when we're grasping at the I, especially at death time. The whole thing doesn't even exist, but we're so convinced it does that we're freaked out about losing it. So what do we do? We grasp onto anything else that will come. The mind grasps. That's why the whole thing is just fueled by ignorance.

R: For me, it's very clear how being in silence for one week and doing many hours of practice lets you see clearly many things. For instance, it is very, very clear how things like feelings come up in your experience, and how it is absolutely clear that some things are nice and that some things are not nice. It's not that you are thinking, "Oh, I think I cannot like this." It is very clear, this feeling of "I like it," or "I don't like it." This process of labeling goes really deep; it is not just a question of thinking that I like this or thinking that I don't like this. So, I think it will take time to get rid of that. What we have to do is create a very clear space between us and that which is coming up as clear, as solid. So I think it's good that we have time to purify. (lots of laughter)

R: This morning, I got lost a little. For example, when I saw my own actions, my emotions, I was thinking that the emotions don't exist by themselves—it's just with a name. And all those emotions arise in my mind because of the actions I have done and the actions others have done to me, and I think there is no emotions—they are just labels. And there are no actions or a real person who does anything to anybody, so nobody does anything to anybody. So I thought, no actions, no emotions...

VTC: Great. Stay there. (laughter)

R: My mind went blank.

VTC: Good!

R: And then I was like, now what am I going to do?

VTC: Better create a drama! (laughter) No, just enjoy it.

R: And then I thought, what about karma, does it really exist? Because when we go from life to life, we bring with us our karma. If the action doesn't really exist, what about the karma?

VTC: This is the whole thing: we can't discriminate inherent existence from mere existence, and we can't differentiate non-inherent existence, or emptiness, from total nonexistence. We get these things confused. That's exactly what your problem is. You're saying, "I thought there was a solid action. Oh, there's no action. So there's no action at all." What you're trying to see is that there's no inherently existent action; it's not that there is no action at all.

R: I think I'm spending a lot of time indulging my ego. You referred to it as an addict. How do you persuade the addict that this is not actually pleasurable, or that it should not continue? I'm telling myself, "Okay, I'm tired. I think I'll spend the session sleeping." I'm finding that I'm reifying...

VTC: I'm not sure I understand—you're having a lot of emotions coming up?

R: Not emotions. I feel like I'm indulging in my ego, in every way, and I feel like I'm using the practice to do that. For example, if I'm tired, I'll just go to sleep. And I'm not finding a good reason not to do that!

VTC: Not to go to sleep?

R: Not to do whatever's pleasurable to my ego at that moment. I'm not finding any good reasons.

VTC: Maybe you need to go get lost in the forest!

R: Even something like that, I say to myself, "so what's this big thing about death anyway? If death is just an experience that you have, like all these other experiences..."

VTC: That's just intellectual blah blah (laughter)

R: But I can do that for a whole session!

VTC: Then just go back to Vajrasattva and all the light and nectar purifying all the resistance. Just go back to the visualization. If you're getting tied up with all your thoughts and going around in circles with all of that: "this is ego, and I can't get off that, and this is coming in here, and it's there, and on and on..." then just go back and focus on the visualization, focus on the vibration of the mantra.

R: Can I go back to an earlier question? This is about the real I, or the concrete I. When you're saying that it doesn't exist...I mean it exists as a mental image? Or the grasping exists?

VTC: The grasping exists, but the object that's being grasped at doesn't exist. If I have in my mind this image of a turtle's mustache, that thought exists—the thought of a turtle's mustache exists—but does the turtle's mustache exist? No.

R: So when you say about the turtle's mustache, "it doesn't exist," you're saying that it doesn't correspond with anything.

VTC: There is no turtle's mustache.

R: So in the same way this concrete I isn't findable among the body and the mind, or among the aggregates?

VTC: Right. There's no concrete I, but there's the grasping that a concrete I exists.

R: And the object of that grasping is...

VTC: Is the concrete I.

R: Then in what way does that concrete I exist? Doesn't it exist—or is it the idea of a concrete I?

VTC: The idea of the concrete I is a mental factor. It's the mental factor of ignorance. The mental factor exists. The object that that mental factor is holding does not exist, because there's no concrete I, there's no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, there's no turtle's mustache, there's no rabbit's horn. But the thought of all of these things can exist.

R: And the subject is what?

VTC: When you have the ignorance, the object of the ignorance—there are different kinds of objects. They talk about the mere object (*mig pa* in Tibetan) and then they talk about the apprehended object (*dzin tang gi yul* in Tibetan). The mere object, just the object, is the I, the mere I. The one that exists by being merely labeled. The apprehended object is the truly existent I. That one doesn't exist at all. So ignorance is distorted. It's erroneous in terms of its apprehended object, because it's apprehending something that doesn't exist. In the thought that's apprehending or grasping at a rabbit's horn, the object is a rabbit. The rabbit exists. The apprehended object is a rabbit with horns. That doesn't exist. The thought that there's a rabbit with horns—that exists, even though the rabbit's horn doesn't exist. So there's a mere I that exists. On the basis of that we project true existence. The truly existent I does not exist, but we think it does—it's the apprehended object of that ignorance. The ignorance itself exists—and that's what we're trying to eliminate through our practice. But the truly existent I has never existed. We're not trying to stomp out its existence.

When we realize emptiness, we're not making something that exists non-existent; we're just seeing that something that has never existed, has never existed.

R: So are you saying the conventional I is just perceiving, and that's all we need to be doing, then? Because once you do the apprehending, that's where we get confused.

VTC: I've been talking about the conventional I as the *object* of a thought here. Even when Buddha says, "I walked," or when we say, "I walk." That I that's walking is the conventional I. There's a thought that's saying, "I'm walking." That thought is a reasonable thought; there's nothing wrong with that thought, and the object that it's apprehending exists. It's just the conventional I. But when we say, "**I'M WALKING**" (laughter), that I is the truly existent one, that doesn't exist. And that's an ignorant thought that's thinking it does.

R: So when we do the visualizations, either in front of us, or visualize ourselves as a deity, is that method kind of the physical way of getting unstuck from the I? It's working in a physical way to loosen that up?

VTC: It's working in a mental way, actually. Because it's our idea of ourselves. When you generate yourself as a deity, your old image of this truly existent self has to get dissolved into emptiness, and then your wisdom appears in the form of the deity. That whole practice is to get us unstuck from grasping at this solid image we have of ourselves.

R: And is that then the process that gets us out of our head intellectually about it, that we actually feel it?

VTC: Yes. It helps to make it much more real. So we do an emptiness meditation, but then when you do the visualization, it makes it more plausible for us. For example, if you're doing the Chenrezig practice and you appear as Chenrezig, then you can't appear as Chenrezig and feel like little old me who nobody cares about. Right? Because little old me who nobody cares about got dissolved in emptiness. Chenrezig doesn't sit there and go, "Oh, nobody cares about me... Look, they gave Buddha an orange. They didn't give me an orange." (laughter) Chenrezig doesn't feel that, so when you're visualizing yourself as Chenrezig, when you have those kind of thoughts or feelings, then you go, "Aha, no, that's not how Chenrezig feels." Then it gives you the space to try feeling what you imagine Chenrezig could feel. So what does Chenrezig feel? Chenrezig feels just

this incredible connection to everybody, and compassion, and friendliness. So then you let yourself feel that instead of going, "Oh no, I can't let myself feel friendliness, because if I'm friendly then people will misinterpret, and they'll think I'm coming on to them. Or if I'm friendly then they'll take advantage of me again." You can't be Chenrezig and think like that! I mean, you can try, but at a certain point it doesn't work. (laughter)

R: I found very useful doing the Lam Rim meditations while doing the visualization. My main focus should be the Lam Rim meditation and I keep saying the mantra, and don't pay too much attention to the rest?

VTC: If you are doing the Lam Rim meditations while you are saying the mantra, the mantra is kind of in the background. You don't have to pay so much attention to the visualization because you are focusing more on your Lam Rim meditation, but then towards the end of the session or when you come to some conclusion from your Lam Rim meditation, come back to the visualization and think that the nectar from Vajrasattva is like firming up the conclusion you came to and purifying any obstacles to really continuing the feeling and conclusion of that Lam Rim meditation. So you come back to the visualization at the end to seal the whole thing.
