

**Vajrasattva Retreat - Winter 2005-2006: 2nd Question & Answer Session  
with Ven. Thubten Chodron  
Thursday, December 22, 2005**

**VTC:** So what I thought to do in our sessions is a few verses each week of *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, just to go through them, because you're chanting them out loud after lunch every fourth day. It's also very good to have an understanding of this text. His Holiness often teaches this text before he gives initiations, and also when you're doing retreat it's so incredibly important for you to do lam rim meditation. This text contains the fundamental lam rim meditations, so I'd like to spend time on a few verses each week, just to talk about them.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is during the retreat to do lam rim. You're purifying, but what's really going to change your mind and really going to help you do things differently in the future is changing how you think—changing how you look at the world. It's the lam rim meditations that are going to help you do that, because those are the meditations that are going to shift the way you conceive of yourself and the way you conceive of the world. Just saying mantra, just doing visualizations alone will not necessarily do that, because, for example, to really shift we need first of all to be able to discriminate what is a constructive thought, a constructive motivation, a positive mental state, and what is a destructive thought or a destructive mental state. If we can't do that—in our ignorance sometimes we aren't clear what's positive and what's negative in terms of karma or in terms of our mental state or our behavior. If we can't do that, then it's going to be very difficult to purify, and it's going to be very difficult to change, because there's no clarity in the mind about what we want to change from and what we want to change to. So you need the help of the lam rim to help you recognize these mental states, and we need the lam rim meditations to actually show us a different way of looking at things. That's why I just can't emphasize enough really doing that.

You'll see that it's the whole lam rim outlook, the whole Buddhist worldview that creates a very different shift within us. Unless that shift occurs, we might visualize up and down the mountain and recite gazillions of mantras, but we're still going to look at life in the same old way: with 'me—center of the universe, everything I apprehend is permanent, pleasure is what I experience by my senses, and there's a real me and everybody else, and real everything out there!' Unless we start to change some of those viewpoints and realize what cyclic existence is, and what it means to be caught in cyclic existence, and how we really want happiness but what we're doing is the *opposite* to happiness... and that's it's our *mind* that's causing the problem, not the external objects or people... Until we can really get a handle on that and really shift how we look at life, not a lot is going to change.

I suspect as you're going through and purifying now, are you noticing a little bit of your old worldview? Not your 'old' worldview—but just what your worldview is, how you look at things. Are you noticing some habits in your mind? Are you noticing different perspectives, how, for example, we think that whatever happens to us is never going to change? If it's pleasurable, we think it's never going to change—or it never *should* change; and if it's painful, like our knee hurts in the sessions, also, that's never going to change, is it? Look at that view, the one that doesn't even recognize that things like this change, and how much confusion it causes in our lives—let alone the view that we're going to last forever, and that death happens to other people but not us! I mean, do you feel like you're going to die? We say "yes," but we believe that death happens to other people. Or the view that's probably coming up a lot in your meditation: all the things you wanted to have in life but couldn't get. Is that coming up? No? You're not sitting there dreaming about the perfect relationship that you always wished you had, but the person never turned up? Or the perfect job you always wished you had, but it never happened? Or the perfect house you really wanted to live in, but it never came about? *Really?* What are you getting distracted about then? (laughter)

**Retreatant:** I've been going back to grade school. I've been having people come up in my meditation that I haven't thought about in forty years: clear as a bell!

**VTC:** Of course. They come up, and you haven't thought about them in forty years, and what's your reaction to them?

**R:** I play out the relationship that I had with them, whether they were a friend of mine or someone I didn't like. I play over the old story. And then I catch myself and ask, "that's odd: why is this person coming up in my meditation right now?" That's when I realize that I'm starting to run up

against my mind that gets bored, my mind that gets frustrated because I'm not farther along in the meditation than I should be. I get entertained by my past.

VTC: Oh yeah. The thing is, when those people come up from the past—when you're going through them and replaying the relationship—isn't your mind kind of wishing it would have been different, some aspects of it? 'Wouldn't it have been nice if this had happened, that had happened, or this other thing had happened? Maybe the relationship could have turned out like that. Or, how nice it would be if we had kept in touch all these years...'

So this is what I'm talking about: the mind is taking something and wanting it to be other than it was. The old friendship: 'oh yeah, it was really wonderful, but gee, it would have been so nice if it continued.' Or, 'it would have been so nice if we didn't have that fight, and that person could have continued being a really good friend...'

This is what I'm getting at: the mind is still looking out there at the people and experiences we had in the past and evaluating the happiness as if it came *from* those people and those circumstances, and wishing that we could have tweaked the past. Wishing... 'couldn't we have tweaked it a little when it was happening so it would be better now so we would have a better memory in our meditation?' This person comes up and it's such a bad memory; why couldn't it be a good memory? So this is the mind that's still seeing happiness out there and wanting even our memories to conform, to be good memories. Or to take what happened in the past, and 'let's replay it again now and it's going to be different and it's going to be better with a different person or a different situation...' something like that. But the mind state behind it is: 'pleasure exists in the people and objects out there, and so if I can succeed in arranging them all properly, then I'll have the happiness that I want!' Is there that view in your meditation? If there's not that view, then either you should be teaching this course or you should be looking harder in your meditation (laughter).

For most of us, this is what's coming up: 'how can I make things outside be the way I want them to be so that I'll be happy.' Like you said, things will come up from forty years ago. I mentioned to you before: I realized when I did Vajrasattva [the first time] that I was still mad at my second grade teacher because she didn't let me be in the class play. I had forgotten it for I don't know how many years, but I remembered it in Vajrasattva. Then you start to see, how many times in my life have I felt that I deserved something but they didn't give it to me? "In second grade, I deserved to be in the play and they didn't give it to me." How many times does this come up?—oh yeah, a lot in my life I'm playing this out. I deserved something and the world's not giving it to me. We start to look at these old patterns of how we interpret things, of what data we select in the environment to pull out and make a story about and interpret in one way or another. People can look at the same situation—e.g. you didn't get to be in your second grade class play—one person could look at it and go, "wow, am I really glad, because I'm so shy, and if I would have been in front of all those people I would have been nervous and made a fool of myself!" And that would have been maybe their pattern their whole life: always trying to exit-right so that they don't make a fool of themselves because they're sure they're always going to. One person, that could be their habit. Then, another person looks at that and says, "Oh, I deserved it. I was the best one in the second grade. I deserved to be in the class play. They didn't let me!" Here, that person's story is, 'I didn't get what I deserved,' and it plays out in all these different ways in their life. Somebody else could have looked at it as, "I wanted to please my mom and dad by being in the second grade play, but the teacher didn't let me." What's my story? 'Oh, I'm always trying to please my mom and dad and I never got the opportunity to.' So that's their thing, how they're framing everything—not everything, but a lot of things in their life.

It just takes one situation, but everybody picks out different data in that situation and interprets it in a certain way and makes a certain kind of story. We have certain stories—we just put in that video, and it plays throughout various situations in our life. In the meditation itself—sitting there on the cushion all those hours—you're going to start to see that. But once you start to see that, what are you going to do with it? What do you do with it? When the mind is so involved in making a story about it, it's hard to see it as even a story—you just think it's 'reality'.

This is why the lam rim is so important, because when you notice those old memories or old patterns or whatever... When there is an uncomfortable feeling in your mind then that's a sign that there is delusion present. When one of those memories comes up, and you're not completely at ease with it—there's some feeling of discomfort somewhere and the mind really wants to think about it more—there's some delusion usually involved in that thing. So what is it, and what's the antidote to it? That's when you take the lam rim out, "Okay I'm always feeling depressed." What's the lam

rim antidote for depression, what do you meditation on? Precious human life, Refuge, something like that.

If you are sitting there and you're longing for what happened before and you're saying, "oh it was so wonderful then, I wish it would have lasted. I wonder if we can go back and pick it up with that person." What is the affliction present? Attachment. And what's the antidote? Yes, death and impermanence. Or some incident comes up and you say, "I am still so mad at my brother, sister, pet dog or who ever it was. I can't believe I was an innocent kid and look what they did and they got me all screwed up and they did this and that. This is incredible and I'm still mad about it all these years later!" What's the affliction? Anger. And what's the antidote? Patience, love and the bodhichitta meditations. So this is why one needs lam rim here.

I thought I would go through a few of the verses of *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* by Gyelsay Togme Sangpo each week and then we'll have some Q & A.

1. Having gained this rare ship of freedom and fortune,  
Hear, think, and meditate unwavering night and day  
In order to free yourself and others  
From the ocean of cyclic existence—  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

That is your motivation for the retreat! Okay? Having gained *the rare ship of freedom and fortune*, in others words, a precious human life... *Hear, think, meditate unwavering night and day*. So what's the basic practice you have to do? You have to hear and learn teachings and then think about them and then put them into practice and meditate on them. Why are you doing this? In order to free yourself and others from the ocean of cyclic existence. That's the reason why. That's the reason why you are sitting in the meditation hall all these hours every day. That's the reason why you get out of bed every morning. So if you are having a hard time waking up in the morning memorize this verse and say it to yourself when you first hear the gong or the bell. So that you give yourself some umpf, 'this is what I'm doing, this is what my mission is, this is my purpose.'

Okay, see if this one is ringing any bells in your meditation:

2. Attached to your loved ones you're stirred up like water.  
Hating your enemies you burn like fire.  
In the darkness of confusion you forget what to adopt and discard.  
Give up your homeland—  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

*Attached to your loved ones you're stirred up like water*. Anybody have that experience in their meditation? Only two people are raising their hands... Okay, how about, *Hating your enemies you burn like fire*. Anybody having that one? A lot of people are lying! (laughter) You haven't gotten angry?

R: Not at others, just myself.

VTC: That still counts, yourself. And check if there's some anger towards others, too. Check. Really look. It's hard to get mad just at yourself. *In the darkness of confusion, you forget what to adopt and discard*. Anybody have that come up? "Where am I in the sadhana? (laughter) Om Vajrapani hum. Om Vajrapani hum. No, it's not Vajrapani, it's 'Om Vajrasattva hum. Om mani padme hum om namo ratno trayaya... Now which one is it?!"

R: Bodhisattva samaya...

VTC: Supo kayo may bhawa. Anu rakto may bhawa (laughter). Tayata om dara dara diri diri duru duru... (laughter) So, *attached to loved ones, you're stirred up like water. Hating your enemies, you burn like fire. In the darkness of confusion you forget what to adopt and discard*. The story of my life! *Give up your homeland. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas*. Why does it say, 'give up your homeland?' Why doesn't he just say, just get rid of those thoughts? Why does he say give up your homeland? You have to make a break. With what? And why? You have to make a break with the patterns. When you're in the same environment all the time, with the same people all the time, those patterns very easily keep rolling, don't they? They just keep happening again and again. Because other people know us well and we know them well.

Have you looked at some of your closest relationships and seen how there's kind of like a script you play out repeatedly with that person? Are you seeing that? People have been together for many, many years... Like with parents and children. There's a little kind of script you do all the time. You know how to bug each other; you know how to press each other's buttons; you know how to look like you didn't. (laughter) It's so habitual and you don't even realize it. You don't even realize it until you come and do a retreat. How habitual, especially certain key relationships where we're very close to somebody. Same old stuff again and again and again. So *give up your homeland!* What's the mind's usual reaction to that? "NO! I don't want to give up my homeland! I want to stay right where I am with the people that I love and the environment that's familiar to me with everything that I own and where I know who I am and it's all comfy. I don't want to give up my homeland!" Right? That's why he says, *this is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

Just to make an external change sometimes takes quite a bit for us. It's really talking about making the internal change. But the external change is something that supports making the internal change. Because unless we're really, really strong, if we stay in the same environment, the patterns just keep happening again. So I'm not saying that everybody should move to the Abbey, and those of you who are at the Abbey should now move away from here! (laughter) The real thing is to change the patterns. But I think there is something to look at in the sense of really deciding that 'I need to change. I really need something, some drastic measures are necessary, to start making that change happen.' But just see what your situation is.

3. By avoiding bad objects disturbing emotions gradually decrease.  
Without distraction virtuous activities naturally increase.  
With clarity of mind, conviction in the teaching arises.  
Cultivate seclusion—  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

This verse is the opposite of the previous one. The previous one was telling us what our problems are. Every time I read that verse, Verse 2, it's like WHOA... I tell myself, it has me pegged; that's exactly it! Then what do we do? What's the advantage of leaving our homeland, going to a dharma environment? *By avoiding bad objects, disturbing emotions gradually decrease.* 'Bad object' doesn't mean the people you love; they're not bad objects. It means whatever it is that makes your attachment, hatred, jealousy, arrogance and all these things arise. The things and the people from their side, they're not 'bad'. They're called bad objects in the sense that our mind is so under their captivity that attachment, anger and bewilderment just spin around and around whenever we're around those objects.

It's like the inmates who are getting ready to get released from prison. It's so important that they go into a new environment and not be back with the old people and the old things and everything that was going on before, because that just stirs up the mind. But if they're in a new environment, and if they've made patterns in their mind through the time they've been incarcerated, patterns of thinking in different ways, then by avoiding 'bad objects,' and I think, specifically, intoxicants here... For so many of the inmates, intoxicants are one of the major things. Intoxicants and friends that don't have good moral values. Those are the two things. So, by avoiding bad objects, disturbing emotions gradually decrease. If you're around people with good ethical discipline, if you're around people who don't drink and drug, if you're around people who don't gossip. If you're having problems with your speech, if you go around with your old friends who gossip and talk about this one and that one, your speech is going to be the same old way. If you remove yourself from that situation and you're with people who talk in a different way, then you'll talk in a different way.

One of the nice things I see when people come to the Abbey is that they find themselves behaving differently, and they like themselves better. And I think part of this is that they're not with the (quote-quote) 'bad objects' so the disturbing emotions gradually decrease because there's nothing to set it off. Of course, we can usually find something or another to set us off. *Without distraction virtuous activity naturally increases.* So if you're really trying to steer your mind in a virtuous way, if you're not having the distraction of what you usually have in your life, then your virtuous activities are naturally increasing.

You all are actually doing what this verse says: you're on retreat right now. That's the cultivating seclusion part and you can see very well for yourself that you're not around the bad objects so the disturbing emotions are decreasing. Without distraction your virtuous activities naturally increase. It's easier to do a daily practice here, isn't it? Could you do six sessions of meditation at home? You have a hard time doing *one* session of meditation at home, let alone six! Here, it flows so easy, doesn't it? You're just in that hall and you're doing it. You're doing

Prostrations to the 35 Buddhas. Because of the environment. What else are you going to do? *Without distraction*— what are you going to distract yourself with around here? You can ONLY look at the snow melt off the roof for so long! (laughter) You can only look at the turkeys for so long! (laughter) There's not a lot to get distracted by...

*With clarity of mind, conviction in the teaching arises.* So, do you find that happening on the retreat? That because you're really practicing and you're really looking at your own mind and the teachings are coming into your mind... As you're looking at your mind, your conviction in what the Buddha said is growing. You can see that he really knew what he was talking about. These are things that are the total antidote to the second verse. How do you get them? *Cultivate seclusion.* Seclusion here doesn't mean like staying in a room all by yourself. It means that you're secluded from things that set your mind off. You're secluded from having lots of sense-distractions around you.

When there's a lot of sense things, we get so distracted that it's very difficult to focus and concentrate. I think we actually get exhausted. One of my theories is, one of the reasons that we sleep is not because the body's tired but because the mind is tired of having to deal so much with sense objects. When you go to sleep, how often do the muscles in your body feel tired? How often is it that your body is physically tired? Or is it just a feeling of tiredness around your eyes? Or is it mostly that the mind just wants a break from all this stuff that's in your face all the time? So there's a certain way that the mind quiets down and we don't have a lot of the sense-distractions here.

That's all I thought we'd do this week. Now, your questions? What's happening with you in your meditation?

**R:** Okay, confession time. I had a dream yesterday night and it was exactly about this. It was very clear. I was thinking we have been here for two weeks and nothing really extraordinary has happened, you know? The meditation has been okay, I have been following the lam rim, and thinking a lot. But because I have previous experiences with purification and big things coming out, I was expecting more. I was thinking "something is not working; maybe it's the mantra. I'm saying it too fast." Actually I noticed there were a couple of syllables missing. So yesterday I was struggling with the mantra to put the syllable back in its place, it wouldn't stick though. I was kind of worried but I knew there was something else, it was clear. But it was clear and it was not clear. So I went to bed and I had this dream that was really shocking: I had gone to Canada in the dream. I had taken a plane and flew away. And I was working there with some guy who was a friend from my past, about twenty years ago. We were polishing a Buddha statue, a white Buddha statue—we were cleaning it. But for some reason, my family kept bringing me back home; they were taking me back home. It was happening many times. I was back home with my mom and dad and my brothers, and it was okay. It was very comfortable, very nice. But I kept thinking, "This is ridiculous. I was over there, thousands of miles away, polishing my Buddha statue, and now I'm back home with my family." So then I was back to this place with my Buddha statue, and I had a bucket of what was supposed to be white milk—it was the nectar, you know? But I was seeing the nectar, and it was all watered down. It was just water; no white stuff. The white stuff was on the bottom, and I gave it to my friend. We were supposed to clean the Buddha statue with this, but it wouldn't work because it was just water. It was dirty also—there was some dirt and stuff floating around. And he was saying, "This is not milk. We can't do anything with this—it's dirty!" Then I woke up and that was in my mind. So my conclusion was very clear. First, I thought, "my family: they're guilty of everything." But then I said, "it is not my family—these are my habitual patterns and everything that is familiar to me." So I'm here very far away, trying to stay with my white Buddha, cleaning it and everything, and I keep going back to this same place—my habitual patterns of behavior, liking things and disliking things, and wanting to be liked by people, and this and that. So my nectar is watered down—it's not really working. So my conclusion, which was very strong for me, was (this is one thing that has been clear for years but I've never really wanted to take the steps to work on it) is that you can't have your cake and eat it. If you really want to purify your negativities, you really have to give up your familiar patterns. You can't go back all the time and have a good time and just relax, thinking your nectar will do everything for you. You really have to do the work. So it was very shocking. For me, it's very revealing, and it's very painful, because the spiritual path was supposed to be very smooth and very nice: "I will do what I want to do." And now I can see that I don't want to give up attachment—it feels good when all these objects of attachment are appearing all the time, very appealing. It's all the happiness I know. To take that decision to cultivate seclusion, to say, "no more," is not an easy thing. So that's what happened.

**VTC:** Very good. Very good.

**R:** Can I say something about this? My experience about the homeland and habits and familiar habits, the city... is I find it very difficult to get rid of the habits you got when you were a kid and you were conditioned. For example, I lived in Japan for about seven years, and when I was going back to Mexico, I thought I had changed very much. I thought I could do everything differently, and I could relate to my father and my brothers differently, and the surprise for me, after seven years in Japan and going back and thinking that I had changed, was that the habits are so strong when you go back to your homeland. After some time, your family and people—they think you are the same person and they want you to be the same—so the two energies get together and after a while, I got back completely and had worse problems, maybe. I wanted to say this because it's very strong, very difficult to get rid of these habits. You really have to work, but this is very hard. The question I had is, I thought I had to go back to work with this kind of problem, to work with my relationship with my father and my brothers and everybody, and I thought it would be worth it. But at the same time I think I lost the battle in a way, because I got back into these habits.

**VTC:** I think what you said is quite true. We have our patterns, but our family—what I was saying before about the patterns of relationships—they have their patterns of relating to us, and they're not really keen for us to change either. Because everybody kind of knows how everybody else is, and even if you fight all the time, it's still familiar. I think that's one of the hardest things when we're trying to change, is when we start doing things differently and then people are shocked and they don't know how to handle us. "But wait a minute...this is the script we play out all the time. How can you not say this when I say that?" It happens in anger scripts, attachment scripts, the competition scripts, and it is sometimes jarring for the other people in our lives too—people who see us as permanent and fixed with a very rigid concrete "I." That's why being in a different environment—such as when you come here, when you don't even know everybody who's here—you have the space to be a different person. You don't have to be who you were before. There's space to be different here.

**R:** Last week, you were saying something to Tom, about labels, and how things are labeled. You said something about, 'in order to develop mindfulness; we should pay attention to our body.' So, I did. My question is, are we supposed to feel the same with the lam rim. If we think about love and compassion, for example, are we really going to feel that sensation too? Or is it just going to be intellectual.

**VTC:** So you're asking... when we do the lam rim meditations, for example, trying to develop love and compassion, are you just intellectually going through the points, or are you really aiming to feel it. Is that your question?

**R:** I have gone through this with intellectual questions, ideas, thoughts, and you feel something. And then you cry. Is that enough, or do we have to feel another thing, that complete awareness. For example, I was meditating, and suddenly, I just opened my eyes, and it was like dozens of eyes opening. Are we supposed to feel that when we think of love and compassion in the lam rim? Or are we supposed to feel another way.

**VTC:** I'm not sure if I know what you mean... but, don't have an idea of an outcome you're trying to get to. Don't think, "Oh, I've got to feel a certain way, and then I'll know I've got it." That's focusing on the result. Just do the meditation. Just do the meditation, and let happen what happens. But if you're trying to say, "unless I meditate on lam rim, and I'm thinking about the kindness of all these suffering sentient beings, unless I cry at the end of the meditation, because I have so much compassion for them—unless I do that, my meditation's a failure." Don't think like that. Don't think like that, because then you're not going to feel anything spontaneously or naturally because you have some kind of rigid idea about what you think you're supposed to feel. Instead, just create the causes. Just contemplate, for example, the first two noble truths in relation to sentient beings. Contemplate the three kinds of sufferings they experience. Contemplate how they're under the influence of ignorance and attachment even though they want to be happy. Think about that, and think about it in relation to people you know, people you don't know, people you like, people you don't like. Then, whatever you feel, that's fine. If you're trying to make yourself feel something and judging your meditation, you're blocking yourself.

**R:** I was thinking, "Maybe I have done the lam rim in that way—the way you are describing." But now, when I feel that, I think, "maybe I haven't understood anything!" I was wondering if I've been doing it correctly...

**VTC:** You know, it takes us a while to actually learn what meditating on lam rim means. I know, for me, for quite a long time, I just went through one, two three, four. "One, thought about that. Two,

thought about that. Three... Four... Yeah, I'm supposed to feel that. Well, I kind of do, but not completely, what's next?" (laughter) And that's why I think the real trick is making those meditations quite personal, and putting our life really into them. So it's not just, starting with precious human life, "Oh yeah, I'm not born in the hells, born in (yawn)...what's the next one? Pretas? Oh yeah, I'm not born there; I'm not born in the animal realm; not born in the long-lived god—I don't even know if I believe in those, but anyway I'm not born as one." (laughter) That's not the way to do it. Instead, imagine: "what would it be like if I were in a situation of extreme pain. Could I practice the dharma? What would happen to my mind in a situation of extreme pain? Well, knowing my mind, I'd freak out. Totally uncontrollable, can't do anything useful with my mind. Wow, thank goodness I'm not in that situation." So do that—make it really personal.

Or you're meditating on Karma. Karma's first point: happiness is definite. Happiness comes from virtue, and unhappiness comes from non-virtue. "Do I really believe that? Well, yeah, I believe that. Do I live like I believe it?" Then you start looking at your actions. Do you really *live* like you believe that happiness comes from positive actions, and unhappiness comes from negative actions? Do I really live my life like that? No, I live my life like that second helping of food and that next movie is going to make me happy right now! (laughter) "That's the cause of my happiness; that's how I live. And I live my life that if I have to tell a little white lie here to negotiate that, that's the cause of happiness." So you make it very personal.

**R:** This might be a bit simplistic, but I was going through attachment in the context of the four noble truths. For example, coffee: I drank coffee, and now there's the suffering of no more coffee. (laughter) So that's the gross sense level dukkha, the first truth. And the cause of that is craving. So I still—I don't have a problem with the coffee being gone—but there's this routine that goes with it. I get up early, I've got twenty minutes to read dharma, and then I think, "wait a minute, I cut off the gross level of suffering, but I still have the cause—there's still craving, but not the coffee."

**VTC:** What are you craving?

**R:** I've got tea now. (laughter) Am I going to see some sensation in this? Am I going to have to go through the whole eight-fold path, the fourth truth, to evaluate the craving? I don't know how to work with that.

**VTC:** You're not missing the coffee so much... What are you craving?

**R:** I see that I still have the same *routine*; I just replaced the coffee with tea.

**VTC:** Is there anything inherently non-virtuous about reading the dharma and drinking a cup of tea?

**R:** No, but there's attachment to it—or it feels that way.

**VTC:** Is it an attachment? Is it an attachment the same way as when the mind says, "I really need this," grasping at something else outside of you. Is it that kind of attachment?

**R:** It certainly doesn't have the buzz...

**VTC:** Or is it just a habit that you're in, that you do to wake yourself up in the morning.

**R:** Right. That's all it really is.

**VTC:** There are worse things going on. (laughter) Don't stress about that one. We have to really learn to discriminate: what's attachment, and what's a habit, and what's liking something, what's craving, what's wanting—we have to learn to discriminate these things. What's aspiration? Just being attracted toward something doesn't necessarily mean that you're craving and clinging to it. We can be attracted to the dharma teachings. Don't confuse attraction with craving and clinging. Sure, in some cases, attraction is the predecessor of, and gives birth to, craving and clinging. I'm attracted to that chocolate cake...whomp! There you know there's some attachment going on. But if it's just something like you're sitting and drinking a cup of tea and reading a dharma book and you're getting some good imprints, and it's a calming way to start your day, don't call that craving and attachment and think, "well, I better go and turn on the television set first thing in the morning to prove to myself I'm not attached to reading my dharma book!" No.

**R:** If it comes up confusing, then...

**VTC:** You need to discern: what is craving, and what is aspiration? Many people get this confused: they think any time you aspire for something that it's clinging. You aspire for Buddhahood! We're trying to create that aspiration! That's not clinging. We aspire to end suffering; we aspire to generate love and compassion in our hearts. We *should* generate those aspirations as much as possible. Don't think that everything you're attracted to or aspiring for is attachment, because then the only image you have of a Buddhist is someone who's sitting there going, "duhhhhhhh." Because they're not attracted to anything, they don't aspire to anything: "I accept everything, duhhhhhhh." You know? Look at His Holiness the Dalai Lama: he's active; he knows exactly what he wants. I got in this confusion too at the beginning: "Oh, if I have any kind of preference for this or that, then it's

just attachment.” Now if I have preference for wanting to live at the seashore in a condo rather than in the inner city, that’s an attachment to sense pleasure. But if I have the preference that I’d much rather spend this time reading a dharma book or talking with a dharma friend than listening to music with an old friend, that’s not attachment! That’s something virtuous that you’re trying to get your mind to want and be attracted towards.

R: Okay, that’s helpful.

VTC: Remember that with attachment, we have to really know what the definition of attachment is. It’s not just attraction to something, and it’s not just wanting something—that’s not the definition of attachment. Attachment is based upon a mind that exaggerates the good qualities of someone or something, or projects good qualities that aren’t there. Then clinging and not wanting to be separate from it. So if you’re sitting there, “oh, I really want to be with this person (whiny tone of voice),” that’s attachment. But if it’s saying, “Oh, I’d really like to have a stable mind, and I aspire to develop some more mindfulness and calmness in my mind. I aspire to have some interest in reading dharma first thing in the morning.” What a great aspiration, to be attracted to dharma first thing in the morning! Go for it! Make this guy a cup of tea tomorrow, will you? (laughter)

We all have our little routines in the morning, don’t we? Some people say, “Oh, I don’t like rituals.” Our life is filled with rituals: we have our little morning routines of how we get up. How wonderful that you put dharma in your morning routine! Isn’t that wonderful? Most people don’t have dharma in their morning routine: they wake up and the news is blaring, they get out of bed and see a stack of bills...

This is very good. I’m glad you asked that. It’s real important to be able to distinguish. There are some tapes on the “Mind and the Mental Factors” downstairs; listen to them. It goes through some of the positive mental factors, the ones we want to cultivate and then what the negative ones are. That can be very helpful, because admiration for virtuous things is a mental factor we want to cultivate. Aspiration for positive things, conviction in the teachings... all of these are involved in attraction, but there is no exaggeration. You’re not projecting things.

R: I’ve been thinking a little bit about the four distortions, and ignorance with that. Is the ignorance that sees inherent existence, is that the same kind of ignorance as the ignorance of the four distortions?

VTC: It depends upon which tenet system you are talking about... but from Prasangika yes. The ignorance that is seeing the self and the four distortions from a Prasangika view is the ignorance that is grasping onto people and things as inherently existent.

R: What about if I see something that’s suffering as happiness? That seems different in some ways.

VTC: That’s another kind of ignorance. There are many kinds of ignorance. There’s ignorance in terms of the ultimate truth—that would be grasping at true existence—and then there are various kinds of ignorance regarding the conventional truths. Ignorance of karma, things like that.

R: So that wouldn’t be an ignorance of karma, then, that would be...

VTC: You mean the other three distortions?

R: Yes, if you see something that is suffering as happiness that would be ignorance of...

VTC: I’ve asked that before and I can’t get a clear answer. It’s a *yi la je pa*. *Yi la je pa* is attention, which is one of the five omnipresent ones, but not all *yi la je pas* are the attentions that are one of the five omnipresent ones, and these four aren’t. So they’re *yi la je pa* but they aren’t the *yi la je pa* that’s one of the five omnipresent ones. One lama I asked, he said that he thought that maybe they were somehow affiliated with attachment, but it seems to me—just in my thinking—that it’s a kind of ignorance, because it’s an active misconception of something, seeing the exact opposite way that it really is.

R: So then is it even apprehending the object correctly?

VTC: When I’m looking at this and thinking that it’s going to bring me everlasting happiness, no. My sense consciousness might be perceiving the object, but my mental consciousness that’s saying, “oh, this cup is going to give me everlasting happiness,” that’s not perceiving the object correctly, is it? The mind that feels that we’re permanent, that we’re not changing: “I’m the same person today that I was yesterday, I’m always going to be the same person. And that second grade teacher—always going to be the same person! Whoever it is, whoever we’re mad at: they’re always going to be the same.” That’s not perceiving them accurately.

R: I have many questions.

VTC: Good!

**R:** When we're talking about anger, and when it says that when you get angry, all of your positive potentials are either consumed or they are prevented from ripening—why anger, and how can positive potentials be consumed?

**VTC:** It's from the collection of positive potential—those are the ones that get consumed by anger. It isn't like everything gets destroyed just by one moment of anger. It depends on who's getting angry, who you're getting angry towards, what the strength of the anger is—there are a lot of different things going on there. When you sit and you feel the energy of the angry mind, it's so clear that nothing virtuous can arise in that mind, isn't it? You get real sensitive in retreat, and you'll begin to see when an angry thought comes in, you can feel it reverberate through your whole mind: this one, hostile thought, just makes all this noise! Then you get a feeling of, "Oh, that's how it impedes the positive potential from ripening." Just the thought, you can feel the energy in the mind, and you can see that nothing virtuous can grow when that's there.

**R:** That's my question: I understand that it prevents the positive actions from arising, but how is it that they're wiped out.

**VTC:** I'm not so sure that it wipes them out 100% completely, but what it does very often is, instead of ripening sooner, it's going to be put off and it will ripen later. Or instead of ripening in a big happiness, it will ripen in a small happiness. I'm not sure exactly what it takes to wipe it out completely. It's a confusing topic, because the teachers say different things at different times. Sometimes they tell you that if you dedicated it beforehand it won't get wiped out, and then other times—like when you come to Chapter 6 in *Madhyamakavatara* (Chandrakirti's *Supplement to the Middle Way*)—they say, "no, wiped out. Finished." Then you say, "but you just taught us in the lam rim that if we dedicated, it won't get wiped out."

Anyway, I haven't been able to get clear about that, but it seems to me that there is some hatred that I think is so powerful and so intense that I can see it really destroying your positive potential. For example, in the tantric vows, the first tantric vow is belittling or disparaging your spiritual master. All throughout the lam rim it talks about this, the relationship with the spiritual mentor and how important it is to keep that one clean, and I can see that if you get angry at your spiritual mentor, some kind of very fierce, intense, incredible anger, yeah, that's going to burn it, that's going to burn the positive potential. I'm just telling you feeling about things here. And why? Because that's the person who's taught us how to do everything virtuous in our life, and if all of a sudden we have hatred towards the person who's been the most kind to us of any possible living being, then it's like we're throwing out all the good that they taught us. We're diminishing the power of the virtue that they helped us to create. That's just how it feels to me. So I can see that some kinds of hatred would just burn it.

But then other kind of hatred: you get mad at Achala [one of the Abbey cats] because he scratched you, I don't think that's going to do eons and eons worth of damage. (laughter) Unless he's a bodhisattva—and he might be—so it's good to make him your practice of patience. (laughter)

**R:** I have a question about the bodhisattva vows, I've been reviewing those...

**VTC:** Good!

**R:** I think I've broken the first one, but I don't really know about the degree. Can I give you the situation? A couple of times I've talked about a friend of mine, and I think I often make a remark about this person to distance myself because this friend has a substance problem. So I sometimes don't really want people to know that—I don't think this friend would want people to know that—so instead of saying that, I just say that "this person's kind of wild." But I realized that when I'm doing it, I'm always doing it because I want to put myself away from that person. And this is a dharma friend of mine. I don't know; it feels wrong.

**VTC:** So the situation is one of belittling somebody else and praising yourself, that's the one you're talking about, right? That's out of attachment to respect and offering. There's another one that's in the secondary vows that's doing it for a different motivation—I forget if it's jealousy, or anger...The first one, the root vow, has to do with attachment to receiving offerings and respect. I think the specific situation that vows is talking about is especially when you're in the role of being a leader in the dharma community, or being a teacher, or having some kind of position. Then, out of attachment to respect and offerings, criticizing other dharma people or praising yourself so that you'll get it; there's this kind of jealousy or competition there. I think that's the primary situation that that vow is talking about. Your situation isn't necessarily that. What you're trying to do is, you don't want to be seen as being affiliated with somebody, so you're just saying, "Oh, they're kind of wild."

**R:** In part. It's a friend of mine, and I want this person to be my friend, but there's also a part of me that wants to distance myself from this person's problems. It's just how I've handled it. It doesn't feel right at all.

**VTC:** If it's something that doesn't feel right, you have to see why it doesn't feel right. If somebody has a substance abuse problem, and you want to distance yourself from that, I think that's quite virtuous.

**R:** Distance myself from that...

**VTC:** From the substance abuse problem. You don't want to get involved with their substance abuse problem, do you?

**R:** No, I don't.

**VTC:** Right—that's why you're trying to avoid it. What you don't want to do is to give up your compassion for that person. It's somebody who's a friend. They have a drug problem. You don't want to have to say to everybody, "oh, this person has a drug problem." You don't want to have to lie about it. You're distancing yourself from them because you don't want to get sucked into their drug problem.

**R:** Not really. I'm not planning on taking any drugs...

**VTC:** Then you have to see: what is the attitude in your mind that doesn't feel comfortable? Why is it there? Are you feeling like you're not being compassionate towards this person?

**R:** That's what I actually came up with, that my response should be instead of saying, "oh, this person is kind of wild," it should be one of compassion. But, I'm not exactly sure—I haven't quite gotten there.

**VTC:** You have to see exactly what's lying behind it—this is something I can't tell you. If there's some discomfort in the mind, you have to see: are you uncomfortable because you're afraid that if you say that she's wild, she'll find out that you said that she's wild and then she'll be mad at you because you're friends? That's attachment to reputation on your part, or attachment to hearing praise, and aversion to blame because you don't want somebody to get mad at you. Or is it that you don't want somebody else to know that you're friends with this person because they have a drug problem, and if that person knows that they have a drug problem they might think badly of you because you're being friends with somebody like that...You have to find out what it is in your mind that's feeling uncomfortable.

This is something that's quite important: we cannot fix other people. We are not responsible for other people's faults. Our responsibility is to be compassionate towards them, and to help them the best we can. Our responsibility is not to fix their faults. Don't get confused and think, "Oh, I'm lacking compassion because I'm not doing everything I possibly can to stop this person who has a drug problem." Or, "I should be able to make them not have a drug problem." That's our grasping at control. That's our grasping at being 'Mr.' or 'Ms. Fix-It', taking responsibility for things that aren't our responsibility. These kinds of things, it takes a lot of time through the course of our practice, to really figure out what an appropriate level of involvement is with different people. Sometimes we might be involved at the appropriate level, but we guilt-trip ourselves and think, "Oh, I should be doing more than I'm doing, because if I only did more, if I was only more involved, then they would really change. I know I could get them to change, and it's just due to my laziness that they still have this problem." That's an inflated sense of self-importance.

On the other hand, in another situation, it could be that we should do something to help somebody, but we're too lazy to do it. We have to learn how to discern these things in our mind, and it's not always so clear. It takes a lot of time going through many examples over and over and over again, through months and years to figure it out. And we blow it sometimes. It's always a work in progress to figure out what's going on. Is this making some sense?

There are a couple of problems: 1) We take responsibility for things that aren't our problems; and 2) we don't take responsibility for things that are our problems. And we have those two problems! (laughter) And we can't always tell. We might have a big fault and we think, "oh, I'm being very responsible." And we're not at all—we're completely ignoring it, and denying it, and covering up our negative attitudes. Then there are other things for which they aren't our responsibility and there really isn't anything constructive that we can do, but we feel that, "I've got to fix it. I should be able to control it. I've got to make it happen differently." It's very confusing, especially if it's somebody that we care about a great deal. Because if we care about them, we really want them to be a certain way—for their own good, right? (laughter) For their own good...well, it's for their own good, and it's also for my good, too! (laughter)

It's incredible: watch this controlling mind that thinks we should be able to fix everybody's problems. Or this mind that says, "oh, something went wrong. Mea culpa, mea culpa." That's just

an inflated sense of self. On the other hand, things where we were really rude, or where we lacked conscientiousness—those we need to really open our eyes and take responsibility for. E.g. where we did have a negative motivation and we're trying to cover it up and pretend like we're just sweet, little, charming innocent me.

**R:** How can we use the pain? For example in this part of the retreat, I am having a lot of pain, primarily my knees and back hurt. How to use the pain in the meditation?

**VTC:** Knees hurt, back hurt? Ohhh, can you complain for me too? So how to use the pain in the meditation? One thing is to say, "I'm purifying." When you purify negative karma, it can manifest in all different sorts of ways. It could be a negative karma that might have caused you to be born in the hell realm for gazillion of eons, and instead it's ripening as pain in this body right now. We don't know how karma's ripening; we don't know what's going on. If you think, "this is my negative karma ripening," then the mind can handle it. Negative karma ripening, I came here that's the reason to finish this negative karma. I used to not experience a lot of pain and it got me worried I wasn't doing something right, you know, I should be purifying more. So this retreat I'm having some physical pain. Now the mind is saying it should go away! (laughter) So just remembering this is negative karma ripening, this is very good it's ripening now.

I love telling this story: I've known this person for a long time. There was nun and she was doing retreat at Kopan some years ago and she got a huge, enormous boil on her cheek. Boils are painful, and especially when you're in Asia you don't want to have a boil. Anyway, you don't want to have a boil anywhere! So she was really into "oh poor me." She was in retreat and she was taking a walk, and she bumped into Lama Zopa. And Rinpoche goes, "How are you?" And she says (whining tone of voice), "Oh Rinpoche, I have this boil!" And he goes, "Fantastic!!" (laughter) "You're so lucky. This is great!" And this nun is very confused. He continues, "This is great, really, really, good!"

So if you look at it like that: "Oh, this is so great my back hurts, my knees hurt: this is great! This is fifty million eons in the hell realms I'm experiencing in one meditation session!" It could be worse, right?

And then you do the Taking and Giving meditation, and then you think, "Oh, Chodron's out there, and her knees hurt (laughter), oh, and all these other people in the hall, their knees hurt and their backs hurt too." Anybody here who hasn't had pain in their knees and pain in their back? And then you say, "Oh, I'm experiencing this. May I take on all their knee pain and back pain. May I take it upon myself, and experience it for them."

**R:** I was actually going to ask a question about this, because at the end of a session, my legs were really hurting. I was trying to do Taking and Giving, and so I was thinking about one retreatant who I hear getting out of bed painfully in the morning, and I was thinking about another retreatant who has a bad back...But then I thought about the inmate I am writing to, and I thought, "I'll take on the pain of being in prison." And then I thought, "wait a minute! Maybe that's a little too much!" (laughter) The [physical] pain of others, that was fine—it was nice and theoretical—but when I really thought about this guy being in jail, I thought, "I don't think I can take that on. Maybe I'll just wish him well..." (laughter) I don't know what to say—I got sort of stuck.

**VTC:** That's really good when you see that happen, because when Taking and Giving is too easy, when you feel, "oh yeah, I can take on their suffering, no problem," it's a little too easy then. I mean, it's fine to let yourself have those moments. But when your mind says "Whoa, wait a minute—I don't want to take *that* on!" (laughter) Then you've caught the demon. Then you've caught the demon of the self-centered thought. So you take it right back to the meditation of the disadvantages of the self-centered thought: "*this* is the mind that's kept me in samsara all this time. *This* is the mind that's made me create so much negative karma. *This* is the mind that's blocked me off from opening my heart with love and compassion." And you just point your figure at that mind.

**R:** On the pain subject: I think that discouragement and self-pity are pretty useless, but I don't actually know what the antidotes are. What I think is useful, though, is that I made a vow to myself: if I have a moment of self-pity I'm going to do the Four Immeasurables.

**VTC:** Good!

**R:** It seems like maybe that's the antidote. I'm not sure.

**VTC:** I think the Four Immeasurables are definitely the antidote for self-pity, because you're pulling yourself out of that very narrow mind that's just thinking of me. I had an interesting experience this

last week with my pain. I've never had a lot of continuous pain—and so it's happening—and there are these weird pains when you least expect them. It's not getting any better—well, it is. You know how this is: it goes up and down. Have any of you had this happen in your life, where you just have a mind that says, "I can't take this anymore! I just can't take it!" And your mind freaks out? You just freak out, and say, "I can't take it anymore, aaahhhhh!" My parents have this home movie of me at age four or five throwing a temper tantrum because my skates wouldn't go on right. It's that mind that says, "I can't stand this," and freaks out. It's that freak-out mind. You can't stand it; you freak out. To me, I think that's got to be the mind that you have in the hell realm. It's not just the pain, the physical pain in the hell realm—it's the mind that's freaked out about it. So I've seen at certain points in my life—thank goodness not too often—the mind will just say, "I can't stand this," and freak out, and go into this rage or hysteria or cry—you know what I mean. Uncontrolled emotion just takes over.

I was getting into bed a few days ago, and all of a sudden, this thought came in of, "I can't take this pain *anymore*." (laughter) And then instantly, the next thought was, "don't go there." And I just stopped it. I stopped it right there: "don't go there; it's too much suffering." And I stopped. You can see that the physical pain is one thing, but the mind that rejects the reality of it is the real pain, the real painful thing. The mind that says, "I can't take this anymore."

**R:** When they talk about pain tolerance—I've had some experience with pain—I think pain tolerance is almost completely mental. I really do. You have days where one day you have pain, and another day you have pain, and one day it's driving you crazy and the other day it isn't. Sometimes the amount of pain you're having on the day it's driving you crazy is less, but it's when you have more fear, because you think it won't leave. That's why it's like, "don't go there." Or at least to recognize that it's mental, because then you can calm yourself down; it's easier to recognize that it's not just physical.

I think that's why the body meditations help, because then they tune you in, and you actually pay attention to the sensations, and then the mind that's freaking out goes to the sensations and finds out, "oh, it's just throbbing—no need to get freaked out about a throb." (laughter)

**VTC:** Very good.

**New R:** I've been thinking about that in relation to death, when my body hurts and my mind starts spazzing, because sometimes I think, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to die and it will be fine because I've meditated so much..." And then I think, "dying is probably at least going to be this painful, and if I can't have some sort of calm or equanimity or maintain some dharma practice now, what's it going to be like when my body is totally falling apart?"

**Previous R:** That's what I was trying to say when I led the meditation a few days ago. When I meditate on death, it's kind of theoretical. But what I always find helpful, whenever I'm experiencing something—whatever it is: pain, fatigue, whatever—I always say to myself, "if I'm dying right now, and I'm feeling like this..."—I can relate to the feeling, because you want to have some sort of control, I think, or do something with it. But that always works. It cleans up my meditations if, say, I'm distracted. Death is something I'm very much in denial about; it's very theoretical. But that seems to help, because I can pretend that, "oh, I could be dying right now having this experience. How do I want my mind to be?" It always cleans the meditation up.

**R:** In the purification of the body, I tend to neglect the crabs and the snakes. I've read and I heard you talking about relating to these things as psychological, but I've also read Lama Zopa talking about spirits and demons that can interfere with you and harm you. Can you talk a little bit about this part?

**VTC:** Talk about the part of visualizing the crabs and snakes and frogs...

**R:** Yes. Is it only something psychological, or...

**VTC:** Or could there really be spirits there in those forms?

**R:** Right. Are we dealing with that?

**VTC:** No. What you're purifying in part of the purification of the body is any karma that you've created to have spirit offenses in the future, or, if there's some sort of spirit offense going on right now, you can think that it's being purified. They say that when you do it, it's not like you imagine yourself filled with snakes and scorpions, and then they come out. Instead, it's just as the negativity comes out it assumes the form of snakes and scorpions and these things. So you don't imagine those things inside your body, but that's how all that energy comes out—in that form.

**R:** So I shouldn't neglect that part. (laughter)

**VTC:** You know, everybody's going to have a visualization that they really resonate with the most. I really like that one, the downward purification, the snakes and the scorpions, and everything yucky

and goopy and disgusting. I can get really into that one. But I can understand that maybe some people can't. Maybe you like the one of filling up from the bottom, the bottle that fills up—actually I can get into that one too. You're just vomiting the whole time (laughter), and out of your senses and your ears everything comes out, "blaaaaahhhhhh." (laughter) It's just all coming up and out. I think there's something nice about these visualizations. They're...

R: Very vivid.

VTC: Yes. Does that answer your question all right? So different people will get into different visualizations; you might prefer one visualization over the others. What I think is nice, is that when the nectar is filling you, whether it's from the top down or the bottom up, make sure it goes everywhere in your body. If there's one part of your body where you go, "Oh! Got to skip over that part," look at it. It becomes a mindfulness of the body meditation in a way. Do I really feel that I can purify all these different parts of my body, that the nectar can actually fill all of them up?

R: About the nectar, you can be creative? For instance I want to feel a very strong stream of nectar but it feels violent, so can you do it like that?

VTC: So the flow of the nectar is it going to be gushing, is it going to be a trickle, is it going to be violent or this gentle thing? I think if you want something sudden go to the third visualization of it coming in and everything disappearing, like turning on the light in the room. I think do that one. Don't visualize a lot of energy going through because I think that might create some misbalance. So the nectar should be a very pleasant feeling, it can be powerful but without being raucous, or uncontrolled or violent.

This reminded me about something I wanted to say, regarding your visualizations, have a certain kind of gentleness in them and gentleness with yourself in general as you're purifying. Don't let your mind get really tight. There's a thing called *lung* (a Tibetan word, pronounced "loong"), that sometimes if people are trying too hard to do it right, they get *lung*. E.g. "There's Vajrasattva, his bell, ooh I can't get all the prongs on his bell!" Or the mind is pushing too hard: "There I go again, I'm distracted! It's not my second grade teacher this time, it's my sixth grade teacher!" The mind's just getting really tight, so if your mind gets tight that's what they call *lung*. It's an imbalance in the air, the internal winds.

I have some tea, I'll put it downstairs and if you feel you're getting kind of moody or something like that, take some tea. It's good to drink before you go to bed or the first thing in the morning. But best thing is to keep a relaxed, happy mind and also that's why I think it's good to go outside every day and look at the sky, move your body, get some exercise. Don't sit there and squeeze yourself. "Oh here's that problem coming up again in this meditation session and I still don't know what my motivation was for that, do I purify at this or do I rejoice at it? I don't know what my motivation was, ahhhh!" Just relax.

R: On that note, if you're in retreat and you're realizing your attachments and your anger and all these other things, how do you not feel lousy about seeing those things?

VTC: It's like when you are cleaning your house, how do you not feel lousy about seeing all your garbage? It's like when you're cleaning your house, you have to see the trash to clean it! If you go into a room and it stinks, completely stinks, but you can't find out what it is that smells, you're going to have a really hard time cleaning it. When you find the corner, "that's where Achala peed," then you know exactly where to clean. You're so happy you found it, because now you know where to clean. It's the same thing when you're doing this and you're seeing some of your internal garbage, just go "good now I'm seeing it! All these years I've been blind to it and that's when it's really made me miserable. Now I'm seeing it; now I can do something about it; I'm on the path to recovery."

R: I'm seeing it, but I don't want to do anything about it. (laughter)

VTC: Oh, does anybody else have this one? "I'm seeing it but I don't want to do anything about it, I just wish all of the bad stuff would go away, and the attachments— I would just get what I wanted."

I had a friend who told me that sometimes she talks to herself in her meditation sessions like you talk to a child. So her difficulty was getting herself on the cushion. She would say (tone of voice as a mother to young child), "Well, I know you don't feel like going to the meditation cushion right now, but this is what we're going to do. Come on, give me your hand... We're going to go sit there." (laughter)

It's very similar if you're seeing your attachment, when you wish you could get everything you wanted and you didn't have to do anything about your attachment, and you wish all the pain of the attachment would just go away without having to do anything. "I don't want to give up all these

things! Can't I blame just one person for being unhappy?" (laughter) "It's not really my attachment—it's just this one person, they really betrayed me."

(VTC again takes on the motherly tone of voice) "I know you don't really want to face this one. I know you don't want to clean up your room right now, but it's time to clean up our room, so let's take a look at this attachment and clean it up a little here." (laughter)

**R:** When you go back to the room, for meditation, sometimes the feeling is, "Oh, again I have to go through the sadhana." It gets a bit mechanical. I would like to enter the practice quicker. Which parts of the sadhana are ones we can skip, and which parts are ones to go through all the time?

**VTC:** With the sadhana, you should go through the whole thing every time, but you can speed up or slow down whatever parts you want to.

**R:** The mantra: sometimes I feel that I go too fast, and that I am missing some words or some syllables. But I feel also that if I slow down...

**VTC:** ...you're trying too hard. Try and say the mantra as fast as you can. You don't want to go so fast that you skip some syllables: "Om Vajrasattva samaya ah hung pheh." (laughter) If you're doing that, you know you've missed a little bit. Then you know you need to slow down. You don't want to go so slow; don't drive yourself crazy. You should be coming along with your mantras. Three months is enough time to finish them in. You shouldn't be going very slowly (VTC then says mantra very slowly); you're going to drive yourself crazy, and you're going to lose the energy of the mantra. But if the "suto kayo me bhawa, supo kayo me bhawa" are all merging into one, then that part you need to slow down.

**R:** This has been a very helpful session for me, Venerable. The whole thing about relaxing into seeing your stuff. There's part of me that's accepting the fact that I had some expectations coming into this retreat. I'm realizing that I'm having an expectation about wanting this retreat to be profound but gentle. But I'm right in the middle of my stuff after only a few weeks.

I've really been wanting to understand what compassion is, how to deepen what that means. Here is this wonderful Buddha that I'm starting to—I don't really have a relationship with. I'm starting to do the lam rim on compassion, and thinking about His Holiness saying that everybody wants happiness and doesn't want to suffer. And when I even start with myself, I find that the fundamental obstacle is the fact that I don't have that compassion for myself, and the whole idea about going through a meditation and saying to myself, "[self], when you get all manipulative, and shady and crooked, and passive-aggressive, you're trying to be happy, and trying to avoid suffering, and this is your strange way of trying to do this."

So what I'm trying to do is get a different spin. When I look at my negativities, the things I have to work on, I give myself such a hard time. I'm such a taskmaster; I'm so hard on myself. And if I just look at it as myself trying to be happy and not to suffer—in the deluded and crazy way that I do it. And being able to see how I don't really have compassion for myself. I'm trying to do the equanimity meditation, and trying to think of wishing happiness for people, and I can't pass my first three intimate friends and my sister—I can't do it! I can't move any farther than people I'm extremely attached to, much less my enemies. I don't even have the attention for strangers—I don't have enough time for them.

It all comes back to the fact that I don't even know what it is to have compassion for myself. So I have been going over my life and looking at the things I've struggled with all of my life, and not seeing them as these concrete, habitual, negative, nasty, 'you're a terrible person, you're unlovable, you're screwed up things'—just seeing them as this is me just trying to be happy and not to suffer. It really just opened up the whole thing. And now I'm really starting to look at some really difficult stuff, and I'm getting hooked into how bad I was, how wrong I was, how much work I have to do, and how far I have to go—and it's just telling myself that I was trying to avoid suffering and be happy. And I can watch myself play this out, and I can watch how I was really just trying to be happy in a situation that was making me miserable.

I've always thought about why His Holiness uses that sentence so often. I've heard him a few times, and asked myself, "why does he keep saying that?" So I said to myself, "why don't you discover why he keeps telling the world that?" And that has been a huge piece.

**VTC:** Yes, yes. I find that same simple phrase—'everybody wants to be happy and not suffer'—so powerful, too. Like you were saying, it's so powerful when we look at ourselves and our own stuff, to have some understanding for the person we were instead of lambasting ourselves all the time. And then similarly, when we see people do things that we don't like, to say, that's just what they're

trying to do—to be happy and not suffer. And they don't know the cause of happiness, or the cause of suffering, but that's all they are. That's all Adolf Hitler was—somebody trying to be happy and not to suffer. That's all. To completely deconstruct all these images we have of people.

**R:** And the judgments, and the projections. And how we think we know why they're doing what they're doing: "of course, they're doing it just to piss me off." (laughter) Even in the past three days, I've seen this judgmental mind come up in relation to some of the folks I live here with, and I've just said, "this is just about happiness and not wanting to suffer. There's nothing else going on." It opens up a window, letting some fresh air into the mind.

**VTC:** Yes, yes. It's amazing how we make it all very personal. "They're doing this deliberately to get at me." First of all, we're sure about their motivation—most of the time we're wrong about people's motivation; we're just projecting things. Most of the time people have gotten mad at us, we didn't try and do anything. It was accidental. But even if somebody did something with a bad motivation toward us, is that a good reason to get angry at them? Even if they want to hurt us—does that mean that anger is a good reaction? No. They're just trying to be happy and not suffer, just like us. And our getting mad at them: we don't need to lambaste ourselves for getting mad at them, because I'm just trying to be happy and not suffer, and I think that somehow getting mad at this person is going to make me happy.

And then you laugh; then you really start to laugh. I think it's so good when you can do this. "I thought getting mad at this person was really going to make me happy. Boy, was I wrong. Pretty funny that I thought that." But I think that's very good in what you said, especially about other people in the group. You'll find that—you probably have already, that in the lack of other people in your life, you start projecting on the people in the group: "They slammed that door because they know it's going to drive me crazy" (laughter) "They forgot to turn that light off because they deliberately want to waste the world's resources. They don't care at all, and that's why they don't turn the light off." (laughter) "There's too much toilet paper in the toilet. They did it because they know I'm the next one in and it's going to run over because I have to flush it. They wanted me to be the one that has to go with the plunger because there's too much toilet paper. They did that!" (laughter)

When you see these things come up, laugh. And then sometimes you see in your own mind, "They did that to me. I wish they had a taste of their own medicine. Gee, I can't speak, but maybe I can just take their napkin or placemat and put it in the laundry and then they'll know how I feel when I come in and my napkin isn't there because they moved it without asking my permission. Let them suffer not having their napkin!" (laughter) "Give them a taste of their own medicine: I'm going to take down the water bowls and spill all the water and not clean it up so then they'll know what it's like to come in and set up the water the next morning after they took it down!" And then you look and you go, "Yeah I think doing that will make me happy." And we laugh.

**R:** In the five heinous actions, there is one causing schism in the Sangha, what is that?

**VTC:** Okay, causing a schism in the Sangha is having the Sangha, the dharma community and getting people to quarrel and fight. They say that the one that is the heinous action it was only created at the time of the Buddha. It has to be with an actual Buddha who turned the wheel of Dharma. So that was Devadatta who had the "honor" of being the only one who did that. So we can't actually create that as a heinous action in this life, but what it's getting at is our mind that likes to create problems, make dharma people quarrel and not get along and divide into factions. That's something that's serious.

**R:** The six paramitas... there are five paramitas we practice, such as being generous; but concentration, samadhi: I am not very aware of cultivating this one. So I was wondering how should we do it on a regular basis—just meditation, breathing meditation? How to integrate this into our practice?

**VTC:** So how to integrate some practice of developing concentration in your daily practice. What you can do is see what object of meditation really works for you. For some people, the breath works well; for some people, the breath doesn't work well. You can do it in the context of, for example, Vajrasattva or Chenrezig: your meditation object is the deity, the figure of the deity. Or, if you do the self-generation, it could be the image of yourself as the deity. That could be your meditation object. Many people find that a visualized object of the deity or the Buddha is easier to develop concentration on.

But they say that when you're doing it, to just do short sessions. So what you might do as part of your daily practice is to work a little at the visualization and keeping your mind on it, for five

or ten minutes, something like that. But then implement concentration in the rest of your practice in the sense of knowing what you're practicing you're doing... (laughter) If you're reading a prayer, focus on the meaning of the prayer—things like that.

**R:** How come we don't say this mantra that's in a lot of sadhanas. It's like "Om svabhava...

**VTC:** Om svabhava shuddho sarva dharma svabhava shuddo 'ham.

**R:** Yes: how come we don't say that one in this sadhana?

**VTC:** That is the mantra where you dissolve everything into emptiness, and then usually after that, the deity emerges. So it's very often done when you're doing a self-generation practice.

**R:** So we're not working with emptiness in that way in this meditation?

**VTC:** No, because we're doing a front generation. Vajrasattva is above your head. You can meditate on emptiness when Vajrasattva dissolves into you, but you can also think of how all the negative karma is empty, and how Vajrasattva is empty.

**R:** Also, in the visualization: you have all the people around you, and you've dissolved Vajradhara, and you leave all the people there...When you do the thing at the end, when you dissolve Vajrasattva—in a lot of our practices, all the people around us, the deity goes into them too—but that's not in this sadhana.

**VTC:** This one, if you've been thinking that there's a Vajrasattva on the heads of all the sentient beings, then you can think that that Vajrasattva dissolves into them too. But usually, in this one, you're focusing pretty much on yourself, although it's certainly good to feel that there are other people around you and that Vajrasattva is purifying them as well.

**R:** I know Shakyamuni Buddha existed, and that he was a person, but once I was thinking, "What about Vajrasattva?" Did he exist? Was he a person?

**VTC:** That I don't know. I haven't heard any stories about previous lives of Vajrasattva. I don't know. Tara and Chenrezig, there's stories, but I haven't heard one about Vajrasattva. But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

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