

**VSR – 5th Question & Answer Session
with Ven. Thubten Chodron
Sunday, January 15, 2006**

VTC: So let's start with the text [*The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas*]. By the way, Geshe Sonam Rinchen has an excellent book out on this text. Also Geshe Jampa Tegchok's book, *Transforming Adversity Into Joy and Courage* is wonderful and I highly recommend it for understanding this text. Verse Ten...

10. When your mothers, who've loved you since time without beginning,
Are suffering, what use is your own happiness?
Therefore to free limitless living beings
Develop the altruistic intention--
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

This is another one of those verses that always gets me. There are two ways to develop bodhicitta, one is the Seven-Point Instruction of Cause and Effect and then the other way is equalizing and exchanging self and others. Verse ten is referring to the first method, the Seven-Point Instruction on Cause and Effect. That's based on equanimity and then on the basis of that, you have (1) recognizing sentient beings as your mothers, (2) second is seeing them as kind, (3) third, wanting to repay their kindness, (4) fourth is generating love and kindness towards them, (5) fifth is compassion, (6) sixth is the great resolve, and then (7) seventh is bodhicitta. All those are in the Lamrim, so I won't go into them extensively now. If you haven't had teachings on those before, then listen to the tapes that are on the "Three Principle Aspects of the Path." I go into it there.

To talk about this verse: *your mothers, who've loved you since time without beginning*. Thinking of all mother sentient beings, all sentient beings as having been your mother... It doesn't matter what form they are in this life, or how they treat you or anything like that; it doesn't matter if they're humans or they're kitties or stink bugs or spiders or coyotes. They've all been our mothers in previous lives, and as our mothers they have been kind to us. So this involves training our mind in not only seeing our mothers as kind but to see sentient beings as our mothers.

Westerners can sometimes have some difficulties, because ever since Freud came along we've been trained to see our parents as mean and as the cause of our problems and to blame everything on them. I think it's very unfair, and that perspective screws us up just as much as anything our parents did! It puts this mentality of blame onto people who have actually been quite kind to us. I think taking some time and really meditating on the kindness of our parents—and we all have stories to tell from our childhood—but bottom line, our parents gave us this body. That is bottom line.

Without our parents giving us this body and assuring that we were brought up and didn't die in childhood—which we very easily could have done—just that fact alone means they have been kind. It doesn't matter what else happened. The fact that we have a precious human life with which we can practice the Dharma is only possible due to the kindness of our parents. Giving us this body and making sure that either they or somebody else took care of us... To

make sure, when we could not take care of ourselves as infants and toddlers, that somebody took care of us— That’s the bottom line for kindness.

If we can train our mind to see that kindness and then, on top of that, for example, the kindness in teaching us how to speak... just simple things like this. It doesn’t matter what else happened; they taught us to speak, they taught us to tie our shoes, they potty trained us, all this kind of really useful stuff! (laughter) If we can see their kindness and see what they gave up in order to bring us up, then it puts in a totally different perspective every other thing that may have happened.

If we had problems with our parents or dysfunctional families or abuse or whatever, it puts that stuff in a totally different perspective. I once heard somebody say that in America now we talk about childhood as something that you have to recover from. I think that’s because we’ve been trained to look at what goes wrong.

What I have found across the board with the inmates I write to is an incredible love for their parents, especially their mother. These are the same people when they tell me the stories about how they grew up, dysfunction in the family, who knows what kind of chaos went on—and they treated their parents horribly when they were growing up, especially their mother. And once they land in prison, their mother is the person who sticks by them, *no matter what*. Society has abandoned them, everybody else also; friends turn against them—their mother still has unconditional love. The kindness of their mother finally dawns on them, and it’s really very touching.

When we can open our mind to see that kind of kindness, it’s something that frees us tremendously. And then when we see that it’s not just that one person—because that one person was kind to us in that way in this life—but that every single other living being has also been our mother, and been kind to us in the same way, then it brings this incredible feeling of closeness and familiarity with other sentient beings.

It’s said that Atisha, the great Indian sage who helped to bring Buddhism to Tibet, would call everybody “mother”... The donkey, the yak—whoever it was, it was “mom.” I think that’s a very nice way to train our mind when we see other living beings, because then we don’t feel alienated, we don’t feel separate from them.

We may not remember when they were our mother, but we can infer that we’ve had beginningless previous lifetimes—plenty of time for everybody to have been our mother, and to have been kind to us at that time. This whole perspective really changes how we see other people. It also helps us not to see people as just who they are in this life, and in the relationship we have with them in this life. It helps us remember that there was a time when there was this incredibly intimate relationship of parent and child.

I remember when I was hearing teachings about this at Kopan, and there was a dog at Kopan named Sasha. Sasha was crippled; she couldn’t walk on her hind legs. She dragged herself around everywhere, using just her front paws. It was so pathetic to see... this dog suffered so much. And then she had a litter of puppies in that state, and she nourished her puppies, and she took care of the puppies. I have such a vivid memory—almost thirty years later—of her kindness to her babies, in spite of her own incredible suffering. And then to

think that every sentient being has been kind to us in that way: it's just mind-boggling. It's impossible to hold grudges, impossible to hate anybody when you see that we've had this kind of relationship with people.

When these beings who've been that tremendously kind to us are suffering, of what use is it going around just looking for our own sense-pleasure happiness, our own reputation, our own feel-good fun? There's this feeling of, "I can't do that when somebody who's been tremendously kind to us is suffering." And here, it's the suffering of samsara, which is so horrible. When they're suffering, can we go out and go to a party? It's unthinkable. For me, I find this a very good remedy when the mind is getting very selfish and very "I just want some happiness; I want some pleasure!" When it's quite self-centered like this, to think, "here are all these other beings who've been so kind, wallowing in samsara, and I want to go out and just have a good time? That's ridiculous!"

When I was sixteen or seventeen, my boyfriend had invited me to the high school prom. And then the Six-day War broke out a couple of days before the prom. I just felt, "Wow. Here are all these people killing each other. How can I go to the prom? What a ridiculous thing to do—go to a prom—when people are killing each other over such stupid things, and causing each other and themselves so much suffering!" Everybody told me I was crazy, and I couldn't do anything about it, so I should 'just shut up and go to the prom!' But it just felt so weird to me: how can you do this?

When you have that feeling, then, automatically what comes to the mind is, *...to free limitless living beings, develop the altruistic intention.* When there's suffering, the only thing to do is try to become Buddhas so we can benefit them in the most effective way. It's the only thing that makes sense to do. Having a good time doesn't make any sense. Liberating just ourselves and forgetting about everybody else doesn't make any sense. Following the bodhisattva path is the only thing that makes any sense to do when you have that kind of understanding. It helps us see past how people are treating us in this particular life. Achie [one of the Abbey's cats] scratches me, and I think "oh, this ridiculous cat." You can make a whole court case... But you can also say "that's my mother who got born in that cat body, trapped by afflictions and karma in a body like that, not knowing what in the world she is thinking or doing. And here's this person who took incredible good care of me in a previous life. Then okay he scratches me, no big deal!"

Verse Eleven:

11. All suffering comes from the wish for your own happiness.
Perfect Buddhas are born from the thought to help others.
Therefore exchange your own happiness
For the suffering of others—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

This verse focuses on the way of equalizing and exchanging self and others. Here we see that ourselves and others are equal in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. We see the disadvantages of cherishing ourselves, and the advantage of cherishing others. When we say "the disadvantages of cherishing ourselves", it doesn't mean we should have low self-esteem

and flagellate ourselves. It means the disadvantages of being self- preoccupied and the benefit of cherishing others.

Then, from there, we exchange self and others, which means—it doesn't mean I become you, and you become me, and your bank account becomes mine, and my bank account becomes yours—it means this: what we usually hold most important is *my* happiness. We exchange who we call “my” and who we call “you,” and what used to be called “others,” we call “I” or “mine.” And we call what used to be called “I,” “others.” So when we say, “I want happiness,” we're referring to all other living beings. And when we say, “I'm number one, and you can wait,” we're meaning “other sentient beings are most important, and fulfilling my own pleasure can wait.” That's exchanging self and others. Then we do the Taking and Giving meditation, tonglen, and that leads us to generate bodhichitta. I won't go into all these steps in detail—look at Geshe Tegchog's book. He has quite a wonderful explanation there.

The thing is to see very clearly that *all suffering comes from the wish for your own happiness*. That should be one of the prime things you realize from this retreat. Is that coming up in your meditation at all, when you're looking back on your life and the things that you have to regret, that you're purifying—when you ask yourself, “why did I do those things that I did that I have to purify?” —isn't it always because I was caring for myself more than others? (Rs nod) Behind every single—*every single*—negative karma we created wasn't there the thought, “I'm more important than others”? There we see very clearly the disadvantages of the self-centered mind: all the negative karma, all the causes for our own suffering, are generated by it. You can even see day-to-day in the retreat: e.g. when you're having a bad day, when you're going through something, isn't there also a certain amount of self-preoccupation then? (nods and laughter) “OOHHH, *nobody* is going through what **I'm** going through in this retreat! **I'm** having so much stuff come up! Unbelievable! *Nobody* else is going through this!” (laughter) That's what we're all thinking, right? True or not true? We all think like that. Is that an accurate reflection of reality— that nobody else is going through all the stuff we're going through, that we're the only ones who are *suffering so much from our afflictions and our karma*? That's just our self-centered melodrama, isn't it? Everybody in the whole retreat is going through stuff. But who do we get stuck on? *My drama, my guilt, my uncontrolled emotions, my suffering!* On and on, session after session. (much laughter) It's incredible, isn't it? Absolutely incredible. And there you have it—right there—the experiential proof of the disadvantages of self-centeredness: there it is, right there in living color.

Perfect Buddhas are born from the thought to help others. So what have Buddhas done? They've said, “all this stuff about me—it's just hopeless: trying to make the world the way I want it, trying to get everybody to recognize how much I suffer, how lonely I am, how alienated I am, and how they ignore me and they ostracize me, and they exclude me, and they don't pay attention to me [very weepy voice].” (much laughter) Trying to get other sentient beings to acknowledge that is just useless. It's useless. Just drop it! Just go, “clunk.” Drop it.

The Buddhas have the thought to benefit others. And in all the space that remains in your mind— when you've let go of your own melodrama— there's so much room to really love other people, and other living beings. It comes very, very naturally—very automatically. Especially when you can see them suffering from their own self-centeredness, just like you used to. You can look and see, “wow! This person is making themselves so miserable.

Their self-centeredness is making them so unnecessarily miserable.” You can really begin to have some compassion for them. And then on that basis, you can do exchange of self and others and the Taking and Giving meditation: take on their suffering, and use it to squash our whole melodrama inside—this whole hard rock of “ooohhh, my suffering.” Bring on everybody else’s suffering and then just transform it into this lightening bolt that clobbers that self-centered lump at our heart, and just totally obliterates it. And then there’s just so much space, so much incredible space... So we develop bodhichitta that way, as well. Because then it becomes clear that if we really cherish others, the best way to work for their happiness is to eliminate our own obscurations so we can be of the most effective benefit—then attaining enlightenment makes sense.

The next verses are about thought training. They are very practical, and very good to employ while you’re doing retreat. Verse Twelve:

12. Even if someone out of strong desire
Steals all your wealth or has it stolen,
Dedicate to him your body, possessions,
And your virtue, past, present, and future—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

What do we usually feel like doing if somebody steals our stuff? What’s our usual reaction?
R: Rage, anger...

VTC: Right, and we’re going to take it back—“no way are we going to let this thief have it! It’s not theirs, it’s mine!” and “how dare they take it!” and “they violated me and went into my space!” and blah, blah, blah. We just want to go snatch it back and clobber the other person. What’s this thought-training saying to do? Give them not only what they stole, but dedicate to them your body, your possessions, and your three times’ virtue. Now, that’s the last thing self-centered mind wants to do, isn’t it? And that means it’s the best thing for us to think about doing. It doesn’t mean we go and commit suicide in front of them and give them our body; it means mentally dedicate our body and our possessions and our virtue towards that person who ripped off our stuff.

So you do the *opposite* of what self-centered mind wants to do, and you do it not begrudgingly—(like) “this verse said I had to”—but you do it happily. How? Because you see that this person who stole all your stuff—why do people steal stuff? Because they’re miserable. People who are happy don’t go stealing other peoples’ stuff! So this person who stole our stuff, why did they steal it? Because they’re miserable; because they’re unhappy. That means they’re in need of happiness. How are we going to give them happiness? We dedicate our body, our possessions, and our past, present, and future positive potential for their welfare.

I was doing retreat once at Tushita and I went out for a walk at lunch and I came back and somebody had come in and stole my clock and pen. That was the only thing I had of value in the room. It was a little clock and a pen, and initially this thought came up: “Somebody came in MY room, how dare they do that and take this!” And then I thought, “no they must have needed it, so give it to them. Anyway, I don’t have it, might as well give it to them!” (laughter) My holding onto it mentally isn’t going to get it back, it’s only going to make me more miserable, so I might as well give it to them...

Verse Thirteen:

13. Even if someone tries to cut off your head
When you haven't done the slightest thing wrong,
Out of compassion take all his misdeeds
Upon yourself—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Togmey Zangpo thinks of these great situations: somebody wants to decapitate you when you haven't done anything wrong! Usually we get accused of doing things and we haven't done anything wrong and people make accusations, but how often has someone wanted to decapitate us because of it? It's usually not such a severe thing that we are facing... But even if that were something, that somebody wants to cut our head off and we haven't done anything wrong, what is it that our natural ego mind wants to do? "THAT'S NOT FAIR! I didn't do anything wrong, he did it!" What do we do, we blame somebody else. "Go cut his head off—not mine! I haven't done anything wrong!" We pass the buck. Even if we have done something wrong, we pass the buck don't we? "Who me? Oh, I didn't do that."

Even animals do that. When I was a kid we had a German Shepard dog and my mother had a salami out on the table—she was making salami sandwiches—and the door bell rang. She went to answer the door, and she came back and there was no salami there, and the dog was looking very guilty, kind of like looking at the kids saying, "oh, the kids did it." (laughter) So that's what we all do... Even if we have done something wrong we blame somebody else, we pass the buck.

Here we haven't done anything wrong, and somebody is really out to get us and what do we do? Instead of fight and scream, and accuse them back and beat them up and everything like that, out of compassion take all of his misdeeds upon ourselves. Again here's this person who's really suffering a lot, really suffering. Somebody who holds a grudge and wants revenge, or somebody who's misinterpreted something and wants to harm somebody back, even if that person hasn't done anything, that person's miserable, aren't they?

So again what's the appropriate Bodhisattva reaction? Take all of their misdeeds upon our self, all the negative karma that they would create by this action, all the negative karma that they've created in the past, take this all on our self and just heap it right on top of our own self-centeredness, and use it to destroy our self-centeredness. Again, it's the opposite of what ego mind wants to do. So you can see how these kinds of thought-training practices are used to destroy ego mind... They're very clear aren't they?

Verse Fourteen:

14. Even if someone broadcasts all kinds of unpleasant remarks
About you throughout the three thousand worlds,
In return, with a loving mind,
Speak of his good qualities—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

There is somebody criticizing you, all sorts of unpleasant remarks, shredding you, telling everything you ever did wrong, making up lies about things that you did, criticizing you up,

down, and across—to the three thousand worlds! Forget the three thousand worlds—if they even do it to one person behind our back, we can’t stand it—let alone the three thousand worlds. Somebody saying bad stuff about us: ego says, “that’s impossible! How can anybody do that? Ok, sometimes, I make mistakes, but that’s just because I was foolish and silly, and you’re supposed to have compassion for me when I’m like that and forgive me. It was because I just didn’t know any better. And then also, so many times, you blame me for things I didn’t do—well, maybe a little bit I did something, but really it was nothing—you just exaggerate it all...”

Isn’t it like this? Whenever we hear the smallest bit of an unpleasant remark, even when somebody has no intention to insult us, we hear what they’re saying as an insult. Again and again... We discover that all the time living here at the Abbey! (laughter, especially by residents) The things that nobody at all meant as an insult, but because we’re all ego-sensitive, we think, “That’s a personal accusation—an unpleasant remark! Questioning my right to be alive!” (much laughter) We just blow it up into this huge, enormous thing.

Or what do we do instead of blowing it up into this big thing, when we’re on our soapbox, “who do you think you are, saying those kinds of things about me behind my back? If anybody has a right to criticize anybody, I have a right to criticize you because you’ve done this, and this, and this, and this...” And we pull out our whole big computer file of every small thing they’ve ever done wrong, because we’ve been keeping track of it just so we’ll have ammunition for a situation like this. (laughter) We hold on to *everything*, and we store it away so we can take it out and really lambaste the other person.

So what do we do instead of doing that? *In return, with a loving mind, speak of his good qualities.* It doesn’t say, “with a begrudging mind.” It says *with a loving mind*. That’s what you were talking about in the example you gave last week [to retreatant]: about starting to look at somebody, and at the beginning it was difficult to see their good qualities, but the more you did it, the more you saw—wow—there were a lot of good qualities there that you never really even noticed before. Really doing that, even for somebody who’s trying to criticize us: see how many good qualities they have. And point them out; praise them! It’s the last thing you want to do, isn’t it? But with a loving mind—again, not with, “oh, I’m doing it just because Togmey Zangpo told me I should,” or “I’m doing it because I have to, but I *really* want to slug the guy”—not like that. (laughter) Really with a loving mind, pointing out their good qualities.

15. Though someone may deride and speak bad words
About you in a public gathering,
Looking on him as a spiritual teacher,
Bow to him with respect—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

This verse is similar to the previous one. *Though someone may deride and speak bad words about you in a public gathering.* There you are, with your Vajrasattva group, and somebody takes you to task, and really derides you and makes fun of you. Or you’re at a family gathering, and somebody in your family really ridicules you and criticizes you. They’re not just saying something to you directly, either: they’re spreading it out to all sorts of other people. Again, for ego-mind, this is just intolerable, totally intolerable!

I think sometimes for people, they cherish their reputation and their image much more than they cherish their very life. People will go to war, and people will get into fights over image and reputation. If you look, a lot of the gang warfare that happens in various places—it's not so much because somebody stole something from somebody else, but somebody criticized somebody else. What was it, the Hatfields and the McCoys, the ones who for generation and generation were killing each other? You see this even in former Yugoslavia, even though people didn't do anything, because this prejudice had been passed on from one generation to the other generation, just hearing stories about how bad the other group was, *then* people fight. And it's all over reputation and image, and not over anything that's even happened this life, anything substantial. Just over reputation and image...

The inmates tell me about this all the time, because that's one of the things that is so important for them: not being respected. In a prison setting—forget about a prison setting, anywhere—somebody cuts in front of you in line, people will start a fight in a public place about it, won't they? I've been on trains where somebody takes somebody else's berth, and they will scream and holler at each other on the train. Just small, small things. Any kind of reputation thing where we feel we're not being respected, then, boy, we get livid. We will fight to the death over our reputation. It happens all the time. Think about it: I'm sure you can think of many examples. Look at our governmental policy. Don't you think part of the reason we're in Iraq is because of the first Bush's reputation, and the second Bush wanted to show that "you can't do that to my daddy"?

This thing about being so sensitive to our image—it's really poisonous. So what's the antidote? Look upon that person *as a spiritual teacher* and *bow to him with respect*. So you're going to say, "What? George Bush should have bowed to Saddam Hussein with respect?" (laughter) Well, a lot of people wouldn't have gotten killed if he did... But I think that what it's emphasizing here is, in these kind of things, listen to what the other person has to say, instead of attacking back and wanting to destroy them. Start listening. Try to hear how the other person is seeing the situation, and what's going on. If we can show some respect—if we can take the other person seriously, even if we think their way of thinking is totally off the wall—if we can show respect to them, it can actually very often bring them around. Very often, what somebody wants—somebody who's acting out—what they really want is some respect and some acknowledgment.

Think about kids in the classroom. The kids who act out in the classroom very often, what they're just needing is some acknowledgment as a human being, and they can't get it any other way than disrupting the whole class. I remember one time actually saying that to one student, saying, "You don't need to act that way for me to talk to you." This happens all the time.

Anyway, so what this verse is getting at is, listen to the other person. Take them seriously. Respect them as a human being even if you disagree with what they're doing and what they're saying. That should give you something to practice this next week. (laughter)

Now, something else I wanted to talk about. Some of you were here last year, and the others have probably heard us talk about Bo, one of the inmates, and how we were reading Bo's letters. His letters stimulated such incredible discussions. He is serving a 20-year sentence—they're going to let him out after 16 years—and last year he was already in for 15

years. He went in when he was 32; he was 47 last year, so all those years spent in prison looking forward to getting out.

He was talking about his “non-negotiables,” i.e. what he wants to do in his life when he gets out that is just not negotiable. Things that he was feeling so strongly that were going to bring him happiness, and that he wanted so badly to do, that no amount of anybody saying anything was going to make him re-evaluate that.

And when I wrote back suggesting that those things don’t bring you actual happiness, he got pretty angry at me. His whole thing about “non-negotiables” sparked an incredible discussion among the retreatants. Everybody—all of us—started looking at our own lives, asking, “what do we consider non-negotiable in our life?” What activities, what people, what places, what whatever do we feel we absolutely have to have in our life? And we’re not going to compromise on those things at all. So this is something very good for you to do and look at in your meditation. What he was calling “non-negotiable”— what they are in normal language are the things we are most attached to; our deepest attachments that no way are we going to compromise on...

It’s very interesting to think about these in your life: about relationships, or activities, or places or career things or food or sports, whatever it is. But no way are you going to compromise those things. So take a look at that. So that’s the introduction and what I have here is a letter from Bo dated January 5th. He’s getting out on January 18th so please, everybody, make very, very strong prayers for him... He’s been in 16 years and he wrote me at one point that it was an incredible moment when he had finally exhausted all of his appeals and he realized he was going to have to serve every single day of the sentence. So here he is 3 days short of getting out; he was nearly two weeks short of getting out when this letter was written. So I want to read you part of the letter [from Bo]:

Well, I have been doing a lot of looking inside. This is a very cool time in my life. I don’t think the way I feel and the way my consciousness is perceiving and computing things will ever be experienced in this lifetime like this. This is a unique moment in my life; this is the time I have waited for, for so long, this is the second significant new beginning in my life.

The first new beginning—which I didn’t recognize as such—was when I was arrested. That new beginning was not something I looked forward to or embraced as a positive change, but in retrospect, it was clearly needed to alter the direction of my life. While this second new beginning has been a goal for a very long time, I totally understand it to be only a beginning. It is not an end-all. It’s not the finish line. It’s not the end product of anything, including my sixteen years of being incarcerated.

I look at it as the beginning of the rest of my life: a life with a clear ethical code and standard of character. My head is in a very good place, a place of clarity, a place of hope and positive thought, a place of peace and tranquility. So yeah, Chodron, instead of nervousness and anxiety (which a lot of guys getting out suffer from), I’m really cool right now. There’s a joyousness and light-heartedness going on inside of me that I can’t ever remember feeling before.

I mean, there were happy times before coming to prison, but not at this level of consciousness. This current happiness is a product of my mind, and the way I've decided to deal with life. It has nothing to do with some sort of superficial bullshit, i.e. materialistic stuff, hedonistic crap, or some romantic relationship (second-person type of thing) that is outside of who I am. I guess that I've learned that happiness starts—and is sustained—from what's going on inside.

Money, drugs, power, sex, material—none of these provide real happiness. Happiness must come from within. Yeah, it's a trip to be me at this point in time. I've never felt like this before, and I feel pretty darn good. Sometimes the pessimistic Bo worries about the world crushing my optimism once I get out, but the positive Bo knows deep down that as long as I do the right thing every day, that I'll be happy with myself. I am no longer controlled by the messed-up mindset that I have to impress people, that I need to be wealthy and popular, that I need to live up to someone else's expectations of success.

As a middle-aged man, I've replaced many of the priorities that I had twenty or more years ago. My list of priorities looks much different than the one the twenty-eight year-old Bo had. Funny how a few years in prison can alter a person's perception and thought processes, how being stripped of your physical freedom, and hitting rock bottom, can knock some sense into even the most hard-bearded person, how finding some humility gives you back some of your humanity. Yes, Chodron, my head and my thoughts are in a pretty good place now.

Isn't that incredible? Quite a change from last year, isn't it? Please make prayers for him as he begins each day the rest of his life—as each of us begin each day the rest of our lives.

I think there's a lot of Dharma wisdom in here—even though he doesn't want to call himself a “Buddhist,” doesn't adhere to any dogma, and doesn't like rituals. (appreciative laughter)

Isn't that letter incredible? Now, your questions...

Retreatant: I have a question that relates to two things you were saying before. I've been trying to look at the self-cherishing mind a little—and I actually did think of it as like a kid in class that acts up—and you were saying, sometimes with those students, if you just listen to them, the problem goes away on its own. But with the self-cherishing mind, I feel like a lot of the advice is to bash it over the head...I don't know...

VTC: Okay, so you're saying with a student that's acting up, if you listen to them they'll calm down, but should we really listen to the self-cherishing mind, or should we just clobber it?

R: Yes.

VTC: Here's where you need to develop some finesse in your practice. What I've done sometimes is I've had this little role-play: I put self-centered mind on one side, and Dharma-me over here. I'm sitting in the middle: I'm the facilitator. And I say, “Okay, self-centered mind, you're whining and you're complaining and you're acting out, what's really the problem?” And then I try and really listen to my heart with what self-centered mind is doing. Sometimes self-centered mind is saying, for example, “Oh, nobody loves me! Everybody's ignoring me. Everybody else has a best friend. Nobody cares about me. I'm so isolated from everybody else, etc.”

And then say, “Okay, I really hear you, self-centered mind. You’re really miserable. Let’s look at some of the things you’re saying. You’re saying nobody loves you. Is that really true? Is that *really* true that nobody loves you?” So you listen compassionately to self-centered mind: “Oh yeah, you are really miserable. You’re suffering so much. But is it really true that nobody loves you? Is that really true?”

And then you go back into the role-play of being self-centered mind: “well, is it really true that nobody loves me? Well, no, that’s not completely true. There are people who love me. But I want *more* love that they’re giving me!” (laughter)

Then you go back into the other person [Dharma-me], “oh, I really hear you. You really want more love than they’re giving you. What do you think could make that come about?” And then you go back—you ask self-cherishing mind: “Is demanding love going to be the thing that makes them love you more? Is that going to help? What’s going to help improve these relationships?”

And then you role-play self-centered mind again, and you think about it. You think, “well, yeah, I’ve been carrying on, accusing everybody of not loving me enough, and whining, and that really hasn’t done any good, has it?” (laughter) “I wonder how these other people feel about me? I wonder how I could be more loveable? Oh! Maybe I could start caring about them. Oh! Hmm...what a novel idea...maybe I can start caring about them...”

So you do this little role play, but when you are self-centered thought, you really get into that role, you really let self-centered thought put out its whole story. We’ve all done role play and improv and stuff like that—you play both roles and then you sympathize with your self-centered mind, but then say, “Is what you’re thinking true? Is your tactic for getting what you want really going to work? Has it worked in the past?”

Sometimes, if you have that kind of discussion with yourself, it gives you some space to just understand yourself, and say, “oohh, poor self-cherishing. You really are miserable. You really are hurting.” Sometimes, when you have that dialogue and role play the two things it can be very helpful.

And here’s why I said there needs to be some finesse in your practice: there are other times when self-centered mind comes up, where you just absolutely need to turn around and clobber it. It’s like knapweed: you don’t have a discussion with it. You pull it out by the roots! (laughter)

R: Like when you told us in an earlier Q&A about the time when you were getting into bed, and you thought, “Oh, I can’t take this pain anymore,” and then you just cut it off...

VTC: Right. (claps) You just have to say, “No, I can take it.” So there are other times when you need to completely say, “I’m not going there.” I think knapweed is a really good example, isn’t it? (laughter)

Questions, comments. What’s happening with everybody?

R: The honeymoon is definitely over.

VTC: The honeymoon’s over, huh?

R: I was talking to myself this morning after the second session of meditation. I was saying, “well, a whole week here and I think you probably have gone through the entire sadhana

uninterrupted or at least only slightly from beginning to end maybe six times the entire week in all the sessions. There were some days when the gong went off and I was like, “reverently I prostrate with my body, speech and mind.” I had disappeared into some discursive thinking or lists of springtime tasks for after the retreat is over or the disturbing attitudes that are sort of just making their way around to everybody in the retreat and taking me away from the sadhana. One day, not getting past refuge in an hour and fifteen minutes... I’d pull myself back; I’d pull myself back, and I was gone before I knew it. Now one of the things I have to say is, and this is very, very different than last year, is that I’m not beating myself up about it. And because I’m not beating myself up about it what I’m finding out is that the beating up and the self-hate ends up tightening the screws even more on the mind that’s already out of control and wandering around samsara and not staying with Vajrasattva at all. By me not doing it this year, it’s amazing, even with all that discursive thinking and the disturbing attitudes and the lists and my senses driving me around too—e.g. I’m too cold, too hot, it smells good, what’s that sound? My senses are just driving me everywhere, but I still have a lot of space in my mind, more this year than I did last year.

VTC: Good.

R: Now I’m figuring out that it’s the judge and the jury and the dictator who come in and beats you up after you’ve been wandering around that makes things even worse. You can’t handle it; you can’t deal with it. So I’m not quite sure... I’ve been using the antidotes, trying to work with those. I’m not quite sure as far as the list thing and getting off on a tangent, just going in my mind, just obsessing.

VTC: We should compare lists. (laughter)

R: I’m not quite sure, do I just kind of hang in with this, is this sort of a phase? The space is there; I’m actually having quite a bit of joy in my mind despite the fact that I’m frustrated.

VTC: Just seeing how you’re not beating yourself up, that’s tremendous progress. That’s really totally different than what happened before and you can see that it does give a lot of space. I think with the list... go and write it all down. Isn’t everyone making a list? Isn’t everybody making a list of what you’re going to do after retreat? Tomorrow everybody take out black felt pens and write down all your lists of what you’re going to do and we’ll hang them around. Seriously! And have blank paper, or blank space at the bottom of the page, so when you think of new ones you can come and write it down. I’m sure everybody is making a list, aren’t you? You know of what you want to do after retreat, what you’re going to do, what you’re going to buy, where you’re going to go, who you’re going to talk to, what letters you’re going to write. So let’s write it all down, we’ll just put it on the walls and when you think of a new one you can just add it. If you get tired of reading your list you can go to another space on the wall to read all the lists. (laughter)

R: So what is the afflictive emotion on discursive thinking? Is there an antidote rather than keep bringing the mind back?

VTC: Well they say for just discursive, just distraction, like that doing breathing meditation. You need some single-pointedness at that point. I think sometimes just really saying the mantra and letting yourself sink into the vibration of the mantra can have that same effect. There’s too much going on with the visualization, just pay attention to the sound of the mantra, focus on the sound, sink. I don’t know about you, but can you see that there are various levels of energy? Especially the list-planning one it’s up a notch and it’s like your voice is up a notch and when you really get into the mantra it’s like you can feel the energy go lower in your body. You kind of settle down and your voice gets lower.

R: It’s really exciting despite everything that’s going on.

R: I don't know if I really have a question but I thought I'd tell you what I've been doing. It feels like for the first month often times I'm kind of in this boat out in the ocean waiting for the next disturbing attitude to come in. Sometimes I'm maneuvering; different storms are coming, some are easy, some are hard. Sometimes I'm maneuvering it; sometimes I'm using the Dharma; sometimes I'm sinking and popping back up. Then it's calm and I do some Dharma reading, and then the next one comes in. But I feel like I'm in this boat. I've been dealing with my body the first month [having a lot of chronic back pain]. Then it started driving me absolutely crazy. In fact, I'm used to dealing with pain but I realized that I was having excessive fear. This was intensified; I didn't really need it. My body just felt out of control. There was a week where I never knew what was going to happen, then it kind of settled down. Then I was nerved out about any little thing: thinking, it's going to turn into something. But then, "ok, I can deal with that; it's the body." But then the last couple of days, until this morning, things were too tight. I didn't sleep well. So finally this morning I took a page out of your book. The boat image had come but I'd always pushed it aside. So this morning I just played with it. I realized that there was no boat actually. I was kind of out there in the ocean. (laughter) I just kind of went with it— free form. Sometimes in my meditation I do it kind of structured and sometimes I just go free form and let it happen. This was totally free form but I went with the images because images help me. I kind of just gave up my body completely. It was nice actually. I really felt like it was a possible thing at least in one moment of time to actually, just completely, give it up because the accommodation's a problem. Then I felt like, "but if your mind is still there..." I've always asked myself, "what am I clinging to?" That thought comes up to me a lot when things aren't going so well. But I really didn't follow that one along. It felt a little bit like a practice for dying actually. I don't know if I have a question. But I was thinking about dying because you're going to have to give up your body. But it also seems like you're going to have to give up your mind.

VTC: Yup. You've got to give everything up. We're giving up everything when we die.

R: I don't know what the question is, what are the best conditions?

VTC: It sounds like you've been fighting with your body.

R: I realized in the fall that I get quite angry at it. I've been a little better. The thing was fear actually. I realized that later today. What made me kind of nervous was I had a few times— it's happened three times where I was experiencing things that I really didn't know what they were and I wasn't comfortable. In fact, today I was thinking, "geez, maybe I'm not so mentally sound; maybe I could have a psychic break." (laughter) Because I really didn't know what the experiences were.

VTC: Mental experiences or physical ones?

R: I finally figured it out: it's Fear. Sometimes I walk up to the meadow when it's dark, and I make myself walk into the woods and I'm fearful; and I do it just because, because actually there is really nothing to fear, and I know that, but I have fear so I just do it. That's how I figured out what it is, it's fear and I'm not so used to it...I really didn't know what it was when it was happening. It helped to label it; it felt a lot better.

VTC: So is it fear of your body or fear of the future?

R: It was easier to see the fear when I could watch my little stories about how I'm going to figure out what to do if my body goes this way or that way. I just didn't know what was going to happen with it and that was okay. But when it came to my mind, that was uncomfortable. I really didn't know what I was experiencing. It helped a lot to label it today. You talk about this sometimes with anxiety and I don't think I have that a lot of time.

I used to tell myself I don't feel fear much except for the unknown, so when I was able to think of walking up to the meadow and what that felt like and I was able to label that, then the whole thing kind of settled out.

VTC: Very often we are anxious and we aren't aware of it and we think, "I'm not an anxious person." And then we look and we're quite anxious: there is a lot of fear and a lot of worry. And so it's true, sometimes just labeling it is very, very good. Helps to calm the mind down. "Oh, there's fear again."

R: The thing that was nice actually, was then I was floating out there on the ocean, I had this sense of protection, actually. I felt like the Dharma and the Sangha, and the Buddha were protection, basically—that's what was so calming.

VTC: Refuge is an incredible protection like that, especially when your mind feels a little bit weird, when you have unusual mental experiences—coming back to Refuge is very, very important at that time. When people have nightmares or whatever, just take refuge. When there's some kind of mental experience that you don't know what it is, it's very helpful to take refuge. Use this as a way to study what goes on in the mind.

I had never thought of myself as an anxious person—everybody's going to laugh, "ha ha, Chodron, *everybody else knows you are*"—but I think I'm not. And then I see, "oh, I have some anxiety there." It was very interesting discovering that, and then doing Taking and Giving meditation with it. For anxiety, what I think works very well—I was doing this in relationship to my leg and the pain I was having, with this shooting pain that sometimes came out of nowhere—I had a determination that, every time it hurts I'm going to say, "That's Good!" I just trained myself to say every time something hurts, "That's good: It's negative karma being used up." Or, every time I don't get what I want—I'm pushing and pushing and trying to control things, and it's not going the way I want—every time I don't get what I want, I'm going to say, "It's Good!"

We usually forget, but if you keep reminding yourself: every time people say something I don't want to hear, "Oh, that's Good!" We usually say, "that's bad." But, why is it bad? Why not label it "good"? Why do we label it "bad"? Why can't it be good? Something hurts. Why can't that be good? Who says it can't be good? Or things aren't happening the way I want to: "Good! Self-centeredness is not going to get his way— It's Good!"

R: Last week, I told you that I was obsessed with finding my "I." Yesterday morning, I was thinking, and at first, I thought there was something that possessed my body and my mind. Suddenly, I realized that I am not my body, and I am not my brain. I began to think in another way. At first, I was confusing my brain with my mind. Then I thought the brain is like the hardware and the mind is like software. I have this kind of brain, and that's why I have these kinds of thoughts and mental factors. But then there was an observer that was watching the relationship between the mind, the hardware, and the software, and karma. But yesterday, I found another observer that was watching my observer—so I have observer #1 and #2!

VTC: Tomorrow there will come a third one and a fourth one... (laughter).

R: (nods) I had a sense that if I continue looking, I'm going to find a lot of observers. Then I thought that my mind is like a dependent arising: there is a mind, but I will never find it. I realized that I was looking for a concrete thing. I just gave up: I will never hold the mind. I will never say, "ah! This is the final Observer!" No. It was a dependent arising—always changing.

VTC: This relates very much to what one retreatant was saying last week: There are these decisions, but who in the world is deciding? It's like this— there's a retreat going on, but

where's the retreat? Is there somebody running the retreat? What's the retreat? Or your workplace— there are all these people working together. Is there one person in charge that makes everything happen in the whole thing? No. There's this retreat going on, but is there one person in charge of the whole thing? And what in the world is this retreat? We can't find anything, but it's all happening, isn't it? The retreat is happening, things are going along, this and that happens, decisions are made, but is there some big thing doing it?

R: And I feel so relieved about that—it is a release. Really, you feel free. It is a very incredible sense of feeling this. I don't know how to express myself. I tried to find something, but I know I am going to fail, but I continue, continue... So I don't know 'who' is going to be reborn, or anything...

VTC: That's okay. It's like another retreatant said: 'there's no boat, but instead of sitting in the water and flailing, I'm just going to float'.

R: You mentioned saying "good" when something bad happens, and I have something I want to share. Last week these people were working on the roof of the meditation hall during one of our sessions. At the beginning, there was the hitting on the roof, and I got hooked to the sound; I could not get away from it. And I was working on one of my own problems at the same time; and I was thinking that if I suffer from these problems, it is because I had done something before. That was one thing.

Then I thought that if I suffer, life is not punishing me. e.g. 'God' is not saying, "You are a sinner. You should be punished." So why do I suffer? Because I did something. But how should I respond to this? I thought, instead of this being punishment, it is something that comes up to *repair* my negative karma, the things I have done. It gives me the chance and reminds me—this hitting on the roof, and on my body and emotions—that I can repair something that I have done before. So I thought that negative karma was a very good teacher, and it's very good, when you really suffer, to take advantage of that suffering, and say, "This is it. I cannot avoid it now." If I remember always, that when you have to repair something, there is pain or hitting, and I remember this image of the [roofers] repairing the meditation hall, then it's an image that can help me.

VTC: Very good.

R: I am not a sinner; I am not guilty. But I did do something that I have to repair.

VTC: Right, very good.

R: For me, the negative karma is the teacher. And it's the opportunity that life has given you at that moment to remind you that you did something, and now, if you want, you can repair it.

VTC: Right: it's reminding you that it's time to repair it, and it's time—in the future—not to do it again.

R: Right, because we live in a conditioned world. And if we don't stop, we will do it again and again. And if you don't take the opportunity to repair your karma, then you will only create more conditions for suffering later.

VTC: It sounds like you just learned something very important. That's good. Very good.

R: For me, I have a pattern of resentment coming up, and I'm just starting to recognize when it does arise. My sense is the antidote is patience, but how can I stop the resentment from arising in the first place? Right now I feel like, "Okay, it's another situation, and it's the same resentment coming up."

VTC: Things aren't going the way you want them to go, and you get resentful?

R: Thinking that I need to get certain things done in certain amount of time, and when that doesn't happen, or when someone interrupts me, resentment comes up. And I'm always in this situation. So now I'm seeing it, but I'm not seeing how to get out of it. This pattern has been going on for lifetimes. I can't stop it, although I can observe it. But where do you actually cut it off?

VTC: So there's this pattern, where you have an idea of what you want to get done in a certain amount of time, it doesn't happen for a particular reason—and especially if someone comes in and you have to pay attention to someone else—getting resentful. What I find, because I have that happen too, is to train myself to say, “Good! I'm glad I didn't get everything done!” (laughter)

R: That I didn't get everything done?

VTC: Yes. Good! This is samsara, of course I didn't get everything done I wanted to. This is samsara, of course things didn't go my way. What in the world did I expect? “Well, I expected everything to happen according to my schedule and turn out the way I wanted.” Time to laugh at myself again—“oohhh, a mess-up in samsara! Imagine that! How unusual!” Here I am ranting and raving because there was a mess-up; I should *expect* these things. In fact, it's amazing that they don't happen more. (laughter)

R: There's a whole ethos around “A good day is when things get done; a bad day is when they don't.”

VTC: Yes. But here, it's thinking, “Of course. It's samsara. Of course things aren't going to get done the way I want!”

R: So I can say that to you [e.g. when things are not done or are late]? (laughter)

VTC: And then I'm going to have to say, “No it's not!” (laughter as VTC bangs table) “It's got to get done!” And I'll have to say to myself, “Oh, it's samsara.” (laughter) Then we'll have to say to all the other people who are bugging both of us, “Oh, it's samsara. Sorry, it didn't get done.” (laughter)

It's good that you're noticing this as a habit, a pattern. Those kinds of things can be so poisonous when they go on for a long time.

R: In relation to that, I find that as this comes up, simultaneously there's a storyline that has been saying that for so long—I've got it memorized. Jealousy comes up, feeling excluded, left out—the whole justification. To reframe it so that we can start talking to ourselves differently seems so important. But there's a hook, a juice, in that resentment, in that jealousy that is almost something I go for. It's like a hit, in a negative sort of way. The disturbing attitudes have a buzz on them that I'm hooked into...

VTC: Why? Because when the disturbing attitude comes up, there's a very strong feeling of “I.” What we're getting out of it is, “I'M HERE.” (laughter) There's resentment, there's jealousy, there's frustration: “I'M HERE.” It is like a ‘hit’.

R: This thing about getting so much space because the mind is quieting down [in retreat], and we're working with our afflictions... It seems that for me, because I've calmed down some, the mind is sort of searching for what to put in there...that's the Lists or whatnot. To keep focused on what to do with that, I've been telling myself to just stay in stillness.

VTC: There's kind of an addiction to thinking. “Oh, there's space in my mind—better fill it up with thinking about something!” Yes, just stay in that stillness. Or, if you put something into it, put the vibration of the mantra. Or that feeling of compassion, that still feeling of compassion. But there is very much this whole addiction to thinking. The notion that “if I don't think, something is wrong.”

R: Right: “what am I forgetting?”

VTC: I should be making *use* of my mind!

New R: And that spaciousness that comes up, that is going toward the more natural state of the mind when it is unadulterated by all this thinking and all this projection?

VTC: Yes.

R: What an unusual experience that is; it’s somewhat disconcerting.

R: That reminds me: I have a relative who’s always on the go, and he would call me when I lived at Gampo Abbey (a Buddhist monastic community in Canada), and every weekend he would say, “So, what are you guys doing this weekend?” (laughter) Always. Or he’d call in the middle of the week: (in a hurried voice) “So, what’s going on?”

And I would always just say, “nothing...”

VTC: The sun came up!

R: It was the funniest thing—he always wanted something, some excitement. I just got used to saying, “there’s nothing going on that’s any different from yesterday, the last time you called...” He just never could get it—[I’d say] “Well, you know, oh just meditating...”

So there is that side of our mind that’s like looking for “what’s going on?! What’s happening?”

VTC:: Something new, something exciting.

New R: That’s when I start picking fights... when space starts to happen. It’s amazing how my mind will start to go to somebody and pick a fight (in my mind) with the behavior of that person for the day—“It’s Tom today!”

R: I don’t know how to make this question very clear but I’m going to try. As we work with the sadhana, we can enter the problem through many doors. I think it’s necessary to find out different ways to focus your problem. Is there any way to try to find out how to go more directly to the root of the problem instead of working with this little side or with that little problem?

VTC: Look at how the ‘I’ appears to exist.

R: How it appears to exist?

VTC: Yes: how it’s appearing and if it exists that way.

R: I have a comment. I wrote one letter to an inmate, he answered me. His letter for me is very strong because he answered with absolute sincerity. I didn’t want this kind of answer. For me it’s not easy to continue this exchange because he is very, very open, very sincere. There are some parts of the letter that I would like to—or maybe all the letter—I would like to share with you. If you like, I could put it out some place. One of the things I would like to comment on him is that on the basis of our experience, the situation that is doesn’t matter if we are inside the prison or outside the prison.

(R finishes her comments in Spanish.) Translation: Half of his life he has been in prison. He has been describing the reasons why he suffers. She’s [the retreatant] saying that many of those reasons are the same reasons she had for looking for a spiritual path. So the strange thing is, that she in no way has been in danger or jail. Even though the experiences are in a way common. You can see the letter. I want to say thank you very much because with this kind of interchange we really can put our experience in a deeper context.

We think sometimes that all the people are in our same situation [e.g. this retreat]. If we look at the world, this is a very rare situation, rare conditions to be with our teacher, to be with

books, to be in this kind of place, to have all the conditions exactly for our practice. Like we are kings, no? I feel like a queen of the Dharma. It's a very, very good experience.

VTC: R shared that letter with me. Thank you very much. It's very touching. He [the inmate] is very much right there; not trying to cover anything or hide or justify. I think it's really a call to respond with that same kind of thing of just—'yes, this is what I'm thinking or this is what my experience is.' [To other Rs] You'll see the tone and how it is written. It's very beautiful.

R: I was thinking about that today. When we read our prayer for our meal, we have the opportunity to make these offerings. I was thinking, "why are we so complacent?" Why does our mind go there? It happens all the time. Someone injures their leg and they can't walk well and have to use crutches. *Then* they notice all the people that have to use crutches. Until they have those crutches, they never do. I've seen this so many times. Our brain, we're just set up that way. I feel that way about this life. You have to do a lot of work to build this cabin, right [VTC's writing studio]? O.K. fine, we recognize that. But we don't seem to recognize how much work we have to do to get this precious human life. We had to do a lot and we just take it for granted. We could say this prayer all day. I've been thinking about so many people I've met in hospitals and different places. It's like what you were saying the very first day... These people aren't even able to *say* the mantra. They are so many people out there— they're humans but they don't have a full brain; they're riding around in carts; they're in Fircrest [home for severely mentally and physically disabled people]. I don't know if you've ever been there. I'm just amazed how much we take for granted. I do it all the time. Until you have an injury, you don't worry about your toes. Unless we think about things we're just going to do that.

VTC: It's very much the thing of taking things for granted and looking at what we don't have and complaining about that. I pick up on that line of the food offering prayer too: *May we always have the opportunity to make offerings to the Triple Gem.* It's true. We take that so much for granted. The opportunity to offer food. It's such a small thing; we just kind of run through the prayer spaced out. But to have the opportunity to have food and then to know the Dharma so that we can offer the food... Just that simple thing which we do, how many times? It already took the accumulation of so much good karma just to get that opportunity whereby we can offer food before we eat. Like you said, just looking at everything that we have. It's true. It's very easy to come here and say, 'I'm working so hard.' But how much did we have to do to have the opportunity to be able to come here and work? The work that you do here is for the Triple Gem. It's not ordinary work. It's work for the Triple Gem: it's work sustaining the Dharma; it's helping other people progress along the path. Just having that opportunity to work at the Abbey, let alone to meditate or participate in the program. That alone took a lot of good karma, and how much we take that for granted and say, "oh, I'm working too hard; I don't want to work."

R: We're like the turtle that came up through the ring!

New R: When we suffer about something very strongly, in that moment we can have empathy for the people who suffer that problem.

VTC: That's the thing. We get so much into our own suffering. Like you said, we can't have empathy for anybody else. It's precisely at that moment that we need to catch ourselves and say, 'I'm not the only one.' And open our eyes and look and see what's going on in this planet, and then we'll see, wow, my suffering is nothing! My suffering is actually quite manageable. It's like nothing. I'm not living in Baghdad right now. Or whatever it is, whatever situation you can imagine. That's the whole meditation on the precious human life:

I'm not born in the hell realms. Just seeing that our suffering is actually quite manageable. It's not so bad.

New R: On the other side of the coin, to let in all the suffering there is. I was trying to think the other day in a session about how to let that in but not feel so pained or overwhelmed. I was trying to think what were the afflictions of that. So would that be attachment? Too much attachment? During the session there was a fly by me that was dying and I really started to try to pay attention to that and look at that, and then I started crying and felt so overwhelmed. So I was trying to think how to have that compassion but not feel so overwhelmed.

VTC: So, how to have compassion without feeling overwhelmed by it? How Bodhisattvas keep their optimism is that they always see that compassion, and that the suffering has causes and the causes can be eliminated. So it's like you can see the pain of the fly when it's dying and that was created by causes, and there is nothing you can do right now to stop that, but you know you can make a karmic connection with that fly, and make prayers to be able to teach it the Dharma in future lives, so you can teach it so it won't create the causes for this, and instead it will create the causes for liberation and enlightenment.

R: I also thought after it really was dead that, and I was still in such pain with it, then I said that's just the body and its consciousness is leaving.

VTC: Its consciousness had left and we of course don't know where it was born, if it was born in a better place or a worse place. That's why it's good to do prayers for it and say mantra so it can hear, and blow on it.

New R: Not a bad place to die in the meditation hall and hearing the prayers...

VTC: Yes, it's a great place to die if you're a fly. But make that connection so you can be of benefit to that living being in the future. And we don't know where it was reborn if it's happier or if it's in more suffering, we don't know. The thing is, whatever suffering it was experiencing is impermanent: it's changing, changing, changing. That's what I tell the kitties sometimes [the 2 Abbey cats, Achala and Manjushri]. When it comes time for them to die, just to let go and the important thing is to have that positive motivation because whatever suffering you're experiencing doesn't last for very long— it's just momentary, its gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone. Carry a good motivation because that carries you through and makes a good outcome come.