

**VSR ~ 6th Question & Answer Session
with Ven. Thubten Chodron
Sunday, January 22, 2006**

VTC: So we're half way through the retreat. Pretty amazing isn't it? It's gone kind of quickly, hasn't it? Very, Very quickly. You'll find that the second half will go even quicker. It will be finished in a finger snap, and then you'll go, "what happened?"

I think at the end of our life when we die it's like that too. All of a sudden it's time to die and you look back and say, "where did it go?" It really becomes like a flash of lightening or a finger snap. So while we have the opportunity, each moment is a very precious moment to live with a precious human life. It is extremely precious and very difficult to get this opportunity. When you think about karma—the karma we've created even in this lifetime, to get the kind of opportunity that we have [now] in the future is hard. So, while we have it, it's very important to really use it wisely. Samara is big and vast, and when this opportunity is gone we don't know what situation we're going to be faced with.

When you think about it, each moment is a very precious moment. And then you think about how often we space out, how often we're going from point A to point B, and we're not paying attention because our mind is already at point B—or already somewhere else in the universe. So here we are, kind of living our life, going moment by moment, but we're never really there. Or we're talking to one person and we're thinking about something else we have to do, or we're doing one thing but we're actually thinking I should be doing something else. So the mind is never quite present with what's going on.

Your lists of Things To Do [After Retreat] are quite interesting. I didn't put mine up yet, I didn't have a big piece of paper... it will take most of the wall. (laughter) The size corresponds with how busy your mind is.

Somebody mentioned mindfulness. I think mindfulness has many different meanings. Especially as Buddhism is coming to the west, mindfulness is being used all different sorts of ways. But in the traditional usage it means, if you're meditating, being mindful, remembering your object of meditation, and during the break time and during your life being mindful of precepts, being mindful of renunciation, of bodhichitta, of wisdom.

In other words, holding in your mind the things that you know are true and valid, and living from them.

Each moment that we live is an opportunity to be mindful, to be fully present in that moment that we're living. And not just fully present in the way of "oh yes, I'm mindful that attachment is arising. Oh yes, I'm mindful I'm telling someone off." Not like that! That's why I said the term mindfulness is very often used any which way in America.

Each moment is really an opportunity to be mindful of some aspect of the Dharma and really live the Dharma in that moment. So whether you're on the cushion or off the cushion: if you're on the cushion when you're sitting there and doing the refuge prayer you're actually thinking about what you're saying. Often when we do the practice many times we stop

thinking about what we're saying. We say, "I know this already. Let's think about something more interesting: what are we having for lunch?" or some other thing. We get distracted.

But mindfulness really is being aware. For example, when you're doing the sadhana, what's the meaning of each part that you're saying? Really being there with it. When you're visualizing Vajrasattva, which is your object of meditation, remembering Vajrasattva in your mind. Remembering your object of meditation, not forgetting it.

Or, if you're reciting the mantra, being mindful of the vibration of the mantra. If you're switching your object from the visualized one to making prominent the auditory one, then really being there with the mantra one hundred percent. So whatever action you're doing in the sadhana, really being there with it. When you're making offerings, you're making offerings; you're not thinking about the next step of making the request or making confession or whatever it is.

When you're going through your daily life activities, it's being mindful of your precepts, how your precepts pertain to each situation you're in. Whether you have the five lay precepts, Bodhisattva precepts, or Tantric precepts, being mindful of those precepts, holding them in mind in each situation you encounter.

Or, what you might do is each day be mindful of a particular Lamrim meditation and see everything in terms of that Lamrim meditation. So maybe one day it's mindfulness of Precious Human Life. So everything you relate to, it's from that view. Another day it's mindfulness of Impermanence and Death, so it's relating to everything from that view, or maybe another day it's Bodhichitta, or it's Refuge. You relate to everything you encounter, whether you're eating or washing the dishes or vacuuming the floor, taking a walk or shoveling snow or whatever, through the eyes of that particular meditation. Emptiness is a good one: everything you're looking at thinking it exists by being merely labeled, it doesn't have its own substantial nature.

So mindfulness means holding the Dharma in the mind and being aware of what you're doing through that means. It doesn't mean just when you are on the cushion; it also means during the break time. For example, I've noticed this last week the people who are bringing my food are being much more mindful. I think when they're opening the door they're being more aware of opening the door and putting the food down and making an offering and closing the door. You know, because the whole opening and closing of the door has completely changed a hundred and eighty degrees from the previous week, so that's indicating there is some mindfulness going on there.

Mindfulness is being aware also when you enter and leave the house here: how are you opening and closing the door? Is it with compassion for the other people you're living with? That's why I talk a lot about being mindful of how you're moving through space. When you're using the bathroom, are you mindful of compassion and how you're leaving the bathroom? Are you leaving it clean for the next person who comes?

All these kinds of things are ways to integrate the Dharma in what we are doing, and being present with a Dharma mind with whatever we're doing. So this is the meaning of mindfulness. If you think that there is no mindfulness taught in the Tibetan tradition

because we don't say the word *mindfulness, mindfulness, mindfulness* all the time, and you think you need to go somewhere else to learn mindfulness, then be more mindful (laughter) of the teachings! Try and hold them in mind.

I just wanted to also check in with you about how the discipline of the retreat is going. Is the silence going okay?

Retreatant: We had to be encouraged once again that this is a very precious time and we should really try even harder.

VTC: That's good. Instead of talking with your mouth are you writing a lot of notes? Is there a proliferation of note writing? Just be mindful and attentive because sometimes when the mouth doesn't move then we think, "Oh I have to tell this person this, and I have to tell that person this, and I have to put this that and the other on the shopping list..." Really try to reign in the mind. It's interesting: when you have the idea that 'I really need to get or buy this or that', don't write the note immediately. Wait one day, and if the next day you still feel you need it—and you're remembering it—then you write the note. It could be that the mind has this thought, "oh, I definitely need this," but maybe you don't. Maybe take a day and just see if your mind comes to it the next day, see if it's something that you really need. Even if it's something like Lamrim Outlines.

When I learned the Dharma we didn't have photocopy machines in India, we wrote out all the outlines ourselves. And you know what? That way we learned them. We had to take out a book and make an outline our self, and think about it and learn the points. So lots of time "oh I need this photocopied," instead, take some time to write it out and see if that helps you learn it and remember it better.

Then some of the inmates wrote questions so I thought to start with those and also I received a totally amazing letter from an inmate I've never heard from before. I gave the letter to Flora. Do you have that same feeling about that letter? You've all read it? I couldn't talk after I read it, I just sat there. I couldn't write back to him right away, I was just so floored. I found it so incredibly moving. So moving. So he's no different than all of us in terms of how stuck the mind can get and how just a little bit of Dharma can free the mind from an 'eight hundred pound gorilla' that's riding on your back.

One of the questions—Tim asked this question—about the Buddha having negative karma... Because in the Pali Canon there's some sutras in which Buddha had stepped on a shard of stone and was in great pain, or he ate a meal with bad food in it and got quite sick. So he was saying that the Buddha is enlightened and suffering is supposed to come from negative karma, so how come the Buddha is experiencing this suffering?

There are two different ways in which the Buddha is seen, according to whether you're looking at the Pali tradition or the Sanskrit tradition. In the Pali tradition the Buddha is seen as an ordinary being when he was born: in this lifetime he went from the first path, the Path of Accumulation, to the fifth path, the Path of No More Learning, attained enlightenment. Then he still had this contaminated body that was born due to afflictions and karma. Then they say that when he attained mahaparinirvana at the end of his life, then because he was enlightened, his consciousness ceased and that's it. So according to that view of the Buddha, then it looks like yes, the Buddha steps on a stone and he experiences pain or he gets a stomachache from bad food or whatever.

From the Mahayana viewpoint, the Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha, is an emanation of the omniscient mind of all of the Buddhas. So Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, was actually enlightened a long time ago and appeared on this earth as an ordinary being and went through growing up and doing the whole thing; appearing to renounce and appearing to attain enlightenment and going through all that. He did that, although he was already enlightened, in order to show us an example of what we need to do and how we need to practice. So it was a skillful way to show us.

When it looked like the Buddha was experiencing pain because he stepped on the shard of stone, he wasn't really experiencing pain; he was manifesting that way in a skillful way to encourage the disciples to be free of a body born of afflictions and karma because that body is painful.

There are different ways to see the Buddha—whether you are seeing him as an ordinary being who attained enlightenment in this lifetime 2,500 years ago, or seeing him as an emanation of all of the omniscient minds of the Buddhas appearing in that skillful aspect. Also on the Mahayana path, when they talk about even before you get to Buddhahood, the Path of Seeing, you're not experiencing physical pain in that way because of the accumulation of merit that you have and because of your understanding of emptiness. So in that way it looks like there's pain going on but it's not really that way.

In the story of the Buddha in a previous life before he was enlightened, when he was the Bodhisattva prince [Mahasattva] and was taking a walk in the forest and saw the tigress and her starving cubs... Do you know that story? The cubs were starving and the tigress was starving; she had no food. She couldn't feel her cubs. They were all going to die. So the Bodhisattva prince thought, "I will just give my body to the tigress; she can eat it, and her cubs can nurse and they'll all live." So very happily he gave his body for her to have lunch. He didn't experience any pain doing that because of the depth of his realization of emptiness, because of the profundity of his Bodhicitta. We ordinary beings aren't at that level yet. But if you ever meet a bear or cougar in the woods, it's a good way to think... So the Buddha doesn't actually experience that kind of physical suffering. It's an appearance done for our sake.

But there are these two ways of viewing the Buddha. It's not like you have to choose one way or another. Personally, in my own practice, I use both ways of viewing the Buddha depending on what's going on in my practice. I remember so vividly when I was in Taiwan taking the Bhikshuni precepts. In the temple they had the twelve deeds of the Buddha; it was a bas-relief made of metal. All around the outside and inside of the temple you had scenes from the Buddha's life. So at lunchtime I would circumambulate. It was like a meditation thinking about all these different things the Buddha did—getting born and going to school, renouncing, and the whole scene with the swan, and all those different things. Seeing the Buddha as an ordinary being and what he really had to do, the effort and hard energy he had to put into gaining the realizations he did... I found it very, very inspiring to contemplate the Buddha as an ordinary being as I was walking around. It gave me a lot of inspiration and energy for my own practice.

At other times it's helpful to think of the Buddha as a manifestation of the omniscient mind. You don't have to choose one way or another. You view the Buddha from whichever way you need to at a specific time.

Then Tim also had the question: "Do you keep purifying something if you feel that it's been purified already?" I think it's always good when we're doing purification to say "ALL of my negative karmas that I've ever done since beginningless time, I'm confessing and purifying all of them, and in particular..." whatever one we're thinking about—maybe some that we really want to work on. So we might work on some for a while, feel like we have come to some peace about that, and feel like we're ready to move on to make some other ones the main focus of our meditation. But it's still good all the time to continuously say, "and I'm still purifying and confessing that one before too." Because we include it in the category of 'all the negative karma that I've ever created'. In that way we're continuing to chip away at it even though we've made peace with it.

The thing is—and I might have mentioned this before—I've noticed in my own experience, I'll feel like something has been purified and settled, and that's good. Then one or two years later, there it is again but at a different level with a different emphasis, a different accent. So I need to go back to it again, and I'm ready at that time to purify it on a deeper level and make peace with it at a deeper level. So I have found in my practice that it's always wise to remain humble and never say, "oh, I've purified that; I'm never going to do that one again!" Or, "I've taken care of that defilement; I'm free of that one!"

As soon as we do that, WHAMO! A situation arises in our life or something comes up in our meditation and we're back at square one. It's always much more helpful to think, "I've accomplished some purification on that one, but actually until I'm at the Path of Seeing I haven't completely purified it. So I've got to still remain attentive and not get arrogant or complacent or smug." It doesn't mean you don't trust yourself. You do trust yourself, but you don't trust your negativities. (laughter) Okay?

[Reading from letter] Bryan had a reflection: he was saying that he always finds something in each Q & A session. He did the retreat last year. Somebody brings up something that really pertains to him. So he's very grateful to all the things you people bring up. He said here, "*in the Q&A session when someone mentioned about the meditation becoming mechanical: I feel that way sometimes, but even when it feels that way, I feel like it is still good for me because I think I am at least creating some continuity in my meditation. It is easy for me to say, 'well this is not going too good. I'll do it tomorrow.' and get up and do something else. So even if it's mechanical from boredom or because my mind is on fast forward, I still feel I am making a habit of sitting.*

"Also, I have been trying to solely do the Vajrasattva practice, but it seems like others are doing different meditations at the same time. If my mind wanders, when I catch it, I just try to direct it back to the mantra, but some of the retreatants seem to be contemplating their thoughts and such, are they 'pausing' the Vajrasattva practice to deal with what is arising? Or are they doing the contemplating, visualizing and mantra all at once?"

VTC: I think that is quite a good question that Bryan has. Actually, technically speaking what he's doing is very good. When your mind gets distracted from the visualization and the mantra you bring your mind right back to Vajrasattva and your mantra. Now we all know

sometimes when we do that, within half a mantra the mind's off again because something has come up quite strong in our mind, and we really feel that "I need to look at it now because if I don't look at it now the energy isn't going to be there." Do you know what I mean? It's like somehow something is becoming clear in your mind at that moment, and you know that if you don't really resolve it or look at it then, you're not going to be able to come back to it. So in that case you need to switch and focus on whatever that thing is that's coming up at that particular time. If what's coming up isn't very strong and you put yourself back on Vajrasattva, stay with Vajrasattva, but if it's something powerful that you really need to look at, or maybe it's some powerful feeling about some aspect of the Lamrim that is really coming true for you in that moment, then I think it's good to switch the majority of our attention to what that thing is.

You can still keep the visualization or the mantra kind of going on in the background if you want to, and then switch to what it is you need to deal with. Or, if what's coming up is really big, you can just 'pause' the mantra and visualization, deal with what you need to, and then go back to Vajrasattva. Depends on you and how you can do it.

In terms of doing the Lamrim meditation, I think that is fine to do while you're doing the mantra. And when your mind is kind of getting bored or when you feel the meditation is getting quite mechanical, then to kind of spruce it up, do some Lamrim meditation. You can think while you're purifying, you're still doing Vajrasattva, but you think what you're purifying (while you're thinking about Lamrim) is the obscuration to gaining the realization of that Lamrim meditation. Or you can think that while you're contemplating that aspect of Lamrim, e.g. one of the analytic meditations on the gradual path to enlightenment, think that the nectar is the realization of that meditation subject, so that while you're contemplating that, that nectar is filling you up with the very realization of what you're contemplating.

[Reading another letter] Ken had a couple of questions. He hasn't received the tape or instructions yet. He said, "*The Vajrasattva retreat has been well, it's been. The visualization practice is eluding me. Another inmate has been trying to help me and it's improving but the melting images and mantra symbols swirling around, then 'Bam!—quick say the mantra,' then the images, then the nectar starts pouring. But mostly it's just the timing and trying to keep the images straight right now.*"

When you're first learning a practice it seems like, "Boy there's so much, so many steps in here!" First of all, *nothing is swirling around*. Vajrasattva is just sitting on the crown of your head. He's not swirling around, the mantra is not turning at his heart; the mantra letters at his heart are standing still. If you visualize them turning, it can really turn your mind up. Don't do that. So, the mantra letters are still. Nothing is swirling around. Vajrasattva is just sitting there, and the light and nectar is pouring down from the mantra and going into you.

Oh, that just reminded me to get back to the topic of mindfulness. You know how to practice mindfulness when you're doing this? When the nectar is coming into you, that's a way of being mindful of the body. It's a practice of mindfulness of the body because you have this nectar coming in: how is your body receiving the nectar? Are you fighting the nectar? Is your mind not letting the nectar go to certain parts of your body? As you feel the nectar coming in, you become very aware of the different sensations in your body, don't you? You become aware of where something is tight, where something's relaxed; you become aware of whatever is going on with you emotionally, which can appear sometimes as

images in your body or feelings in your body. Has that happened to you? So it becomes also a practice of mindfulness of the body when the nectar is flowing through your body.

The mindfulness of feelings, the second of the four mindfulnesses—pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings: When you are visualizing the light and nectar coming through, are you having pleasant feelings, unpleasant feeling, neutral feelings? How do you react to pleasant feelings? How is the feeling of the nectar coming though different than other pleasant feelings you have—like when you eat ice cream? Or, if you're having an unpleasant feeling in your body, and the nectar is trying to go through but there's something unpleasant... Is that a physical unpleasantness? Is that something that's tied to an emotion you're experiencing? How do you react to unpleasant feelings? Do you tighten up even more? So investigating your feelings while the nectar is flowing...

Or, if your mind is unhappy that day, how do you react to unhappy feelings in your mind? Or, how do you react to happy feelings in your mind? It's quite interesting, because you begin to see so clearly that as soon as there's an unhappy feeling... ooohh, I don't know about your mind, but my mind just says (she claps her hand), "I reject this! This is totally unacceptable! I have to do something to remove this unpleasant feeling ASAP!"

So the mind jumps for whatever samsaric thing that can remove it. Whether it's a restless unpleasantness in the mind, or something going on in the body, so be mindful of the feelings, okay? Be mindful of the thoughts while you're purifying. What kinds of thoughts are coming up? What kinds of emotions are coming up? Learn to discriminate what are positive emotions, what are negative ones. Where does your mind feel it's really settled and where is your mind kind of skipping over and rationalizing and justifying, and it's not really settled? This can happen when something's come up for you to purify, and you can watch as you're purifying it; you're purifying and you're purifying and you're also saying, "yes, but this person did dah. . .dah. . .dah. . .dah!" So watch that.

What is that? Is that a positive mental factor or is that a negative mental factor? Why is that one coming up? What's the logic of the mind in saying, "yes but— I'm purifying, but really they did dah. . .dah. . .dah. . .dah!" Be mindful of your mind and the mental factors—the thoughts and emotions. Be mindful of impermanence, of how quickly your mind is changing. Be mindful of emptiness while you're doing this.

This is just another way to bring mindfulness into your Vajrasattva practice. But it's the kind of way that you try and be aware when you're doing the visualization and the mantra. So nothing is swirling around. The only thing that melts is that at the very end, Vajrasattva melts into light and absorbs into you. Then you feel like your body's become completely clean, clear like crystal, and your mind has become like Buddha's mind. Stay with that for a while.

[VTC returns to Ken's letter] He commented that he really would like to purify his speech because if he's not swearing and telling people off, then everybody thinks that something's wrong with him. (laughter) So he really wants to change his speech and his self-image and, I guess, his image in front of other people. So I think that's quite laudable, quite praiseworthy.

Then he was saying, and I think he may be fairly new to the Dharma, he says, "*Buddha didn't have to take any vows and no one gave him any titles; there were no mantras or meditational deities too for*

him to visualize, and he became Buddha, so why do we need to do all these things?" (laughter) How many of you have not thought the same thing?

[VTC continues] *"I understand, mantras are a mind protection, vows are to keep ourselves in line, titles let us know previous accomplishments, meditational deities are to focus our thoughts. In the end though, Buddha had none of these and he turned out perfect. Why don't we say it under the bodhi tree for seven years?"*

First of all, to just clarify many things. When Ken said *'Buddha didn't take any vows'*, actually Buddha **was** the vows. His mind had no negativity, so his mind was already living in vows; he didn't need to take them. The rest of us—because our mind is not a living manifestation of the vows—need to take the vows. The Buddha, his mind, was already the vows, so no need to take them.

His second thing, *'titles let us know of previous accomplishments'*. False. Titles are words. They are labels. They don't denote anything. Especially when you're looking for spiritual teachers, do not rely on titles. His Holiness tells the Tibetans again and again and again: don't look at somebody's titles, look at their practice. Especially here in America, titles are used every which way.

The title "lama" for example is totally ambiguous. It used to mean, in the tradition how I was raised, that is was for a really greatly well respected teacher. Then, in other traditions if you do a three-year retreat, you get the title "lama." But now even some people don't do a three-year retreat, they give themselves the title "lama." Even getting the title for having done a three-year retreat, His Holiness says, that too is easy; that it's not actually beneficial. So the title "lama" means also nothing nowadays.

I have the title, "Venerable". Why that title? It was not my own doing. When I went to Singapore to live, the Singaporeans address all monks and nuns, calling them Venerable. That is their title. That's how they address showing respect to ordained people. So that's how that came about. In America, I think it's good if someone is a monastic that they're addressed as Venerable; or to use some kind of title, e.g. "bhante" or whatever it is, according to the tradition. But that indicates that the person has taken precepts. It doesn't indicate any level of realization. Although to keep precepts, you definitely have to practice! "Bhikshuni"—that title I use sometimes, that's my level of ordination. That's it.

Sometimes I've been in places where people try to call me "lama". I stop it right away. I would be embarrassed to death if any of my teachers ever heard that somebody was calling me lama, because lama is a title that's reserved for people with the capacity of my teachers. It's not reserved for people like me.

However, in America, you have people who are not monastics or people who know the Dharma for one or two years who have not done much study or have not done much retreat and they are called lama. So the title does not mean very much. So do not determine your spiritual teachers by titles even if someone is called "Rinpoche" that title is given in all sorts of different ways now too. His Holiness says very clearly that some people just live off the achievements of their previous life. He tells the reincarnate lamas who are called Rinpoche that they need to practice in this lifetime. Some of them are quite remarkable practitioners;

some of them, hmmm, I don't know... If somebody has the title "Geshe", that's an educational degree, so there at least you know somebody's put in the work and gotten that educational degree.

But do not rely on titles; you really have to see how a person lives, how they teach, if their teaching is in accord with what the Buddha said or not, and if they keep precepts. Whatever level of precepts they have, if they keep that level of precepts well. There's the whole thing in the Lamrim about the qualities to look for in a teacher. So please, do not do that according to titles.

The next thing: "*there were no mantras or meditational deities for him to visualize if he became a Buddha.*" Well, as the Buddha is portrayed in the Pali tradition, he didn't do mantras and visualization practices and things like this. The Buddha as portrayed in the sutras, he was doing basically the practice of the four mindfulnesses, the four foundations of mindfulness, which is an incredible practice, and mediating a lot on the twelve links of dependent origination, contemplating impermanence and dukkha, suffering and emptiness. So that's how the Buddha is portrayed as living when he appeared on this earth. That's to the common appearance.

But at the same time the Buddha was living like that, he was also teaching a select group of students, which included some human beings, but also many Bodhisattvas. He was teaching them things like the prajnaparamitra sutras [teachings on the Far-reaching Attitude of Wisdom], which are on a whole different level.

He was also teaching the tantra to some very highly realized disciples. So the rest of us, ordinary beings who were alive at that time, were not privy to those teachings because we didn't have the level of realization where those teachings would have benefited us. Those mantras and visualizations were given to those highly realized beings, so there became a lineage of tantric teachings.

The Mahayana teachings were given to those Bodhisattvas and to some human beings who were at that level. That continuation of those teachings exists until this day. So the teachings have become more widely spread. But the Buddha himself actually practiced all these different things; they're not things the Buddha didn't practice, or that the Buddha didn't teach, because otherwise you would have other people who were less realized than the Buddha making up things that Buddhas practice, which is kind of absurd. The Buddha did teach and practice all these things although he didn't do it necessarily in the common appearance in a very public way to everybody.

So why do we do all these things? Because they're beneficial. Now having said that, the Buddha taught many, many different methods of meditation because people have many different types of dispositions and different types of tendencies. So for some people, the practice of, let's say, the four foundations of mindfulness as taught in the Pali sutras, that way really appeals to them and just fits their mind perfectly and they practice that and that is wonderful.

For other people the way the Buddha taught in the Mahayana sutras and talking about Bodhicitta and giving up or postponing even your own enlightenment if that were beneficial

in order to benefit all sentient beings. So cultivating that deep wish to benefit all sentient beings, practicing the emptiness is taught in the Mahayana sutras. All these kinds of things, for other people, that way of practice is very suitable. So they practice in that way.

Already in the Mahayana sutras, if you read them, there are pure lands—well, like the Sanghata sutra—with beings going here and there and emanating; it's pretty enormous, isn't it? For some people this way of thinking about the enormity of the universe, the enormity of infinite sentient beings and pure lands and skies full of offerings and all this stuff... for some people the expansiveness and especially bodhichitta is helpful.

As Lama Zopa always says, “I will attain enlightenment **ALONE** for the benefit of all these sentient beings; I will go to the hell realms **ALONE** in order to benefit each and every sentient being.” For some people, although all these things seem rather intimidating and they may think, “how can I ever do that?” just even thinking that way is so inspiring, and some people say, “okay even if it's totally out of sight... (I can't even endure the pain of my leg hurting and here I am vowing to go to the hell realms for eons **ALONE** for the benefit of each and every sentient being?) Even though this is totally inconceivable, still it's so inspiring, one day I will want to be able to do that.” And so your heart is filled with joy just at the thought that “one day maybe I will actually be able to do that,” because it seems like such an incredible marvelous thing to be able to do even though we're not capable of it right now. So that is really like, “I'm going there.” But for other people, thinking about that is like, “wait a minute—this is too much. No, I just gotta sit and let's just watch my breath and feel the sensations in my body. I can't go and think about those things.”

So you see, everybody has really, really different dispositions, different things that inspire them, so that's why the Buddha taught all these different methods, and we see in this way how incredibly skillful the Buddha was. As a teacher, that he could teach all these different things for all these infinite sentient beings who all have their own way of doing stuff. It shows us how tremendously skillful as a teacher the Buddha was. It also teaches us how important it is never to criticize any of the Buddhas teachings or any of the practices.

You can debate about levels of understanding of emptiness and things like that, but you never tell somebody, “oh that practice is wrong and what you're doing is wrong.” How can you say anything the Buddha taught is wrong? If somebody is doing some kind of virtuous practice we have to respect them.

If they're Christians or doing some other religious practice, if they're keeping some morality, we have to put our palms together and respect that, that they are keeping morality. It's not our business to go around and trash other religions and tear people away from the things that they have faith in. So like I said, we can debate things, if somebody wants to talk about ‘can there be a creator god’, yes we can talk about that and why we don't believe in a creator god, or what our view of emptiness is if somebody has another view. All these things you can discuss and debate, but that is very different than criticizing, and it's very different from tearing somebody away from a practice that they are doing that is virtuous even if what they're doing is incomplete. Don't make them lose faith at least in the things that they are doing that are positive.

If you can enhance their mind and kind of drop seeds of bodhichitta... Like when I went to Thailand, before the airplane was landing I was just making prayers, “may I bring bodhichitta here.” So I was kind of this undercover agent. (laughter) Just little things: I didn’t push it on anybody, but when people asked questions I talked about it. I love that. You never go and say, “your tradition blah, blah, blah and your religion blah, blah, blah, blah.” That’s not our business to do. When anybody does anything that is remotely constructive, we bow. We bow to the deed that they are doing. That doesn’t mean we have to approve of everything that they do in their whole life. George Bush makes one good decision, we can put our palms together. So that helps us to really respect traditions and respect human beings.

R: You mentioned the twelve links of dependent origination: is that from the Vedic tradition or is that strictly a Buddhist tradition? Is that from the Hindu tradition?

VTC: I don’t think it’s Hindu, no I think it’s completely Buddhist. I mean the Hindus talk about rebirth but I’ve never heard the twelve links talked about in that kind of context. The Buddha talked about it quite a lot when he was alive.

R: In the morning I was practicing Lamrim and it came to my mind this question when I came to ethical conduct... The sadhana says ethical conduct is ‘the wish to abandon harming all others’. I thought, why not all others and ourselves?

VTC: It should be all sentient beings. Ethical conduct is the wish to abandon harm to all sentient beings— it includes ourselves.

R: What if you feel like you just need a break from Vajrasattva for a while?

VTC: What do you feel if you just need a break...

R: A day off.

VTC: You say, “Oh, I feel like I need a break from Vajrasattva, and I need a day off, and I’m going to session.” (laughter)

R: I had a feeling you would say that.

VTC: There’s no day off from samsara! Can we take a day off from samsara, say “I don’t want to be in samsara just for today, and I’ll come back to samsara tomorrow and keep on practicing.” We don’t take a day off.

It’s interesting, if we feel like we need a break from Vajrasattva, to step back and say, “Why do I feel like I need a break? What’s happening that I think I’ll feel better if I don’t do the practice for a day? Why would not doing the practice for a day make me feel better?” Because that’s what we’re thinking at that time: that not doing it would make us feel better. Why would it make me feel better?

And then do some research into what your mind is saying about why you think you would feel better, and what your resistance is to the practice, because there’s some button there. The ego is pushing back at something, so it’s a very good opportunity to really question and investigate a little bit deeper: “why do I think that?”

I noticed that on your sheet, you wrote that after Vajrasattva retreat you wanted to sleep. And I was thinking, “why would sleeping make somebody feel better? Sleeping all day, sleeping late...why would that make us feel better?” What’s the mind attracted to? Okay, some days we’re exhausted, but why do we take refuge in sleep? I remember when I was quite a new student, and one of the older students was giving us some instructions, and he was talking about sleep, and just sleeping as much as you need. He said, “It’s so strange that we think sleep is happiness, because we’re not even awake to enjoy it.” (laughter) I realized he’s completely right! When you’re asleep, you don’t even enjoy being asleep, do

you? It's not like when you wake up, you say, "I was so happy for eight hours (or seven hours, or six hours, or whatever it is)." When we're sleeping, we're just gone. So what happiness is there in that? (laughter) It's so strange how our mind thinks, isn't it?

R #2: As you said last week, I know that I'm addicted to thinking, and sleep is a reprieve from my addiction.

VTC: Sleep is a reprieve from the addiction of thinking?

R #2: Yes. I need to go unconscious because I don't know any other way to stop this thinking.

VTC: I think that's why we do sleep. We go into deep sleep, and it gives us a break from thinking. But, to see, if we need that break, how else can we maybe start to take some breaks from that chattering mind during the day, too?

R #2: I think that's what the dharma can do. I've been reading *Destructive Emotions* by Daniel Goleman in the Mind-Life series, and it's just been fascinating...trying to find ways to rest ourselves. I've been really exploring this week what I consider to be four or five of my main disturbing attitudes that have repeated themselves over and over again in my life, and repeat themselves in this environment. Some of the things that the book shared were that some of this is the ignorance that has been floating around in my mind since beginningless time, but some of it is acquired through our environments, and it's been very helpful to see, for example, about how I misinterpret body language, and personalize a lot of gestures and body language that people do unconsciously.

Then I look at my life and see how much in my family dynamics the body language was so much a part of the communication, so much a part of the dysfunction—and that I replay that, totally misinterpreting people who don't make eye contact, people who turn their backs on me. I've been seeing how I've been misreading a number of situations this past two months, and then thinking back and saying, "I know where that came from." And I'm seeing how I'm still playing them out. And at the time when I was raised, the person who was doing that was indeed giving me a clear message, "I don't want to talk to you, you're unlovable, you're worthless, you cause my anger."

VTC: Are you sure of that, for a fact?

R: Not a complete fact, but that's what the vibe was.

VTC: That's how you interpreted it. Can you be one hundred percent totally sure about the other person's motivation? Can you be one hundred percent convinced that they turned their back on you because you're unlovable, or because maybe they turned their back because they were in pain? Aren't you making up a story about their non-verbal body language?

R: Then where am I getting this misunderstanding that seems to follow me through this life? Where I am misunderstanding people's body language all the time? Is that a karmic— an ignorance that's been there since beginningless time, is it not an acquired habit?

VTC: It could have been something that you're habituated with from a previous life so there's a tendency to misinterpret certain things because that's a habit in the mind. The habit just continues, and some things may have gotten reinforced in this life, but it's not necessarily that the other person is reinforcing it. Our mind is reinforcing its own story that it's making up.

R: It's interesting...I'm trying to figure out why I continually play this story about the way that I perceive people's body language.

VTC: Why? Because your mind is making up a story: it's what you said at the beginning, that you're personalizing the body language.

R: So even in this life, where I traced it back to where this pattern got instigated, at that time, even as a young child, I may have been misunderstanding the motivation and the body language of this adult also?

VTC: Yes. Yes.

R: And being a child, I just took it in. The experience came at me, and then how I perceived it was embedded in my mind as this is what this means forever and ever.

VTC: You'll find two people who grew up in the same family, or people who grew up in the same kind of situation, and one person will interpret the situation one way, and one person will interpret it the other way. It's because of the habit in the mind, the story that the mind is making up at that situation. Let's say there's a family where there's a lot of aggression. Some people, depending on the karma they come up with, they will react to aggression by getting angry. Other people will react to aggression by feeling guilty, and internalizing it as 'my fault'. Other people will react to the same aggression with compassion—even if you're a kid.

R: So this is the karma that is the habituated one that follows us, that keeps getting strengthened every time that we concretize that experience and say, "this is exactly what's happening."

VTC: Yes. It's a habit of the mind. Our karma put us in those situations, and the habit of the mind just keeps playing the same movie, projecting the same story.

How do we know 100% for sure what was going on in anybody else's mind? We don't. And in any case, when we were kids, we've all had that happen, haven't we? Your parents scream at you, and they refuse to talk to you—hasn't this happened to you? This happens in all families, doesn't it? Because parents are sentient beings, they're human beings. They aren't Buddhas. This happens.

Then, how do we react to it? What story do we make up about what's happening? And we're kids at the time—we're probably (I don't know about you) very self-centered kids. So we make up the story revolving around me. Maybe mom has a stomachache. Maybe dad is bummed out because of something that happened at work. Who knows what in the world is going on in their minds at that time? But whatever happens, there's some situation and we say, "I. It's *me*" (VTC hits chest) Then we say either, "they did this to me, and they're blah blah blah blah," or we say, "Ohhh, I'm so blah blah blah blah" because they did this to me. We're the one creating the story about it, aren't we?

And we rerun the same story. You can see it in this life, that you're rerunning it. Maybe you played the movie in previous lives. You don't need to find a beginning to the movie. What's important, what you need to do is notice what the movie is, and identify it as a movie.

Try going back to those situations when you were a kid and saying, "how do I know 100% sure that how what I thought was going on in those situations was what was actually going on?" It's quite challenging business, isn't it? But this is what frees our mind. This is what gets us unstuck.

R #3: It seems that even if you try and trace back the beginning of something, a habit or whatever, even having that information and getting clear about it—that doesn't help so much. You still have to do something with you and how you're working with it in the moment.

VTC: Right.

R #3: The more that I'm working with this, the more I'm not going after that anymore. It's not helpful. It's not helpful.

R #2: I think it was helpful for me to see a continuity because I'm very identified to my disturbing attitudes, and that's one of the things that I'm still hooked in on. I still don't see them as afflictions of the mind just passing through. I'm still very identified so by me saying 'this isn't who you are; this is something that you've been bringing along with you that keeps changing and morphing and now you're recognizing it'. I think the continuity was just to get it out of me being selfish, resentful, jealous, opinionated and judgmental. These are disturbing attitudes; they are not who I am as a human being. That was the part that was very, very helpful. It loosed up my identification with the attitudes themselves, which was very, very helpful.

R: My question is around that same thing. Yesterday I got really, really angry, almost livid. I'm sure a few people might have heard me. I was working on this project and something I've done before. It's kind of crazy, really. I kind of analyzed it. Even in the moment I'm aware that I'm angry, but it's uncontrolled. I can't stop. It's just horrible. I'm talking to myself out loud. I looked at it in different ways.

Today— I'm calmer. Even at the moment I'm telling myself "I'm not a disturbing attitude!" But I *am* in that moment. I'm so there. I don't know if I'm going to understand emptiness in this life, realize it. I'm just like, "why do they even give us this? This is so insane. I mean, do I know anybody who's realized emptiness? Is it even logical that I could even be able to do it in this lifetime?" This is where my mind went.

Then I thought, "that's not going to get you anywhere." Then I went, "Okay, I've had this experience, and my teacher has had this experience, and the scriptures have this experience. Then okay, some of these things work. I can see how these things work, so I have to take it on faith." Then I wrote last night, I'm in this dilemma now intellectually: "Why are we doing this? Why become a Buddhist? It's so hard. Why not just do something where they do it for you?" (laughter by all)

Either don't be a Buddhist, or once you start, never stop. So this is what I've been thinking about. So finally I'm writing last night, the way out of this is, just go beyond this life; you have to think beyond this life. That really helped.

Then today I actually replayed the whole scenario. It's actually something I've done a few times. Here you really have the space and the time. I looked at it from different aspects and thought, "this is crazy." The hardest part is that you're just so identified with the emotions. There is no separation in the moment. And it's uncontrolled. It's just sick.

VTC: Do you get a feeling when you see how identified we are, how uncontrolled the emotion is? Do you get a feeling of what it means when the Buddha says we're under the influence of afflictions?

R: I'm just so glad that it's pointed towards me, because I would be in jail if this was directed toward somebody else! It would be so easy. It's so easy to see. I've never injured anybody in my life—physically. I haven't hit anybody. I did throw scissors at my sister once. Luckily I missed—when I was a kid!

I can see how it would be so easy to do. It would be so easy to do, like the story you told (referring to the dedication of a fellow retreatant) of the guy who killed that guy. He got drunk and stabbed this guy. It would be so easy...

R #2: His Holiness said, in this book I was reading today, that renunciation is beginning to see how absolutely vulnerable we are to suffering. We are totally addicts. We are. And when you really start seeing that, that's when renunciation can really start to manifest in your mind.

VTC: Yes. How vulnerable we are to suffering, and how much suffering the afflictions cause us. Forget about future lives—they cause incredible suffering in the very moment they're there in our minds! What suffering state our mind is. When there's anger, or jealousy, or even attachment, there's such suffering in the mind, isn't there? So when you see this, it gives you this feeling—just one simple phrase that you've heard in teachings, all of a sudden becomes, “Oh my goodness! This is what this phrase means!” Because you see it in your own experience.

R #3: At the end of the letter of this inmate (an inmate who wrote to VTC), I read it this afternoon, he says, “What you told me helped me to not become a murderer.” He realized that he was a potential murderer because of this feeling that was so strong, and he had completely decided to be a murderer, because he felt that. He said that something clicked and changed—I don't know exactly how, but then he said that he didn't think we was going to become a murderer, and he thanked you for that. I was really impressed by this change.

VTC: Yes. All of a sudden, seeing that there is choice. Sometimes when we're angry, we feel like there's no choice. There's no choice in our actions. We have to beat somebody else up, or we have to beat our self up. Whenever there's an affliction in the mind, the mind gets so narrow, and we feel like there's no choice at all in what we can feel or what we can do. And here's this whole incredible, huge universe with choices of what we can feel, and what we can do, and we can't see it. We can't see *anything*. There's attachment—“I've got to get *this*”—the mind can't see anything else. It's so identified with the attachment. Or, jealousy: “I've got to do this,” or whatever it is. So there are choices, but we can't see them. Completely blind.

Now if this doesn't make compassion come—for yourself and for others—doesn't it make you have some compassion for yourself? We've all been through where our mind has been like that. Can we have some compassion for ourselves when we get like that? Can we have compassion for other people when they get like that?

I think this is where it's so helpful, and where we can really start creating the feeling of ourselves and others being equal, because we realize that we're no different from anybody else. When the Rodney King incident happened, I remember thinking, “I could have done what Rodney King did. I could have done what the cops did. I could have done what the rioters did. I could have done what *any* of these people did, because the tendency, the disturbing attitude to act in that way, the seed of that exists in my mind.”

So there's absolutely no reason for me to think that I am any better than anybody else. I need to have compassion for myself, for that part of myself, and compassion for all these other people. Because all these other people are parts of me. They're parts of me. Do you remember that situation with the guy in New York who got shot several years ago? He was standing out on his porch at midnight just taking a breath of fresh air, and these four plain clothed cops were coming in a car and stopped the car because they were suspicious of what he was doing. He turned to go back in the house and turned to pull out his wallet; they thought he was pulling out a gun, and they started shooting at him and killed him.

Remember that? Talk about misjudging a situation! Those cops **completely** misread: The guy's pulling out his wallet and he's going inside because he's terrified of these four huge men who are not wearing police uniforms—they were in plain clothes and getting out of the car. He's terrified; he's going back into the house. They totally misread the situation. How many times have we misread situations? We may not have riddled another person with bullets, actual bullets, we may have riddled them with verbal bullets. Just because we totally misread the situation.

So can we have compassion for all these people and all these different things that are going on and the situations they find themselves in. “There but for karma go I”— being the guy that got shot, being the cops, being anybody. Just the whims of karma. This is why a precious human life is so valuable. Why the opportunity we have now is so valuable. We weren’t born with some of those situations happening to us right now. So there is a little bit of space in terms of physically the choices we have available. There’s a little bit of space mentally of the choices we have available.

That’s why it’s so important to make use of our life right now. Because we still act that way; maybe not on that scale but it’s all inside of us. Those people are just reflections of us, aren’t they?

R: These are just comments. The retreat has been very, very hard. Which is okay for me: I came for that. I knew it would be hard and I’m trying to really go deep. So it’s very impressive. You can find me in your own mind. It’s very humbling in many ways because I really thought I knew myself; I thought I had everything under control. Even though I’ve had experience with purification, I really thought that I was okay. After a few weeks, the time goes by and you can really go deeper and deeper. What comes up is really amazing. You don’t even realize what’s going on: e.g. the amount of rage— you don’t even notice that it’s there but after a few days, you’re going crazy.

I have many, many things to say but actually my conclusion is that it’s a rare opportunity and it’s really, really valuable and unique. One of the things that really struck me—a few years ago, you remember, when I was doing this purification that I was really on the frying pan. It was really, really painful. Before that I thought I was okay. I didn’t know I had that in myself. I was, you know, “okay, I need to practice sometime, but if I die, I’m safe because I took refuge. I have a human life guaranteed, because I’m a Buddhist doing the right thing.” When I went through that purification, I thought that had I died with *that* amount of anger and rage, I would have been in a very very bad situation!

What I’m seeing now is the same thing. I thought I was okay. Well, I was working; I was doing my practice, and I was doing what I could... But this is when you see that practice is really something you *have* to do. I’m not saying that after the retreat I’m going to practice eight hours a day. I don’t think so. I’d like to, but I don’t think so. But practice has a different role, will play a different role in my life because there’s a lot there—there’s a lot of work to do. Everything takes a different perspective. This whole idea of enlightenment and liberation, and pain and suffering, confusion is really vivid.

I know what confusion means now. I really want to get out of that! So everything takes a very, very different perspective. In a way it’s pretty funny because it’s like as if I were seeing two me’s: One is taking it really easy. “Everything is under control; I’m not freaking out; I’m not going anywhere; I’m able to deal with what’s coming up.” But there’s another part of my mind that’s *really* freaking out— big time. I think it’s really amazing to see; it’s like you’re crazy in a way. You could see different aspects of yourself at the same time. It’s like, “what the hell is this?”

Because when you are out there in your everyday life, you’re too busy. The same old you, bring your stuff, you know. There’s no way you can see all this. You are here: quiet, silent. It’s you here and it’s you there. One guy’s freaking out and the other is just looking. And many other things are going on at the same time. So it’s very interesting, very, very interesting. It’s like you really need to go through this to notice how I feel about myself. What this ‘me’ feels like. Here it’s very, very clear. It’s very clear for me how it is getting in the way. I want to get rid of this and I can’t. I want to feel compassion, but I can’t. I can see

all the people suffering but I can't feel it because I feel this lump, this ME, in the middle of something and it's not going anywhere. I'm stuck. So practice takes a very, very different perspective. There are many more things that I can comment on.

VTC: That's exactly it.

R: I have a comment related to that. I've just been thinking for a couple of weeks now how retreat—for me at least—I feel like it's for the slow learner in me. I hear these things over and over again. I just need to sit through them and just see that, for example, I'm trying to put my mind on Vajrasattva, but it just isn't going there. It's going all these other places. It's just what it means to have a mind not under my control. Afflictions—I'm just so locked into them that I can't do anything with them. It's this embodied way of experiencing things, as opposed to the more intellectual.

VTC: Yeah! It becomes very clear the difference between knowing the teaching on an intellectual level, and trying to practice them. This kind of retreat makes it **so** clear. You can sit there and rattle off the antidote, and your mind is going berserk. One part of your mind is saying, "this is the antidote to this emotion," and this other part of the mind goes, "what are you talking about! Don't tell me! I'm reasonable. I'm right and my feeling's right and I'm going to act this out! Go put your head in the sand!"

This is *precisely* why the retreat is so valuable because otherwise we get in this lulled state that [R] talked about and you talked about too where we think, "yeah, I understand the Dharma and I'm practicing it; it's going okay." I would say, if I could be so bold, that this retreat is going to be one of the major experiences in your life, for however long you live. If you all live to be eighty years old, you're not going to forget this retreat. So something very, very important is happening when you're putting your energy into really trying to work with your mind and develop wisdom and compassion, and learn about how things are on a samsaric level and how they aren't: how all the ignorance that the mind puts... that is totally unreasonable. How things aren't like that.

R: The Buddha is sometimes explained as the doctor, the Dharma as medicine, and the sangha as nurse. But the part that I'd always skipped, and didn't appreciate until now, was when it says to see *yourself* as a patient, or as a sick person! (laughter) I'd always just gone, "Oh, yeah, we have this doctor, and he's a good guy," but I never really appreciated my sickness!

VTC: Yes. Yes.

R: It's just like [the previous R] was saying, "oh, yeah, I know the antidotes."

VTC: And "I'm an okay person, yeah, I get angry sometimes but it's not too bad. Yeah I have some attachment—nothing major." Really, it's exactly what you're saying: we forget to see ourselves as the sick person. And when we don't see ourselves as the patient, then we don't take the medicine, do we? We have all the medicine. It's there on the shelf. We read all the labels. We teach other people all the formulas about the medicine. We tell them all about the shapes of the bottles. We never take it.

R: I'm just seeing how much attachment there is in my mind, and I've been looking for the 'P', and I don't understand how we suffer so much with an 'P' that doesn't exist! (laughter) All these people are killing each other over something that doesn't exist at all!

VTC: You really see how all these things that people do that cause suffering to themselves and others are totally done based on hallucination. *Totally unnecessary*. And yet how locked in we are to the whole thing.

R: To realize that is so incredible. I have to take it easy, though, otherwise my *lung* [condition in the body of long-term meditators manifesting in anxiety or tension] will come back. I don't know what to do with this.

VTC: You just keep practicing. Keep breathing, keep generating bodhichitta.

R: When I do my meditation, I try to think of a very nice place where I am meditating: it has an altar, and the altar has two doors. And the times when I really need to go deep into a meditation, or I need some advice, from one of these doors His Holiness the Dalai Lama or Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche comes out. When I met the Dalai Lama in Mexico, I was very moved, and I felt very close to him. I felt this confidence of being able to ask for advice. And the same thing with Kirti Rinpoche—he is the one who gave us the Vajrasattva initiation.

Two days ago, I was doing my meditation, and I really needed to find out a few things. So I invited His Holiness and Kirti Rinpoche to my practice, and I felt that I could go really deep in my practice. I saw the whole thing from when I was very little until today, and I could see from when I was very little until today how ignorance played a big role in this chain of events in my life. I felt like I was receiving real advice from His Holiness the Dalai Lama about those parts of my life. It was very special.

It was funny, because my ordinary mind was saying, “Come on, I'm not inviting His Holiness to my sessions every time I request him,” but my feeling was that he was really guiding me, saying, “now you focus on this, and now breathe, and now let go.” He was guiding me through the whole meditation. It was a great session. And my feeling now is that I really want him in my sessions!

VTC: This is the purpose of the guru yoga practice.

R: I wanted to share this experience: if you feel close to a teacher, it helps you with your practice, and it flows much better.

VTC: Thank you for sharing that.

R: Could you tell us about the emptiness of the circle of three: the agent, the action, and the object?

VTC: Okay. I'm drinking water. Agent: me. Object: water. Action: drinking. When we look at them, it looks like they're all out there with their own essence, completely existing independently of each other, doesn't it? There's a big “me” who's the drinker, who is waiting to get something to drink, and to have the drink. And there's this water that's the “drink” by its own side, waiting to be drunk. And there's the action of drinking somewhere lurking around, waiting to happen. But actually, all these three things, it only becomes drinker, drink, and drinking, in relation to each other. We only say “drinker, drink, and drinking” because all three are happening. They only exist in relationship to each other. So everything that we give a label to, it's given a label. We make it into an object by differentiating it from other things, in relationship to other things.

A seed becomes a cause because there's a sprout. Or, a seed becomes a seed because there's a sprout that grows out of it. If nothing grew, we wouldn't call this itty-bitty thing a seed. It only is a seed because there's a sprout that grows out of it. The sprout is only a sprout because it grew out of the seed. Things are defined in relationship, in terms of each other.

Lots of times when we think of our self-image, “I,” we're pulling “I” out of “other.” “I” and “other” live in relationship to each other. We're doing that differentiation process. And how we imagine our self to be—I am this, I am that, I am the other thing—it's always

in relationship to other people, isn't it? What you were talking about before: these people do this, therefore, I'm like that. So we make them into this, and me into that. But we're defining things in terms of each other.

And that's okay on a conventional level, but the thing is that we don't leave it as just something that's nominally that way. We think that all these things have a real essence, that these things are really, inherently, like that. There's no other way they can be. And similar with our self.

But in actual fact, all these things are just differentiated out by words and concepts. Even what we look at, with any different object, you can give it so many different labels—there can be so many different concepts, so many different ways you can look at one object. You look at one person: they can be a parent; they're also a child; they're whatever career they are, whatever nationality they are. They have all these different labels that can be put on them. But all those labels are differentiating them from some other thing. And then we think, "Oh, this person is inherently all those things." But they're not inherently those things! They're only that because we developed that concept to differentiate that from something else.

I find it very helpful to think that the Eskimos have how many words for snow? 20? 50? There's all these different words for snow. We look, and we say, "snow." They look, and there are so many things that they see there, that we don't even see simply because we only have one word for it. But if you look closely at the snow, you can actually see: there's the little itty-bitty ones that we were having and the big flakes; then there's the slooshy kind; there's the fluffy kind. There are different kinds of snow when you really look. But when you don't have labels and concepts for them then you don't really see them. But they're there. When you have the labels and concepts, then you see those things. But instead of seeing them as things your mind made up, you see them as inherently existing entities out there with their own essence from their own side. So that's where we get really screwed up.

R: This might be off the record. I don't know... You know, Resistance is my second name. So for a while, I've been really thinking about hell realms and hungry ghosts. I'm not really opposed to this being something that can happen, especially after seeing my [enraged] mind. I really think it can happen. But on the other hand, when I read the different texts, I've been reading Je Tsong Khapa's explanation and detailed description of the hell realms, which is really terrifying; it's really brutal. I want to think it is made up. I want to think that there may be something, but not that terrifying. I'm not saying it is like that or is not like that. I'm just thinking about that.

This is a big resistance for me because one of the things that really attracted me to Buddhism from the beginning was that feeling of freedom, freedom of mind... but not like, "if you do this, you'll go to the hell realms; you behave and you'll go to..." I was running away from that. Now we don't have one hell realm, we have eight or more and they're even worse than the others! But they're impermanent, which is a big difference. So my thought is, I'm reflecting about this, one of the things that is freaking me out is opening up to the possibility that this is real and that I'd better think about this.

So my request is—because I've noticed, maybe I'm projecting on you, but often times when you are teaching for instance, you talk about spirits and hell realms. In the same teaching you say, "well, we westerners don't even think about spirits." Or sometimes you tend to make everything in terms of psychological things. You kind of disregard a little bit things about the spirits. So this makes me think that you also have kind of a resistance? So my request is can you share with us things that you have reflected about this topic, things

your teachers have told you about, things you think, or whatever that has been helpful to you about this.

VTC: So my own process of reflecting on the hell realms and these different things. Do I see them as just psychological or do I see them as actual places? I see them as both. How I see spirits and how I see hell realms is slightly different. I believe spirits and hell realms exist and that to the beings born in them they're as real as our human realm is for those of us born in a human realm.

I don't necessarily believe that everything a person thinks is a spirit affliction is actually a spirit affliction. That's where my doubt comes in. His Holiness himself has said that he thinks sometimes people when they have any obstacle they just immediately attribute it to spirits instead of attributing it to karma. Because it's the same old thing: "oh, a spirit's harming me; stop someone else from harming me." No spirit can harm you unless you have the karma to be harmed. So I don't think that everything that's necessarily interpreted in some cultures as being caused by a spirit affliction is actually necessarily caused by one. It may be; it may not be. I have no way of knowing.

But in terms of, are there beings born in the spirit realm? Yes, definitely, I believe so. And are there hell realms? Yes. I don't believe they are located so many poksays [a unit of measurement in ancient India] below Bodhgaya, like the *Abhidharmakosha* says. I think for the beings born in them, they are as real as our human realm is. We tend to think our human realm is reality. This is grasping at true existence. The human realm, whatever we are experiencing, is reality. Hell realm, hungry ghost realm. We're not really sure they really exist. Animals, okay, I can see them. If you think about the war in Iraq, is it really real to you? Or is it somehow separated? It's separated, isn't it? There's my life here, which is 'real' reality and then there's this war in Iraq; there's the starvation over there and these other things. But they're somehow not quite as real as e.g. my having cornflakes instead of pancakes, and I want pancakes. Do you see what I mean? Everything around the "I" is so solid and everything else is definitely less real. Their suffering is somehow not quite as real.

Yes, the Buddha's hells are terrifying. I remember when I heard about them. It was interesting because when I was meditating when I was a beginner, I discovered the thing that terrified me the most was constantly being disparaged; someone yelling at me all the time. For me a hell realm would be just sitting here; nothing is happening to my body, but somebody constantly ripping me to shreds verbally. I could see how I could go into this incredible mental state of unbelievable suffering because I'm so sensitive to that kind of thing. That could hurt in one way more than words. You know, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words hurt more than you can ever know"? It's really true. So for some of us, maybe the hell realm is that.

But the thing is that our karma, our mind creates the hell realm. Again, it's not like there's this external hell realm out there that is waiting for me to be born into it. There are external places that we beings share, but exactly what that becomes for me, my mind has to put me there. And why do we have so much resistance to believing in the existence of the hell realms? Because we can actually conceive of them. And if we can conceive of something, there's a chance that it might exist. (nervous laughter) We don't like thinking that something like that can exist. It's too scary.

So it's easier to say that it doesn't exist; they're just saying that to make people afraid, in the same way that the church used to make people afraid telling them about the hells. But then you realize, no, Buddha had no intention of making anyone afraid. Being afraid doesn't do any good. The intention isn't to give us this fear or this panicked, freaked-out feeling like

we got when we were six years old and told about the hells; the purpose of the Buddha talking about these things is for us to get a sense of danger so that we're careful.

It's like when you're merging onto the highway—you're aware of potential danger. You're not sitting there all freaked out and panicked: "Ah, I might have an accident!" because if you think like that, you're not going to drive very well. But you're not just merging on the highway going, "dah duh dah..." You know there's some danger, so you take care. That's the state of mind the Buddha wanted us to be in: "okay, there's some danger here. I need to be careful." But we go into thinking, "well, if I believe the hell realms are true, then that means I need to be freaked out, and tense, and stressed." Who wants to go into that state of mind? Can we believe that there might be the possibility of hell realms, and just see it as a potential danger that your own mind can create? Our own hallucinating mind: just like she [R] misinterprets body language, we can create a hell realm.

We misinterpret things all the time. We can create a hell realm. And if we did negative actions—you can see the psychological process, how the karma creates the hell realm. Let's take this example: you have so much hatred inside that you really want to take revenge on somebody, and your hatred just is livid, and it's boiling day and night, day and night. Then you go and you take your revenge on somebody. That whole time, what have you been familiarizing your mind with? Hate. What's contained within the hate? Fear, suspicion, distrust—isn't all that going on in your mind at the same time you have the hate?

Paranoia, alienation, isolation, hopelessness—all those emotions are there together with the hate, while you're contemplating the motivation and doing the action. So when they say that by inflicting harm with hate on somebody else, hurting somebody like that, that you get born in the hell realm—it's just making manifest the feelings that were in the mind already. If they say that the karma of the result that corresponds with what you did, you can see very clearly.

Let's take that action of killing, with so much hatred and fear and suspicion all in the mind when you kill. Then you're born in a life where you're filled with—leave the hatred aside—fear and suspicion and paranoia. Where do that fear and suspicion and paranoia come from? They come from that mind of hatred that killed somebody else, because those emotions were right there in the mind of hatred. When the action was done to the other person, you implanted it even stronger in your own mind, and then there's this whole psychological tendency, even when nobody is out there hurting you, to feel that. And everybody appears in your own mind as an enemy. If that's going on in your mind, it's such a small step between that mental state and what your body is, to have the body of a hell realm being.

Or a hungry ghost being: have you seen in the retreat how the mind can get so attached to something? I've been meaning to ask you this whole time, actually, about your "non-negotiables", if you've been looking at those. The whole way the mind will get stuck on something, and it thinks, "This is non-negotiable. I Have To Have This. I have to have it! I cannot live without it. I have to have it." Has your mind ever been that way? (laughter) It's the mental state of a hungry ghost. You can see some people, even in the human realm: they're in the human realm, but the mind—you'll see some people in terms of relationships, the feeling of "I need to be loved." The poverty feeling of love is so strong, that what do they do? They go from one relationship to another relationship to another relationship. Anybody that shows them the least bit of affection, they will glom onto, and then if the relationship doesn't work out, then they're onto the next person, because there's this incredible hole inside of needing love. They're like a hungry ghost running around looking for love. There's this whole mental state that's like that.

Or some people looking for praise, or looking for approval, or looking for fame, or whatever you're attached to—the mind is so stuck on something, that it has to have that, and it's like the hungry ghost mind. You're born as a hungry ghost with a body that's craving food and water—it's not much different. The mind has been there; now the body's catching up with it. You can see how it came from the mind, that it's just completely glommed on with attachment. So I do see these things as psychological, but I do see them as real when you're born there, as our reality is to us now.

Similar with the deva realm: when you're born there, it's a real to you as this. Why? Because grasping at inherent existing, wherever we're at, wherever we're born at, that's the center of the universe for the time we're there. It's crazy, isn't it? Does this make some sense? Does it help at all?

R: Yes, it does.

R #2: And the spirit interferences? I don't think I understand that at all.

VTC: Sometimes I find this helpful to think about; sometimes I think learning about spirit interferences just increases superstition and paranoia. But there are certain beings—mostly in the hungry ghost realm, although some might be in the asura realm—who just have bad intentions because of their own confusion, so they harm other living beings. It's like another person trying to harm you, except they don't have a body you can see—so you can't call the police on them.

In some ways, I think thinking about this can create a lot of paranoia: “oh these spirits are all around, and they're going to harm me...” That creates paranoia. In other ways, I think sometimes it can be helpful if you think, “Oh, I'm in such a bad mood. Maybe there's some interference. I need to have compassion for this being who's doing this interference.” Then you generate love and compassion for this being who you think is putting you in a bad mood. And then your bad mood isn't there any more. How that works, I don't know.

If you get mad at some spirit, you're going to suffer even more. But if you say, “Oh, somebody's mind is suffering, so they think that causing this disturbance to me will make them happy. I need to do some Taking and Giving for them.” I see it basically like when another human being is trying to harm you, but you can't see them. Like I said before, I don't think that necessarily everything that people say is a spirit interference, is one.

R #3: What about when you sense the spirit, but you know that it doesn't want to hurt you?

VTC: Generate compassion. Whatever you do, generate compassion. You can never go wrong with compassion.

R #3: When I am in the meditation hall, I feel safe. But when I am in the forest, I don't know.

VTC: You carry the meditation hall with you. We used to say that about Lama Zopa, because his previous life, he was a meditator in the mountains in Nepal, doing incredible meditation. You meet him this life...we used to say, he just takes his cave with him.

(laughter) So you take the meditation hall with you.

R #3: I just think, “Okay, they're here now. ‘Good morning!’” But at night, I wouldn't go into the forest for a million dollars.

VTC: For me, I go out at night, and it's so peaceful and beautiful, and I think, “this is the time when all the dakinis are there.” It's so peaceful and quiet in the forest. I'm much more afraid walking down a street in a city than I am here in the forest. Why would an animal want to hurt me?

R: I did have a question about this letter, the inmate who is putting such effort into not responding with revenge to the wife and the man. If he continues to make that choice towards forgiveness rather than revenge, the karma, the result he is experiencing as misfortune, that seed is ripening at that time. Because he's making a choice towards forgiveness, he will not experience it. They're creating the cause and conditions, they are producing harm. If he stops the karma from his side, they still do create the cause and conditions with some other sentient being to have that result?

VTC: If we harm somebody, it doesn't mean that person we harm is the one who harms us back. We can harm a Buddha or Bodhisattva; it doesn't mean they're going to harm us back. The thing is what's going on in our mind. If there's two people, John and Peter, and John harms Peter, and Peter from his side just doesn't react. Then Peter's negative karma is ripening and getting dispersed, and he's not creating any further negative karma because he's not getting all upset and angry and vengeful about it. But John is creating the negative karma that will ripen in his having misfortune. But it's not necessarily Peter that causes his misfortune in the next life. It'll just be whatever. The karma ripens in terms of our experience but we have the choice of how we respond to that experience. How we respond either creates more causes for suffering or it stops that whole mechanism, back and forth and back and forth.

R: He's not only stopping the results similar to the cause but the habituation to have the mind of revenge, the mind of hatred.

VTC: Right. He's stopping also the ripening result: being born in a lower realm because of acting out because someone harms him.

R: So even though the anger is uncontrolled... So from that just letting it control my life, e.g. with my remodeling project it tends to come out once in a while. So I'm working with it. So that's why the purification—so actually it could stop at some point. You mean this could stop happening? But it's uncontrolled!

VTC: The uncontrollable anger, that's not karma. That's just delusion. That's your afflicted mind. The situation that you're encountering is due to karma but you're choosing to react to that by getting livid. Now you're not taking it out physically and you're doing that intentionally so you're creating some positive karma by not taking it out physically. But you're also creating some negative karma by letting the anger continue. But you're also creating some positive mental karma by recognizing, "oh, this is a disturbing attitude; that's an affliction, and I'm going to try and cease this and not buy into it." Whereas if you just believe in that thought and go running with it, then you have the mental karma and probably you'd say something, so the verbal karma also. Then you'd do something and get the physical karma.

Whereas even if the mind is uncontrolled, at least you're keeping the precepts by not taking it out verbally and physically, and you're working on the mental side by recognizing that it's an affliction and wanting to do something about it. Then trying to train your mind in one of the antidotes... there still is some creation of negative karma because the mind's at that point. But it's certainly nothing like what would happen if you didn't have the Dharma.

R: Would it be reasonable to think that while you're working on these afflictions of the mind that you keep resting yourself in purifying. So that's kind of like a place to rest while you're not into creating more negative while you're working on these subtle habits that keep coming up?

VTC: While the afflictions keep coming up you can think, "Yes I'm purifying," but think that in terms of the suffering feeling that you're having due to those afflictions. Don't think that experiencing this affliction is purifying, because then the more afflictions I experience

the more I'm purifying—but actually the more afflictions we experience the more uncontrolled our mind is. So look at it in terms of when an affliction is arising in the mind there's suffering in the mind. So, say that suffering is the ripening of my previously created karma, and I'm purifying that by experiencing this mental suffering right now. Okay? Are you getting what I am saying?

If your mind is livid with anger, the mind is suffering at that point so separate out the anger from the suffering feeling in the mind, make those two separate. In fact, try to experience them as separate and then just focusing on the suffering mental feeling, say 'this is a result of my own negative karma, and I'm going to take on the suffering of others and use it to smash this mental suffering in my own mind'. Are you getting what I'm saying?

R: Then the anger, you deal with that?

VTC: If you focus on the suffering feeling in your mind, and dealing with that, you're not going to be angry.

R: This is being compassionate, isn't it, when you see it that way?

VTC: Yes, because anger only arises when there's suffering in the mind. If you get rid of the suffering feeling in the mind, the anger is not going to be there. So stop and say, "I'm suffering in this moment and it's a ripening of my own negative karma." Turn your focus to the suffering. See it as ripening of negative karma; do Taking and Giving for that suffering. By dealing with the suffering, automatically the anger is going to get dealt with.

R: I decided to think about my intentions. Because we've been doing practice six times a day, and how I set the motivation runs the whole practice basically. Even if I don't do well on the motivation, and I try to set it later, it doesn't work. It's not so good. I decided a few things. One of the things talks about analyzing the situation: how I'm getting myself into this situation. But I think, what I decided besides the physical part is these projects, these things. It just goes back to what we do in the morning.

What's the biggest goal of the day? Is it to get this piece of wood onto the wall? Or is it to work joyfully and not to do any harm? I just decided I have to change. I'm not going to try to get anything done. Things will get done. Just learn to work with more joy, like Dave. You watch Dave work, it's so impressive. It's frustrating doing these things: things [obstacles] come up all the time! I don't know why I don't expect things to come up all the time. You try to fix something—and everything went wrong on this little piece of wood, everything that could go wrong: It took 50 minutes instead of 10. It took 2 days instead of 10 minutes. But Dave goes through that and he's like. . . I don't know how he does it, actually. A good model though, he really is amazing that way. I mean this is how it is, this is the nature of these kinds of projects. Sometimes they go smoothly and sometimes they don't.

VTC: It's the nature of whatever activity we are doing. (laughter)

R: Is it the four distortions that make me think that there is going to be some happiness in here?

VTC: It's what [R] was saying last week: you think you're going to get this much done, then it doesn't work. It just doesn't work out that way.

R: Then also it seems that if you don't accept the reality of what is, like when it starts turning and going not like you think. You keep holding on to "no, it was going to be *this*." If you can let that go, and it is 'this' instead, then less suffering.

VTC: Yes, that's exactly it, to let go of our plan and our expectation.

R#2: That's why I go to sleep because that's an escape and that's a letting go of that tight mind and I don't know how to do it otherwise. So that's like numbing out, I could do it with food; I could do it with sleep.

VTC: Can you do it with letting go of the thought? That's the trick for all of us— when we do it with just letting go of the thought. We can get away from the thought by going to sleep, by eating, taking drugs, by drinking, by having sex, by going shopping, by keeping busy, by watching television, by innumerable things.

The thing that actually frees us is to be able to look and say, “that thought is not true. I have to let it go.” We are so invested in our thoughts sometimes. Especially if you have a plan that it's going to be like ‘this’, or an expectation of what's going to happen. We go into things with expectations and we don't even know we have the expectation until in the middle of it when we're all upset. You may have come to the retreat and said, “Oh I don't have any expectations for this retreat” and then in the middle it's like, “I want to revise the schedule!”—or whatever it is. “I want us to enter in the side door instead of the backdoor!” I've got to let go of that thought; that's not what's happening.

R: I thought there was going to be some serenity. (laughter)

VTC: Well, there will be.

R#1: I can't even imagine: I was thinking today in meditation...if I hadn't met the Dharma where would my mind be? And sometimes to really go for it, and say, where were you before you met the Dharma? And to realize that I have no idea where I would be now if ten years ago I hadn't walked into DFF [Dharma Friends Foundation in Seattle, WA].

R #2: I made a list one time. The summer before I met the Dharma, I was just a wreck and I made a list of everything I used to either try to solve my problems that didn't work— you know, drinking and relationships, eating Oreos for dinner, etc... And then I made a list of the things I thought about doing, but thankfully didn't do. One was a tattoo—which isn't maybe that big of a deal—but hard drugs, and all this other stuff, and looking at wherever that would have gone... And then, thinking about whatever ripened that allowed me to meet the Dharma and hear things that really allowed me to look at things differently. Looking at what I was taking refuge in, what appeared to be objects of refuge, and then seeing what an actual object of refuge is.

R #1: I had come to the understanding that if I hadn't met the Dharma, I would have either gone crazy or killed myself. That may be the dramatic in me, but there were times in my life where those were absolutely two options for how to solve my problems and get rid of my suffering.

VTC: I sometimes look at my life and ask myself, “where would I be if I hadn't met the Dharma?” I would have caused so much suffering to other people. Unbelievable. More suffering that I do already! (laughter) I was right on the verge of going in a really not very good place, and it would have caused incredible suffering.

R #3: One thing I've felt good about in this retreat so far, is that it's answered one of my questions about the confusion that I've had most of my life. Even when I first met the Dharma, I remember going up to my teacher and saying something to him about confusion, and it was only on this retreat that I realized that it was confusion about what the causes of happiness are. All the things I've been running around doing for decades, and having this confused feeling—that's what it was, basically. It's not there anymore. I mean I get confused at times, but it's a different thing. I was looking for happiness, basically, and that was in the confusion way: not knowing the causes of happiness.

R: When I freak out big-time because of this resistance, I think: “I was okay before coming to this retreat, I was feeling fine, I was happy. Look at me now! These people want me to become a sangha member, and they are scaring me with the hell realms!” (laughter) This part of my mind freaks out big-time. But this other part of my mind, it says, “What are they asking me to do? What is the option they are presenting? They are not asking for anything? They are just inviting me to have what? Love. Compassion. Cherishing others. Free your mind. Hey, that sounds really great. I can live with that.” So it’s amazing because some things are really threatening, but the option the Dharma presents—what else can you want in your life? I can’t find anything that is even a little bit threatening, scary, disappointing, or anything—and I want everything.

VTC: And then you realize too that some of our resistance is because we’re projecting our old stuff from our previous religion onto the Dharma, instead of seeing what the Buddha’s teaching is and why he’s teaching something and seeing it with a fresh mind.

R: I was thinking about impermanence, it is difficult for me—I feel like I am the same. To deal with things that are impermanent, to deal with them that way is very difficult. It’s easy to understand, but to deal with them is another thing.

VTC: Whatever we think about—something right now—it’s changing. It’s going to be different in the next moment.

R #2: Is that because we do things with mental images? I have been thinking about that. I have vivid dreams, and I also have this memory of this person I was with many years ago, and I’ve thought about this a few times, and every time it’s the same. The image of this person and the dream, they actually feel the same to me.

VTC: Yes, yes.

R #2: Exactly the same, there’s really no difference in the way it comes up. So that’s the mental image they talk about?

VTC: Yes, yes.

R #2: But isn’t that why we see things as permanent, because we have this image, and unless we think about it, you have that image. We’re wired.

VTC: Yes. We form a conception about something...when we see this flower, we don’t think of this flower as having come from a flower show, and there’s a seed...it’s just there. If we think about it: “oh yeah, this flower had causes,” but that’s only if we think about it. If we just look at it, it’s as if it’s just there and it’s always going to be there. So we don’t even think of the flower as deteriorating—let alone ourselves or our own body.

R: Being in retreat, because of the circumstances, the mind has the chance to go up and down, and all over, because there’s a lot of space. I feel that with this kind of experience, with my mind is changing and changing so much, I cannot have a solid opinion. In one state of mind I want to come to a conclusion, but the next day... (laughter)

VTC: You’re getting some wisdom!

R: Nobody can conclude anything, because you’re going to be wrong [no matter what]!

VTC: So just let go. Develop some wisdom in the situation, but all these “it’s got to be like this,” “I want it to be like that,” and “I feel this way,” and on and on...it’s just a roller coaster. I want the window open. I want it shut. I want it open. I want it shut. I want to be able to talk, no I want to do isolated retreat in a cabin...fickle mind!

R: In the routine of our lives, the mind doesn’t have this chance because we are not open to the circumstances, and we haven’t been in the circumstances that we are in now. That’s why

ten years can pass, and we can still have the same conclusion that we have now. It's a big waste of time in our lives.

VTC: Yes, a big waste of time. And never even questioning ourselves, like what I asked [R] at the beginning of this session: "How do you know *for sure* that that thought is correct? That that is really what was happening? We'll believe a thought for who knows how long, and never even question that maybe it's a wrong thought.

VTC: I can tell from your questions and your comments that you are meditating quite well, and that the retreat has been quite beneficial for all of you. There's a definite shift between last week and this week in terms of your comments and what you're saying. So please continue to go in this direction.

Dedication of Merit.