

**VSR ~ 7th Question & Answer Session
with Ven. Thubten Chodron
Sunday, January 29, 2006**

VTC: A couple of things I was thinking about: One is the break time and how you spend the break time. When you're reading, what are you reading? How are you reading it? I'm not in the house very much, but when I am, there seems to be a steady group of people who are reading quite a bit. Is that right?

Reading Dharma books is quite excellent. It's a very good thing to do in your break times. It's very important to read the Dharma books properly, especially when you're on retreat. If you're sitting down just reading a book and reading and reading; you finish that one and go to the bookshelf and get another one, and read that, and finish that one and go get another one... Maybe by this time in the retreat you've been through a book a week. But if you do that, you're just filling your mind with a lot of information and it's going to fatigue your mind.

If you're going to read a Dharma book during retreat, you need to read it very, very slowly. Read a few paragraphs and then sit and think about it. Then read another few paragraphs and sit and think about it. Your reading a book becomes kind of checking meditation. You're getting the ideas from the book, and then you're contemplating them and relating them to your life. So if you do that, you read something and then the book just sits in your lap for a while. You sit and think about the few paragraphs or the section or however much you read. Then you read a little bit more. When you've gotten done thinking about that, then you read a little more and think about that.

If you don't do that, then you're just reading for information and you're just going to clog your mind. It's not going to benefit you at all, because Dharma is not about getting information, it's about changing our heart. To really change our heart, we have to really stop and read very slowly and think about what we've read. Then bring what you've read into the meditation hall. So that it helps you when you're cultivating your motivation, or so that it helps you be more aware of things that you want to purify. Or so it helps you when you dedicate, to know how to dedicate properly.

It's easy on a retreat like this where you have a lot of time to just devour books. Then books, reading, becomes a distraction actually. We think, "oh, I'm doing really well: look how many books I've read." But actually, it's a distraction from looking at our mind, because we're just sitting there reading, reading, reading... But how much is going in and how much are we checking up what's happening? So don't use the Dharma to distract you from the Dharma. It's very easy to do, very tempting. That was one point I was thinking about.

Another one was how it's very easy here to do a kind of ongoing meditation on the kindness of others. Especially since Bodhicitta is one of the main things we want to focus on in the retreat. To develop Bodhicitta you need to have compassion for others. There are two things you want to principally meditate on to develop compassion for others: one is the disadvantages of cyclic existence. So you understand what suffering is; the three kinds of unsatisfactory conditions in relationship to yourself, so then you can apply them to others.

Then, second, is to see the kindness of others. So those two things are quite important for developing Bodhicitta. Without being able to see your own suffering, it's impossible to see the suffering of others. Your own dukkha— When I say suffering don't think, "oh, my stomach hurts and I can get a heart attack." Think of the unsatisfactory condition of just being in samsara. That's the real dukkha. So without that, wishing ourselves to be free (which is renunciation), we can't have compassion, which is wishing others to be free. So we have to think of these unsavory parts of cyclic existence that we even call 'happiness' in order to generate real compassion. Then to be able to focus the compassion of others, not just on ourselves, we have to really see the kindness of others so we can see others as lovable.

So when you're on a retreat like this, even though there aren't a lot of people around, still everything you look at is a manifestation of the kindness of others. Especially people who have been here, have lived here or have visited here on and off over the years. If you had any idea what your downstairs rooms looked like when we moved in—just concrete and wood framing. And how people came here, and out of the kindness of their hearts worked REALLY hard to put in the sheetrock and the insulation, the electrical wiring and the floor, and the whole thing. So there are rooms downstairs for people to sleep in.

Or, coming up here and remembering what it used to look like when we first moved in with our 'beautiful curtains,' and the kindness of the people who took those down! (laughter) All the repairs we had to do in the bathrooms and different things. If you're living out in the community room, last year that had a dirt floor and was filled with wood—no walls, nothing in it! So think about the kindness of all the people who worked to build that room.

Those of you who remember before, the garage, with the kerosene heater... Remember in the garage: the two metal garage doors and all the rafters and stuff up on top, and the mice, and how filthy it was inside! What it took, how many people put their energy into making it into a meditation hall. Building the altar and painting, getting all the Dharma materials... All the people who offered the Buddha statues and thangkas and texts, and all these kinds of things.

So everywhere you look, everything you touch, everything you use is an embodiment of the kindness of sentient beings. Just coming in [from outside], and you have food! You don't even need to think about food. Of course you do, but you don't need to. (laughter) All these people in Coeur d'Alene who are driving in the snow over an hour to come up here to do your laundry! Would you do that? Drive two hours in a day to do somebody else's dirty underwear? I think you'd find a way to get out of it. Look at what these people are doing for us. Going into town and buying food: you need this and that and this and that. And they're buying all these things. And just coming here and dropping it off... not even being able to come in have a cup of tea and relax a bit.

So when we think of the kindness of the people who are making this retreat happen: all the benefactors who gave money so this retreat could happen. It's just amazing. Everywhere you look, everything around you, is the kindness of mother sentient beings. This should be something you are thinking about during the retreat because you're starting off every session with the Bodhicitta motivations.

To have Bodhicitta you need to feel connected with others and the best way is to see their kindness like this. When we really see sentient beings' kindness and it makes an imprint on us, then automatically, without any extra effort, the mind arises that wants to repay that kindness. This is just kind of how we are as human beings. When people are nice to us, we want to do nice things back. So how we repay their kindness comes out in two ways: one is through our Dharma practice. So when you go into the meditation hall really feeling, 'wow, all these people are believing in me and that's why they're supporting this retreat and making the buildings at the Abbey happen and making the retreat happen. All these people believe in me, so I'm going to repay them by practicing well and practicing diligently.

Another way that you repay the kindness is when you see that things need to be done or somebody needs help, then automatically the mind comes that wants to help them. So without this mind that says, 'oh, I SHOULD do it, but I'm so comfortable sitting here on the sofa and that's their job.' Do you see how the eight worldly concerns come in?

Or we think of repaying others kindness with, 'I SHOULD do it.' That's not a mind of Bodhicitta, the mind that says 'should.' If we're having that then we're not really contemplating the kindness of others. Because if we really, deeply take any object or any event or anything and really think of how many people's effort lay behind it, then automatically the wish comes, this feeling of being the recipient of kindness, then automatically we want to give back. So if you're having a "should" reaction then you're not meditating in the proper way, so come back to the meditation instructions.

If you find you're taking things for granted and that you can watch the same people every week carry the laundry back and forth and every week carry the garbage back and forth and every week carry the food back and forth, and if you see that you're kind of spacing out and seeing some people here working— because it's kind of the same people, at least from what I see, doing a lot of the things— and you find you're not noticing how much work other people are doing to support the retreat... If you're seeing that you're spacing out, then you need to open your eyes a little bit. Really do this contemplation about the kindness of others and everything so many people are doing to make this [retreat] happen. So that we don't just take stuff for granted and think "yeah, I'm on retreat and I'm comfortable here reading my fifteenth book, page after page after page, and nothings going in. (laughter) But it's so comfortable to sit here where it's warm and anyway that's their job..." No, that's not the way to think.

When you think of the kindness of others, then automatically we want to give back. So everybody has their own way of giving back, if you're in the middle of thinking of something really important, you're having an "ah ha" moment, that's your way of giving back. Or if you're transcribing or shoveling snow or whatever, that's your way of giving back. To really see, while you're here, not only the kindness of the people you don't see who contributed to the retreat but the people who are working very hard who you're looking at breakfast, lunch and dinner every day who are making this happen and really feeling grateful to them and help them out. So especially the people who are doing a lot of the maintenance work, they're not even getting a break after lunch or after dinner. They're bending over my stinky composting toilet with a happy mind not complaining one single ounce that they don't get a break all day and they're smelling this toilet! They're really practicing with a happy mind, but

it would be nice if other people were aware of the maintenance work that has to be done around here and automatically feel privileged to be able to serve the community.

I was thinking about it because I received more letters from some of the inmates and some of these guys would be so delighted to come here and just work! Just think of how much good karma you have to create just to be able to come here and offer service to a Dharma community. So instead of seeing it as “work” and therefore something I don’t want to do (and how can I get out of it?)—because this is the way we’re taught, since we’re very little—let’s be honest, this is what we’re taught! Instead, see it as, “Wow! What an incredible opportunity to do some small, piddly thing for fifteen minutes that sustains this retreat and repays the kindness of all the people who are helping to make it happen!” Then your mind is totally different. That’s why we call it “offering service”; we don’t call it work. We are offering service, and it’s part of our practice. What this does is it also cuts out this very dualistic mind that we have, which says, “Dharma practice is sitting on my cushion, and reading a book, and all this other stuff is wasted time.” It’s not.

In a Zen monastery—if you ever go to a Zen monastery, at Shasta Abbey it’s like this—the person who is the chief cook has to be one of the best practitioners in the whole place. It’s an incredible honor to be the cook in a Zen monastery. It’s an incredible honor to be able to chop the vegetables and wash the dishes. So when you see things like this, then you bring your compassionate motivation into what you’re doing in your daily life, and what you’re doing becomes a mindfulness practice, because you’re aware and you’re actively transforming your mind while you’re doing whatever it is you’re doing. It breaks this dualistic mind that says, “Dharma practice is just sitting there on the cushion.” Are you getting what I’m saying?

You want to have an integrated practice, because when you leave here, you’re not going to be able to sit as much as you’re sitting here, and you’re going to have to be able to practice when your body is moving, and when your senses are functioning. This is a good place to be able to start practicing doing that right now, and being mindful, and being aware. How are you pushing the vacuum cleaner? What’s your mind doing? Is it, “I’m pushing the vacuum cleaner and doing it as fast as I can to get done, so I can go and relax,” and it’s the same old city energy that you have? Or are you vacuuming with the mind that says, “I’m sucking up all the defilements and sufferings of sentient beings,” and you’re gracefully pushing this vacuum cleaner around, and really enjoying vacuuming!?

This is all practice. Can we enjoy what we do moment-by-moment, or as soon as we start doing normal daily-life things, does our mind go into complaining gear? “Why do I have to do this? Somebody else should do this. This isn’t any fun. I want to go sit on the cushion so I can really practice Dharma. How come I have to do this? I signed up, but I’m doing more than everybody else is. They should help me.” What kind of mind is that? That’s not a Dharma mind, is it? Really take advantage of this possibility, and start training your mind so that you keep a good motivation and a happy mind, being mindful of how you’re acting and moving and doing things when your senses are functioning and your body is moving.

When I heard that our cooks were keeping silence, I thought it was fantastic, because you two are being so mindful and aware, and that’s putting so much good energy into the food.

It makes a very big difference than when the kitchen is just this source of shrieking, or whatever. (laughter) Just chopping the vegetables with care...

I heard that you all have one slip of paper or something—I don't know if I got it right—something that says, "It's your turn to wash the dishes, but if you don't want to, pass it on." Is there something like that?

R: I wrote that.

R #2: [It says:] "It's your lucky day!"

VTC: To really feel that it really is your lucky day. Why wouldn't you want to wash the dishes? Okay, if you don't feel well or something like that, that's fine, but if you have the chance to serve—washing the dishes is so nice and relaxing. Think of all the other stuff that needs to be done to keep this place up that is much more challenging... to be nice and relaxed while washing dishes, you just wash your dishes! It's done; it's fun. Try really, while you're here, to change your mind, because you can take that back out with you afterwards.

Let's do *The 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva*; we didn't get to it last week. All these thought training verses that we've been doing, have you noticed that it sets out a situation in the first two lines that is very painful, that you don't like, and then the last two lines, it tells you what to do—and it's always the exact opposite of what you *want* to do in the situation! (laughter) Have you noticed that? That's telling us something...

Verse Sixteen:

16. Even if a person for whom you've cared like your own child
Regards you as an enemy,
Cherish him specially, like a mother does
Her child who is stricken by illness—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

This one, for people who are very sensitive and get hurt very easily, and you're easily offended, and your feelings are hurt, and you feel like people betray your trust—this one is almost impossible. Somebody who you've cared for like your own child, who you've done so much for, who you've given sooo much to with soooo much love, and you haven't asked *anything* back, you're just *completely* benevolent and self-sacrificing... (laughter) And what does this person do? They turn around, and they criticize you, and they beat you, and they steal your stuff, and they lie to you, and they denounce you—they do all sorts of horrible things. And you're sitting there feeling, "Oh my goodness! What did I do to deserve this?" (laughter) Have you ever said that one? "What did I do to deserve this? I was so kind. Look at how they treated me so rotten!"

Here, what is the verse telling us to do? And what do we usually feel like doing? "I'm going to go beat that person up. Or, I'm going to go sit in my room and cry, and use up three boxes of tissue. I'm either going to cry and get on the phone and tell them off, or I'm going to go beat them up. They have no right to treat me like this, after all the kind wonderful things I did, and how much I trusted them, how much I *loved* them—I loved them with my whole heart, and then they turn and they betray me and do this!" We're really upset, aren't we?

What's Thogmey Zangmo doing? He's saying, cherish that person especially, like a mother whose child is stricken by illness. When you have a little kid who's sick, and they have a fever, they're totally out of control, aren't they? Little kids who are sick are out of control: they're shrieking, they're crying, they're scared, they wake up in the middle of the night and they need something. And what do you do if you're a parent? Go take care of them, don't you? Do you resent it? No. You love that kid to bits. It doesn't matter that they're waking you up in the middle of the night, or if they're hitting you because they're having a nightmare, because they're sick with the fever. None of this stuff matters—how they're treating you.

All you see is this kid who is sick who doesn't know what they're doing, and you love them. That's exactly the situation with the person who betrays out trust. What's making them betray our trust? They're sick with ignorance, anger, and attachment. They're sick with arrogance and jealousy and resentment. Can we see them as we would a sick child? They're sick with the afflictions, and so to love them especially like that. They don't know what they're doing.

This is quite powerful, especially when somebody has hurt us very badly, to really be able to transform our mind like this. It's always very helpful to think of your own family situation. When we were growing up, when we were a sick child with the fever, and we were screaming and waking up in the middle of the night, and hitting our parents because we had a nightmare, did we ever think of the kindness of our parents taking care of us?

Did we? No. Not a thought. Not a thought that here they are waking up in the middle of the night, and they're sleep-deprived. Not a thought that they go to work and work very hard and work overtime to get us our toys. Not a thought of how many meals they've cooked for us—even when we were well. We just took it for granted: mom and dad are there to serve me. Isn't it? They're there to serve **me**. I cry; they come. As adults, have we ever written our parents a letter to thank them for bringing us up? Have we ever really, in our heart, thanked our parents for what they did, and for putting up with us?

Sometimes when we think back about our own lives, and what people did for us very selflessly, in spite of how terribly sometimes we treated them, and then think that people put up with me—it's the least I can do in this situation to try and be kind to somebody who's not treating me properly.

When we think like this, it's not to feel guilty. It's to really recognize that we've been the recipient of a tremendous amount of kindness that we've never stopped to realize. And then, when we see that, thinking, "Wow! I've received that. I can extend that to others." Think about when you were sick. How many of you had chicken pox, measles, mumps, flu, the whole thing? Sitting there whining, crying, and people took care of us, didn't they? We never once said "thank you." I didn't, anyway. I just cried for more.

Then it really makes you feel, "Wow. I've been the recipient of so much kindness. I have the capacity to give some of that to others, and to extend to others the same kind of selfless care that I've been the recipient of."

17. If an equal or inferior person disparages you out of pride,
Place him, as you would your spiritual teacher,
With respect on the crown of your head—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

If an equal or inferior person—that means everybody except maybe one or two people, right? (laughter)—disparages us out of pride... So they're having an ego problem and they put us down, what do we feel like doing? "Who do you think you are, talking to me like that? You're not listening to what I'm saying! You're just saying 'no, no, no,' and not making an effort to understand me! You're acting like you know so much, and I know more than you. You're acting like such a big know-it-all! Why don't you listen to me?" This is what's going on in our mind, right? We want to put us on top of their heads like we're *their* gurus! But to put them on top of our head like we would our spiritual teacher— because when you're doing the guru yoga practice, Vajarasattva is on your head. Vajarasattvas' the same nature as your spiritual mentor. So then you put this person, this obnoxious person, who doesn't know how wonderful you are and how much they should respect you, and is deprecating you instead. Put that person on your head like they are you're spiritual teacher? Why? What are they teaching you? They're teaching us humility; they're teaching us to be okay with however other people treat us, they're teaching us not to be so ego sensitive. And we are treating them with respect. So difficult, isn't it? But so beneficial.

18. Though you lack what you need and are constantly disparaged,
Afflicted by dangerous sickness and spirits,
Without discouragement take on the misdeeds
And the pain of all living beings—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

So how do we usually feel when we lack what we need and are constantly disparaged? "Oh, poor me!" We throw ourselves a pity party with ourselves as the star! "Poor me, I'm sick, I'm afflicted, I don't feel well, oh, poor me, poor me..." Then what do we usually do? We get discouraged don't we? "Poor me, I'm trying to do this and I'm sick and I can't do it right and there are all these interferences. I'm just going to give up, it's useless..." That's what we want to do, isn't it, give up and go to bed? Take our teddy bear and go to bed, suck our thumb and feel sorry for ourselves! (laughter) What is Tongmey Zangmo telling us to do? **Without discouragement take all the misdeeds and pain of all living beings...** So do the Taking and Giving meditation. Right on top of all the self-pity, we take all the pain and suffering of all the other sentient beings; take it all on and use it to strike at that lump of our own self-centeredness and blow it to bits! Then radiate out love from our heart and give our body, possessions, and three-times virtues to all sentient beings.

One of the letters I got this week from one of the inmates, he was saying: 'How's my retreat going? Horribly wonderful! I sit down, my back hurts, my knees hurts, I have cold sores in my mouth almost every day. My stomach is continually upset and there is another inmate who is on my case and threatening me! Prison is quite a dangerous place, you know. And he's saying, 'now my retreat, is that horrible or is that wonderful? Who could ever wish for a better opportunity to easily purify negative karma?' This guy has an amazing attitude! If somebody's stalking you, are you going to say, "yippee, this is the ripening of my karma!" Are you going to sit and have your mantra be, "why am I afraid and what am I afraid of?"

and really look at your fear? Or are you just going to slide into all the self-grasping the fear brings, and all the self-pity of not feeling well?

So it's the same kind of thing—transforming the situation. He writes in his letters, “well, it beats the hell realm!” If you look at it, it's true. Your stomach hurts, you have cold sores, your back hurts... But ‘it beats the hell realm!’ Some other inmate might jump you and stab you... Beats the hell realm! You can still have a happy mind. Incredible, isn't it? So we need to take this as an example of how we should practice. That's why it says, ‘take all, without discouragement...’ Take all the misdeeds, all the negative karma— all this from all these sentient beings onto yourself, and use it to crush the self-centered mind that's the source of our own misery.

19. Though you become famous and many bow to you,
And you gain riches equal to Vaishravana's,
See the worldly fortune is without essence, and be unconceited—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Vaishravana is one of gods, the god of wealth. So he's quite wealthy. So here's an opposite situation. Everything's going great. You become famous; many people bow to you. Forget about whether you have any good qualities, never mind that. People are bowing to you and showing you respect and giving you stuff and you have a lot of wealth and everybody thinks you're very important because you're rich and famous and blah, blah, blah. So how do we tend to do when those situations happen? We stick our nose in the air, don't we? Kind of make sure everybody SEES how rich and famous we are. So what's it saying? To see that worldly fortune is without essence. That wealth and fame doesn't mean sh---. It doesn't, does it? It doesn't mean anything. You can have all the wealth in the world: are you happy? No. You can have all the wealth in the world: do you feel good about yourself? No. Do wealth and fame help you to have a good rebirth? No. Do they help you to have a happy mind now? No. Do they get you closer to enlightenment? No. They're totally without any kind of essence, totally nothing. ‘Come, come; go, go’ [as Lama Yeshe used to say]. And it's true, isn't it? Wealth—come, come, go, go. Bye-bye. Fame, good reputation, praise—come, come, go, go. Very quickly. The more famous you are, the more they'll trash you in the newspaper! These things are totally without any kind of meaning from a Dharma perspective, no meaning at all. So seeing that even though you have these worldly things and other people think you must be terrifically important or wonderful because you have them, then seeing that they don't mean anything... Be unconceited. Be simple.

20. While the enemy of your own anger is unsubdued,
Though you conquer external foes, they will only increase.
Therefore, with the militia of love and compassion, subdue your own mind—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

So that's really true, isn't it? As long as our own anger isn't subdued, we're going to have lots of enemies, lots and lots of enemies. It doesn't matter how many enemies we've vanquished: as long as we have anger, we're going to have a new enemy. Because what is it that creates enemies? The angry mind, isn't it? It's not the other people lying to us that creates an enemy. It's our getting mad at their lying to us. It's not their telling us off that makes them the enemy. It's our getting angry at them for telling us off that we make them the enemy. So

we're making our own enemies and the key player is our own anger. We create an enemy. Then we get angry; we want to destroy the enemy; we want to beat the person; we want to kill them. We wish that a truck would hit them. We wish that all their stocks go down and they have to file for bankruptcy. We hope their marriage breaks up. We talk about them behind their back. We make little cliques at work, in the dharma center or wherever it is. "Oh, that person . . . yak, yak, yak." Talk about our enemy. We might get rid of all these enemies: the person leaves, dies, or who knows what. But another one comes because our anger creates another enemy.

Anger creates the enemy. Instead of having anger be our old friend—actually one of the inmates wrote that to me—he wrote about a problem he's having and he said, "I find myself going back to my old friend, anger, and I don't want to do this. But how else can I see the situation?" Sometimes when we're angry we can't even see there's another choice in how to see the situation. We're so completely stuck in our view that we don't even realize the situation. But somehow, this is the value if you're heard Dharma teachings and thought about them even a little bit, then when you get angry there's always this voice in the back of your head saying [in a sing-songy voice]: *"This is a distorted state of mind. This emotion doesn't have any benefit. Think about how you're seeing things."* (laughter) It's kind of there, and the angry mind goes, "Shut up! I don't want to listen to you! I'm too busy being angry!" It just keeps on. But if we can stop and see that there is a choice, with anything that happens, about how to see it clearly. Sometimes at the beginning we don't see that there's a choice, and it's only halfway through that we see there's a choice. Well, that's good! Because at least we realized at some point that there's a choice. Then we practice, and we tame our mind, and we calm down, and we let go.

What helps us? We call out "the militia of love and compassion." Isn't that a great image? *The militia of love and compassion. The National Guard of love and compassion. (laughter) Or the Marines of love and compassion, the Green Berets of love and compassion.* (laughter) You call them out, and you let them get rid of the enemy of the anger. And you just generate love and compassion for the people. It is possible. It is possible. If we can, even for a moment, see that the person we think is harming us is suffering—if we can for a moment see that—there's the possibility of compassion.

I think it's kind of a human reaction that if we see someone suffering, we want to help. If we can see that that person isn't so solid, how they're appearing to us in that moment, that they're a suffering sentient being who is afflicted by ignorance, anger, and attachment, and under the sway of their karma and headed for aging, sickness, death, and rebirth—if we can see them like that, then automatically compassion comes.

21. Sensual pleasures are like saltwater:
The more you indulge, the more thirst increases.
Abandon at once those things which breed
Clinging attachment—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

This verse is for our mind that is an addict. All of us are addicts, aren't we? All of us are addicts, and —o'holics of something, whether it's alcoholics, or drugoholics, or workoholics, or sexoholics, who knows what it is, but we're all —o'holics of one kind or another. Food, if

you sit and stuff your face—whatever it is. “Sensual pleasures are like saltwater.” The more you drink saltwater, you think it’s going to quench your thirst, you think you’re going to feel better, what happens? You feel worse. This is the mind that takes drugs, isn’t it? This is the mind that drinks. This is the mind that whatever –o’holistic thing that we have is functioning.

We think, “If I do this, it will temporarily soothe the anxiety or the restlessness that I’m feeling inside.” But what happens afterwards? You feel worse. Don’t you? You drink, and then you have a hangover, and then you feel crummy about yourself. You take drugs and then you feel crummy about yourself because you see what it’s doing to your family and everybody else. Or you sit and overeat and feel crummy about yourself. You go on a shopping binge—whatever our thing is. Some are legal, some aren’t. But it’s the same mind, isn’t it? So we shouldn’t hold our nose up in the air [as if we’re better than others e.g. who are doing something illegal].

Really see that the more we indulge, the more the craving increases. It just increases and increases and increases. Of course, we don’t want to *squeeze* ourselves, and clamp down: “I. Can’t Have. That. **Oh! I have so much craving and desire! That’s saltwater! I’m not going near the saltwater! I’m staying away! AAAHHHHH!**” (much laughter) Meanwhile, what are you doing? It’s self-torture, isn’t it? There’s this drama in our mind, isn’t there? Lama Yeshe used to say, “Don’t squeeze yourself, dear.” Because we do, do that. We squeeze ourself: “**AAHHH, One piece of chocolate! It’s saltwater! I’m going to go to the hell realms if I eat that piece of chocolate! Get it away from me!! AAAHHHHH!!! I’m soooo self-centered!!!!**” (much laughter)

We drive ourselves nuts, don’t we? This verse is not saying to be like that. That’s not the antidote, to squeeze ourselves, and clobber ourselves, and feel so *guilty*: “**I’m letting the Universe dooown!**” (laughter) Rather, to try and apply our wisdom here, and say, “Ok, I have a problem with this. I’m working on it. I’m working on it in a reasonable way, chipping away at it slowly, because if I squeeze myself, I know my mind just gets worse. I’m working at it slowly, but I have a plan, and I have some discipline around this, and I’m really following that.”

And then you bring your wisdom to see that the thing *is* like saltwater. That’s very different than having the intellectual mind that says, “oh, I have so much attachment! That’s bad for me!” That’s just intellectual, isn’t it? Because inside, it’s like, “I want it!!” So just sitting there having this intellectual mind—“Oh, I have so much attachment. I’m bad.”—that’s not Dharma practice. We have to really work with our mind in a slow and gentle but very persistent way with whatever our –o’holistic thing is. Whether we’re email-oholics, computer-oholics, whatever it is—learning to have some discipline around it. Something to think about.

I asked you a couple of weeks ago to look at what your Non-Negotiables are. Did you do that? What did you come up with? First of all, did everybody do that?

Retreatant: A few. It’s more difficult that you think.

VTC: Why don’t we just go around in a circle and everyone can share what they came up with for their Non-Negotiables.

R: I decided that being here at the Abbey is getting to be more and more of a non-negotiable for me. I've also found that having animals and critters in my life, also, as far as my connection to them and caring for them. If it wasn't here, I think I'd probably find someplace else to care for them. Being outside is a non-negotiable for me. I do not thrive if I do not have that in my life. I have to be honest to say that my practice is definitely deepening during this retreat, but what happens if I go out into the world by myself... to say that the Dharma is becoming a non-negotiable—I'd like to be able to say that someday, but I think it's still got some vulnerability around it. I think serving my teacher is starting to work into a non-negotiable. It's having some feeling around it—it's moving in that direction. I have to get out of the way, however—I think my pride and my sensitivity and my need to be acknowledged have got to get out of the way if I want to do that in the proper way. But I feel a little bit of that coming up, that it might be a non-negotiable.

R: Mine are so worldly. The first thing I thought of was really beautiful music. It would be hard for me to give up beautiful sounds, all different kinds of music. My practice is non-negotiable: I will do that everyday. Some movies would be non-negotiable... I'm very picky about what, but some of them. That's what I came up with so far.

VTC: Relationships?

R: Hmm. Relationships... 'Come, come, go, go,' I think. I don't have a strong feeling for relationships.

VTC: By the way, when I say "relationships," I mean all kinds of relationships with people in our lives.

R: I didn't give it a whole lot of thought, but what's popped into my mind sitting here is that I can only see 6-8 months of non-negotiables. The only thing that popped into my head is receiving teachings. That's non-negotiable.

VTC: It would be fine if all the people in your life just disappeared, and your wealth disappeared?

R: I think so...I'll have to look at that. I don't know.

R: To be sincere, I haven't thought too much about it this week. Now I would say that relationships... I've been thinking about my brothers: they are not really anymore my brothers. We don't relate too much as a family, and I don't really need to be with them because I am their brother. But I felt some anguish, and still some dependence of being a member of the family. At the same time, now I am not in a relationship with a woman, but this has been one of my difficult questions: can I be by myself, happy, and calm, and doing my things, whether or not there is a person [in an intimate relationship] with me? I haven't solved this problem yet. For about ten years I've been trying to find it out and feel calm with myself about it, and I haven't resolved it, actually. I feel kind of lonely in this way.

R: When I first thought about this a few weeks ago, my first thought was something about environment and space... and I realized that I've always lived in beautiful places, and how much I value that: especially to have open air, fresh air, clean air, etc. And then, I think it was the same week the power went out in the multi-purpose room, and Jan said she would have to move a couple of guys into my room, and I would have to move, and I felt myself going, "No! That's *my space!*" But the more I thought about it, I remembered about five years ago when my non-negotiable was organic food: I decided I would only buy organic food; that was my [then] non-negotiable. Then when I moved to another place that didn't

have organic food, I had to give that up. So now I feel like any of those physical things [organic food, space, etc.], if I was in an extreme situation, I could give up— because people have to do that all the time e.g. when they lose their health, or they're put in prison, or whatever it is. So now, I guess I feel that my only real non-negotiable is to have the time and the support to practice the Dharma, and to learn the Dharma. And that includes Dharma friends.

R: I haven't really thought about it much, but one thing I've noticed that's changed is everything used to revolve for me around work or whatever I'm doing. My Dharma practice supported work and that's the way it should be, but it gets confusing. What I'm trying to say is, it should be the other way around. The most important thing is my practice but I don't think I function like that. I do this [Dharma practice] but it's second to work and sustaining myself. I'm realizing that this is backwards. I'm not sure I'm making myself clear... I don't have control over anything. I can feel that. Right now I want to stay connected with my kids and granddaughter. I don't know what that looks like; I don't have any control over it. I can see that. Actually it's been helpful to see equanimity and work with equanimity. It's not just 'my kids' but it's all sentient beings in different lives. It's kind of interesting actually. I feel right now on retreat that health care is something that's non-negotiable. I need to have health care. I think I can do whatever in terms of doing without this or that. But I have really thought about it deeply. The practice piece is interesting though because I had it backwards, really backwards. I realize that that post-meditation session is the rest of my life! That's big. That's all I have to say.

R: I think that in my life the thing that has been most important is freedom. Those things that give me this sensation to be free, to choose, to think, to act. Many times this purpose was very, very confused. I thought that in these [past] activities I would find freedom, but the result was the opposite. I was totally confused and engaged in a very bad situation that had nothing to do with freedom. But now freedom for me is exactly the Dharma, to think, to stop it, to practice, to taste the Dharma, to be with my Dharma friends, to be with my teachers. Nowadays one of the most important things for me is this relationship with the Dharma. But of course, my family, but my relationship with my family is very free in the sense that I love them; I help them when I can, but I keep my freedom to do the things I need to do. The same with my friends. Nowadays this gives me the sensation of unbelievable freedom. So finally I have found this.

R: Mostly I thought about my conclusion. I'll say it first. My conclusion was to follow the instructions of the teacher. I was thinking about my family a lot with this question. The things that kind of came to mind. I pondered things like activities of the body; how much exercise you need in a day. That used to be a non-negotiable for me: being very active. A lot of things that have been non-negotiable don't feel that way anymore. I remember last year when we did this question, my non-negotiable was, and still is, my commitments, my Dharma commitments. I was thinking that that's still there. I was thinking about the situation that come up with me moving here and the relationship with my family. It's like a conflict; they want me to do one thing with my life it seems at this point, which is kind of funny to me actually. I'm not doing that. That's the way it's going to be. (laughter) I have thought about it the first month of the retreat. I thought about my responses and interactions about this and how I could do things a little differently that would be helpful.

The mistakes I've made that have made it harder for them and how to make that easier. That's kind of what I thought about when I thought about this question.

R: I've been turning this one over a lot. One thing that's really surprised me I think is that there's a really strong wish to do the Chenrezig Retreat next year; figure out a way to do that, either supporting it or being able to do it. So that's one thing. Related to that is my family; being kind to them I think is very important to me. It's becoming more important to me. Especially my grandparents because I think everyone's realizing that they won't be around much longer, and for me there's a desire just to repay that kindness as much as I can before they pass away. I made a list. It's kind of like a spectrum. You mentioned finances at one point and I hadn't thought about that, but I have a reasonable amount of financial independence at this point, and I guess I'd like to hold on to that, to be very honest! (laughter) I think one of my biggest attachments is kids, my old kids from the high school [where I taught]. I miss them a lot and having that kind of rapport in my life, just being around kids and teaching. I'm actually back in high school quite a bit [in my sessions]. I don't know. I'd like to be around that in some capacity—I'm still working on what that means. I still don't even really know why—I think it's an attachment and an aspiration both, I don't know.

R: Since I met the Dharma, my perspective has been changing very much. I'm at a point right now where everything, basically, is negotiable. So I'm thinking that now freedom is something very, very important. I have a very strong attachment, for instance, to my family, but right now everything is negotiable.

R: I was thinking a little bit about this. I've been thinking in my meditation, and it's been changing. At the very beginning of the retreat, it was like everything was very clear: "Good old me is here doing this retreat, I am this person, and I will go back to the same way, doing the same thing..." And right now, it's like, I really don't know who I am, and I don't know what will happen when I go back! So everything is very open right now. I talk a lot about my dreams; I have a lot of dreams. I had a dream that I was getting out of this front door here, and after the retreat I felt very different, very young, and my feeling was that I had new eyes, and everything was new. So that is my feeling: I am going back to the same place, the same things, but I don't know what I am going to find... Even though I feel that way, I am quite certain that some things won't change, because I have very strong commitments: for instance, with my spouse, my city, my Dharma group, with my family, so I am sure—I have to be honest, I am not coming to Sravasti Abbey to be a monastic, for instance. I want to stay where I am. For me, something very important is to go where the Dharma is for teachings—but I want to take it to my place. I want to work there, I want to do the Dharma publishing house, to buy property and make a retreat center—to do many things where I live. So it doesn't make sense to go anywhere else. That's one of my conclusions. On the other hand, the things that I am very attached to, that were very strong, I think they are still very strong, like watching movies. I am multi-functional, and all over the place all the time!

R: I have spent five sessions trying to figure out my non-negotiables. At first, I read about attachment, and then I thought that I want to live in a comfortable place. Always. Then I thought, "Wow. If I want to move where the Dharma is taught, I don't know where I'm going to live!" Then I thought, "the place has to be clean, with flowers, and a lot of blinds..."

'This is non-negotiable!' (laughter) And then I thought, "with music, DVDs, and movies. And a bookcase filled with my Dharma books. So, flowers, books, music, and movies—that's all I need!" (laughter) Then, "I'm going to live next to a monastery (I don't know which one) and take classes with my teachers every day."

And then— I'm working with attachment: And what I am attached to? Attached to flowers, to music, to movies..."No, no, no, this is too worldly. What is non-negotiable? I can negotiate the flowers—maybe to have just one flower." (laughter)

Then a few days later, I was reading the Lamrim about the hell realms. It was so scary. Then I thought, "Wow! Everything is negotiable— what is non-negotiable is that I have to be a human being in the next life. That's what I have to work for!" Then everything changed. I didn't want anybody—my spouse, family, nobody—I didn't want the chains for all my life. I didn't want to have chains here [in human realm]. E.g. if I'm going there and I feel like somebody is pulling me, attached to me, wanting me to do this and that, I don't think I want to do that. "This is our only chance we have to do Dharma!"

I don't know what's going to happen. But I have to have the freedom to do what I think is right to do. And then I want to move to where the Dharma is taught—that is something I really want to do. But I don't want anybody to be attached to me; it's because of that attachment I cannot move! No. I have to cut it. And if I am attached to something or somebody, I have to cut this attachment. I have seen this attachment so clearly: attachment to my comfort, to this 'I' that doesn't exist! I don't know anything anymore—just that.

VTC: That's good. The more you don't know, the better your retreat is going. (laughter) The more you realize that you don't know—especially what you said, really seeing the bonds of attachment. Attachment is like chains, either us being attached to somebody else, or if other people are attached to us, and then we feel attached back, or we feel guilty, or we feel restrained because of their attachment to us—it's bonds, it's like handcuffs.

R: And you have to do the thing they want because you are a Buddhist! They have a lot of expectations.

VTC: This is actually in regard to what another Retreatant said who asked: "what's the difference between being kind to somebody and doing what they want?" That's what you're saying too. We're kind of equating being kind and doing what somebody wants. Are they the same? What's the difference between being kind and doing what somebody wants? Because if you can be real clear about the difference, then other people's expectations and attachments don't trap you. This is related to what a few of you were saying.

R #1: I really love the whole thing about freedom. What we conceptualize as men or women, or Americans about freedom, and what true freedom is. It's like this question that you ask people: what really is happiness for you? What is freedom for us? This would probably have some interesting answers too. I never thought of the Dharma of being something around freedom—I see liberation, but freedom has a different feeling for me.

VTC: I think it's called "How to Free Your Mind." There's a reason! (laughter) It was very beautiful, what that previous Retreatant said about freedom.

R #1: Once the mind gets turned away from the resistance to letting go of the attachments, and letting go of how we see ourselves, because there's a real investment in that. When you see the freedom, that you actually do have these choices, then all these possibilities open up. It definitely requires the mind to do this 180 degree turn: it's not what you're losing, what you're missing. It's more about 'I don't know what's going to happen'...Freedom is turning

your mind totally around, looking at the same circumstances and situation, but looking at it differently.

R #2: We need to be able to see all the possibilities, and not get stuck on one or two.

R #1: But a lot of that has to do with letting go of control.

VTC: Letting go of control, letting go of attachment.

R #1: And the eight worldly concerns.

VTC: Yes.

R: I agree with what was said about freedom. And longing for freedom is really nice, but right now, what I see in my mind, is that I am not in control. It [my mind] goes wherever it wants. For instance, this thing with attachment and the emotions—it is so clear, and you are seeing everything—and there is nothing you can do but relax, work on it, reflect, and see all the connections. But it is there, and it is not really moving. So, one of my conclusions is that the retreat is just the beginning: I *really* have to practice. I *really* have to purify. Because what is most striking for me is to think that everything was there—I was just not seeing it! It has been working the whole time.

VTC: Yes...

R: I am sure that when I go back home I will cover it up again. (laughter) But I think I will remember, and it's quite scary, because I really couldn't do anything. I've had some experiences that I won't relate because they're very embarrassing, but my mind sticks to these things. It won't move. It doesn't matter what I do. I can jump, and cry, and scream—it won't move. It literally has taken four or five days for it to let go. And I think it is still around, but my mind just found something else to grab onto... (laughter) I feel like my mind grabs something, lets go, and it loosens for a little, and then it picks up something else—it is very, very strong! I can't do anything. To really take control of the situation, it will take a while. So this freedom for me—I am not free right now to do anything.

For me, then, the commitment thing is very important. Before I became your student formally a few years ago, my practice was very loose. I actually didn't know how to practice—I was practicing this and that, and trying this and that, and then I found out that regular practice, being consistent, and persevering, is very rewarding. But now I know that what I was doing before was nothing compared to this. So this is why I say that I don't know what's going to happen afterwards. After this atomic bomb, who knows? The last thing is that it will take lots of work to get rid of that [stubborn mind]. The image in my mind is of a very, very strong structure. It is there. Maybe it is not inherently existent, and it can be removed, but it is very strong and very clear, so let's find out how to remove it, because it is there.

VTC: It was very interesting to hear you say at the beginning, "I don't know who I am, I don't know what's going to happen—but I'm going back home, I'm living in the same house, with my spouse, and I'm doing the Dharma group, and I'm doing my job, and I'm doing this, and I'm doing that..." (laughter) It was like the door opened, and then the door—wham! [VTC claps hands together].

R: I've been thinking about it. I don't see it that way, because for me, having my job is really great: I can be here. I'm not thinking about giving it up. It's great. I really love where I live, so I would go to many places, but I love living where I live, and I really want to do what I'm doing. For instance, my Dharma group: I love it. I don't want to go somewhere else to live close to some other teacher. Because I would like to be there and bring the teachings to where I live. For me, I don't feel it like a contradiction. I don't know what's going to happen, because when I go back, I don't know what I'm going to find, but right now I really

want to go back and do what I was thinking about doing. Some things I want to do, some things maybe will change. But I don't see it as a contradiction. Let's see what happens...

R: I am very worried about this. I feel like the previous Retreatant feels, a bit out of control. What happened in the last two days, I feel worried because this is too much pain for me. It has been very painful. I wanted to find the Dharma and find spirituality and be of good to others, but I didn't think it was going to be so painful! (laughter) My god! It's been very, very painful. I wanted to comment on this.

For the first time, I had a difficult experience, and I thought, "I'm purifying this karma." So then I said "thank you." I felt like I was dying! I don't want to dramatize it, but it was so strong, this anxiety of dying, of losing myself completely, and not being of worth to anybody, and not being able to control things. Last night was the most difficult night, but at the same time, I learned to think about purification. I remembered what you told me, and I learned something. I really felt that I could not control the anxiety and the pain, but I felt, "what if I let it happen without control?" Then the emotional level came down. Now I have to remember when something like that comes up so strong, I can just let go, or what you said, step back. And then let things happen. This is the first time I came to be a bit more relaxed.

VTC: Good, very good.

R: It was a very important lesson for me. I think I'm starting to care about me. I've had problems with anxiety, when I felt I couldn't breathe, but I just tried to follow your advice, and it was much easier at the end of the session. It helps to keep practicing! I learned that, too. (laughter) I also had a bad dream, and I reacted very strongly to it. I realized then, that it was the mind that makes the body respond so strongly. I had a thought, and I couldn't control it. I've had blood pressure problems, and pills to help me with them, but the thought—the thought is so strong, and I think it causes a lot of my problems.

VTC: You're learning a lot!

R: I want to stop the pain! (laughter)

VTC: You are. You're in the process of doing it. You are. You did very well last night, you handled it well, you learned a lot of things from it. You're in the process of doing that.

R: I am very grateful to be here.

R: I had something to say about some comments from before about control. I certainly have felt—or, I am realizing I don't have control over my mind or my body either. That's been interesting to observe what I do with that. I often take refuge in my attachment. This is where attachment comes up. It's like, I'm out of control: if I make PLANS that will put me back in control. (laughter)

Actually, when we did the dispelling hindrances, I imagined this engineer side of me trying to plan out every last thing I'm going to do with my life—it didn't work; it [this planning mind] is still here. I thought about it, and tried to think about Refuge: what are those plans and what else could I be taking Refuge in? With the attachment, there is such a sense of solidity, and that's being undercut when the sense of control isn't there. I've been trying to turn my mind more towards Refuge.

VTC: There's a security issue, too. You know, when one makes plans: I know who I am, I know what I am doing, I'm secure here, in samsara! (laughter)

R: Each week or so, I think, this is it! This is the one [my life plan]! And then I'm like, "no, no, I know this isn't it," but then today, I thought, "I've got it! This is great! Now I can just

not worry for the rest of the retreat.” So, absolutely, it’s a real question of control and lack of control, and security and lack of security.

VTC: It would be interesting for you, in your meditation, when that comes up, to stop the mind from planning. Push the pause button on that. Don’t let the mind take refuge in planning. See what happens. See if you can relax.

R: When I was seeing all those things, that everything is negotiable, I realized the inspiration that the teacher gives me was my practice. If I don’t have that, uh-uh, I won’t be able to do too much. The life goes, so that’s why I have to have that.

R: In the meeting yesterday, one Retreatant talked about how when you’re feeling crummy or when you’re feeling good... how we tend to turn our energy in more when we’re feeling crummy. Then sometimes we get extroverted when we’re feeling good. We can turn that in also. It’s a suggestion for the group. I was thinking about that in terms of renunciation. What does it feel like. I was thinking of the prayer, “day and night unceasingly” [from the Three Principles by Lama Tsongkhapa] because I do that prayer every session six times a day in Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind to Dharma. It’s kind of like a renunciation-bodhicitta little prayer. So I contemplate that the way I structure my contemplation-motivation. The prayer says ‘induce’—basically you’re trying to induce in your mind renunciation. Sometimes if things are crazy, out of control, I can relate to R completely. It’s easier to go there [to renunciation]. You feel like the suffering is strong so I want out of here [samsara]. Then when you’re not feeling that, you have to generate it [feeling of renunciation-bodhicitta]. So that I can understand. Then I wondered how true is it? If you’re going to have this feeling of renunciation 24-7 all your mind states have to have it, this sense of renunciation... all your mind states.

VTC: I think this relates to the whole thing about freedom, because when there’s renunciation in the mind then attachment doesn’t have a hold; either our own attachment isn’t running the show or our own attachment isn’t hooking into other peoples’ attachment to us: people are attached to us then we’re attached to them: e.g. “I got to do what they want me to do.” I feel guilty if I don’t. This kind of thing. Renunciation is just unlocking all of that because the mind’s so clear when there’s renunciation about what’s important and what’s not important. You’re just doing what’s important and you’re happy and relaxed about it because your mind isn’t sitting there tormented with, “I should be doing this and why aren’t I doing that? Maybe I made the wrong decision and I should have done this. No, maybe this was the right decision.” You’re mind’s just free of all that.

R: So the aversion to unpleasant experiences is like the feeling of suffering, so that’s not actually renunciation.

VTC: With renunciation the aversion is toward dukkha, the dukkha of samsara. It’s not just towards unpleasant experiences because everybody has that, even people who don’t practice the Dharma! Nobody likes unpleasant experiences. But it’s seeing dukkha very clearly and just saying, “I don’t want to go there. Doesn’t have any purpose.” Then all of a sudden there’s so much freedom in the mind. People say this... people say that. “That’s nice. I can listen.” But you don’t get confused by it.

R: That’s the way I was taught about renunciation... that it means Freedom. Freedom from everything that causes suffering, either now or in your future lives. So you’re choosing

freedom from your own suffering, and whatever level of vows you take, every one of those vows is helping you with that. To me it's the same word: renunciation is freedom, freedom from your own suffering. E.g. Whenever I drive to town I was realizing recently, I don't even think about stopping at a bar. I was realizing all the things I don't even consider that I use to consider when I was in my craving [non-renunciation] mind: e.g. "where can I go next and get a fix of something, some simulation." All the things I no longer consider because of the vows. I do look at the espresso house however! But I don't ever think about bars or pancake houses or ice cream parlors or whatever. All those things that used to fill me up temporarily.

VTC: So there's more freedom in the mind, isn't there?

R: Yeah, there's not all this "oh should I stop there; should I not stop there." Just go and come back. Very simple. Very clear.

R: Part of my misunderstanding is that I think I'm making a choice when the craving mind arises. That when I go by e.g. the espresso stand or go by the ice cream parlor I'm making a choice. To some extent I am, but it's actually the craving mind and the attachment to that sense pleasure that's driving the choice that I'm making! I give myself a lot more credit that what I have going on in my mind at the time. Because I've watched—and I agree that ever since being here at the Abbey and not having the 'fixes' that I'm normally used to having—To some extent when I get into my distracting mind, I can see where my mind used to go when I got in cars, getting those sense pleasures and getting those distractions of friends and calling on the phone, etc. But here at the Abbey, I've had this gracious withdrawal without having to go cold turkey. Now I don't even think about the things that used to come up in my mind that I used to say were 'given constitutional rights' that I could have: e.g. going to the movies and pancake house and calling my friends on the phone and talking for hours. I don't even miss them! And ironically, that was the biggest fear when I came here and I told Venerable, "I'm afraid of losing my autonomy; my ability to make a choice to leave—to go to town and go out with a friend." And it's been almost two years and I hardly ever think about those things. I had all this charge around losing these things that I thought was some sort of sacrifice that I was not going to be able to make. And now, it's like I rarely want to leave; I just would rather be here. When I do [those things], then I enjoy myself and it doesn't have that kind of craving of 'let me out of here' sort of feeling. It's more like I want to share a friendship or whatever. The misunderstanding is that we can't live without certain things in our life. I think the whole point about those non-negotiables is that they are negotiable. And replacing them with things that really feed you, rather than just the saltwater that you take in a glass.

VTC: Yes, that's the whole point, they are negotiable.

R: Why when we offer the mandala, why are we giving the objects of attachment, aversion and ignorance? Why are we giving those?

VTC: Because when you give them then they aren't there for you to hold onto. If you give you're objects of attachment to the Buddha what are you going to say, "Buddha I want them back?" Especially people that you are attached to, if you think about it, aren't they better off under the Buddha's care? Isn't it better to offer the people you're attached to to the Buddha? And let them go in our mind instead of thinking "hold onto me, I'll save you"? So that whole thing in the mandala offering, of offering and the visualization you do of offering your body, and how your body becomes different parts of the mandala. Again, it's this whole thing because whatever you give then it's no longer there for you to cling to. It doesn't

belong to you anymore. In our monastic vows we're only technically allowed thirteen different possessions, you know, our three robes, and a needle, a bathing cloth, a strainer, and our bowl and these kinds of things, but whatever you use—because you live in a community and you use many things—then you think “this doesn't belong to me”. So then the mind doesn't cling to it, but you also feel a sense of responsibility because it belongs to the community. So if I break it, it's not just me throwing away my own personal stuff, it's like “this is community”. So it changes your relationship with how you relate to the objects around you because you've given them. That's why in the Bodhisattva practice it says, you know, because we're always talking about giving our objects of attachment and when you do six-session guru-yoga you're giving your body and possessions and abode and three-time virtues and just everything you give— then it's not there to be attached to.

R: I've been trying to offer my future to the Buddha. And I'm still working on that.(laughter) Presumably it's better in His hands than in this anxious mind, in my hands.

VTC: You should just, every session have somebody else worry for you. (Laughter) “Please worry for me. Please plan my future.”

New R: It's almost like you get these precious human rebirths, and have these eighteen freedoms and fortunes, and sometimes it looks like we have *so much* precious human rebirth that we are confused about the possibilities.

VTC: Thinking about the people who come here, is they have so many things to do in their life or they could do, that it's very hard for them to stay put and stay focused. So often it's the '31 Flavors mind', except now it's in Dharma. You know trying the 31 Flavors of Dharma and going around, because there are so many options and so many teachers and so many places and you have money and all you do is get a ticket and go there and you can live there. You spend one retreat planning what course you're going to take after that one. And then you spend that course planning the retreat you're going to do after the course!
(laughter)

Sometimes I think too much physical freedom is not good for us. I mean, we have to have enough freedom to choose, but I see now people have so much freedom they get confused. When I started noticing that was after my first Dharma course when I went into the grocery store. I was so confused. I find grocery stores tremendously confusing, because there are so many things you can choose from. In those years in India there were milk bickeys and that was it! Now there are even more cookies in India to choose from. It gets confusing when you have a lot of things to choose from. I was thinking, in old Tibet, there weren't so many things to choose from: people made a decision, and then it was so much easier to stick with it, because the mind wasn't always going.

When I went to MABA, there was one young man who came to live with us. From the day he got there, he was on the internet looking at other monasteries and dharma centers where he could go. And every time he went to another place, he would be unhappy with it, and start looking for other places to go. Sometimes our mind is just like that. Too much physical freedom sometimes can bring confusion.

R: When we were young, we had three TV channels, and we enjoyed it a lot! Now we have 200, and no one enjoys television anymore. There are too many things to see!

New R: You spend one hour just to see what's on.

VTC: Exactly!

R: And you don't feel calm when you're watching it.

VTC: Right: What can I get that's going to give me the most happiness? So we're not satisfied with anything—we're looking for the better thing. It's the same thing of the grass is greener on the other side of the meditation hall. The mind does the same thing. Somebody wrote this last week, and was saying that they really understood how important commitment was: I thought, "Wow! This person is getting it." That's what really deepens, when we can really commit to something.

R: Related to this, with the people who shop for our food and supplies: it's actually easier for them when we specify which brand of toothpaste or whatever, because otherwise it's too confusing for them: there are so many choices!

VTC: Right, how we think 'the more choice, the more happiness.' Not true.