

Venerable Chodron's first Q&A session with retreatants
January 18, 2005
Sravasti Abbey

[Three Vajrasattva mantras to set the motivation]

Venerable Chodron [VTC]: So how are you all doing?

Retreatant [R]: Vajrasattva's holiday retreat!

VTC: What kind of questions do you have? What's happening in your meditations?

R: I'm still settling in; my concentration is terrible. I've had moments where I'm generating some strong feelings of regret around certain things that I'm flashing back on. I've just gotten my body calmed down, my mind is still pretty much distracted; in my mind, I planted the vegetable garden today. I'm still just settling in.

VTC: Have people gotten settled in?

R: It seems to vary with the session, rather than day. I feel rather settled in after struggling with my health a bit. As far as the day to day it seems that I have a routine for myself. Session to session seems a little more focused. At times I'm able to generate regret, and the next session I feel like "Where was I last session". In the moment I seem more settled, at least my body.

VTC: Your body is here.

R: Yes, and that makes it a bit easier to work with my mind. I've gone different places, with really getting in touch with the regret aspect of the practice and not wanting to do those actions again in the future. Is a fleeting thing, but seems to give me a bit more focus and a sense of stronger reflection.

VTC: If you have stronger regret, then you will have stronger wish to not do it again. It's going to be a stronger experience for you.. If you don't have much regret, well then you might do it again – there's nothing there. Is that what you are experiencing?

R: Yes, yes. And in the places where that regret is not as strong I see the contrast. Why is there not the same interest in not wanting to some actions again in the future – What's keeping me from wanting to develop that regret?

VTC: So some things you are having very strong regret and other things not so strong. And you are asking yourself about the difference. So what do you come up with? What's keeping you.

R: I think of it as the trickster of my mind, lulling me into the thought that it's OK to ignore that particular action; the subtle mind that rationalizes my actions.

VTC: You might consider looking at whether the negativity you're working with has strong attachment. In some way, there is the lack of regret and the lack of the wish not to do it again. Some part of our mind says, oh, I got some pleasure out of that. (laughter by all). Check to see if there's some attachment lurking there.

R: First for me, it has been easy to realize some regrets, some special events, the very tough ones. But others are not so easy to see and regret. For example, I am always kind of afraid of some kind of attack or something like that by other people. But I am not sure I know exactly why I feel this. When I feel this fear, I am not really regretting having the fear, but I think I must have done something to feel this. And then I want to purify whatever it has been.

VTC: Let me see if I understand you so far. Sometimes you are afraid other people will attack you or hurt you and you are wondering what kind of karma you created that causes you have that kind of fear?

R: Yes, I can't identify the exact event that could cause this. But it's interesting, because just yesterday, I had a very bad nightmare. I was jealous about my roommate's dreaming. She told me, oh I am having so many nice dreams. And I said, Oh come on....But in this nightmare, I woke up saying, why am I dreaming this? It was like a movie, but seemed real and a guy was hitting another guy really hard and I was afraid he was killing him. I woke up and realized I must have been hit or hit others that way in my past lives. So, today, I tried to just purify this sensation.

VTC: Yes, I think that is making you really think about karma, which is quite good. They say when we have fear of something, it's possible that in a previous life we did that; in a previous life, we beat someone else. Or if we have a lot of fear in general in our minds, it's often due to having a lot of malicious thoughts. Because when we think harmful thoughts and ill-will towards others—Oh I wish they fell in well—I wish they died—then when we have that kind of mind, the karmic result is that then we have fear and suspicion in our own mind.

The other thing is maybe having done that aggressive action in the past, then being afraid of it being done to ourselves in this life. So it's very good, even though you can't remember the specific incident in your previous life—who knows what we've done—they say we've done all sorts of things in our previous lives—to just think, OK, anytime that I have hurt anyone else physically, or anytime when I have caused them fear, I really regret that and I want to make sure I don't do that from now on. And when you have nightmares, don't worry about it. Because sometimes the nightmare makes you look and say, Oh, I have something important here to look at. Sometimes our dreams can do that for us; make us say, Oh, I have to look here. Sometimes a dream can be a way of purifying that karma also because we have the suffering in the dream. But I know with my dreams, sometimes I can see my negative habits better when they occur in a dream than in regular life. They seem so much more blatant in the dream. Even all the other dream people think I'm obnoxious.

R: I have a real problem with my stress.

VTC: What are you stressed about? Gotta to go to work?

R: In my practice I have a lot of energy (like too much energy). I have a lot of problems with my concentration. At this point I am tired – I feel tired. I don't know how to put limits on myself. I'm always telling myself, "Do it, do it, do it!" I can't stop – I just go, go, go. When I feel bad is when I see that I need to stop, but it is too late because I feel very tired by then. I am trying to understand why. Maybe I don't have patience with myself, I always think – go, go, go. I can't sit one moment-- I need to move, to do something. At this moment I can see that I don't have patience with myself and I don't know what to do because I need to be with myself.

VTC: Let me make sure that I got this right. You have a lot of restless energy, like you can't sit still. And so you push yourself to do a lot of things, then you get exhausted. But even when you're exhausted you can't just sit still and rest. I think that learning to be balanced is one of the big challenges in our life. One thing is that when you're young you have a lot of physical energy – wait twenty years and that will change. We do have a lot of restless energy, and in our regular life we're not used to just sitting still. We don't

know how to relax. Our society is always saying, “Do something, do something, do something”! Then we tell ourselves, “I’ve got to do something, do something, do something.” It’s very difficult for us to be quiet, and when we do try to be quiet we fall completely asleep. We don’t know how to just be peaceful and yet awake. This is a skill that we have to learn – how to be a balanced person. If you can learn it now, it will save you a lot of pain later. I think that learning to be a balanced person is one of the chief benefits of Dharma practice. When we’re not balanced, then the attachment is over here, the anger is over there, the jealousy, the pride, the laziness – everything is bubbling up all over the place. We’re not mindful or aware of what we’re doing, saying or thinking. We just splash our energy out into the room.

I think being in a retreat situation like this, where even starting with your body and learning to use it in a relaxed way without rushing about; learning how to get up out of bed gracefully and slowly; how to walk up and down the stairs gracefully and slowly, instead of like an elephant; just learning how to walk to the meditation hall. Watch your body posture as you walk into the hall. Are you all bent down to the ground? What does that tell you about where your mind is? Try walking out the door on the way and look up at the sky, the trees. Think of all the snowflakes as Vajrasattva. Feel the cold wind on your cheeks, walk slowly, with awareness.

Start with how you move; how you do things and learn to do them in a gentle, smooth way. That will help your physical energy to be more peaceful, which will help your mind also to be more peaceful. If it’s any help, when I did Vajrasattva retreat, and for the first few years of my practice, I had incredible restless energy. It was very hard for me to sit still. Some of my restless energy manifested in my knee hurting all the time--VTC demonstrates moving all around in an agitated manner-everyone laughs. We begin to see (on a very gross physical level) the kind of energy in us. Just give it some space to calm down. I recommend walks. It is very important to walk. I see all the letters by the door, waiting to be mailed. No body is walking to the mailbox! If you don’t walk there, where are you walking? Get out and exercise; that will help with the restless energy. Then watch how you are breathing—your natural breathing pattern. Do you tend to do a lot of short breaths? That is restless energy. Breathe from your belly; make sure your belly goes out and in. Do that and watch your mind settle down. Stop trying to be perfect. Everybody, just stop trying to be perfect.

R (Spanish speaker) : Can I ask a question? What is this “restless energy”? Nerea translates the meaning.

VTC: It’s like a kid who can’t sit still. (Asks for the Spanish for “restless energy”)

R: When I do the visualization, I always try to feel something. It’s easiest to see Vajra Baghavati’s knife. Could this kind of visualization increase my attachment? Because I am grasping at something?

VTC: Why would it increase your attachment?

R: Because when I see something in the visualization; I feel something. I don’t know how to describe what I feel. The sensation is very comfortable. I forget my pain, my body, everything. So I try for that feeling again and again and again. And if I get lost, I come back to the knife.

VTC: And the knife helps you regain the rest of the visualization? When you lose it, you can just come back and generate it again. Don’t squeeze yourself though. And don’t put so much attention up here so that all your energy is up there. That will produce

restlessness; pushing your energy out to make up a Vajrasattva; don't do that. Just think Vajrasattva is there and has never gone away. You are just remembering them again. If it helps you, just start with her knife and from there do the rest to remember, that's fine. You're here, don't start putting your mind up there. You be in here and let the nectar come down and purify you.

R: What is difficult for me is that I see Vajrasattva is there and I am here

VTC: Don't worry about it. Vajrasattva is like an extension of you. That's part of this skillful means. We project Vajrasattva as this perfect being, but Vajrasattva is a projection of our mind. Plus there is a real Vajrasattva too, there is a unity up there. But then at the end we dissolve Vajrasattva back into us. But try and keep your focus here. If your mind is getting way too restless, remember Vajrasattva is on your head and have the light come down and purify you, but keep your focus more inside you, even in your belly. If you start projecting yourself out there then all of your energy is going to go up there and your going to get light headed, get headaches.

R: More of the emphasis is the flow of the light and nectar into you and by virtue of that happening you know Vajrasattva is there, rather than having to get outside yourself to figure that out.

VTC: If you're out in the garden and you're getting squirted with water, you know the hose is there.

R: The first week, I was generating too much regret. It was very helpful for practice, but it generated too much self, ego for me. I felt there was strong sensation of "I". I said this, I did that, I didn't do that...I felt very guilty. I know that's not the point, but I felt it. Then, 3-4 days later, I was feeling very, very bad—very strange. I was without confidence in the practice. But I understood this was a reaction. Then, I realized this week that regret is not to increase the self. And I need to balance. If I am Vajrasattva (potentially), I am wisdom, I am bliss. I am kind. With this aspect of my mind, I need to contrast this with the guilty self. Finally, I understood that Vajrasattva is my refuge. So now it's better. I understand the meaning of refuge and that it is very important. And now I know I can't start my meditation if I don't take refuge. Otherwise, this self, that is very bad, stupid or intelligent will take over.

VTC: So you're saying if you take refuge at the beginning of your practice, it helps subdue that strong feeling of I.

R: It will help me keep this I in check. Sometimes I have good sessions, other times, I feel very tired, with no inspiration. Sometimes it just feels mechanical.

VTC: Oh yes, sometimes it feels very mechanical, very rote and you don't have any inspiration—is it like that?

R: Yes.

VTC: That's very natural. That's going to happen sometimes. A few things: Just do it anyway. It's like you come in for lunch and you may not be hungry, but you eat anyway. Right? It's like that; just the power of doing it creates the familiarization and increases the habit. And that enables you to feel more inspired later on and more in tune with the practice. If you go through a lot of time when you feel blah...then do some bodhicitta meditation and think of others' suffering. Think of negativities others have done and the consequences they will suffer if they don't purify. And then think how you have probably done those same negative actions in my previous lives. I can't just be

afraid for them; I should be afraid for me too. But when you feel blah; enlarge the scope to other sentient beings. Spend time with Vajrasattva on their heads, purifying them.

R: In these memories, I was always depressed or sad when I did something very negative. Lama Yeshe says that Vajrasattva is joyous energy. If I increase my ability to be joyful, to rejoice, I can do something to help. I want to generate this feeling of happiness. I am 53 years old and I never in all that time thought about how important it is to generate joy.

VTC: That's a wonderful point; the importance of cultivating joy. So often in our world, we feel that joy comes from outside; not something I can cultivate. It's something that some other person or thing gives to me. But in actual fact, joy is our own internal attitude. Based on how we look at and approach life. And if we cultivate joy, then there's a lot of joy here, we don't tend to do negative actions. We do those because we are unhappy, trying to do something to be happy. But when we are able to keep our own mind joyful, the joy comes out of us. And we're not jealous, depressed, angry. So there is something to cultivating joy. For some of us, we never let ourselves feel joyful; there's a prohibition against feeling good. Maybe you were raised born again Christian or Catholic or something where if you feel good, there's something wrong; it's sinful. But we are not talking about some hedonistic feel good. We're just talking about an inner sense of joy. What a beautiful thing to be able to offer to life; our own smile and our own joy at being alive. Sometimes they say, if you act like that, then you become like that. So, with the nectar coming down and feeling blissful and joyful; we are acting like that and then we will become like that. And especially if we start thinking of ourselves as a person who can give joy to others, then we act like that. If we think of ourselves as a poor, unfortunate person, then we act like that. So joy is something we can cultivate. I think together with joy comes a sense of humor. Lama Yeshe really brought that with him when he came into the room, there was a joyful feeling. And there was the sense of humor to help us look at how stupid we act and to laugh at it; to see our stupidity and change it without getting depressed about it. Because usually when we see how stupid we are, we say, oh I am just such a terrible person. Instead, Lama got us to think, yeah, that was really kind of dumb, that was kind of funny; to be able to laugh at ourselves. That doesn't mean we just brush it off saying, "Oh yeah, I made a horrible mistake and was really nasty to a bunch of people—ha, ha, ha"; having no regret at all and not trying to correct it; because, sometimes we use humor to avoid taking responsibility for our mistakes. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about taking responsibility, but instead of beating up on ourselves, we're not being heavy, but we will start to change our behavior.

R: Actually the practice feels like it's going pretty well, when I can be there, because I have been sick. But, when I am there, one thing I am wondering about is the pacing of the mantra. If I start going quickly—because I have GOALS of getting a certain amount done every time—pretty soon, I am really tight. But if I go as slow as I want, it feels like I will never get anywhere near the goal.

VTC: Can you say the mantra quickly, but in a relaxed way?

R: Can I? It hadn't occurred to me that those are compatible.

VTC: Can you drive at 60mph and be relaxed?

R: Sometimes, it depends.

VTC: Can you drive at 35mph and be relaxed?

R: Yeah...

VTC: Are you always relaxed at 35mph?

R: No.

VTC: Are you always tense at 60mph?

R: No.

VTC: OK.

R: So that's the goal? Not to have aching muscles. So, I can relax at 60.

VTC: It's like people who type fast. They type fast and aren't stressed out. They just know how to type fast. Or, I remember once when you were driving me in your car and you were reaching back and answering a question and making a left turn. Remember? And I commented on it and you said, Oh mothers know how to do so many all at one time; like we have a thousand arms. It's kind of like that. That situation would have stressed someone else out, but you could do all those things at the same time in a relaxed way.

R: So, do it like a mother. (everyone laughs)

VTC: Yes, relaxedly.

R: Thank you.