

Vajrasattva Retreat Q & A (2/1/05)

VTC: Do you have any questions or anything about the initiation (with Lama Zopa Rinpoche on 1/28/05)? It was nice huh? What happened for you?

R: With Lama Zopa, you really have to pay attention or you will miss some really precious teachings. You can't let your mind wander off, you have to be present with him or miss it.

VTC: Yes, you have to pay a lot of attention when Rinpoche speaks.

R: His coughing wakes you up though, it brings you right back.

R: I think that he repeated somethings? I got confused some times (due to language differences).

R: It was wonderful to hear all the teachings: renunciation, bodhicitta, all the topics of the Lam Rim and from his own mouth, directly. To hear it directly from him was incredible. I was thinking, I am hearing all the most important dharma teachings directly from the Lama! And here is Venerable Chodron and Yangsi Rinpoche and the other monastics and my retreat partners! I felt like it was an incredible dream.

VTC: Like your life is better than any dream could be, because you were able to hear the teachings directly from somebody of Lama's caliber.

R: When I read the books, they are beautiful. But if I am hearing it directly...I couldn't believe it.

VTC: Yes, that's a very good point. Reading books is one thing, but hearing teachings directly is something else. That's very important, that human connection with someone who is actually practicing it, saying it in their own words. There's something that gets transmitted there that you don't get in a book. A book is a good way to review and it's the next best thing. But there is something very precious to actually having that connection with the real teacher. And that's important for us to remember, so that we don't get complacent, thinking it's not necessary to put in that effort to go to teachings. Thinking, I'll just stay home and read.

R: I was thinking also that it was wonderful that Lama came one month after we started our practice; because we had more understanding about the practice. We were more calm, more clean, more open and sensitive. I was thinking if the same teaching had happened one month before, it would not have been the same.

VTC: Yes, a month before your mind was busy. You didn't understand, you weren't as familiar with the practice.

R: And each word was very meaningful. Very nice.

VTC: That's why I think, when I first started studying, I would take notes and try and write down everything word by word. I found that every word has something in it. If I listen closely, sometimes the idea is slightly different than it is if I don't listen so closely because of the way the words are placed. And you will find that especially with a topic like emptiness, the way the words are put is very important. It's good to try to get them exactly as it is, because it has a specific meaning. We have Lama's teachings on tape, so you can listen again.

Nerea (Assistant): Is it Ok to listen to the initiation again?

VTC: I don't see any harm in that. You're not taking it again. And most of it is a talk. So I think it's good to listen again.

R: As far as the practice, the talk filled in some pieces, Lama Zopa's presence filled in things...made a connection. It made things like taking refuge or doing the Long Life Prayer... it made a direct link in a way that is different than before he came. And also for this place, it feels that way; imbued with a different energy.

VTC: It was quite incredible in the room that night, wasn't it? Lama and the sangha and all that energy. It was really quite amazing.

R: In our bedroom, right under Lama's room that night; I could hear him, mantra all night. And I thought, oh my gosh.

VTC: Yes, he doesn't sleep.

R: I would barely wake up and think, oh my, Lama's mantra all night and Yangsi Rinpoche right down the hall. It was too much. Better than a dream, I couldn't dream this up. It was wonderful. Thank you.

VTC: This was all due to a lot of good karma; collective karma. This was a very good example of collective karma. All the people who were there together had the karma to receive the initiation. Some people had planned on coming but couldn't. And we talked about how some planned to come to the retreat and couldn't. So you can really see the collective karma that it takes; it's not just one person. Rinpoche is not just coming for one person. It takes all of our karma to invoke that kind of thing. So that's why having virtuous friends is very important and being careful about the groups that we are a part of is important; because we create that karma together with other people. Alone, we don't have enough good karma to make something like this happen. We need everybody else. So what's coming up in your meditation? (Lots of Laughter).

R: I have a lot of questions. We had some questions (written) for Lama Zopa when he was here. I don't know if he answered them all in his talk, but I have a question. For me this practice...I believe in the power of this practice to purify because I am trying to do my best effort: the mantras, the visualization, but I really want to benefit all beings. When I am doing my practice, I can't understand how I can benefit others and purify

their negative karma, because karma is not transferable. Right? I really wish I could. It's very difficult because I really need to feel that I am helping them.

VTC: OK, so your question is; that karma is not transferable, the person who creates it experiences it. The person who creates it is the one who has to purify it. So, what is this part in the visualization, where you imagine Vajrasattva on everybody's head purifying them? Or you are imagining sending out purifying rays to them. And you are wondering how that works; are you really purifying them? First of all, the intention is very powerful and you're creating a very compassionate intention when you have the wish to be able to purify others. So even if you're not able to purify them, yourself, that visualization increases your compassion towards others. It also increases your forgiveness towards them, because you imagine the people who have harmed you being purified, instead of being angry at them and hoping they suffer from their karma. So it helps you forgive and let go of grudges.

It helps you purify past memories and lingering issues in relationships with those people. And that will benefit them, because next time you meet them, you won't have all that baggage with them. Because let's say you had a horrible relationship with somebody and you said "Na, na" and they said "Na, na" and you said you hated each other. Then you come in here and you're doing Vajrasattva meditation and you're purifying your negative actions of speech and your anger, and you imagine purifying them of their negative speech and their anger. That helps you to realize that they're not always going to be that person that you had the quarrel with; that they are different, they can purify, they can change. By doing that visualization and generating compassion towards them and purifying them, the next time you go to meet them, you're going to be very fresh. Whereas, if you didn't do that you're still going to have in your mind, "Oh, that's the person who did this to me, that's the person who said that." It's so easy for the two of you to create negative karma again together, which harms you and harms them.

Also by doing this visualization of purifying them, you're making a strong karmic link with them so that when you become a bodhisattva and can emanate many different bodies or become a Buddha and can manifest spontaneously for the benefit of others, you will already have that link with that person. You'll have that compassionate connection so that when you gain those abilities later on, you'll be able to manifest just like that with them. Do you remember what Rinpoche said? That when you purify the sentient beings, it helps later on if you want to do Powa with them and transfer their consciousness (to a higher realm at time of death). It's that same thing, because you're making that strong compassionate connection with them.

So you may not directly help them, because you can't go in there and tidy up their karma, but what you're doing is setting up conditions for a beneficial relationship in the future. I think our mind is quite powerful and when we have these strong compassionate thoughts towards others, it influences the energy around that person – they get something. Scientists have done experiments where someone prays for somebody else and that person recovers faster. Our mind is very powerful. And especially the clearer our mind is, the more it can have these kind of influences that don't happen on a material level that you may see, but that are there nonetheless.

What else is happening?

R: I've been on my roller coaster, not like I'm going to lose my lunch type of thing, but I just never know what's going to come up in a particular session. Today felt like a bust. What has been consistent is that everything, in one way or another, points to me being the center of the universe. If I could just change that particular aspect then I could interact differently with others. In order to be able to do that it means being truly mindful, and that requires a great deal of effort. Having some insight in a session doesn't carry me very far. I have to go back into the trenches again and hopefully be able to stay attentive. Hopefully I can make the link that this purification and being mindful will have the benefit to not have to experience the suffering results. I can affect what's going to happen in that interaction at some other time with somebody if I can maintain vigilance. I want to get it; that it's all over with and I don't have to think about that any more. But the reality is you have to come back and be in the next situation. This is mixed in with my struggles of the rhythm of the mantra – too fast, too slow; or I get through a session and only complete one mala. The little pieces of insight are the things that carry me; that it's possible to have a little understanding.

VTC: What I heard were several different points. One was the whole roller coaster, which I imagine everybody has been on? I think what you said was very important was that in one way or another it all comes back to ME, doesn't it? When I did Vajrasattva retreat, I remember I spent three months thinking about me and once in a while I would get distracted and visualize Vajrasattva. Your mind is off here, and off there and it's all about me. My worries, my plans, everybody who has hurt my feeling, everybody who hasn't done things and still doesn't do things the way I want them to, everybody who is mean to me, all the people who don't understand me, all the people who've betrayed my trust. Have you had all of this come up? It becomes clear how strong the self-centered attitude is.

We get a very clear idea why self-centeredness causes suffering – we can see our own mind is in such incredible states of suffering, by the way that we remember all these things from the past. When we remember things from the past we don't remember them with compassion, with forgiveness, with tolerance. We remember them with anger, with jealousy, with attachment, with arrogance. We begin to see how all those attitudes are all centered on me, the center of the universe and they are all based on the ignorance that grasps at an inherently existent ME. So there we have the Wheel of Sharp Weapons. Remember the “heart of the butcher” - the two things mentioned: the self-centeredness and self-grasping ignorance. There they are and we see them so vividly, it's no longer theoretical, it's right there in our face. We can so clearly identify the cause of our suffering, even if we can't do anything about it right at this moment. We have no idea what emptiness means and the self-centeredness is so powerful. But just by seeing that, it enables us to see what the source of our suffering is. It shows us that the Buddha really knew what he was talking about when he described suffering and its origins. And that increases our refuge because we see the Buddha really understood how our mind works. He wasn't just making up some kind of theory. What he describes in the teachings is exactly what's going on in our minds. That makes our feeling of connection with the Buddha so strong and our refuge so much stronger. Don't get discouraged if you see all this wallowing stuff, but really use it. It really does increase your refuge and trust in the Buddha. Then you begin to see it and that seeing it isn't enough, that you've got to get in

there and really make a lot of effort and be aware when this stuff arises. Be mindful of your compassionate heart and mindful of your precepts and mindful of your values. So that you keep the positive things active in your mind so the negative ones can't get in or if they get in you're able to come back and smash them.

You begin to realize that it's going to take some effort and that's why we call it practicing the Dharma – practice means you do it over and over and over again. Meditate means to familiarize – you do the same thing over and over again. We begin to understand so much better what the path is about. It's not just about learning the words- blah, blah, blah; it's really about over and over and over re-training your mind. And you realize it's hard. That's when you make your requesting prayers to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and that's when all the requesting prayers get said with a lot of heartfelt feeling, because you're realizing that your mind is really screwed up; that you need to do something and this is hard work and you need help – so Buddhas and bodhisattvas help! Then when you make requesting prayers to your spiritual master or to Vajrasattva or to all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, it really comes from a very deep place inside you. You're really saying “I need help. I can't do this by ego's will power. Ego's willpower is not going to do this. I need patience, I need inspiration, I need encouragement, I need to know that there are Buddhas and bodhisattvas out there and I'm not alone trying to do this. I need to feel a very deep connection with my spiritual master, knowing that there's someone else really on my side doing everything they can to help me and who's really rooting for me.” That's when the feelings of trust and devotion and refuge can become so deep and the feeling of connection with your spiritual mentor and with the Three Jewels can become very deep. And those prayers stop being just blah, blah, blah words and start being something that you really feel inside.

R: Do you have any suggestions for working with the mantra? I've really had problems with it. I can sit down and get a certain cantor to it, but if I go a little fast, I run syllables together or I have problems...

VTC: Don't feel like you have to do every syllable with emphatic enunciation. Just do it really fast. (She demonstrates). Part of it is it just comes in your mind. Just relax around it. Just relax with it and enjoy it.

R: About the same issue. At the beginning, I started to say mantra quickly and at some point it felt really...I liked it...because I thought if this sound has the same beat as my heart. That was a nice experience. But then I read in Lama Yeshe's book (Becoming Vajrasattva) that if you say the mantra too quickly it's not good and then I felt discouraged from doing that.

VTC: When they talk about saying it too quickly...I don't know about you, but I don't have that problem. When I hear how fast the Tibetans do it, I am on the slow side. (laughter). I think too quickly means saying: Om Vajrasattva Hum Pey. (laughter) That's too quickly. But I think if you are more or less getting the different phrases in there...then don't worry that you have to distinctly enunciate every single syllable, because you will never get anywhere. Too quickly just means too sloppy.

R: In this part, I can see that if I don't take enough time for regret, I bring this emotional reaction in the remedy and I can't do the visualization. I need to take enough time with the regret or during the visualization, suddenly I see my mother or whatever and off I go. And when I see that, then I can't do the visualization. I can't do it.

VTC: You mean, when you get distracted by thinking of something with regret? Or are you talking about your mind just getting distracted by something else?

R: Sometimes it's for the regret and sometimes it's just distraction.

VTC: OK, because while you are saying the mantra, it's fine to feel regret while you are saying it. In fact, it's good because then you purify. When your mind just starts thinking about all this other stuff, as soon as you notice it, you can anchor yourself back, either with the visualization or with the sound of the mantra or you can put Vajrasattva on the head of the people you are thinking about. Or put Vajrasattva in the middle of the situation you were thinking about and he radiates light and purifies the situation and the environment.

R: Let's see if I understand. It's correct if I bring the regret into the remedial action?

VTC: Yes, yes, you can feel regret at the same time you're doing the remedial action. There's no fault in mixing the two. Because when you have the regret, actually, you have more energy to purify, don't you?

R: In the last session, I was working on doubt because I had really big doubt come up today. It goes on and on. Why am I here chanting in an ancient Indian language that no one speaks anymore, with a visualization on my head that I don't understand on a farm above Spokane, Washington. (laughter)...

VTC: Yes...when I could be in Portland, making some money... (more laughter)

R: Well, at least I could see S.

VTC: Oh...(more laughter)

R: And then I say to myself, OK, you can leave and go home. And then I remember, oh yes, all those problems at home.

VTC: Yes, that's exactly right.

R: So those thoughts work well, because I stop romanticizing home with all the mail, emails to answer, all the bills...ugh. But about doubt, what I noticed along with regret. I don't regret my doubt...in a way...because my doubts have helped me to sort things out in my life. But then I wondered if there is part of the doubt that is healthy. Like the Buddha says test it all, to be sure. But there seems to be part of doubt that keeps me from whole-heartedly doing anything. So, what if I decided this was all totally true? That Lama Zopa is a Buddha and is telling the absolute truth and this is how this goes. What if I just decided that? And I felt...and this is hard to describe...that there's a wonderful thing I could almost have except for this doubt. So it wasn't regret...but is it regret; that noticing of being held back?

VTC: OK, now there are a few different issues there. One is, you're right. There are different kinds of doubt. Some doubt is like curiosity, it propels us to learn, to think deeper and to understand. And that's fine, that's good. It's not really doubt; it's more like, I don't understand and I want to. Then there's another kind of doubt that doesn't really want to understand; doesn't really want to explore. It just wants to sit there and complain...and go home. It just says, why am I doing this in an ancient language that nobody understands and there's this couple making it above my head, why do I have to visualize that when I could be home with S. doing it myself?

R: Oh, you've been reading my mind. I didn't realize it was showing like a movie. And I am sure no one else has had that thought. (laughter).

VTC: (Laughter) Yes, I'm sure no one has. So, this kind of doubt just wants to sit there. It sounds like it has good reasons. But the flavor of this doubt, the texture of it...it doesn't really want an answer. It just wants to complain...."why am I doing this? This doesn't make any sense...it's not doing any good. If my friends knew what I was doing, they would think I was crazy". That kind of doubt, you have to recognize it for what it is. Because that's more skepticism or a complaining mind. It's not curious, doesn't want to understand. It's a mind that, like you said, prevents you from doing anything. And so, when they talk about doubt, they talk about three kinds: the doubt inclined toward the correct conclusion; the doubt that's half /half and the doubt that's inclined toward the wrong conclusion. But they always say that when you have doubt, it's like trying to sew with a (curved) two pointed needle. What happens?

R: You get pricked.

VTC: And you can't go anywhere. Because when you are trying to sew you can't get both points through the fabric. You are just blocked. So that's what you were saying; that kind of doubt that just blocks you. And it doesn't enable you to go forward, anywhere. So I think it's interesting that you experimented about what would happen if you just accepted this; if I just believed it. Then look at what it is that holds you back. It could be all sorts of things. I don't even want to mention some, because then you'll get into why I have mine. (laughter). It could be interesting for you. And it may be that you need to understand this more before you completely give yourself over to it. OK, I'll just take some more time to understand it. But, you maintain an attitude of openness so that you can understand it.

But it is interesting, because you can understand why they talk about relating to the spiritual master and having a pure view. For example, if you saw Lama Zopa Rinpoche as a Buddha, and said, what he is telling me is the truth, from his own enlightened experience, and you could really see him like that, then everything he said in the teaching you would listen to in a totally different way than if you think, here's this little Tibetan guy who's talking and coughs a lot and I wonder what he has to say, if it makes any sense.

The way you think of your teacher influences how you listen. So, you get an idea about why they say it's so important to maintain a good relationship with your teacher and to try to have as pure a view as you can, because that benefits you. Whatever the teacher says you take more seriously. So first, you have to really check the qualifications of the teacher. You don't just do this with everyone who has their picture on a flyer and calls themselves a teacher. In your mind, you really check their qualities. But when you have checked well and they really are a qualified teacher, then if you can put your doubt aside and really think: "Oh, what they are telling me is no different than what the Buddha would tell me if he were here".

That's also why you want a teacher who knows the scriptures well, who is not making up their own thing. Because then they are telling you exactly what the Buddha would tell you. If you listen to Lama Zopa with those thoughts: If a Buddha were here, he would be saying the exact same thing to me; if Vajrasattva were here in the meditation hall, that's what he would be saying to me. Then you listen with a totally different mind. That change in how you look at your teacher benefits you, because you take what the teacher says more seriously. But if you look at the teacher with an ordinary aspect, "Oh,

he coughs a lot, and he mumbles and repeats himself and I can't understand him and didn't anyone ever give him proper English lessons, then what benefit are you going to get from his talk? So here's where you can begin to understand why they talk about the importance of a good relationship with our spiritual mentors; having a pure view of them. That doesn't mean that you have to see everything they do as, "oh, he burped, that's the Buddha burping". You don't want to get into that kind of weirdness. But, what I am talking about is that feeling that this person is here to help me. That's their motivation. They know what they are talking about. I can trust them; I need to listen because they are saying something that can help me, that's valuable.

If you cultivate that kind of pure view and a feeling of gratitude and kindness for your teacher, that overpowers the doubt. They say, for example, that our teachers are kinder to us than the Buddhas; in the sense that we didn't have the karma to be born when Shakyamuni Buddha was alive. So we missed out on him. So, who is it who really helps us? It's our spiritual mentor. Who is it that keeps teaching us the same thing again and again and again, even though we don't practice it, forget it and don't listen? I'm listening to Lama Zopa Rinpoche: actually since it is 2005, it's 30 years since I met him. And he's saying the same thing! Why? Because I still haven't gotten it. I'm listening a bit differently, thank goodness. But what sort of kindness is that from him; to hang in there and say the same thing again and again and again? When your own mother tells you, "I can't stand to tell you one more time to pick up your clothes". Imagine how our spiritual teacher feels!

[Venerable talks about a couple of letters from one of the inmates (Daniel) who is doing the retreat with us from prison]. What I want to point out is this letter was written the 10<sup>th</sup> of January, not very much into the practice and the other one was written on January 18. The whole tone of his letters is completely different than the correspondence that I've had from him previously. It's interesting. He says he doesn't have the mantra memorized; so he's trying to do the visualization and read the mantra at the same time. It was so touching and here at the very end of his letter, he says: "Thanks once again for giving us the opportunity to do such a powerful, blissful and wonderful practice. It seems as though I can finally put some things from my past to rest and continue the process of making peace with myself and others." Isn't that incredible?

Somebody asked me if it's OK to cut a piece of one of the katas (presented to Lama Zopa when he was here) and send it to the prisoners. I don't know. Sometimes the prisons are very picky about what they allow in. The best thing to do is to write to the inmate, tell them what a kata is and find out; maybe you can send a whole one.

Bo (another one of the inmates) said that your (one of the retreatants) letter cracked him up. You said something about the mantra that you were saying, something in Spanish; that your mantra was more: "I want to go home". He said that it really cracked him up and made him laugh that that was your mantra for the first few days. I have been writing to Bo for six years and we will get to meet him on my upcoming trip to Portland.

{Venerable talks about giving him some feedback on another letter he had written, as it relates to his advice to young people about women. She said, "I gave him a piece of my mind"}.

R: How can we best incorporate Lam Rim meditations into the practice? Should the Lam Rim topic relate to a particular item being regretted?

VTC: You can do the Lam Rim while saying mantra. If you get distracted while saying mantra, Lam Rim is what's going to help you get out of that particular delusion. Your mind starts tripping off on arrogance, jealousy or anger, and the Lam Rim cuts it. Use the Lam Rim to deal with your various distractions. Also, if you're having a session where you just don't seem to be able to focus or you're bored or you can't think of anything to regret – except that you didn't have more ice cream – the kind of mind that's bland, then while you're saying the mantra do some Lam Rim mediation. So when your mind can't focus or is bored, instead of letting it go all over the place, put it on the Lam Rim topic / outline – you can do that while saying the mantra.

R: Another thing I found about distractions while saying the mantra...if I start thinking of something wonderful that I want to do, like that hike or that trip or that vacation – I start giving it away real fast to Vajrasattva, and it cuts it right away.

VTC: Especially if it's something you're attached to, offer it. Sometimes when you're offering it, you think "Motel 6 is not such a nice offering". You start to see what we think is pleasure is not nice enough to offer Vajrasattva. Then you can imagine it being nicer and more beautiful and that also makes you see that what you're hungering for is not worth very much.

R: When we set our motivations now, many of us – maybe all of us – in some way we are speaking about emptiness. I think intuitively, or maybe because of the practice or the teachings, we are now more conscious about the way that emptiness; that understanding of it; how what we do is rooted in our self-centered attitude. Because each session, we are seeing many people and events, but the same problem shows up in all of them: ME, YO, I, MY. So, if it is possible...I feel a little embarrassed to ask)...but could you please lead a session with us with a meditation on emptiness; only one? I want to have this experience directly. We have the CD on the Lam Rim, but I have never been in a session with you leading this directly. I only have worked with the CD and I think it would be wonderful if all of us had this meditation from you directly.

VTC: OK, when I return from teaching in Washington and Oregon, remind me and then we can do that.

R: Thank you so much. I want to relate the purification and the emptiness.

VTC: You know, I remember one thing, when Rinpoche was leading some purification with emptiness, he really emphasized seeing that the negative actions exist by being merely labeled; that they exist in dependence upon other things. In other words, they're not inherently negative. They are called negative because they bring suffering results. That's the only reason that they are called negative, because of the result they bring. And that the actions themselves don't exist in their own right. They came about due to causes; they're dependent on other causes. So it's not like there is an inherently existent negative action there. Rather, there are all these causes and all these conditions that came together. There's this action and then it goes out and becomes different effects; none of these exist in their own right. They exist in relationship to other things. So contemplating that in terms of purification; and then contemplating that I, the agent, who did the negative action; the action and the objects or people involved...all these exist in dependence upon each other. Or that I, as the person doing the purification, the activity of purification, the object of purification, all these exist in dependence upon one another. So, contemplating how things exist dependently helps lead you to see that they are empty. Especially in terms of purification, that can be very helpful because it cuts our tendency

to reify, to make solid our mistaken actions. Like, sometimes we can sit there and really beat up on ourselves: “Oh, I did THAT...OHHH, I’m so bad. How could I do THAT?”

We need to be able to see that the THAT is something that arose due to causes and conditions and it’s dependent. The person who did it is dependent. Who I am now is not exactly the same as that person who did that action. There’s not one solid person there; that helps us forgive ourselves a bit. Because, I think it’s helpful to be able to look back in the past and that person that we used to be; who did those things; to have some compassion for him or her. We understand that person quite well. We were inside their head at one point, so we understand them well, but we aren’t the same person now. So we can look with compassion and we can see all the causes and conditions that came together in the confusion of that mind that made them do that. We can see how the action and person are dependent and thus how all these things are empty. OK?

VTC: In terms of your previous question about listening to the initiation on CD, I think if people here listen, there’s no fault. But when you make it for the library, just put the teachings on it—before and after the break.

Nerea (assistant): And also the mantra explanation in the middle of the initiation, which was a teaching?

VTC: Right, just omit the visualization parts and us reciting after him and all of that.

R: What is the meaning of this mudra? She demonstrates with her hand.

VTC: It’s a wrathful mudra; fierce.

R: When I visualize Vajrasattva, what is he doing with his hands?

VTC: He is holding the vajra and bell.

R: And Vajrabagavati?

VTC: She is holding the knife and skull cup; the knife in a wrathful gesture, cutting through stuff.

R: What is the meaning of the earrings?

VTC: Oh the earrings...there are six sets of jewelry, ornaments – they stand for the six far-reaching attitudes, the six perfections. And the reason the earlobes are long comes from the fact that the Indian royalty wore very heavy jewelry and it stretches out their earlobes.

R: This retreat experience is something very difficult for me to deal with. And I am wondering if the reason for the difficulties is that I have not cultivated the causes for the effort and understanding to come. I am doing as you suggested and asking the Buddha for help, and even though my devotional aspect is not there (like the other people on the retreat), I am trying to cultivate that and ask for help.... maybe in the future...?

VTC: First thing is don’t compare yourself to anybody else. And especially about faith, I used to think that everybody else had so much more devotion, “I’m the only one who’s skeptical, I don’t have faith like the others do. This one is so devoted to our teacher, me always sitting here with my doubts, wondering, wondering”. But now, I look and thirty years later, I’m still here and some of those people aren’t. I began to see that it’s not fair to compare myself to others, because we don’t really know what true devotion is. Some people may seem to have a lot of devotion and faith--this year –and the next year, gone. So, it wasn’t real devotion and faith at all. Don’t put yourself down, thinking “Oh, I don’t have so much faith and devotion and everybody else does”, because you don’t know.

And what you said about maybe you haven't created the causes for the joy and enthusiasm to come – that's why you're doing the practice right now so that you can create the causes for that. So just even seeing that, understanding that, learning that is something successful in your retreat. So, don't think that a successful retreat means that you're just blissed out—oh, Vajrasattva, oh. Because that doesn't necessarily mean you are learning anything. Sometimes when you are having difficulties is when you are learning about yourself and learning a lot about the Dharma. So don't judge it as good and bad in terms of whether you feel good or feel bad or whether it's easy or difficult; because those are not the right criteria. Really, sometimes when you go through the difficult parts in the practice, having gone through those, that's when your mind becomes so much more grounded and mature. And you begin to realize that the difficulties have been a blessing of some sort; without them, you would not arrive at your new state of understanding. You would still be back there with your old, more superficial state of understanding.

Many years ago, a Catholic nun came to visit us in the nunnery in France. She had been a Catholic nun for 50 years. And at that time, I was only ordained 7 or 8 years, so I said to her, how do you do it? How do you go through all the hardships? And what do you do when you go into crisis? And she said that when you go into crisis, it means that you are ready to go to a deeper level of understanding. So, she said, it's a sign of making progress. When you feel good, your understanding just kind of stays right where it is. But when you go into crisis or go through a difficult time, that forces you to start looking deeper. And when you look deeper, and you explore more, you come to a deeper understanding. The change happens within you in a much more profound way. So she said don't worry about having some difficulties or crises, see them as a sign that your mind is ready to go deeper in your practice.

I remember what she said from all those years ago and it's really helped me. And I think, looking back, that it's exactly true. I realize sometimes we have so much junk coming up and we want to pray to the Buddha, please make all this anger go away. Please may I not be so angry. May the anger not arise. But then, if you think about it, if the anger doesn't arise, you will never learn how to cultivate patience. And if the anger doesn't arise, you will never see the object to be negated in the emptiness meditation. If the anger doesn't arise, I might become smug, thinking what a great practitioner I am, I don't get angry anymore. So then, you begin to say, well, maybe I shouldn't pray that the anger goes away. Maybe I should pray that I develop the antidotes to be able to penetrate the anger; to disperse it and eliminate it, not just have it vanish on its own.

Sometimes when all this junk comes up and it's difficult, it helps us over the hump of our arrogance and our complacency. Sometimes in our practice we say, oh I'm doing OK, I'm a pretty good person. I'm a nice person, you should like me. I'm practicing Dharma. I only get distracted half the time, that's good enough. And then you go through a difficult time and all that smugness, complacency and conceit vanishes. Then your mind becomes very alert and your motivation is clearer, much better after that. Then when you're thinking about emptiness, you think, "Oh, that's the "I". That's the "I" that doesn't exist. Meanwhile, one part says, I do exist, I do exist and I am going to get my way if it kills me.

R: Or if I have to kill you...laughter.

VTC: Right. And you say, oh that's the one. OK, Let's dedicate this effort.

Due to this merit may we soon, attain the enlightened state of Vajrasattva, that we may be able to liberate all sentient beings from their sufferings. May the precious bodhi mind, not yet born arise and grow. May that born have no decline, but increase forevermore. (End of tape). May all beings benefit.