

Venerable Chodron – Introduction to the Vajrasattva retreat 2005
Sravasti Abbey – January 4, 2005

[Venerable leads an opening meditation / motivation]

So let's cultivate our motivation... and think about what samsara is; being born again and again under the influence of ignorance and karma. And this has been our experience since beginningless time. So, we haven't always been who we think we are now, it's just a continuity of consciousness. We've had many, many lifetimes and each of these lifetimes wanting happiness, not wanting to suffer but not knowing what the causes of happiness are and what the causes of suffering are, and being blinded by our ignorance; thinking that happiness and suffering come from outside. Thus begins our struggle with other people and things in our environment. Trying to make everything outside of us exactly the way we want it and to get rid of anything or anyone that obstructs the way we want things to be – and thus conflict occurs, because we and others have different ideas of how things should be.

What external things cause happiness, what external things cause suffering? We fight with each other, thus creating more karma, more causes for rebirth and more causes for unhappiness right here and now. And so it seems, in our ignorance if we follow this attachment to the happiness in this life, we will be happy. When in fact that causes us to get into more conflicts, get more confused and create more causes for suffering. So let's give up this selfish concern with our own immediate pleasure of this life and instead turn our minds to the Dharma.

The most immediate thing we need to turn our mind to is to creating the causes for a good future rebirth, because without that we won't be able to attain any higher goals. So to actualize this, we need to be aware of and follow the functioning of karma and its effects. But our real Dharma aims are liberation and enlightenment; liberation, freedom from samsara, stopping this dysfunctional merry-go-round of cyclic existence fueled by ignorance. But not leaving things there with our own liberation, but realizing that all sentient beings are in the exact same situation as we are. Therefore, we want to attain Buddhahood in order to benefit them most effectively. So we look at other sentient beings and no matter what realm they're born into, no matter what kind of body they have, what kind of social class, education, race or religion – all them are exactly like us, wanting happiness and not wanting misery. There's no good reason why we're more important; why our happiness or liberation is more important than theirs.

Furthermore, these very same sentient beings are continually kind to us. Everything we know, everything we have, it all came due to others. So we try to open our hearts to feel this fabric of inter-relatedness and inter-connection with all other living beings; caring about them in the same way that we care about ourselves. We're actually no different. We have the fortune to have met the Dharma and to be able to make our lives highly meaningful and so we have a responsibility to all of those who have been kind to us, to all sentient beings, to make good use of our precious human life, to not fritter it away. We also have that same responsibility to ourselves, to use our life wisely, because it is indeed very precious, no matter what situation we happen to be in at the moment.

Therefore, we generate a very strong motivation to practice the Dharma, to attain full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, and specifically to do the Vajrasattva retreat. Because to gain realizations of the path, in other words, to transfer our minds into the Buddha's mind we need to purify our past negativities, cleanse our minds, accumulate vast merit or positive potential and then learn the Dharma. Doing the retreat is a very powerful way to cleanse the mind, specifically, of so much of the negative actions that we've done in this life and in previous lives. So really, generate a strong motivation to do the Vajrasattva retreat for the benefit of yourself and others, for the enlightenment of yourself and others.

[Come out of your meditation]

(Teaching)

It seems important to have that strong motivation going into retreat, for leaving your life in general actually. And to do the Vajrasattva retreat is indeed quite a miraculous opportunity! Just look at it this way--there are seven of you here. We had probably 15 applications and we didn't have room in the house for all of them and then even when we had room for people, things changed in their lives. They didn't have the karma to come to retreat. Two people couldn't get their visas, one person had family problems, another person couldn't get time off of work, Actually six of the people who had been accepted on the retreat didn't have the karma to do it; obstacles came up. So just having the karma to be able to come here for three months and do retreat is quite rare and special. So it is quite incredible fortune that you people have to be able to do this retreat.

Three months may seem like a long time, but it will actually go very quickly and you will turn around and all of sudden you will go "What Happened?" The first week will seem like a long time. But after that it goes very quickly. It is a very precious time. When you think about what samsara is, like we did in the motivation and we really think about all the negative actions we've done under the influence of ignorance, anger and attachment and how these negative actions perpetuate our samsara, perpetuate our unhappiness, our confusion, our anxiety and fear, then we realize that it's desperately important to purify those actions (that karma) and to transform our minds so that we don't continue to create the same negative karma.

So what you see when you are doing Vajrasattva practice is certain patterns in your behavior. That could be physical, speech (how you talk, tone of voice), it could be mental habits, playing the same drama over and over in your mind and it is very special to be able to see these clearly, to identify them and look at them in a different way. Our present way of looking is to blame someone else or to blame ourselves. We feel guilty, hopeless and fall into "poor me" thinking

In this retreat, we are trying to look at this in a much healthier way; not to blame others or ourselves but to accept responsibility for what we did and by doing that, learn to change it. Accepting responsibility means that we start looking at our motivations, we may have been blind at the time we acted, but now those motivations are becoming clear to us. And it can be shocking sometimes, because we might have thought we were acting wisely and compassionately; or at least reasonably. And now we see we weren't and we have created a ton of negative energy and hurt people. So just accept that without blaming the other person, saying "You made me do that" and without blaming ourselves,

saying, “I am such a terrible person”. Just look and say: there were these emotions and attitudes that arose in my mind. I wasn’t aware of them, I believed in them. I thought they were true, so I let these motivations influence me, to push me to think, speak and act in a certain way and now, I regret that.

So we generate the **first of the four opponent powers, regret**. Regret is very different from self hatred and very different from blame; but it is regretting and taking responsibility. In taking responsibility, we have to sort out others’ responsibility and our responsibility. Because if we blame others, we think it is all their responsibility and if we blame ourselves, we think it’s all our own responsibility. When in actual fact, everyone had a part to play. So I think part of the purification process is learning to discriminate, what were the causes and conditions that others created and then how did we respond? Or how did we provoke others? And then we need to own our part of it, because we can’t change others’ minds. We’re working on changing our own minds. Don’t worry about others’ minds. Don’t think of a situation for example and say to yourself: “Oh my friend really has to purify. I better tell them that when we had that fight, they created so much negative karma and they better purify!”. Just let others be. In the retreat, our business is our own mind, not their minds.

Having three months of solitude is a very precious opportunity for beginning to reflect on this and make these kinds of discernments. So it is very precious; very special. When we have regret, we restore the relationship in some way in our own mind by developing an appropriate attitude toward whoever it was that we harmed. So, in case of our spiritual mentor, in case of the Three Jewels, we take refuge. In the case of ordinary sentient beings, we develop bodhicitta and love and compassion. So that’s **the second of the four opponent powers: Refuge and Bodhicitta**, because they transform our attitude toward whoever we harmed or created negative karma with.

The **third opponent power is developing the determination not to do it again**. Depending on how strong our regret is, then the rest is going to be stronger also, especially the determination to try and avoid it in the future. One of the reasons for living in strict discipline during the retreat is that it helps us avoid doing the same negative actions again and again. Especially with our verbal karma, by keeping silent in the retreat, we don’t have the opportunity to play out all our habitual negative verbal karma. We begin to watch how our mind is about to say something, but we know we are in silence, so we stop ourselves. This is very good. It helps us to control our speech. And this will have a very positive influence after the retreat; it teaches us to pause before we speak.

The **fourth of the opponent powers is remedial behavior**. In the sadhana we say the mantra and do the visualization. The practice has all four opponent powers and you can follow them in the sadhana. The key is the regret; so really spend some time thinking about the actions we want to purify. But the benefits of doing the purification are so great, because when we purify, we stop the karma from ripening. Even if we can’t stop it from ripening completely, because only the wisdom realizing emptiness does that – the direct perception of emptiness, but at least if the karma ripens, it will ripen later,

rather than sooner, so hopefully we can realize emptiness before it ripens. Or if it does ripen, it will ripen as a small problem, not a big one. Or it will ripen as something that's short, rather than something that is long. It is very powerful to do the purification, that's one benefit in terms of our lives and working with our karma and stopping the causes of suffering from ripening, purification is important.

Second, the purification cleanses our mindstream, which makes it much easier to understand Dharma teachings. Part of the reason we can't understand the Dharma is because our mind is too obscured. It's as if you're trying to make a clear tape recording, but the microphone doesn't work well and there's a lot of noise in the background, you're not going to get a very clear recording. Similarly, if there's a lot of dirt in our mind we might listen to teachings but nothing much goes in or we can't remember it or we only know it intellectually but when we come to practicing it in our lives and applying it when we have problems, we don't have a clue what to do.

Purifying helps us learn how to practice Dharma. It cleanses our mind of all the karma that obscures us from understanding the Dharma and putting it into practice. And during the purification process, it provides an excellent opportunity to start practicing those different methods and remedies, because as you're doing the mantra, different thoughts will come up in your mind, past incidences, things that you get angry about, things you are attached to. When those distractions come into your mind, that's the perfect time to take out your Lam Rim outline and your mind training meditations, thought transformation meditations and start practicing them, so you that you can deal with whatever is coming up in your mind. That process of having to work with your own emotions and difficulties during the retreat is also purification. It helps us break our negative patterns. And as I mentioned before, you really see the difference after the retreat, because you've had a head start during the retreat. You're really working with some of those ingrained habits and patterns.

So there are many advantages and benefits to the retreat. Some of them you experience now in this life; others you experience in future lives by having happier rebirths, because you cleansed the cause for an unpleasant rebirth. Some of it you will experience in terms of your path to liberation; enlightenment is easier, because the mind isn't so obscured. I know for myself, I did Vajrasattva retreat about a year after I had met the Dharma. And after the retreat, I went back to hear my teacher teach some more and I was so astounded, I was saying to myself, "did he say this last year?" All of a sudden, I understood him completely differently. That is a sign of purification; something had changed. Before, I thought I had understood everything correctly and then afterwards, looking back, I realized that I didn't have a clue what was going on—well, maybe a little bit of a clue, but not much. The purification made a huge difference in what I understood.

Many people want to do very high practices like Mahamudra or Dzogchen, but if you haven't purified your mind and accumulated positive potential, these high teachings are not going to make much sense to you; you may not even understand them or be able to practice them because the mind is too cluttered; so that's why purification practice, especially at the beginning is so, so important. Another benefit of doing Vajrasattva is-- you will really be much happier. You will see so vividly how your mind creates happiness and suffering. It becomes so vivid. Because we have our daily schedule; we do the same things every day at the same

time and we are in silence. And yet you will see that one day you will love every body and the next day (if not the next session), you will feel like you can't stand anyone and the retreat is useless. And you will see that nothing changed on the outside. And we begin to see how incredibly moody we are. People around us don't have a clue what to expect from us because we don't even know what to expect from ourselves. One day we're up and the next we're down.

We learn to see how it all comes from our mind and this leads us into the meditation on emptiness. We learn how our mind labels and conceives of things and how our experiences are dependent upon our mind and karma. So you are very fortunate with a lot of good karma just to be able to do this retreat. Rejoice in your own and others' virtues. You may have different expectations and fears and probably all of them are inaccurate. You might expect- oh, I am going to reach enlightenment in three months. His Holiness says that is communist propaganda. Aspire to reach enlightenment, but don't expect it. Let go of that one.

Let go of expectations of seeing Vajrasattva and experiencing bliss and getting clairvoyant powers. Just let go of all of it. If anything happens; great, fantastic. But don't expect it. Also let go of fears: my knees will hurt too much to do the retreat; I will get so angry no one will want to be around me, I can never be silent for three months without going crazy. Just let go of these fears. Also let go of missing spouses, partners etc. They will live very well without you and your relationships will be better for having done this. It might be helpful to write down your expectations and fears and get them clear and have a discussion group about them later. Then during the retreat, check out how accurate they were. Often what we thought is not what happens. Try to have an attitude of contentment. Some days you will find fault with everything. But just let go. Recognize it as the mind doing one of its tricks. Don't pay too much attention to all of that.

And when your mind gets very discontented; remember the conditions I had when I did retreat. I did retreat in 1975 at Tushita Retreat Center in Dharamsala. It was during the monsoon time and it rained every day; not just drizzle, but it poured rain. As a result, nothing ever dried out. So everything smelled like mildew and mold. The meditation hall had a concrete floor, there was no carpet, there was just concrete! We had an aluminum roof, so when it rained – you can imagine the noise that we heard.. And we shared the meditation hall with many other critters, particularly a family of mice. So while we were meditating the mice would scurry around outside of the hall – scurry here, scurry there. Someone even had a mouse scurry over his lap.

There was a Tibetan man who was cooking for us. Tushita Center was poor; we were all very poor – so we were basically eating rice and cabbage, and lady fingers (some kind of vegetable you can get during monsoon). And that was kind of about it. We didn't have gourmet food a la Susan (the cook for the current retreat). In my room I had a mattress on the floor and not only did we share the place with mice but we also shared it with scorpions. One time in the middle of retreat (thank goodness I was sitting on my bed), a scorpion fell down from the ceiling right next to me. I took that actually as a good sign because you're

supposed to visualizing things like that coming out of your lower orifices. And I scooped it up and took it outside. Our water was a big pipe from the neighboring village. Sometimes we wouldn't have water. Our toilets didn't flush – you had to carry a bucket of water to pour down it, if we had water. So you can imagine the perfume coming from the toilets. It was rather rudimentary.

So, when you're sitting here in this beautiful place – thinking of that might help your mind to be a little more content. And there were no such things as hot showers, forget that, forget hot showers. Another retreat {I was very poor when I went to India) I had gotten some things to offer that would last me for the retreat but I didn't have enough money to get a lot of stuff, so it quickly got used up. What I would do, is get one chapati (like a tortilla) for breakfast. I would cut it in half each day and offer half, along with peanut butter – peanut butter was a luxury (one scoop of peanut butter was WOW). I would offer my chapati and some peanut butter everyday. So that I would have something to offer and then I would eat the other half. When I took down the daily offerings I would eat the other half (the stale chapati and peanut butter). Sometimes the electricity went out, so we meditated by candles or whatever. You just got used to everything, dealt with the situations the way they were and with what was. I'm just telling you this in case your mind starts complaining, “why isn't this the Hilton Hotel?”. You can think, “It could be worse”.

The discipline around the retreat is set for a specific reason, to really create a good retreat environment. The silence is very helpful in that way. The silence is not an unfriendly silence. It's not like we don't want to talk to people because we don't like them or anything, but it's a respectful silence, we are all going through our own internal processes of purifying and thinking about things. So we are silent so that we don't disturb and distract each other. We are also silent because it means that we don't have to make such effort to create a personality; to tell everyone who we are. Because when we talk—who is our favorite topic of conversation? It's ME! I like this. I don't like that. I've done this. I haven't done that. I'm going to do this. I'm not going to do that. Everything about ourselves we talk about – the food like, our clothes, our friends, our work, everything. We create a personality that we believe is really ME. And creating that personality and grasping onto it as something real and concrete and truly existent, that's the cause of ignorance. That's what causes so much of the karma. So by not speaking, we don't have to get into that whole trip of creating a personality; telling everybody all of our opinions.

Somebody remembers me saying from a previous retreat and I'll say it again – the opinion factory is CLOSED for three months! It's shut down and boarded up. So we don't have to have an opinion on everything. Watch the mind that has an opinion about how everybody combs their hair or has an opinion about what everybody eats or has an opinion about how people walk. You will begin to become aware that your mind is so opinionated about all sorts of things. And we watch ourselves get so irritated with each other. “Whenever so and so offers the food, they say ‘continually’ instead of ‘continuously’. Can't they learn? This person is so dumb. Or so and so doesn't clean off their snow boots when they come indoors – who do they think they are--Princess Diana or do they think that somebody else is going to clean up the snow from their snow boots? Their parents never taught them any manners”. And this voice just goes on and on.

“This person doesn’t make eye contact and they’re grumpy - I think their anti-social. Maybe they have borderline personality disorder”. Or, “so and so must have post traumatic stress syndrome”. We become the psychologist and diagnose everybody. “This person is chronically depressed. This person is hyperactive. This person is manic-depressive. I’m the one who is close to Buddhahood”.

Just stop being the psychologist and diagnosing everybody, close your opinion factory. Let other people be. And just remember that they can be as they are they don’t have to be the way we want them to be. Let things be the way they are. They don’t have to be the way we want them to be. Of course if something isn’t functioning right, then in your group meeting you bring it up. But if it’s just one person or some preference of your own, learn to live with it. If it’s something that’s major, then bring it up and discuss it with each other. The last Vajrasattva retreat I gave people this advice and when the hot water went out, all of them thought, she said to be content; so they didn’t tell the people running the retreat center there was no hot water. I think it would have been a legitimate thing to let the people know that the hot water system was broken. When I tried to tell the managers after the retreat, they didn’t believe me, they said if there had been no hot water, the retreatants would have told us. I asked the retreatants and they said “you told us to be content”. So if something major is a problem (like no hot water) please bring it up.

You are sharing rooms--living with other people. It’s an opportunity to show your kindness to the people that you’re sharing with. Show your kindness to the people you’re sharing the house with. So it’s good to look at our guidelines for living here, especially compassion and the way that we become mindful of our behavior. In terms of opening and closing doors, do it as quietly as possible. Arrive at the sessions on time, it’s a way of showing compassion to people. Do our chores [offer service] so that they are completely done not so that half of the room is vacuumed and the other half isn’t or so that the dishes are done but the sink still has food in it and the dish towels are all wet and smelly. Do your job completely – we are taking care of Vajrasattva’s pure land. Be respectful of Vajrasattva’s pure land and take care of the environment. If you do chores because you have to do it, you don’t create any merit. But if you think you are offering service, then you create a lot of positive potential. Bring mindful. Take care of the toilets and the water. Don’t let the water run for 3 minutes while you brush your teeth. Save the water for other sentient beings. We are on a septic system, so be aware of what you put into the toilet. If they back up—we don’t want to think of what might happen if the septic system fails. These small things in daily life become real expressions of kindness and real ways to be mindful of our precepts and bodhicitta. Also, be aware of how you move through the environment. On the days you are in a bad mood; how you walk, move, take your coat off will be different. Sometimes, you won’t notice your own mood, until you notice how you are moving; almost bumping into things. Ask, what does this say about my state of mind? What kind of mood am I in. OK, I have to move differently. And if you change how you move, it can affect your mood. Or you can first look at your mood and that will change how you move. This can be very helpful. I really recommend that you walk every day... down the driveway or around the forest loop. If there’s a lot of snow, down the road is better. Get outdoors. Look at far distances. Look at the sky. Take advantage of the natural beauty and silence around here. If your mind is

making a lot of noise- just walk up to the meadow and listen to the silence and let your mind get silent like the meadow is silent; or like the forest is silent. That's very helpful.

I will probably meet with you every 7-9 days. I am not going to make a schedule in advance, because it will depend on Khensur Rinpoche's teachings and Lama Zopa's visit. And I have to go away in February because I promised to teach in Seattle during that time. I will let you know in advance. And Barbara McDaniel (who had done this retreat before) will come and do Q & A with you sometimes. She did retreat in 1998 and can share her experiences.

Barbara, you have a great story that somebody told about that retreat. [Barbara telling the story]: It was a vivid experience for me. It was very late in the retreat, December, so we'd been silent for a long, long time and it was a snowy day before lunch. One of the women had been in a pretty angry space for some days. Everyone was aware of it. At one time, another person was standing near her, looking at a silhouette of a different person in the snow. So another retreatant picked up a camera and quietly moved over and snapped a photo of the silhouette. The woman who had been feeling angry was in the same vicinity and thought the photo had been taken of her, without her permission. It seemed to spark her rage. She was furious that someone would presume to take her picture. She went up the stairs very angry. Everybody was affected. When we sat down to lunch, she came down the stairs and slammed a note onto the plate of the person who took the photograph and stormed out. Everyone was very shook up. No one could communicate to the angry person that it hadn't happened as she thought. The entire retreat space was on edge the balance of that day. It was a good example of how much we affect one another. It wasn't until retreat was over, some weeks later before the person who had the anger found out that the photo had not been taken of her.

VTC: Yes, very interesting things happen on retreat. At the Tonalli retreat (Chenresig retreat in Mexico, 2002), there was one young man who thought he was keeping silence very well because he didn't speak. But he brought a checker board and would play checkers with his friend during the break time. Then he would play baseball with a bat and a ball and he would juggle and do all these things, but because he wasn't speaking he thought that he was doing everything perfectly. Some retreatants were disturbed and wrote me a note. I responded with a note for the retreat manager to share with everyone. She read the note out loud and he later shared that he thought "she must be talking about ME". And he was a little bit upset by this. However, by the end of the retreat when everybody shared about their experience of the retreat, he shared that he began to understand why he had been expelled from so many schools when he was young. This was an incredible understanding for him, he hadn't been aware of his behavior and how it affected other people. The person who was leading the retreat, tended to be a bit straight forward and brusque. Later on, I wrote some other general note to everyone, in another session, I can't remember exactly, just talking about how to be kind to each other in retreat. And that time, she thought I was talking about HER. It was an interesting experience that she took it that way because, I was actually talking to everyone.

In any case, what I was trying to say is that we will meet sometimes during the retreat; probably more at the beginning than later on. At the beginning there is more to sort out. Then, as you get into a routine there isn't so much to sort out. What I thought I could do is one of the weeks when I see you maybe talk with 3 of the people privately

maybe for 10 minutes each and the next time I see you talk with 4 people privately – this could happen at a lunch break. And then I would come and speak to the whole group in the evening. So that means that every two weeks you would have a chance to speak to me privately for about 10 minutes. We will discuss what is coming up for you in the retreat; an opportunity to check in. But what I'm hoping that when I come every week, since it is a small group that there will be time to ask questions and you won't have to wait to see me privately. Because probably the questions you have everyone else has too. If it is personal to you, like your family, you can just ask it in a general way in the group. Just leave out the names and details. Chances are others in the group are struggling with their family members too in their mind. And so it is helpful for everybody. Or if you have the issue of I just can't concentrate, I am distracted, what can I do. Well, everybody has that and we can discuss it as a group. If in between the times we meet, you feel like you are having big problems in your meditations, I am happy to see you personally. But please remember that I am in retreat. I would prefer not to have someone every day needing to speak to me, because then I won't be able to do my retreat. Sometimes you may have what you call a bad session with big anger, jealousy or attachment and you are feeling really upset. If so, just wait half a day or wait a whole day and if you still feel you can't handle it, write me a note and we will talk. But lots of times these things that come up are gone after you wait, take a walk, chop wood. Or you just learn to work with them. Because whatever comes up is impermanent. It changes. Whether it's good, you like it, you don't like it...it's not going to be there for long.

Don't just get up off your cushion and come and bang on my door. Wait and deal with it for a day yourself and then see if you still feel the same way. Sleep enough, but don't sleep too much. You might find yourself getting sleepy in a session, even though you slept enough the night before. It's not that you haven't slept enough. It's just ego mind; negative karma coming and manifesting as sleep during sessions. Drink a cup of tea, take a walk, make sure that you're not too warm, take off your blanket or sweater. Someone in Singapore told me of a method against sleepiness that they found works well. Fill your mouth with water until your cheeks bulge out and then take cold water and splash it on your face with your eyes open. You won't be sleepy after that. Take a walk. Look at far distances. Do prostrations to purify the karma that causes you to fall asleep and prostrations will keep your body active and energetic.

In terms of food, eat enough but don't eat too much. On the last Vajrasattva retreat, there were two people who got way too thin and one person got too fat. We need balance. Eat to sustain your body; not too much. Everyone has to self-regulate. Eat the nourishing food, not all the candy. Take care of our body without indulging it. So eat enough, sleep enough, get enough exercise; but not too much of anything and your body will be happy.

We have a number of people participating in retreat with us who are not here in the room. Some of them found out about it through the website and are sending pictures and Nerea will make a collage and we will put it in the meditation hall. And, there is a group of prison inmates (VTC does prison work). We wrote and asked them if they would like to participate and 15-16 said they would. And Nerea will make a collage of their pictures too. They don't have a lot of pictures of themselves, so it is very precious that they send them. These will be in the room tonight when we start, so that we will all start together. So know that you have an extended family, an extended group of people

participating with you; people from Israel and Singapore and across the USA and Mexico and from Argentina, Brazil, India and Palapa. They will do one session a day and they are thinking of you and you are thinking of them. Especially think of the inmates. When you start feeling sorry for yourselves, think of the conditions of the inmates. If you are upset because someone is coughing, think of the noise in the prisons. Prisons are outrageously noisy. They are also dangerous. Think of the situation they are doing retreat in. And when your mind starts feeling sorry for yourself, think of them. In their letters, the inmates said, “thank you so much, I feel so honored that you asked me to do this retreat, I am so pleased”. We will put the letters out, so you can see what they said. And dedicate for them and when you are purifying, think of all these others doing the retreat and picture Vajrasattva on their heads, purifying too.

I want to discuss an idea with you. There is no letter writing during the retreat, but I wondered if some of you would want to write postcards or short letters to an inmate during the retreat, saying, how is it going and how you are doing. It will give you an opportunity to express what’s going on with you and then you will get letters back and hear what is going on for them. So, if any of you would like to do that, please let me know.

That’s all I can think of. What questions do you have?

Retreatant: I would like to write, but would need to write in Spanish. Maybe Nerea could translate.

VTC: Maybe Nerea would be willing to translate. She may be too busy. Or some inmates can find someone in the prison to translate for them. One inmate is not participating in the retreat, but he speaks Spanish. Or you can write simply in English and that would be OK.

Lupita asked me this morning about the 35 Buddhas. There are two ways to do the prostrations. You can make one prostration to each Buddha, saying the name of that Buddha repeatedly. And there’s another way of saying the names one after the other and continually making prostrations. You can do it either way. If you are the one leading, just let others know which way you want to do it. You will take turns leading the motivation in the morning. Kevin has a roster for that. Each of you 7 will take one day each week. It’s good to lead motivation out loud in the morning. It’s good for your practice and good for everybody else. Other questions?

Retreatant: How do we structure the meditation sessions--with the mantras, the more extensive offerings etc?

VTC: OK, how to structure the sessions...in terms of the extensive offering practice—you don’t need to do it separately. While you are reciting the mantra, you can think of beautiful offerings and offer them to Vajrasattva and all Buddhas and Boddhisattvas throughout infinite space. Your main meditation is to think of the nectar coming into you and purifying. And one of the things you make think is, I need to purify my own stinginess, and times I didn’t share. So as part of the process of purifying stinginess and attachment, picture making vast offerings to Vajrasattva on your head and to all the infinite Buddhas and Boddhisattvas throughout space. You can do it as part of the mantra recitation. Basically, the morning session will be the multiplying mantra, the blessing of the speech, prostrations to the 35 Buddhas and then the leader generates motivation and leads the saddhana. In the beginning, you might lead it 2-3 times a day. You decide. The rest of the time, lead it yourself because then you really learn how to do

it. As time goes on, you might decrease the number of sessions that you lead. But it's always good in the morning to have it led because then somebody can generate the motivation and make it a bit different; point out different things. Since you are doing 6 sessions a day, in the first morning one, you may want to take more time with the visualization and then in subsequent sessions you can do it more quickly in the other sessions. You don't need to do it slowly and elaborately in each session so that you have only 15 minutes for mantra recitation. Learn to do it more quickly. And as you get more familiar with it, you will learn to do it more quickly. The Tibetans go very quickly with this. In the beginning, you are getting familiar with it and take a little longer. Do not read while you are reciting the mantra. It is not time for reading; it is time for meditating. While you are reciting the mantra, sometimes you can do Lam Rim meditation. You can think of purifying. Like if you are doing the meditation on precious human life, you can think you are purifying all the hindrances to realizing your precious human life. You think about what hinders you from realizing it. You could do Lam Rim on Equanimity, purifying those hindrances and then ask yourself what is the negative karma that keeps me from realizing equanimity and purify those. That becomes part of the checking, analytical meditation on that Lam Rim topic. OK? Some sessions you may concentrate more on the visualization with the mantra in the background. Other sessions you may focus more on the sound of the mantra with the visualization in the background. Other sessions, you may concentrate more on Lam Rim meditation with the mantra in the background, just thinking about Vajrasattva purifying.

Don't try to have everything clear and distinct all at the same time. You will drive yourself crazy. It's like trying to watch TV, eat dinner and have a conversation all at the same time. If you're trying to pay attention to all three of them equally, you're going to go nuts. When you're doing that, you may pay more attention to eating dinner and the TV and your friend are in the background or you pay more attention to your friend and the TV and food are in the background. Do you get what I'm saying? Don't have high expectations of, "Oh Vajrasattva's light and nectar is coming in at the same time I have this clear vision and at the same time I'm practicing the mantra".

If you're going to do Lam Rim meditation it's good to know the outlines fairly well. This is a good opportunity if you don't know the Lam Rim outlines well to really learn them and to memorize them and how to do the different topics. You can't be rustling through a bunch of papers for your Lam Rim outline in the middle of a session. It's going to disturb other people. So if you have your Lam Rim outline and want to do a certain meditation, have it out to that meditation at the beginning of the session. Or if the outline is in a book, have the book open to that page or better yet because most books don't stay open, copy down the outline yourself before the session, because if you copy out the outline, you'll learn the points a lot better than if you just rely on the book.

It is not a time for reading and stuff like that. And it's not a time for writing either – not like your doing a Vajrasattva meditation and writing a journal at the same time. After a session, if you want to take a few notes after you've dedicated, that's fine. But during the session there's no reading, there's no writing. You can open your eyes to read your Lam Rim outline which is one flat sheet of paper on your desk. [Venerable simulates shuffling through papers, making lots of noise]. Everyone around is getting irritated.

In terms of counting, don't be obsessed with the counting. Don't get into the mathematics of the counting. You will learn to say the mantra quicker as you get used to it. You take the first day and note that you only did ten mantras, it's going to take five years and 57 days to a 100,000. You'll learn to do the mantra faster. When you count, you only count whole malas; you don't count half of a mala. At the end of the session, when you're dedicating and you're half way through a mala, you dedicate with the whole group, then you can stay afterwards and finish that mala. If you're keeping track of how many malas you have, some people may have counters on their malas. What I often did is I had two little bowls with beans and I when I said a mala, I would a bean from one bowl to the other. Devise some little system for yourself on how you keep track. Be careful not to drop your beans and make noise. [Venerable asked Barbara how people on the precious Vajrasattva retreat counted their mantras, Barbara indicated she thought most people used beans]. Again, you only count the whole mala, all the mantras you count have to be said on your cushion. You can't go outside and do five malas and count that – all the malas are on your cushion.

You can't move your cushion once you set it down for the retreat. You can adjust your cushion, get different top cushions, but your place doesn't move. There is a little thing of penalizing oneself, if we get distracted or if certain things happen. Barb has that information and she will share it with you later. There's one that says if you get distracted you start over at the beginning of the mala. If we did that we would never finish. If you get vastly distracted, penalize yourself a little bit, go back a few. If you spent an entire session completely distracted, then penalize yourself accordingly. I'll leave it up to your discretion. Don't be too strict because you do want to finish counting, but also don't be too loose about it.

I don't anticipate anyone getting very sick and since it's a closed environment without people coming in, I don't think we'll get cold or flu germs and things like that. But if you don't feel well, you need to still come to one session to keep the continuity. Try to not walk out in the middle of a session. If you walk out, you can't come back in and you can't count any mantras from that session. So the motto is, go to the bathroom before the session. If you are having a hard time and your mind is completely distracted. Just sit peacefully and say your mantra and focus on the sound. If you have to, open your eyes and keep saying mantra and you can close those. But don't say, I'm having a terrible session, I'm out of here. Because that will affect the others and their retreat.

Retreatant: What about finding your breath or moving your lips? VTC: demonstrated whispering the mantra and says we don't want to have to hear each other, so move your lips a little or not at all. Mostly say it inside yourself.

We'll just know already it will be too cold for some people and too hot for others. Let's just accept that. It's not going to be the right temperature for anybody. So Nancy will set the thermostat... don't go changing it for yourself. If you are too cold, bring more blankets and sweaters. If you are too hot, take something off.

The person who leads, will use the little bell about 5 minutes before dedication. At the beginning of each session, let's use the big gong. It sets a nice mood before starting the session. Hit it very gently along the top rim. The one in the house, just hit very gently in the center. When we hear the sound of the gong, remember impermanence. Remember emptiness. If it's close to time to go to the hall and your friend hasn't noticed the time, just tap them on the shoulder.

Retreatant: Regarding offerings, shall we have the eight traditional offerings in one row? VTC: Yes, that's a good idea and the others can just be water. OK, so welcome to Vajrasattva's Holiday Resort, where you will spend the next 3 months on vacation with Vajrasattva: different; no telephones, no email, no work, no screening clients. You are just on holiday with Vajrasattva and with a wonderful group of people who are here and many who aren't here, but who are thinking of you. And you send your energy to them too. OK? And then as questions come up, write them down and then you can ask them.

One thing I will tell you in advance: don't get too focused on what color Vajrasattva's celestial silks are, white, rainbow colored, yellow into red. Last session they were green. Oh, oh this session they're yellow, maybe I'm doing it wrong. Don't worry about that kind of stuff. Just get the feeling of the presence of the Buddha on your head. If you need stuff, clothes, medicine etc, just write us a note. Nerea can get it for you. But let's spare her stuff like: I want 15 chocolate bars...and I also realize the kind of hand lotion I have now won't do, I need another kind of hand lotion, I want another kind of toothpaste, and oh by the way would get me some special things. Only ask for the things you really need.

Try to keep the notes to one another minimal. Sometime you're here with your friend and you need to tell them that today you had a very bad session –no, it is not necessary to write them a note about that. If someone is doing something that is driving you completely out of your mind, write them a note asking if it would possible to, for example, “to please not leave your boots in the middle of the meditation hall”. Watch what you write notes about, as that can become a huge distraction. That's why we're not having a bulletin board for notes, because then everyone looks to see if they got a note. So we'll keep the notes to a minimum. If you need to communicate something like letting your roommate know that you're going to sleep and could they please read in the outside room? – that would be an appropriate note.

If you read something in a book that you think would be very, very helpful for everybody to read, at the next meeting (Q&A or group meeting) you could share it with the group. If you borrow books or tapes from the Sravasti Abbey library, please return them soon because other people may want to read or listen to them also. If you're not reading actively during every break, maybe read it in the library and pull it out whenever you're going to read it. And try to put it back in the same place you took it from.

Let's dedicate. [Dedication of Merit]

So, do His Holiness' long life prayer one time a day, at the end of your last session. And if you also want to the King of Prayers after your last session, that can be optional. Another set of prostrations (to the 35 Buddhas) at the end of the day and the King of Prayers – if you want to do that, it's optional, but some people might like to do it. You can lead your sessions and motivation in whatever language you want to. If you're having trouble with the English, tell us and whoever speaks English well can help. Nerea can translate during the morning session. If you're having problems with the motivation talks in Spanish, someone can translate. In terms of following the sadhana, we should have enough of each other's language that we can follow what the steps are in the sadhana. You can kind of get it.

[End of recording]