

**Venerable Thubten Chodron – Q & A (after) Vajrasattva Retreat- Sravasti Abbey
April 5, 2005**

VTC: Laughter. Ok. So, retreat has finished. How are you?

Nanc: The remnants of the retreatants are here.

VTC: And the remnants of the retreatants are here and the other ones are back with their honeys (polite laughter) their objects of attachment. Have you been thinking about them? Wondering about how they are?

Nanc: It has been interesting every morning the space and number of bodies in the hall gets smaller. First there were seven. Then there was six. Then there were five and now there are three. The space is still holding the energy. It is still there but it is also getting more spacious too. The closing circle is getting smaller-

Flora: And it is also getting bigger because Torreon, Xalapa, Florida (Laughter).

VTC: Yeah, the circle is expanding.

Nanc: We dedicated for them last night.

VTC: Yeah, I've been thinking about them wondering how they are. Betting that they wish they could be here for this discussion. (Laughter). "I went home and this happened and that happened." ...So, what is coming up?

Flora: Could I ask a question that Venerable Khensur Rinpoche talked about?

VTC: Uhhuh.

Flora: The relationship with the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. He said that the Mahayana path has a very direct connection, important connection with the Buddha while the other paths have more connection with Dharma or Sangha. I would like to know more about that.

VTC: Ahh, ok. So when Khensur Rinpoche was talking about the three different vehicles: The hearer vehicle, solitary realizer vehicle and bodhisattva vehicle. How one has more connection with the Buddha, one with the Dharma and one with the Sangha? Ok, the hearer vehicle is kind of specified in the Tibetan system. So the hearer vehicle, those beings aspire for liberation, not for the full enlightenment of buddhahood but for liberation. And they primarily meditate on the 4-Noble Truths, and they practice together in a group. Those are the ones that hear the teachings of the Buddha and then speak them so that others can hear them. So that is why they are called the hearer vehicle. Ok? Because they live together in groups to hear teachings, you know? Many of them were the original disciples of the Buddha, the Arhats that were realized. So they are more related to the Sangha. You know, the Sangha community in that way. And the solitary realizer vehicle, they primarily meditate on the 12-Links of Dependent Origination. And they meditate-there are different kinds of solitary realizers. Some will

stay with a group for part of the time but others are called rhinoceros like solitary realizers because like a rhinoceros, they go off and live alone. They attain their arhatship, liberation at a time when there is no founding Buddha in this world. A founding Buddha is one that turns the Dharma Wheel like Shakyamuni Buddha did; in a universe where the Dharma Wheel hasn't been turned yet. So, always in the lifetimes before, they learn the teachings but then the final lifetime these rhinoceros like solitary realizers appear at a time when there is no founding Buddha, so there is no Dharma, but they meditate alone in the forest, in the cave, like solitary, and they attain liberation and then they teach, but they don't teach so much by words, but more by actions. Ok? So it is said that they (solitary realizers) are related to the Dharma.

Then the bodhisattva vehicle. These are the beings that aspire for the full enlightenment of a Buddha, and they primarily meditate on the Prajñāparamita (the perfection of wisdom sutras) and the emptiness of inherent existence. And because they're trying to attain the full enlightenment and the full qualities of a Buddha then they are more related to the Buddha in that way. But you can see that actually all three, whether someone is a hearer, solitary realizer or bodhisattva vehicle follower that they all have the three jewels as their refuge. Ok? So, this is just a way in our minds to associate them with one object of refuge then the other, but they actually cherish all three objects of refuge.

Flora: This explanation caught my attention because sometimes I feel that it is easier to feel close to the Dharma, even to the Sangha, but for the Buddha I cannot- I don't know how to feel connected to Buddha. I don't know which feeling or thought to connect with the Buddha.

VTC: Ahh. Ok. So how to feel a heart connection with the Buddha?

Flora: Yeah.

VTC: So they say that the Dharma is our real refuge because it's by actualizing the Dharma -transforming our minds into the Dharma- because the Dharma is the last two noble truths. Yeah? The cessations of the various afflictions and sufferings and then the path. The path that leads to those cessations. So that is the real Dharma refuge and when we actualize that in our minds that is our real refuge because then we have real realizations. We have true cessations so we don't have suffering. Yeah? And then the relative Dharma that shows this is the teachings. So of course we feel very connected to the Dharma.

The Sangha that we take refuge in are the Arya beings. In other words, those who have realized emptiness directly. And the relative Sangha that stands as a symbol for them is the community of four or more fully ordained monks or nuns. Nowadays in America, in the West and in Mexico too I hear the word (Sangha) used to mean anybody that comes to a Buddhist center. But, that is not the Sangha. Because Joe Blow down the street who still drinks and goes hunting comes to a Buddhist center is not our object of refuge. Even people who keep the five precepts. They are to be admired for keeping the five precepts, but they haven't realized emptiness- they're not our object of refuge. And Lupita commented on this to me and I stress this point that the real Sangha that we take refuge in are the Aryas. She told me in Torreon, where she was involved with the Buddhist community, had many splits and different groups formed and it was very disturbing to

her mind to see this happen and it made her kind of ask herself, "What's this path I'm following?" And then she said, "Oh, maybe that's why Chodron made the difference between the Arya Sangha that we take refuge and just the people who come to the Buddhist center." Yeah? Because if you see it like that then the Arya Sangha--they're not going to split and have politics going on. They are always a reliable refuge. The people who go to a Buddhist center, there is politics. So these splits and divisions can occur. But if you realize that then you won't get discouraged because you realize they aren't your object of refuge, they're just other sentient beings. They are Dharma friends and you respect them and cherish them but they're not the object of refuge that will lead you to enlightenment. Ok? So that is an important thing.

Then, in terms of -I'm getting around to answering your question- feeling close to the Buddha. The Dharma is like, if we have the analogy of a sick person who wants to get cured, the Dharma is the actual medicine because if you take the medicine you follow the teachings, you get well. Yeah? The Sangha are the ones that help us take it. They crush the pills up, put it in applesauce, put it in a spoon and go, "Open wide! Zoom, zoom (waves hand with pretend spoon)." (Laughter). So they help us, you know? They sustain us and support us. Then the Buddha is like the Doctor. You know? Here we are, suffering sentient beings, so confused. We don't know what's up or down and so we go to a doctor and we say, "Help! I don't feel well." And we trust the doctor. And the doctor knows our symptoms very well because he used to suffer from the same disease. And he says, "Your disease is Samsara. And your causes are ignorance, anger and attachment." And he prescribes the medicine of the Dharma and lets the Sangha help us take the medicine. So the Buddha is like the doctor. The doctor is definitely somebody we can trust. The doctor diagnoses our disease, gives us the medicine, is always there incase we mix up the pills and we have a relapse because we took the green pills in the morning instead of the afternoon and the red pills in the afternoon instead of the morning. We forgot to take them a few times and take chocolate instead (laughter). Yeah? So the Buddha is always there if we have a little bit of a relapse. We go back to the Buddha and say, "Tell me my prescription again." "What do I need to take?" And so the Buddha helps us in that way. So, I think we can feel close to the Buddha the same way we would feel towards a trusted doctor. And we can also feel close to the Buddha because he was initially a sentient being like us. And in some of our beginningless, infinite previous lifetimes, we use to hang out with that mental continuum of the Buddha, you know? We use to go to the beach and hang out and drink tea you know? (Laughter). So, it is not like the Buddha has always been separate and far away, we use to hang out. But then that mental continuum, that person, practiced the Dharma and we just stayed at the beach. So he got enlightenment and we are still here. But we definitely have that connection. Then the Buddha, when he was born in India, he was just another person like us. The Chinese temple where I took full ordination, along the outside and the inside of it had various murals describing the deeds and events from the Buddha's life. I use to circumambulate and look the murals and it kind of became a meditation for me. Just thinking about the Buddha's life and what he did. Because that in of itself is an example for us of how to practice. You know? Because the Buddha was born as a prince, ok, but if we are going to update the story, the Buddha was born in a family that had middleclass comforts. Yeah? He was born in a family where he could have you know, most of the things he would want. And, of course his parents wanted him to be successful. They didn't want him to go off to a monastery somewhere. In fact, one holy man had said to the Buddha's father, "This child is either

going to be a world leader or a holy man." And the father didn't want him to be a holy man. The father wanted him to be the CEO of the country, yeah? So it is kind of like, I mean if we take the story and update it, it is just like the families we were born into. Our parents want us to have a good education, have a worldly job, be worldly successful, have a house, a mortgage, a family and do something they can be proud of in front of their friends. So, the Buddha received all the same kind of conditioning that we have received. Or, we received what he received- that same kind of conditioning. And then his family was so protective. They wouldn't let him out of the house. Kind of like our parents. They don't want us to go to a third-world country where we see aging, sickness and death. They don't want us to go to a cemetery or a morgue. They don't want us to do anything dangerous. They want to protect us from all suffering and so did his family. But then the Buddha actually ventured out beyond the palace walls and in the same way, coming of age, we left home and ventured and we started learning about life. We saw sickness, aging and death- suffering. We saw people that were miserable in the same way that the Buddha did. The Buddha went on and saw a sick person, an old person and a corpse, and then the fourth one that he saw was a religious person; a mendicant or holy man. So, in the same way we ventured out of our comfort zone, our house. We saw all these different things in the world. We started wondering, "Wow, what is the meaning of life if everyone gets old, sick and dies? Everyone is running around trying to be happy, get what they want, get away from what they don't want but they never really get it. They can never really do this. What is life about?" And then, all of a sudden we meet a mendicant. We go to one of His Holiness' teachings, one of Geshe's teachings. We go somewhere and see someone living an alternative lifestyle and we go, "Wow, this person has a lot more peace of mind and is a lot more together than all the other people I see running around with their cars and their hectic lifestyles." Ok? So, it is exactly the same thing that happened to the Buddha when he was growing up. And so this stayed in the Buddha's mind and he was really trying to figure it out. It got to a point where he just said, "Look, I gotta leave the environment I was living in before and really go search for the truth." So, he left home. And he cut off his hair, took off his nice clothes and he put on the mendicant's robes. In our language you know, we got rid of our jewelry, our hairdryers (laughter), hair-blowers, make-up, basketball shirts (continuous laughter) and we go out and wear sweat pants, Birkenstocks and sandals. So, that is kind of like what we do (laughter) yeah? We're not wearing all the fancy clothes that we grew up in. We left home and we dress more modestly, got rid of the makeup, the perfume and the aftershave. We got rid of the moose, the hairspray and all this kind of stuff (laughter). And then the Buddha went to the teachers that were present at his time, because he wasn't alive at the time a founder Buddha had appeared, you know? He met the teachers of his time. He actualized what they taught, but he realized he still wasn't liberated. So he left those teachers and then he did six years of extreme ascetism. He was like Miles. He was worried about his attachment to food. (Laughter). So, he went to the extreme and only ate one grain of rice a day. So when he touched his belly-bone he could feel his spine. When he touched his spine he could feel the skin from his belly- he was that thin. Yeah? And then he realized that torturing the body and doing that kind of stuff didn't tame the mind, yeah? It just makes you so weak that you can't really meditate. So he left his friends in the ascetic life and started eating normally again and crossed this river in what is now Bihar state. And he sat under the Bodhi Tree and said that he was going to get enlightened. And he did.

So, we are more fortunate in that we are living in a time when a Buddha has appeared. The Buddha didn't have all the full teachers to access at that time you know? He actually had the karma to be a founder Buddha at that time. Actually the Mahayana view point he was already a Buddha, but that is another topic. (Laughter). But in our way, maybe we went to a few different religious groups you know? Like the Buddha went to different teachers of his time. We went to different things and it was like, "Well, ok, but that really doesn't satisfy me." And we were able to meet the Buddha's teachings and sit and practice them. So, I see many similarities between the Buddha's life and ours. In the sense of having to leave what is familiar, leave our comfort zone, leave what seems normal and kind of secure to us to go out and look for the truth. And then the Buddha, once he attained enlightenment, he taught for forty-five years. He went all over the place. And here we see the example: during retreat we saw Khensur Rinpoche and Lama Zopa, going all over the place, tirelessly. Think of Khensur Rinpoche and how sick he was, and even Jeff, how sick they were. If we were that sick would we have even gone to a teaching let alone have the energy to give one? No. We get the sniffles, we stay in bed. They are incredibly sick with the flu, but to benefit sentient beings, they have so much joyous effort. And Khensur Rinpoche kept on teaching, Jeff kept on translating. Lama Zopa's schedule was so packed. He had flown from the West coast to the East coast. He had all these different people pulling him in ten different directions of what he should do, but he still took off 24hrs to make the trip to come here to give the initiation. When our schedule gets too busy what do we do? We collapse (laughter), go to bed. Or have some tea and watch a movie. Or, go out and smoke a joint and have a beer. Rinpoche doesn't do that. He has this joyous effort to benefit sentient beings. So he made the time to come here, you know? The journey to come here just to give the initiation for such a short time and then go off to all of the other things that he is doing. So, you look at it and it is kind of like what the Buddha did. He really extended himself to benefit sentient beings. He went all over and taught. So, you know, we're not the Buddha yet, so we do our own little piece in our own little way. We lead meditations and we give the morning motivations, you know? But it is our way of training, in our own way, according to our own level to one day be able to do what the Buddha did. Ok? So, I look at the Buddha's life kind of like an example; a role model of something to follow. And I find it very comforting to just look at the different stages of the Buddha's life. He didn't go from being a baby to being the Buddha. Yeah? He went and grew up, studied everything. All the arts and sciences of his time and then he renounced. Then we went off and meditated and so forth. So I think we can learn a lot from the example of his life. And that gives us a way to feel close to him. Does that help?

Flora: Yes, sure!

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Nanc: Well, I guess the thing that has been coming up for me has been- as the retreat ended and people were leaving, I remembered Barbara's words. The fact that my mind is saying, "Don't get all worried about where I'm going and also don't get attached to the experience." So, I've been looking at the impermanence of this, and the transitory nature of this world. If we don't get it, it is an incredible cause for suffering. Dissatisfaction, frustration, greed, disempowerment because if we see the more precious the thing is, the more we really do want it to last and the more we really do want it to stay.

VTC: Ahhuh.

Nanc: So, weaving in and out of, you know, just a little bit of missing, a little bit of wanting whatever feelings of inspiration and of that moment or that group dynamic that sustains itself. You know? Wanting to reproduce that somewhere soon and not lose it. It will change though. And I was saying in the motivation this morning, that to look at impermanence is sort of like a dying thing, because things are changing and they don't stay the same, but that it is an opportunity to create something new with it. That there is a birth and a death going on simultaneously.

VTC: Ahhuh.

Nanc: I'm so much more attached to the permanence and I don't see the wonderful opportunity to create something new moment by moment.

VTC: Ahhuh. We cling onto what we had, instead of using the creative mind to see what we can go towards. Yeah? I know that when I leave my teachers in India or when a teaching ends there is always this feeling of, "Oh, I want to stay here." (Laughter). But, what I should do is say, "How fortunate I was to be here to start with. How fortunate I was and to receive so much." You know? "My teacher gave me so much; the group gave me so much." And now it is just my job" -and here is where I find the bodhisattva vehicle so precious- "it's my job now to take whatever I've received to share it with other people." And realize that whatever I do share is not a fixed pie. So it is not like if I give some joy then I have less (laughs). Or if I give some energy, then I have less. But to really rejoice and say, "Ok!" It is kind of like, for me, that leaving process is like a Guru Yoga thing. At the time when Vajrasattva dissolves into you and then you get up off your cushion and you go do your daily life things. Well, leaving a teaching or retreat is like that. It is like the deity dissolves in, the Buddha dissolves in and I become the Buddha and now I have to take that out into my life, you know? Being the Buddha or having the Buddha at my heart, and give that and share that with others. Knowing, and really having confidence that the more I share, the stronger the Buddha in my heart or myself imagined as a Buddha will be. Yeah? And so that is how I have learned to deal with that transition faze of coming out of retreat of leaving a supportive environment or supportive group.

Nanc: It is interesting that even in that space, as precious as it is, the self-cherishing thought arises. And wants to hold on for its own benefit, for its own joy, for its own happiness rather than thinking, "Wow, I have all of this experience now. I have a few insights and I feel like I've let go of a few things." Or "I wonder what it would be like to engage with someone? What would be different in this situation that I might find myself in?" Rather than going, "boohoo, waah." (Laughter). It is very helpful.

VTC: Yeah (sigh). This self-centeredness is so sneaky. It is so easy for us to get into this, "My Dharma practice!" Yeah? "What is good for MY Dharma practice?" (Laughter). "I want to stay in this nice environment because I (emphasized) feel good!" Yeah? That doesn't mean that every time there is the self-centeredness we do the opposite. No. Every time we see the self-centeredness come up it doesn't mean you should act in the opposite way. This is very important you know? It means that you need to transform your motivation and then with a clear motivation look at what you need to do. Ok? So, it

doesn't mean that you know, you're in a good Dharma environment and you find yourself getting attached to it and say, "Oh, I'm attached to this good Dharma environment I better go live down by the bus station on the street (laughter) so I don't get attached to the Dharma environment. Well, you know, we're not stronger enough practitioners to do that. If we were very strong Bodhisattvas then yes, go live on Skidd Road. You know? But we're not. So it is better for us to stay in a Dharma environment. So we're not holding onto it and clinging to it, but instead using the environment to deepen our practice, ok? Or another example: every time you're attached to your family. You realize you're attached to your family. So it doesn't mean you do the opposite and never speak to your family. Yeah? I mean that is not very- (laughter) "I'm attached to you so I'm never going to speak to you for as long as I live." No. That is not so wise. So what do you do? You have to transform your motivation and you look at the situation. "How can I create a good relationship with my family, where I'm of benefit with them but also so it doesn't interfere with my Dharma practice?" Ok? So you create a new relationship, but you don't go off and not speak to them again.

There are some situations where our attachments are so overpowering or what we were doing was so negative that those things and situations we do need to do the opposite. For example, if you have a drug or alcohol problem, it is not a thing of changing your motivation (laughter) and you go back with all your drinking and doping friends- no! That is not how you handle it. It is like, this environment is no good for me, it destroys my mind and then I do things that harm myself and others. I need to be completely away from those people and that environment, because my mind isn't strong enough yet to be in it and I need to completely get myself in a different environment where people support me in living an ethical life. And so it is important to do what I know is beneficial. And so in that situation you do do the opposite because you need to. Ok? But it doesn't mean in every situation you do the opposite.

Flora: Venerable, in relationship with this reaction that we do when we think that the outside or the people we are around are pressuring us to do something (remember this was the topic that we were talking about before, the social pressure) and see this pressure is not all external but it is our attachments or ways to cover-up our attachment, no?

VTC: Yeah (energized).

Flora: We don't assume that, "I am not doing that because I have some, because I have some obstacle in my mind." It is easier to project and say, "No, I am very considerate and concerned for the feelings of my son, or my mother." I realized this when I was meditating and I think it is very important to change. Observe the thing, and to watch this thing. I was realizing that sometimes we cannot grow. We want not to grow. We want to keep like a little child that needs her mom, father or someone- someone to decide for us! Or, we want not to take a commitment because the commitment is dangerous. This commitment could be the meaning of my own freedom yet I prefer, "I cannot do that because I need to do another thing that is before that."

VTC: Ahhuh!

Flora: It is like I can't grow. I don't know how to explain that. There is some relationship between not taking some commitments and not being able to grow. It is like my jail, my inner jail. I'm not sure how-

VTC: I think you explained it very well. Because there is the link between: how we use the outside. How we project our own values on the outside and say, "Oh, I can't do this because it will make somebody else unhappy." There's a link between how we do that and how we don't want to grow. And how we don't make commitments. Those three things of what you're saying are-

Flora: They are like-

VTC: Intertwined.

Flora: I feel that if I break one of them, this is your (gestures at heart with fist tight) (laughter). So that is why this is very, very interesting for me to watch this projection when I'm feeling, "No I cannot do that because what will my son or my family think? I think that's not good?" (Laughter).

VTC: Uhhumm.

Flora: I think the more deeper place, I want not to grow. I have fear.

VTC: Also, another thing that is linked in that is a fourth element. You had also brought it up; not taking responsibility for our own lives but wanting somebody else to decide for us. We, instead of saying, "I don't want to take responsibility" we say, "I want you to decide." We put it in the form, "If I care so much for this person then I can't do it (take commitment). So, actually, look how kind I am and how I'm following the Dharma. I'm caring for this person. I don't want to harm them." So, we put it all into projecting things outward, not tasking responsibility, not wanting to grow and shying away from commitments. Those four things, like you said, intertwine. And if we start to pull at one, the other three start to go, "Wait a minute, you can't do this." (Laughter).

Flora: "You need to learn more. You need to experience more. You need to do other things." (Laughter).

VTC: Yep. And you know what I find how we often express it. One way we express it is, "I care so much for the other person." And another way we express it is what you just did, "Oh, I have to learn some more or do some more." And another way that we express this is, "I have to." You know? As if the environment is forcing us. Instead of saying, "I choose to." We say, "I have to." And in actually fact the only thing in our life we have to do is die...That is the ONLY thing we have to do. Everything else is optional. (Laughter). Isn't it? Everything else is optional. Now, of course if we make certain decisions we may have certain consequences that we don't want but we do have the power to make that decision. So when people say, "Oh I can't go on retreat." What they really mean is, "I'm choosing not to go on retreat." Nobody else is holding them back. They could quit their job. They could do whatever it is, but they are deciding, "No, my job or whatever else it

is, is more important to me at this moment than doing the retreat." So, they are actually making a choice, but rather than taking the responsibility they're saying, "Oh, but this crazy modern society is making the choice for me. I can't do it. I have to do something else." Or you know, we say it, "My family, I can't do it because I have to take care of somebody." Now, I'm not saying in all those times if someone is sick and you're the only person around to take care of them- I'm not saying that all of the time you drop that person and go off to do retreat- no. But we should realize that we are making a choice instead of saying, "I have to stay home and take care of my aging sick mother."

(Recorder battery died. The following is from notes.)

VTC: If we say, "I choose" instead of "I have to" we feel better because then we know we made the choice. "I can't go to Dharma class because my gold fish is sick." But are we just scared that we will grow?

Monastics have it different. We do not have the choice. We have to go teach or go to teachings. It is good because I have learned that I can do more than I thought I could do. Or when I am sick, if I go and teach, by the end I might feel better. It is a stretch, but we can do it! Having rules like we did on retreat pushes our limit. But, we still choose to do it. We think, "I choose to." And we choose with bodhichitta and we won't feel guilty. If we say that we "have to" we are crossed with resentment and not growing, yeah? Eventually the stretching becomes familiar and we can do so much more. Did you see this on retreat? Having structure or making commitments provides a base to realize, "Oh, this can wait, my workaholic mind can shut up." We begin to set our priorities, both planned and in the moment. We always ask, "Is this the best thing I can do?"

Flora: The challenge is getting back into structure and not getting distracted. The voices that say "Do this. Do that."

VTC: Yes, the (internal) family advice. The past conditioning and family patterns that we have eternalized. We need to ask, "What would our Guru do?" We can see that we have eternalized ourselves with fears. In this way we can see that Guru Yoga is possible. We have just done it with the wrong people. (Laughter).

Flora: The ghosts (voices) are quite arbitrary.

VTC: We have to see that there are no external obstacles. Only internal obstacles appearing outside. We only need to continue familiarizing our mind with this stuff. That is all (and be patient). Rejoice in our own merit, "I cleaned the path to see where I can walk."