

Daily Buddhist Inspirational Teachings to Create Peace in a Chaotic World

By Ven Thubten Chodron & the Community of Sravasti Abbey



365 Gems of Wisdom

A Gem a Day Keeps the
Worries Away

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Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery
Awaken Publishing
88 Bright Hill Road, Singapore 574117
(65) 6849 5342
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Project Editor: Esther Thien, Christina B.
Creative Team : Awaken Publishing
Layout Artist : Ada Koh

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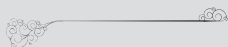
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January



*“Taming the Mind”
is what every Buddhist
should strive for*



January 1

Setting Our Motivation

We start any new activity by generating our motivation. We do this at the beginning of the day, the beginning of a project, or the beginning of a meditation session. We do this because our motivation is the prime factor that will determine the value and worth of whatever we do.

Buddhism always points us inwards to examine the state of our mind, our motivations, and our intentions. We can look good on the outside and be doing the “right thing”, but it is not considered spiritual practice if we have a manipulative or rotten motivation. This is why we take special care with our motivation and continually check why we are doing something. We frequently try to cultivate an attitude of love, compassion, and altruism in order to train our minds so those thoughts will be our motivators. Even if we do not always feel it from the heart, just bringing the mind back to a compassionate motivation, again and again, makes a profound imprint on us and helps us to generate genuine love, compassion, and altruism. 🍵



January 2

Practising Dharma Means Transforming the Mind

Practising the Dharma means transforming our minds. Mental transformation is difficult and does not happen quickly. We have a lot of old habits, one of which is telling ourselves, “I can’t change, my bad habits are too ingrained. I’m just an angry person/attached person/self-centred person. I’m hopeless. There’s no use trying to transform my mind.” Such discouragement is actually laziness because we will not practise the transformative techniques if we give up on ourselves. We should realise these incorrect thoughts for what they are, rather than assuming they are true and following them. Otherwise, we will be back in the same old hole with all our negative and incorrect thoughts; we will continue to blame our unhappiness on others, making ourselves and others miserable.

Being able to identify what is a correct thought and what is an incorrect thought on the conventional level is important. While ignorance of the ultimate nature of reality is the root culprit that underlies all our incorrect thoughts, we should first focus on identifying cases of attachment, anger, arrogance, jealousy, doubt, and wrong views that arise prominently in the mind. Instead of bowing down to these mental afflictions and following their instructions, we must call them out as the thief that has been stealing our virtue and making us so miserable. Then we can call up our forces of wisdom and compassion to counteract these incorrect thoughts.

All the meditation, service, and studying involved in Dharma practice are for building our capacity to identify the difference between beneficial and unbeneficial mental states and to know the techniques to enhance the former and release the latter. Learning or reciting mantras or making offerings just for the sake of doing them may put some good imprints in our mind stream and is better than watching TV or playing computer games. But the real Dharma practice is about confronting and applying counterforces to incorrect and unbeneficial thoughts when they arise. Doing this will bring happiness, not doing it will bring misery. Patience with ourselves is necessary when we do this inner transformative work since we are not going to get it all at once. 🙏

January 3

Cultivating Wisdom

Our mind is befuddled by the four distorted conceptions: (1) Seeing things that are impermanent as permanent, (2) Seeing things that are foul as pure, (3) Seeing things that are in the nature of dukkha as pleasurable, and (4) Seeing things that lack a self as having a self. All the distractions and afflictions that arise throughout the day have to do with one or more of these four distorted conceptions.

Practise thinking about the antidotes for each one, beginning with reflecting on gross impermanence — a plate breaking, or a friend dying — and subtle impermanence — the momentary change in things. By doing this, we will begin to understand that the nature of everything that arises due to causes and conditions is change. We are also changing, so there is nothing to hold on to so tightly as I or mine. Holding on to things that change at every moment causes us a lot of pain because we are fighting against reality, and reality is going to win.

To address seeing what is by nature foul as pure, consider our body. It is just skin, blood, bones, muscles, tissue, organs, etc. There is nothing there that is so attractive that we should worry about leaving it when we die or going overboard to make it comfortable. If sexual desire comes up, think deeply about the nature of the body of the person you are attached to and ask yourself if you really want to hug that.

When we see things that are dukkha or unsatisfactory by nature as pleasurable, contemplate the three kinds of dukkha: the dukkha of pain (physical and mental pain that all beings recognise as undesirable), the dukkha of change (the fact that all our ordinary pleasures eventually become disturbing if we do them long enough), and the pervasive dukkha of conditioning (the fact that we are tied to a body and mind that are under the control of afflictions and karma).

If we are grasping things that do not have a self as having a self, we need to investigate and see what is really there. In terms of a person, there is a body and a mind, but neither one of these is a person. There is nothing personal about our

body or our mind. So, what is this person that we revolve our lives around? This can be very helpful to get rid of that self-focus that makes such a big deal about ourselves.

Then we can meditate on bodhicitta to shift our minds to a more realistic attitude of working for the benefit of all beings. There are countless beings, so why should one of them — who coincidentally happens to be me — be considered more important than the countless others? There is no reason. Start by wishing for the welfare of the people in the same room with you and gradually expand it to your family, friends, strangers, and enemies. We are doing our practice to benefit all these living beings, including ourselves. Make this part of your daily motivation and enjoy your practice. 🍃



January 4

Impermanence and Priorities

Being mindful of impermanence and death encourages us to examine how we use our physical and mental energy and what makes for a valuable use of our time. When I look at the things I think about all day, I recognise that they are not terribly valuable. Especially when I think about the fact that my life is going to end and all I will take with me is my physical, verbal and mental karma. When I ask myself if these thoughts are the kind I want to have when I am dying, or whether they are the kind of imprints I want to take to my future lives, usually the answer is “no”.

We spend so much time on thoughts like: “Does that person like me? Do I fit in? How do I appear to others? What are they saying about me? Do I look good enough?” Our obsession with reputation and others’ opinions and judgments about us is not Dharma practice, which involves checking our motivations and physical, verbal, and mental actions. Learning to assess ourselves properly includes rejoicing at the things we do well, doing purification, and deciding to change the things we do not do well. Not included is beating ourselves up for our trivial thoughts, which is another classic waste of time and serves absolutely no healthy or productive function.

Nobody ever taught us how to think healthily, so this is something we must learn to do as part of our Dharma practice. Of course, we eventually want to go beyond thought, but first, we need to learn how to think in logical, useful, and beneficial ways on the conventional level. Indulging ourselves and feeling guilty are counterproductive, and remembering impermanence and death helps to cut out these extremes. They also make us think about what virtuous thoughts are and how to cultivate them in our minds. Then we can transform our body, speech, and mind by practising the positive mental factors and the ten virtues of refraining from killing, stealing, unwise sexual behaviour, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, idle talk, coveting malicious thoughts, and wrong views. 🙏

January 5

Not Taking Feedback as Criticism

It is good for people to help by reminding each other about things, such as their posture. I certainly would want someone to remind me to stand up straight if I am slouching. So, we must learn to take these tips as reminders instead of criticism, just as we need to be able to take feedback at work, at home, or with our friends and not see it as criticism.

If someone says, “Please bring me a cup of tea,” we may hear the request as a criticism of who we are and think, “Oh, I’m such a bad person! I should have brought the person a cup of tea before being asked! What’s wrong with me? I can’t do anything right.” It is good to examine how often we interpret statements as criticism that were not meant in that way, and how this can keep us from growing. Soon we become afraid to even move our little toe because we might do it wrong. Fear of getting criticised can paralyse us, and we cannot learn anything if we are so afraid of making a mistake that we do not act.

Something to really pay attention to is how we put limits and boundaries on ourselves rather than simply learning from a situation and moving on. Let us all work on this and keep reminding each other to stand up straight, or the various other things that we all want to do but forget so easily, like “Remember to wash your hands before eating.” 🍵



January 6

Bodhicitta Arising

If we meditate on the kindness of others and feel deeply how we have been the recipient of so much kindness, a feeling of wanting to reciprocate or pay it forward naturally arises. It is a feeling of obligation in the sense that you will not feel good about continuing to live off the kindness of others without reciprocating in some way. This is the kind of feeling that we are trying to generate in our meditation leading to bodhicitta, at which point our gratitude moves us to action.

Bodhicitta is the natural result of conquering our selfishness; we see how it is completely inappropriate to be self-centred when we have been the beneficiaries of so much kindness. Once we understand the reality of the situation, we will not fall into thinking, “I’m such a bad person for being selfish.” Instead, we will see that being selfish just does not fit — it is like a round peg in a square hole, so let us chuck it. In its place will arise a strong feeling of wanting to be kind to others and wanting them to be happy, which is love, and wanting others to be free of suffering, which is compassion. Love and compassion for ourselves will also arise at the same time, which means wanting ourselves to be free from samsara. ☸

January 7

A Meaningful Life Right Now

We can spend a lot of time in the present thinking about the future, making the present quite miserable in the process. I was reading a letter in which a person said she was so afraid because she was sick. Her fear was all based on projecting things that had not yet happened and creating scenarios that did not exist, and then being miserable about it.

In the same way, sometimes we look into the future and see something that seems quite exciting, that we think is going to bring us some happiness. We get this kind of giddy, excited feeling even though the incident has not yet happened. This excitement stirs up our minds, takes us out of experiencing the present, connecting with people, and making our present life meaningful.

It is always good to realise that the future has not happened. Although we do make plans for it, so we have some idea of what is happening. Try not to hold too tightly to any of that, come back to the present, and make your life meaningful right now. The present is all we have whilst alive. 🍃



January 8

Dharma View of Death

Those of us bound in samsara die again and again. Witnessing death was one of the things that propelled the Buddha to leave the palace and search for the truth. Death is a reality of our lives, it is a product of causes and conditions: ignorance, afflictions, and karma. Seeing this, we generate a strong intention to free ourselves from these afflictions. This leads to the renunciation of samsara, and the aspiration to gain liberation, a state beyond the cycle of death and rebirth. For this reason, liberation is called “the deathless”.

Spend some time thinking about what the worldly fear of death is and what a Dharma concern with death is. Look into your mind and ask, “Where does that panicky fear of death come from? Where does that grief about death come from?” If we do not practise the Dharma, at the time of death, that ordinary fear of death will arise and the mind will be in fear and turmoil. If we practise the Dharma now, we can die without fear or regrets.

Whenever somebody around us dies, whether it is a bug or somebody we care about, look at it as a teaching that is reminding us of our mortality, the importance and urgency of practising to free our mind from attachment and ignorance, and to purify our destructive karma. ☸

January 9

Dharma Friends

Making good friends is incredibly important on the path. Our spiritual heart is the most important part of ourselves, and if we associate with people who value that, they will nurture that part of us. Our mind stream contains many seeds, and depending on the environment we put ourselves in and who we are friends with, they water certain seeds and not others.

Dharma friends nurture the Dharma seeds in our minds; lazy friends water our lazy seeds; resentful friends feed our resentment. Which seeds in us do we want other people to water? Depending on our answer, we should cultivate those kinds of friends. 🌱



January 10

Overcoming Depression

Lack of spirituality or spiritual direction can be a cause of depression, or at least can contribute to it. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels can be important in this regard, particularly taking refuge in the Dharma. Understanding Dharma will show us that it is possible to overcome the reasons we are stuck in samsara, that ignorance, afflictions, and karma can be counteracted, that there is a path to train our minds to eradicate the afflictions and that there is a way to overcome our self-centredness so we can work wholeheartedly for the benefit of all living beings. Having this worldview will inspire us to follow the path and attain nirvana and awakening, giving our lives great meaning and purpose.

In this way, refuge can help overcome depression — the sense of hopelessness, helplessness, and meaningless existence — and steer us in a positive direction. If we deeply cultivate refuge as our purpose and meaning in life, we will be able to see through all the stories on which our attachment, anger, and other afflictions depend, like how wonderful samsara is, or how awful someone or something is. Practising Dharma becomes very joyful as we let go of this conceptual rubbish and steer our minds back to our refuge with confidence and faith based on wisdom and knowledge. Cultivating refuge daily is important for staying clear about where we are heading in life and what we are doing. 🙏

January 11

Compassion for “The Enemy”

Think about compassion, especially for the people we tend to judge or feel threatened by or are afraid of — people who have harmed us, people whom we would usually put in the “enemy” category. Usually, when we think about those people, we think about our suffering and how they have caused us to suffer. What the Buddha asked us to experiment with, is to think of their suffering and to change the focus from us to them. Instead of having the wrong conception, “They made me suffer,” we step out of ourselves and see their situation. When we focus on their suffering, that they too are caught in the net of samsara, automatically some compassion for them arises. When we wish for them to be free of suffering, our mind softens, along with our dislike, aversion, hatred, or anger. 🙏



January 12

Looking at Your Mind

Sometimes we may look back over the past year, or even our whole life, and decide that we want to try and put to rest some things in our minds so that we do not continue carrying around a lot of bitterness or acting out old habits and patterns that just do not work. In the process of doing this, we will see a lot of junk in our minds if we are honest with ourselves. Lama Yeshe called this the “garbage mind” because it produces garbage actions that in turn cause suffering.

We may feel rather shocked when we first realise how distorted our perceptions are, but that shock can be a good thing if it inspires us to do something about our behaviour. Sometimes seeing the garbage in our mind can even deepen our faith in the Three Jewels because we realise that the Buddha understood how the mind works and how to counteract its garbage. On the other hand, we might go, “Oh, woe be me! This is too big of a thing, so I’ll just go to the pub.” We know this kind of attitude will not get us anywhere, so it is important to use our experiences constructively and not let old habitual patterns take over — like low self-esteem, self-criticism, defeatism, or wanting everything quick, cheap, and easy. We must recognise that these habits are rooted in ignorance and are part of the garbage mind to be abandoned.

Instead of following these thoughts like subjects following a dictator, we should stage a rebellion and overthrow the tyranny of self-grasping ignorance that produces all the negative habits that keep us bound to confusion and suffering. If we ever feel surprised at what is in our minds, let us use it to strengthen our refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and to increase our determination to turn things around. This is possible because all the afflictions are based on misconceptions that can be eliminated by wisdom. Let us always go forward in our practice with a very optimistic mind. ☸

January 13

***Six Recollections* by Anandabodhi Bhikkuni:** **A simple and transformative teaching**

The six recollections are simple but transformative teaching from the sutras that can be used to create a foundation of joy in our practice.

The first recollection is of the Buddha, the Awakened One. One can think of the Buddha who lived and taught in India and transformed the lives of so many beings; or we can think about the awakening potential within ourselves.

The second recollection is of the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha by reading, reflecting, and studying them. Also included is recollecting the way things are — the truths of change and impermanence, that nothing truly belongs to us or is ours, and how attachment to anything in this ever-changing world brings suffering.

The third recollection of the Sangha can refer to the monastic sangha, that is groups of people who practise together, or the Arya Sangha — those beings who have either fully awakened or are on the path to awakening. To encourage ourselves and remind us of our potential, we can recall special people we have met who are radiant, clear, and bright and who do not act out of greed or anger as ordinary folks do.

Then there is the fourth recollection of one's virtue. We are usually good at recollecting the things we think are wrong about us, but not so good at recollecting what is good. The Buddha encouraged us to recollect the times we have held back when we wanted to do harm and the times when we cultivated or acted on wholesome intentions. Cultivating awareness of the good we have manifested will encourage us to perform more virtue.

The fifth recollection is of our generosity and the positive feeling it brought us in the past. In western culture, we are not particularly encouraged to recollect our generosity, but remembering previous acts of giving starts to transform our self-

perception from a little confused person who is never going to become awakened to a flow of generosity and cultivation of virtue that is aligned with the stream of awakening.

The sixth and final recollection is of the devas, or beings living in the god realms. The classic intention is to recollect how much virtue one would need to cultivate to be reborn as a deva, but I prefer to think about how the beings whom we cannot see might benefit from our practice. Some beings have helped us and are helping us along the way. If we nourish and support the devas with our kindness and merits, they will reciprocate and enjoy our company.

Regularly recollecting the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, virtue, generosity, and devas will bring you great joy. 🙏



January 14

Finding Who You Are

Scientific reductionists seem to think we are our body, and specifically the brain. This does not make much sense because a brain separated from the body is not going to act like a person. Sometimes scientists say consciousness is an emergent property of the brain, but what exactly does this mean?

Centuries ago, they had this idea of a little homunculus hanging out behind the pineal gland, and that is really what we are saying if we say that we are located in our bodies. Spend some time checking to see if you are your body, or any of its material elements, like organs, limbs, and bones.

Next, you have to check whether the person is the consciousness. This one is harder because we are so familiar with the dictum: “I think, therefore I am.” Consciousness is what is performing the action of thinking. Buddhism views feelings and emotions as mental factors that are part of consciousness or primary minds. It is tempting to think we are all those different minds and mental factors together, but they are always changing, so which moment is us? Some mental factors cannot exist simultaneously because they are opposites, such as love and hate. Nor can you say the person is the collection of mental factors because the collection is just a bunch of individual parts.

There is a strong feeling we are our minds, and even Buddhist scriptures say the mind is what goes from lifetime to lifetime. We have to look more closely. Within one day we have so many different mental experiences, so which state of mind are we? The awake mind, the sleeping mind, or the dreaming mind? Amongst the awake minds, are we the happy mind? The miserable mind? The spaced-out mind? The alert mind? The angry mind? The wisdom mind? Search through all these different minds and see if you can find who you are. 🙏

January 15

What Others Think About Us

According to the priorities people have in their life, what they consider advantageous and disadvantageous for fulfilling those priorities will determine action. Practitioners and worldly people have very different priorities. Most of the time we are worldly people, wannabe practitioners. The worldly part tugs at us. It is so hard to let that go and to see there is really no benefit from it. Our whole life, we have been very attached to what other people think about us. That has been the most important thing.

Consider all these honour slayings that happen now and that has happened in the past, people killing each other over their honour. What is that? It is an attachment to a good reputation, isn't it? Somebody infringed on the good reputation of my family, my clan, or whoever it is, so I am going to kill the person. That is pretty heavy, isn't it? Is reputation so important, even more important than somebody's life? That is what happens when we are immersed in that kind of attachment.

The only good use of reputation is if you are trying to benefit others. If you act in a way that you earn a bad reputation, then your ability to benefit others has impinged. That is why there is a Bodhisattva vow of keeping our precepts properly to inspire other people's faith so that we can be of benefit to them. There is also another one that if our reputation is suffering because of misunderstanding, gossip, or whatever, we should try and correct any misunderstanding, not out of attachment to our reputation, but with the motivation to benefit people. This does not mean we lie and say we did not do some naughty things that we did do. It is not telling a lie to have a good reputation, "I'm going to lie because I want to maintain a good reputation so I can benefit other people by teaching them to abandon the ten non-virtues." What? Excuse me? When you are not doing it yourself? That does not make any sense.

The whole thing about the Dharma is that our virtue is not evaluated in terms of whether other people think it is virtuous or not. Our virtue is evaluated based on our intentions and our actions, and we are the only ones who can really do that.

Other people can think what we do is fantastic when it is rotten. They can think it is rotten when what we did is perfectly in accord with the Dharma. That is why we should not be attached to reputation but should listen to what the wise say. If the wise are criticising an action, or pointing out a faulty behaviour in us, then we need to pay attention. Not out of attachment to reputation, but because we know they are coming from a good place and they have the wisdom and compassion to benefit us. 🙏



January 16

Relying on the Dharma

We are born alone. Even if we have twins or triplets, even if we live our whole lives surrounded by other living beings who promise never to abandon us, can they fulfil that promise? We are born alone, and we will die alone. Even if everybody dies together at the same time, each of us has our individual experiences. Nobody else can and is able to really share our dying experience.

Not only are we born and die alone, but our friends and relations are also unreliable, aren't they? They are lovely people and they promise all sorts of things, but can they fulfil those promises? How can they fulfil those promises when they are impermanent, and under the influence of afflictions and karma? People promise to protect us from mental pain, "I'm going to love and support you forever." But do they? Their minds go up and down because they are under the influence of afflictions. One moment, they like us; the next moment, they can get mad at us. One moment, they want to always be with us; the next moment, they never want to have anything to do with us.

We may even have a bodyguard who tells us, "I'm going to protect you from anybody who tries to hurt you," but how can they protect us from suffering when they cannot even protect their own body from injury and death since all living beings can be easily injured.

When we read people's biographies, it is very interesting. Some people start with horrible circumstances when they are young, but when old, they have a very nice life. Conversely, other people start with a wonderful life when they are young, and as they age, negative karma ripens, and they experience a lot of pain and suffering. This makes me think of the Chinese aristocrats before the communist revolution and the Cultural Revolution, who wound up being imprisoned, beaten, and tortured simply because they were from the upper classes. Nobody saw this coming. Nobody could have said when somebody was born, "You know, you are going to be imprisoned by the time you're 40 years old and tortured."

All these things are controlled by other conditions, they are not self-generated things that we have control over. The mind changes. Karma changes. The only real protection in all of this is our Dharma practice, because who knows what we will wind up experiencing in this life? To have that Dharma practice we must hear teachings, reflect on them, meditate on them, and integrate them into our minds. If we do that, then these things need not be situations of great suffering. We have something we can do to transform them. ☁



January 17

Keeping the Dharma in Our Hearts

Someone wrote to me once to tell me about a very hard time she had gone through over the last year or two. She said her mind had been quite angry and now she could see that she had projected so much onto the people around her. But at that time, she could not see that; she just thought that it was the external situation that was the cause of her suffering. Looking back, she realised that she had such a rough time because she had not been practising the Dharma. She had the wrong idea that just because she had learnt the Dharma, the Dharma would always be inside her heart — even if she was not practising!

We cannot just expect the Dharma to be there for us without actively creating a relationship with the Dharma. This woman had not been actively creating that relationship, so it was not there for her when she needed it. She realised after much suffering how silly it was to think that the Dharma would be there for her when she had not been there for it.

This is something to remember. It is up to us to keep the Dharma in our hearts and create our relationship with it. We cannot expect it to be there for us if we have ignored it. On the other hand, if we have really cultivated the Dharma and the Dharma perspective on life, then it is always there for us. Or even if it is not always there, we can easily recall it when we need it. 🍵



January 18

Repaying the Kindness of Others

When we talk about repaying the kindness of others, it is easy to get confused in terms of, “How exactly do I do that? Does that mean I have to be everything everybody wants me to be and make them happy?”

No. Repaying kindness does not mean we become a people-pleaser. It does not mean that we try and squeeze ourselves so that we become what others think we should be. That is just crazy, and that is not being ourselves.

Repaying kindness means opening our hearts to see that other people are just like us; they have feelings like us, they want happiness and they do not want to suffer. And, in situations when we can be of direct benefit, we act without any kind of impediment on our side.

But sometimes we see somebody who needs help, and we go, “No. I’d better not. What are others going to think of me?” or “Eew, that’s dirty!” or “That person is beneath me. I shouldn’t help him.” There are lots of things preventing us from engaging on our end. Let us free ourselves from all these things so we are open and can reciprocate with kindness when there is the opportunity to do so and let us train our minds to do this spontaneously.

Even at times when there is nothing much we can do to help others who are suffering, or who are going down a wrong path and doing harmful things, we can still hold the thought in our mind that we want to be of benefit.

If we get discouraged and fed up and think, “I’m not going to benefit you,” then, when they change, there is not much opportunity to help anymore. The door is closed. Sometimes we need to accept people for where they are in their lives and that they are not so receptive to our help. But, things change, so we keep the door open on our side.

We cultivate love and compassion for other living beings, regardless of whether they listen to our advice or not, and whether they are what we want them to be or not. The element of acceptance is important. Otherwise, we are always going to be battling everybody and saying, “You need to be what I want you to be!” That is a dead end. We cannot even control our minds. How do we think we are going to make somebody else change? We have got to work on ourselves first. 🌱



January 19

Freeing Ourselves from Samsara

Having gained this rare ship of freedom and fortune, hear, think and meditate unwaveringly night and day in order to free yourself and others from the ocean of cyclic existence. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Our current life is precious because we have a healthy body and mind and we have encountered Buddhist teachings, Dharma friends, and Dharma texts. On our part, we also have an interest and aspiration in the Dharma, which not everybody has. Our precious human life is like a ship that takes us from where we are now — samsara — to the other shore — nirvana and Buddhahood. Recognising this, we need to consistently practise the Dharma in whatever activities we are engaged in, not just in formal practice or when we are in a Buddhist place.

We do this by hearing, thinking, and meditating on Buddhist teachings that direct us on what to practise and what to abandon. Without hearing the teachings from a reliable guide like the Buddha, we basically form our own path to awakening, which is what we have been doing so far. We do not accept teachings on blind faith, but really examine them using logic and reasoning and then apply them to our lives to see if they explain the world around us. In other words, we integrate our minds with the teachings so that they are no longer something outside ourselves, but rather something internal in how our minds think and the way we regard life. Of course, this takes practice and time, and it does not happen quickly or easily. There is no shortcut to getting around this process.

We practise the Dharma, not because we want to be great yogis and yoginis, famous spiritual practitioners, or even just for our own liberation. We hear, think, and meditate on the teachings with the motivation to free ourselves from cyclic existence and attain full Buddhahood so that we can lead others on the path to freeing them from cyclic existence. This big, long-term approach of working for the benefit of self and others also increases our short-term happiness, but we are not doing it with that motivation, because as soon as we do something just for our

happiness right now, we are working against our long-term goal of awakening. This is something to keep in mind as we go about our daily activities and see if it applies to our life or not. ☁



January 20

Working with the Yo-yo Mind

Attached to your loved ones you are stirred up like water. Hating your enemies, you burn like fire. In the darkness of confusion, you forget what to adopt and discard. Give up your homeland. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

In one part of our lives, we are attached to our friends and family. We want to be with certain people and do not want to be separated from them because we think they are going to make us everlastingly happy. We miss them when we are not with them and long to be with them. When we are with them, we do not want anything to change. When there is attachment, the mind gets completely stirred up like the ocean and waves, and the mind is not peaceful because of the clinging, wanting, and craving that are present.

Another part of our lives is hating the people who do not give us what we want, do not respect us, do not approve of us, hinder us and get in our way of the pursuit of our desires, criticise us, forget our birthdays, gossip and say bad things about us behind our backs, or hit us and harm those we are attached to. We are vengeful and spiteful towards them and just want to quarrel or bash them up either verbally, physically, or mentally. This is why Lama Yeshe said our mind is like a yo-yo — when there is someone we are attached to, we are up, and when there is somebody we cannot stand, we are down.

If we are not involved in those two, we are usually just spaced out and apathetic. We do not care about anything that does not influence us and we go through our day in automatic mode. The result is that we forget what to adopt and what to discard. Adopting refers to things we want to practise, like precepts, training in bodhicitta, and understanding the Four Noble Truths. Discarding refers to the ten non-virtues, negative thoughts, and all the afflicted mental states. We are usually very confused ethically and have thoughts such as, “It’s okay to tell this lie because it’s for the benefit of all sentient beings,” or “Being kind to this person is

not a good idea because he may hurt me later.” This confusion is what it means to be in samsara, and we are all quite similar. There are slight versions of the same theme, but these three — attachment, aversion, and indifference — pretty much run our lives.

The antidote is not necessarily heading for the nearest cave, but remodelling our internal, mental homeland — all the thoughts, habits, and conditioning we received as kids. As adults, we should go back and review everything we have learnt and throw out whatever encourages attachment or aversion. Sometimes it is very helpful to leave the place where we grew up or are living as adults, especially our expected social roles which keep us mentally imprisoned or are antithetical to our Dharma practice. Keeping some distance helps us to build up wisdom and internal antidotes, so we will not fall back into our old habits and go completely bonkers with attachment or anger if we encounter these situations again. 🍵



January 21

Guarding the Senses

By avoiding bad objects, disturbing emotions gradually decrease. Without distraction, virtuous activities naturally increase. With clarity of mind, the conviction in teaching arises. Cultivate seclusion. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Defiled states of mind, be they ignorance, anger, attachment, belligerence, laziness, concealment, deceit, pretension, or others can easily arise with exposure to all the greed and violence in the media, internet, and ads. The more that we guard our senses and take care of what we encounter and the more we guard our mind after we have come into contact with certain objects, the less likely disturbing emotions are going to arise. It does not mean we go around with blinders on, but we are careful with the situations we put ourselves into and make an effort to train the mind since it is impossible to go anywhere where we are totally free of objects of attachment.

We have had so much more time to practise without the distracting influences of the internet, TV, shopping, or gossiping with our friends. A simpler lifestyle would also free up more time because owning many things complicates our life. It can be very revealing to make a list of what we typically worry and are anxious about and keep track of how much time we spend thinking about those different things. Then, when we say, “I don’t have any time,” we can look and see what we actually did with our time.

Virtuous activities naturally increase when we are less distracted by bad objects and more clarity arises in our minds. With clarity, we can think about the Buddha’s teachings and test them out using logic and reasoning. There is no other way to gain real conviction without putting the teachings into practice and applying them to our lives and the world around us. But we need a certain amount of mental space to think about the teachings so we will not be shaken when other people ask questions or criticise Buddhist practices.

To create such space, we seclude the mind from bad objects, distractions, and other things that spark the arising of negative thoughts. One of my teachers, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, described the real meaning of retreat, which is to have the mind, body and speech retreat from non-virtue and the eight worldly concerns. Seclusion can also involve the body by finding a peaceful, less populated place to practise where we will not be bombarded so much by distractions, bad friends and the media. As beginners, we do not have much defence against these things, and we are liable to just go with the flow and wind up in trouble. 🍃



January 22

A Balanced Attitude

Loved ones who have long kept company will part. Wealth created with difficulty will be left behind. Consciousness, the guest, will leave the guesthouse of the body. Let go of this life. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Thinking about impermanence and death challenges us to think about the meaning of our life and its outcome. Nowadays, it is as if we have an obligation to keep ourselves busy all the time, but what is the point of getting so agitated over our cell phones, computers, and electronic devices if ultimately, we are all going to die? Our body and consciousness, which we label the “I” or “person”, will split at the time of death. The label “I” continues with the consciousness, but not our ego identity of this life that is based on our present nationality, ethnic group, sexual orientation, gender, profession, political party, and so on. We might think that being loved and appreciated by the people we are closest to is what makes our life meaningful, but no matter how much we love someone, we will have to separate when death comes. We will be born in one place in our future life while the people we are close to will be born in another.

The Buddha said very clearly, and it is certainly our experience, that whatever comes together has to separate. We work very hard to get money and possessions that solidify our sense of who we are. But we cannot take our wealth with us when we die, and it has the potential to become an object of dispute for our relatives. Only the karmic imprints or seeds in our minds go on to the next life. Our present actions of body, speech, and mind leave latencies and predispositions on our consciousness which influence whom we are born as next, where we are born, our habitual tendencies, and our life experiences. It is not that things are predetermined, but they are conditioned by actions we created in the past. We are all creating the causes right now for what we are going to experience in the future. Given this situation, the best way to use our current body, wealth, and relationships is to create virtue by practising generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyous effort, concentration, and wisdom.

We can use sense pleasures as objects of generosity instead of attachment, see our loved ones as objects to practise equanimity with, and people we do not like can be used as objects of patience.

We still have all these things in our life, but we can learn to employ them differently so that our mind reacts in a constructive and wholesome manner. As we start to develop the view of future lives as more important, we will experience more satisfaction and happiness in this life since clinging only brings dissatisfaction and fear of loss. We do not need to go to the other extreme of shunning people we are attached to, giving away all our wealth, or depriving our bodies, since none of these benefit sentient beings and may cause more problems. We just need to keep a balanced attitude towards these things without clinging. 🙏



January 23

Avoiding Bad Friends

When you keep their company your three poisons increase, your activities of hearing, thinking, and meditating decline, and they make you lose your love and compassion. Give up bad friends. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

One of my teachers, Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, used to point out that bad friends are not people with horns on their heads and evil scowls hooking us on skewers. Rather, they are simply people who only think about the happiness of this life. Even if they know about their future lives, it is not important to them. They say things like, “Why are you going to a retreat? You are just going to sit on a cushion and look at your belly button all day.” Other bad friends might say to us, “A retreat’s okay, but come out to the movies with us too. Don’t be so extreme in what you’re doing.” These people may really love us and care for us, but because they do not understand karma and rebirth, their whole way of helping us focuses on only the happiness of this life — “Find a nice partner, settle down, have a good career, and get that car you always wanted, that will make you happy.”

Another kind of bad friend is someone who does not have good ethical standards, whose influence leads us to break our precepts and get involved in the ten non-virtues. They encourage us to do things like retaliate against those who have harmed us, break company rules when the boss is not around, conceal information on our income taxes, and watch pornography or violent movies. Very often these are people we have been friends with for a long time. Our old drinking and drugging buddies turn out to be bad friends from a Dharma viewpoint because our three poisons increase when we keep their company.

All this can happen in a very subtle way, and we are not even aware of it until we suddenly realise we stopped doing our morning practice a few weeks ago, and are spending more time in front of the video screen than reading

Dharma books. Gradually our activities of hearing, thinking, and meditating decline and we lose love and compassion because these friends encourage our anger and self-centredness. The remedy is to develop some discriminating wisdom that helps us distinguish a good friend from a bad friend. We need to be very conscientious about who we hang out with because it makes a huge difference to our practice. 🙏



January 24

A Qualified Spiritual Mentor

When you rely on them your faults come to an end and your good qualities grow like the waxing moon. Cherish spiritual teachers even more than your own body. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

How are we influenced by spiritual teachers and friends? There is a quote in the Upaddha Sutta (S.N. 45.2) where Ananda said that spiritual friends are half of the spiritual life, and the Buddha corrected him and said, “No, spiritual friendship is all of the spiritual life.” Some people think this refers to our regular Dharma friends, but in the sutra, the Buddha went on to talk about himself as the spiritual guide whose guidance we should follow. The Buddha is our ultimate spiritual friend from whom all the teachings came, but we must depend on other people to give us the teachings because the Buddha is not alive today.

Forming a relationship with a spiritual friend is quite important because books cannot give us the inspiration of an actual human being who is practising the path, who is going through or has gone through some of what we are going through. Also, a book cannot point out our faults in a very direct manner, whereas a spiritual mentor can really pinpoint the things we need to look at. This requires opening and establishing Dharma relationships rather than doing everything ourselves. When we have a relationship where there is a lot of respect and admiration and trust for our spiritual mentor, we take to heart our mentor’s advice and do our best to practise their teachings. In the process, our faults will come to an end and our good qualities increase as we practise the Dharma.

Having a good relationship with a qualified spiritual mentor will help us not only in this lifetime but will also lead to a good rebirth if we create good karma by following our mentor’s teachings. We may also have the opportunity to reconnect with the same spiritual teachers in future lives if we make

strong prayers. Conversely, the last thing we want to do is to create negative karma that sends us to the lower realms by establishing a connection with an unqualified teacher over multiple lifetimes. We need to rely on people who have the proper practice, knowledge, and motivation of wanting to help us for our sake, not because they want offerings, followers, or prestige. ☸



January 25

Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels

*Bound himself in the jail of cyclic existence, what worldly god can give you protection?
Therefore, when you seek refuge, take refuge in the Three Jewels which will not betray you.
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

In Buddhism, we take refuge in the Three Jewels: The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Refuge is important to consider. The Buddha, who broke free from cyclic existence, can show us the way to awakening. The Dharma is the actual refuge, the true path, and the true cessation of suffering that, when actualised, frees our mind and turns it into our refuge. We take refuge in the Arya Sangha, those beings that have directly realised emptiness. Sangha in the conventional sense refers to a community of four or more monastics.

Sometimes in the West people use the term Sangha to refer to anybody who goes to a Buddhist centre. The latter usage is particularly confusing because people who attend Buddhist centres are not necessarily Buddhists and may not have taken the five lay precepts. The Sangha we take refuge in is special — those with actual realisations, who are represented by the monastic community.

We can be sure that the Three Jewels will not betray us because compassion is what propelled the Buddha to realise the nature of reality, and he has absolutely no self-centred motivation to harm, mislead or manipulate us. However, chances are great that we will be misled by worldly gods, spirits, or psychics. It is funny how concerned we get when a fortune-teller tells us some bad karma is about to ripen and immediately do purification practices, but there is no rush when the Buddha tells us the same thing. It is important to learn about the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha so our faith in them becomes stable. We should know what we believe in and why we believe it after having examined the teachings and gained conviction. Otherwise, somebody else might come along and teach something that sounds good, and we will end up as followers of the next Jim Jones. ☸

January 26

Waking Up to Karma

The Subduer said that all the unbearable suffering of bad rebirths is the fruit of wrongdoing. Therefore, even at the cost of your life, never do wrong. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Any suffering we experience, such as bad rebirths or any physical or mental pain we experience in this life, comes about because of the negative actions we have done either earlier in this life or, more likely, in previous lives. When we understand that our suffering is due to our past actions, we stop blaming whoever was involved in our present suffering. To learn from our situation, we decide not to accumulate any more negative karma that could lead to similar suffering in future lives.

We might think that our life is the most valuable thing we have and worth protecting even at the cost of killing, stealing, or lying. But there is no guarantee our negative actions will successfully preserve this life, which we are going to lose eventually. And at the time of our death, we must take with us to our next life whatever negative karma we had created in order to preserve this life. We may end up trading the short period of happiness left in our current life for a longer period of misery in the lower realms.

We need to wake up and question the rationalising mind that dismisses the karmic results of small negative actions. We also need to pause and look at what is going on in our minds when we are doing negative actions — are we unaware that it is a negative action, in which case we need to study more about the Dharma so we can tell the difference between positive and negative actions? Are we not being mindful and having no idea of what we are doing? Then, we need to restore our mindfulness and awareness so that we are attentive to our actions. Are we being reckless and just not concerned about the suffering we will receive from a negative action because we are getting some happiness right now? In this case, we need to cultivate some conscientiousness that cherishes virtue and think about the effects of our actions.

Maybe we know what we are doing and realise it is negative, but our mind is just overwhelmed by the strong force of afflictions. In that case, we need to strengthen our antidotes to the afflictions, so they do not overpower our minds and control our actions. We should use our energy to do the opposite of the ten negative actions in addition to refraining from them. These are practical things like not killing, but protecting life, and not stealing, but being generous. ☁



January 27

Broadening our Spectrum of Aspiration

Like dew on the tip of a blade of grass, pleasures of the three worlds last only a while and then vanish. Aspire to the never-changing supreme state of liberation. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

The three worlds are the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm. The desire realm pleasures are sense pleasures, and form and formless realm pleasures come from concentration, but all of them last for only a short while. If we think back, even in this life, we have had a lot of pleasure and happiness, but where is it today? We have all worked very hard to accomplish certain things in the past, but what happened to the happiness and pleasure we experienced afterwards? At the end of our life, we can end up with a lot of photo albums, scrapbooks and journals, but where is the actual life that we lived? It will be gone, gone, gone. We may have some stories to tell, but is the purpose of our life to accumulate good stories?

Think about the image of a drop of dew on a blade of grass. It is there in the morning but disappears when the sun comes out and never returns. It is the same with the transient happiness we experience in cyclic existence, which is grade “F” happiness because it does not last very long. It is here and then it is gone, and in the meantime, we experience much unhappiness trying to get it. We also create a ton of negative karma, which follows us to our future lives. We are so locked into the vision of just this life that we think everything that exists is only what we are experiencing now, and all that can ever be labelled “I” is who we are right now, in this body. That is such a narrow vision of what is happening on the conventional level, let alone the fact that there is no inherently existent person there to experience it.

The Buddhas are trying hard to get us to open our minds so we can attain a kind of happiness and bliss that does not let us down, leave us, and is not just a slideshow at the end of a lifetime, but a state of bliss that comes from freeing

our mind from afflictions and karma. A state of bliss that comes from generating bodhicitta and knowing that we are making our lives meaningful for all sentient beings in the long term. We just need to broaden the spectrum and see that the supreme state of liberation is completely within our reach. We can create the causes for this kind of result with the proper motivation and joyous effort. ☁



January 28

Kind Mother Sentient Beings

When your mothers, who have loved you since time without beginning, are suffering, what use is your happiness? Therefore, to free limitless living beings, develop the altruistic intention. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Most people have a strong bond with their mother, and even if they do not, we can all appreciate the fact that our mother gave birth to us, fed us, potty-trained us, taught us how to speak, and everything else. We moved in after birth as a total stranger and stayed for the next forty years (it used to be eighteen, but now kids stay home a lot longer). If our birth mother could not take care of us, she made provisions for somebody else to do it, because she wanted us to thrive and become contributing members of society.

Considering that all sentient beings have been our mothers since beginningless time, we think that we have this kind of relationship with all other living beings. Then instead of feeling left out, ignored and unloved, we realise we have received a lot of kindness and affection from others, and a wish to repay them naturally arises. When we reflect on how they too are going around and around in samsara under the influence of afflictions and karma, we will not be satisfied and content with just our own liberation. Working for personal liberation alone does not seem right because the whole reason we have the opportunity to practise the Dharma is that other people have helped us in the past.

Our practice takes on a whole different flavour when we develop the altruistic intention of bodhicitta, which is the mind that seeks to attain full awakening as soon as possible, to benefit all sentient beings most effectively. When we take the Bodhisattva vow, we commit ourselves to doing this, and this wonderful long-term motivation helps us overcome frustration and obstacles along the path. Thinking this way is very helpful for dealing with a two-year-old mind of attachment that whines, “I want this, I want that,”

or a rebellious teenager mind that snaps, “Who are you to tell me what to do?” Turning your mind towards bodhicitta inspires you to drop whatever ignorance, anger, or attachment you are stuck in at the moment. ☁



January 29

Taking and Giving

All suffering comes from the wish for your own happiness. Perfect Buddhas are born from the thought to help others. Therefore, exchange your happiness for the suffering of others. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

The self-centred mind thinks its happiness and suffering are more important than everybody else's, and that everyone has been put on the planet to serve it. Conflict inevitably occurs because everyone has this same thought! The self-centred mind is what tries to get everyone to side with us against somebody we do not like; it is what seeks revenge, gets jealous, and is easily offended. We are very unhappy when the self-centred mind is active on a day-to-day basis and it leads us to create much negative karma through committing the ten non-virtuous actions of killing, stealing, unwise sexual conduct, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, idle talk, coveting, malicious thoughts, and wrong views. It is essential that we realise we are not our self-centred thoughts and abandon them as soon as we identify them.

The bodhicitta motivation is what pushes a Bodhisattva to keep meditating and accumulating the vast store of merit that is necessary to become a fully awakened Buddha. We need to be able to discern our motivation for helping others, which should be ensuring their happiness instead of pitying them or wanting to get something from them.

The taking-and-giving meditation of tonglen is based on exchanging self and others. This involves shifting the basis of the "I" in "I want happiness" to all other sentient beings and shifting the "you" in "You are less important" to ourselves.

We imagine breathing in others' suffering, which turns into a lightning bolt and bombards the wall of self-centredness around our hearts until it is

completely demolished. At this point, we no longer suffer from self-centredness or self-grasping, and other sentient beings no longer suffer the results of their karma or afflictions. From within that open space in our heart, we imagine multiplying our body, possessions, and virtues, and radiating them as light to others. These gifts become the physical and mental circumstances required for other sentient beings to meet the Dharma and attain awakening. Keep focusing on compassion, giving, and love. Practising well helps us to generate the mind of bodhicitta. 🍃



January 30

Practising in the Face of Adversity

Even if someone out of strong desire steals all your wealth or has it stolen, dedicate to him your body, possessions, and your virtue, past, present and future. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

How do we feel when somebody borrows a book and does not return it, or borrows ten dollars and does not pay us back? We are not happy campers. Imagine how angry and upset we would be if we came home to find everything gone — our car, clothes, mementos, computer, and all our devices. To make matters worse, our possessions were stolen only out of strong desire, not because the thief was poverty-stricken.

By transforming our minds, we can develop compassion for the thief who, out of strong attachment, created a lot of bad karma by ripping off our stuff. We can do tonglen practice for him and offer our body, possessions, and virtue in whatever form he needs. We can pray for him to meet the Dharma, not so that he learns about karma and gives our stuff back, but for his own well-being. It may sound impossible but changing our minds in this direction even just a little is beneficial. The only other response is being totally freaked out and belligerent and wanting revenge because we feel violated. A third choice might be going out and getting drunk or drugged out, but the anger would still be there and could come back through the fog.

Instead, we can free our minds of anger by looking at the other person's situation and cultivating love and compassion. We can also reflect on how the theft happened as a result of our own previous acts of stealing, and the negative karma is now finished, whereas the poor fellow who did this is going to suffer through awful rebirths. Negative situations like these can really spur us in our Dharma practice and make our minds happier and more peaceful. ☸

January 31

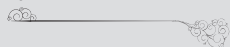
Transforming Anger

Even if someone tries to cut off your head when you have not done the slightest thing wrong, out of compassion take all her misdeeds upon yourself. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

When someone does something to us that we do not like, we usually feel like we have not done anything wrong. This then justifies our retaliation, and the others whom we have harmed will also think in the same way. Regardless of whether we have done something wrong or not, the fact is that the bad karma we created by harming someone in the past is now ripening, so there is no sense in being angry at the person harming us now. This does not mean that we deserve to suffer, just that whoever we were in a previous life was overwhelmed with negativity and did something harmful. It could have happened three gazillion aeons ago, but karma, once created, stays in the mindstream if we do not purify it. We should use this knowledge to motivate ourselves in the evening if we do not feel like doing our purification practice.

We can do the meditation on taking-and-giving, tonglen, where we take all our aggressor's misdeeds upon ourselves with compassion. Instead of getting immersed in our own trauma and betrayal and throwing a pity party, we take their negative karma into ourselves, which turns into a thunderbolt that destroys the lump of self-centredness in our hearts. From the clear open space, we generate compassion and give them our bodies, possessions, and all our virtue from the past, present and future. The best thing we can wish for anybody who hurt us is to meet and practise the Dharma in future lives because they will be much less likely to harm us again. Our gut reaction of retaliation and anger is particularly inappropriate because the more we harm somebody who harmed us, the more they are going to harm us back. This is the dynamics behind so many long-standing wars and personal disputes, so it is better to take all their misdeeds upon ourselves with compassion and wish them well. 🙏

February



*Cultivating a Compassionate
Heart for great happiness*



February 1

Working with Criticism

Even if someone broadcasts all kinds of unpleasant remarks about you throughout the three thousand worlds, in return, with a loving mind, speak of his good qualities. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

One of our biggest attachments is our reputation. If somebody broadcasts one tiny unpleasant remark about us to the cat, we get completely freaked out and angry. Even yogis living in caves can get hooked on their reputation amongst town people as great renunciants and meditators. Attachment to reputation can become a big problem for us, and the greater it is, the more bent out of shape we get when other people do not agree with how wonderful we think we are. If somebody broadcasts unpleasant remarks about us, we want to trash them in return to anyone who will listen, instead of doing the exact opposite.

We take out our file of all their faults that we have been saving up and give them all kinds of negative psychological diagnoses. All this is driven by our self-grasping which needs to protect the “I” from any kind of criticism. We get so bent out of shape because we have become very dependent on other people to tell us who we are. We did not have much discriminating wisdom when we were kids and believed all kinds of information people gave us about ourselves. Some of these messages were not correct, so we need to sort through them as adults and let go of false ones. When we are better able to assess our own strengths and weaknesses, what other people say will not hit us as strongly. We will also know if we are acting properly by checking our motivations.

The goal is to have space in our minds so that we are not so defensive about every tiny comment people make about us and can appreciate others’ good qualities despite their faults. We will be more likely to try and work things out with whoever criticises us instead of never speaking to them again. And we do not talk about their good qualities just because we are Dharma practitioners, but because we have transformed our minds and can actually see some good qualities to speak of. 🙏

February 2

Unexpected Spiritual Teachers

Though someone may deride and speak bad words about you in a public gathering, look on her as a spiritual teacher, and bow to her with respect. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

There you are, in a staff meeting, or family gathering, or with your Dharma group and spiritual mentor, and some loud-mouthed jerk comes in and trashes you in front of everybody. Or you are in front of a whole auditorium full of people receiving an award and somebody stands up and says something like, “You don’t really deserve that award.” In such situations, there are not a lot of alternatives: we can either fly into a rage, cry and stomp out of the room, slam the door, or we can work with our mind.

It is impossible for our self-centred mind to see the jerk who is criticising us as our spiritual teacher, but it is quite possible from the viewpoint of the Dharma mind. Why? If we have such a dramatic reaction to somebody smearing our reputation, clearly, we have some attachment to reputation, a little bit of an ego problem. We are not mad at the person for the benefit of all sentient beings, but rather because she is interfering with our happiness. This person becomes our spiritual teacher because she forces us to look at our self-centred mind, the “me” whose self-confidence went out the window because of a few harsh words.

When we do emptiness meditation, the first step in the four-point analysis is to identify the object of negation, which is the inherently existent “I” that we believe exists, but which has never in fact existed. The scriptures recommend recalling a time when we were unjustly accused, or someone smeared our reputation because the “I” comes up very strongly in these instances. With the object of negation clearly in front of us, we are able to do the analysis.

One of my friends had just painted the inside of the temple where his spiritual teacher lived. When his teacher came in, the teacher tore his work

to bits. My friend clearly became dismayed, and his teacher looked at him and said, “That’s the object of negation.” His teacher was teaching him about emptiness meditation by showing him the object of negation — his “I” — very clearly. Those who publicly deride us are doing the same thing, so we should bow to them with respect because our Dharma practice is more important than our reputation. We can use the opportunity to meditate on emptiness instead of getting upset and bummed out like we have done in similar situations since beginningless time. ☁



February 3

Enduring Painful Experiences

Even if a person for whom you have cared like your own child regards you as an enemy, cherish him specially, like a mother does to her child who is stricken by sickness. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

People we have cared for deeply turn their backs on us and see us as their worst enemies. If we are going to practise the Bodhisattva path, we must be able to endure painful experiences like this without our minds getting totally bent out of shape and falling into anger, self-pity, self-righteousness, or any of the usual things we do when sentient beings are not behaving as we think they should.

We can reflect on how the mistreatment we have received is our own negative karma ripening, and how the afflictions lead all sentient beings, including ourselves, to do and say outrageous things. If we spend just a couple of minutes, we can also probably think of times we have treated people who cared for us like an enemy. We do not always appreciate our parents during our growing-up days and we probably gave them a lot of headaches. Accepting others' kindness and generosity but later turning on them can happen in friendships, work relationships, student-teacher relationships, and so on. Should someone turn against us, we can use the opportunity to reflect on times we have done something similar. We can generate regret, and make amends by calling up or writing to whoever we have offended to apologise.

We can also view the person who betrayed us as a child with a raging fever whose mind is out of control. The child may be kicking and screaming and calling his mother names, but she does not take it personally and keeps looking after him with a lot of love. In the same way, we can have love and compassion for people who turn against us because their mind is overwhelmed by afflictions. 🙏

February 4

Sore Spots

If an equal or inferior person disparages you out of pride, place her, as you would your spiritual teacher, with respect on the crown of your head. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

These jerks do not leave us alone, do they? They spread bad stories about us throughout three thousand worlds, deride us at public gatherings, betray our trust after we cared for them like our own children, and even cut off our head. Then someone who knows less than we do or has a lower social status or ranking in the company hierarchy, disparages us out of pride. At least this verse does not say that she does it in front of a big group, but she might.

Is it just our pride that makes us feel so insulted by what they said? We could also be mistaking a difference of opinion as a personal criticism or assault. If we listen more closely, often people are just expressing their ideas about how to do something differently from our ways, but we feel insulted and put down because of how our mind interprets the situation.

We are encouraged to respect the person who disparages us as if she were our spiritual teacher because she is pointing out which defilements we need to work on. Of course, we would rather she tells us in a sweet, loving tone while reminding us of all our good qualities, as our teacher would do. But she is still performing the same job by pointing out where our sore spots are and what we need to work on. We keep her on the crown of our heads and check in with her throughout the day to see how our practice is doing, and whether we are acting with compassion and seeing situations as empty. 🍃

February 5

Discouragement is a Form of Laziness

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

Sometimes we lack physical things we need like food, clothes or shelter, but we also have emotional distress because we are disparaged by others and lack external support. On top of this, we are experiencing health problems due to sickness, injury or harm from spiritual entities. Usually in any of these situations — let alone all three at once — we complain, blame others, get discouraged or depressed, and have a pity party.

At work is the samsaric, self-centred mind that feels entitled to better and more, or fears we are not good enough for the world to give us anything. Instead of succumbing to this mind, which keeps us immersed in suffering and prevents us from actualising our spiritual aspirations, we can do the taking-and-giving meditation of exchanging our happiness for the pain of all living beings. It is very important that we do this without discouragement, however, the meditation will not work well unless we have realised that the self-centred thought is our enemy. Viewing ourselves as martyrs taking on the suffering of others who do not appreciate us will only lead to more discouragement.

From a Buddhist perspective, discouragement is a form of laziness because it is the mind indulging in self-centred thought. Once I had an infection in my big toe when I was living at a monastery in France many years ago. We were in the countryside, and I could not get to the doctor until the following morning, so I had to endure the pain all night. I spent the night in the meditation hall doing the taking-and-giving meditation, starting out with sentient beings with pain in their big toes, then spreading out to others. I also tried to view the situation as a way to develop the qualities of the Bodhisattvas I admire so much. I began to see how physical pain was one thing, and how

the self-centred way I was dealing with it was causing me much more misery. Employing the taking-and-giving meditation can be a very effective method of relaxing and calming our mind in situations of physical or mental suffering. It also increases our compassion and empathy, so we are more inclined to help others we encounter who are suffering. 🍃



February 6

Worldly Fortune is Without Essence

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

The Buddha warned about all the ego problems and power trips that can arise if we become rich, famous and well-respected through our worldly careers. Even if we are monastics, when we become well-known and respected and are the recipient of lots of offerings, it is very tempting for the worldly mind to show up and convince us that we are a big shot, that people should do things for us, that we should be more famous and powerful than we are.

To prevent this from happening, it is important to see that worldly fortune is without essence — it comes and goes, goes and comes very quickly in this life, and when we die it is gone. Worldly fortune does not mean we are good people or good practitioners. Unlike good karma, renown and wealth cannot follow us to our future lives. It is important not to get hung up on these things or see them as indicative of being a good practitioner, which could make us conceited or too lax and complacent in our practice.

We need to be meditating on the essence-less nature of worldly fortune way before we become famous, rich and respected because afflicted mental states are more likely to arise first. It is important to be humble and to always see ourselves as a student. His Holiness the Dalai Lama views himself in this way and as a servant of others despite his status, wealth and fame. This is exactly the kind of behaviour and attitude that we should cultivate. 🙏

February 7

The Chief Enemy of Compassion

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

Compassion is a very important element on the Bodhisattva path. Without it, there is no way to benefit sentient beings or attain awakening. The chief enemy of compassion is anger because when we are angry at someone, be it ourselves or others, it is impossible to have compassion for them at the same time.

As we know from our own experience, anger can be disastrous. We can all probably think of times in our life when we were overwhelmed by our anger, we have said or done things to people we cared about, things that we regret and never would have done if anger had not overtaken our mind. Anger destroys or prevents merits from ripening that may have taken us years, lifetimes or aeons to acquire. There is really nothing good to say about anger except that it is possible to eliminate it, so we need to strive for this instead of telling ourselves we are a bad person because we got angry. It is crucial that we do not identify with the anger and instead, see it as an enemy afflicting our minds that is only causing harm to ourselves and others.

Just as a militia trains and works together and does not give up until the enemy is conquered, to combat the enemy of our own anger we must develop strong love that wants others to be happy and strong compassion that wants them to be free of suffering. We need to nurture these attitudes conscientiously and deliberately by practising the meditations for cultivating bodhicitta, such as the seven-point instruction of cause and effect, or equalising and exchanging self for others. As our mind gets more familiar with love and compassion, anger cannot arise as easily because our whole attitude towards others has shifted. A mind grounded in loving-kindness and compassion also makes it much easier to subdue any anger that does happen to arise. ☸

February 8

Combating Consumer Culture

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

Drinking saltwater to quench your thirst actually does the opposite and only makes you more thirsty. The same thing happens when our mind is filled with attachment and is thirsting for things outside itself. The more we indulge in the things we crave, the more our clinging and dissatisfaction increase because the happiness that worldly things provide is very brief. This is why many people in the United States, no matter how much they have, still suffer incredible dissatisfaction and discontent.

Consumer culture is like drinking saltwater because we always want more and better, more and better. The antidote to this situation is not giving up everything in life — and clearly, we cannot do without things like food, clothes, medicine and shelter — but rather giving up our attachment to them. We can still have friends and relationships, just healthier ones free of attachment. If our mind has not yet trained in other ways of relating to these things, it is going to be very difficult to abandon our attachment to them. For many people, attachment automatically arises when they see a chocolate cake, something beautiful in a store, or an attractive person. Distancing ourselves from these objects and developing a sense of caution around them will give us some space in which to retrain and subdue our mind so attachment cannot rear up and overwhelm us. As we do this, we realise that we can live very well without the things we thought we could not live without. In fact, our mind is more peaceful when it is free of the clinging, craving, worrying and fear that accompany things we are very attached to.

Freeing our mind from attachment is an essential Bodhisattva practice for many reasons. Samsara looks wonderful from the point of view of attachment, so we cannot generate the determination to be free from it if attachment is

in our mind. Attachment also interferes with our bodhicitta motivation, since having genuine love and compassion for the beings we are attached to is quite difficult. Similarly, it is difficult to meditate when the mind keeps flitting from one object of attachment to the next, which interferes with generating the wisdom that sees the actual nature of these objects. We cannot let go of clinging attachment all at once, but we can start by identifying what we are attached to most and start chipping away, feeling more peaceful as we do. 🍃



February 9

Ultimate Nature of Reality

Whatever appears is your own mind. Your mind from the start was free from fabricated extremes. Understanding this, do not take to mind inherent signs of subject and object. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

All phenomena exist dependently and have done so from the start, which really means “by their nature” since there is no beginning in Buddhism. Yet, due to ignorance, our mind projects inherent existence onto phenomena, which then appear back to us as their inherent nature. We believe that things have their own intrinsic nature or essence that distinguishes them from other phenomena and makes them what they are.

But neither the perceiving mind as the subject nor the perceived phenomena as the object, have any inherent existence. They actually exist dependently in four ways — upon one another, upon causes and conditions, upon parts, and upon being conceived and labelled. Repeated familiarisation with this realisation will enable us to cleanse ignorance and afflictions and their seeds from the mindstream and attain arhatship, or the full awakening of a Buddha. 🙏



February 10

No Face in the Mirror

When you encounter attractive objects, though they seem beautiful like a rainbow in summer, do not regard them as real and give up attachment. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

What is ultimate nature? The emptiness of inherent existence. When we see something that is attractive, it looks like a real object, out there, objective, having its own essence. The appearance of inherent existence comes on many levels. The beauty appears to be inherently existent in the object, and the object itself also appears inherently existent. It appears to have its own nature, to set itself up, to exist unrelated to the mind. Actually, the object is empty of existing in that way. It exists dependent on its parts, dependent on causes and conditions, and more subtly, dependent on our mind conceiving and labelling it. A rainbow in summer looks very beautiful and there is an appearance of colours even though the colours are not really there. Just like a reflection of a face in the mirror, there is no face in the mirror, but there is the reflection. These are analogies that show how things appear in one way but exist in another. There appears to be a real face, but there is not; there appears to be a real rainbow and real colours, but there are not.

When we see that things do not exist from their own side with their own nature, we should not go to the extreme of saying there is nothing there whatsoever. Things do exist, but dependently, nominally, conventionally, and only on the level of appearances. This goes not only for external things, but also for other persons and for ourselves. If we think about an attractive person we can see that not only is there no inherent beauty or attractiveness in that person, there is no inherent person there to start with. Similarly, with us, there is no inherently existent person there to defend or please, or who is all embroiled in suffering. There is only a conventionally existent person. The more we grasp ourselves as inherently existent, the more everything becomes a big deal in relation to this very exaggerated way of apprehending the self. This is what we want to penetrate in order to see the ultimate nature of how things exist, which is nominally independent of being merely labelled, and yet ultimately empty of any inherent existence or nature that we project onto them. ☸

February 11

Like an Illusion

All forms of suffering are like a child's death in a dream. Holding illusory appearances to be true makes you weary. Therefore, when you meet with disagreeable circumstances, see them as illusory. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Things are like illusions because they do exist (as dependent phenomena), just not in the way in which they appear to our senses and mental consciousness (as having their inherent nature). When considering emptiness, it is extremely important to properly identify the object of negation and then negate it by proving to ourselves that it is totally impossible for an inherently existent “I” to exist.

Even if we attain incredible levels of samadhi and have visions of all sorts of different deities or deep experiences of bodhicitta, we will never get out of samsara, let alone attain awakening, unless we correctly identify the inherently existent “I” and negate it. To get out of cyclic existence, we must see that the object grasped by ignorance — inherent existence — does not exist at all, has never existed, and will never exist. Our understanding of emptiness is conceptual at first and appears through the veil of a meaning that is generalised or a mental image. The next step is the union of serenity and special insight, where we combine this understanding with serenity meditation. The mind still has a very subtle mental image of emptiness at this time, but by repeatedly meditating on this, we can remove the subtle image and directly penetrate emptiness. Then we use our direct non-conceptual perception of emptiness to cleanse the mind of acquired afflictions learnt through wrong philosophies, followed by the innate afflictions we have had since beginningless time, and even the subtle latencies of the innate afflictions that prevent awakening.

Like waking up from a dream in which our child dies, understanding the emptiness of the “I”, our aggregates, and all other phenomena eliminate our sufferings by eliminating the false view that is the basis of our attachment. If we can learn to see everything as an illusion, we can save ourselves all the anxiety and weariness that result from grasping at them as truly existent. 🙏

February 12

Incredible Generosity

When those who want awakening must give even their body, there is no need to mention external things. Therefore, without hope for a return or any fruition, give generously. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

It is recommended that we keep our body and use it to practise the Dharma before we have directly realised the emptiness of inherent existence at the Path of Seeing and above. That said, at some point along the path to awakening, we want to be able to relinquish everything — even our body — without any fear and attachment. If we are going to work with our mind to be able to relinquish our body one day, let us start with simple things that are easier to give away.

We can see our miserliness coming up in all sorts of incredible ways — there may be something that we have not even thought about or used for years, but then when the opportunity comes to give it away, we cling to it and cannot let it go. It also emphasises giving without the expectation of getting something in return, whether physical or emotional and without hope for any kind of karmic fruition. At lower levels of the path, it is fine to be generous because we know we will be getting something in return in future lives, but we do not want to be attached to karmic fruition if we are practising as a Bodhisattva. We want to make sure that our giving is done with a bodhicitta motivation and within the context of our long-term spiritual aims. We give not just to benefit somebody, but also to create the merit that will ripen to propel us along the Bodhisattva path and attaining final Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings. There are many things we can give generously — material goods, time and service, protection to beings who are in danger, and encouragement and affection to those who need it. We can also give the Dharma by teaching, leading meditations, giving Dharma counselling, and sharing the Dharma in any way we can with others. 🙏

February 13

Foundation of Our Well-being

Without ethics, you cannot accomplish your well-being, so wanting to accomplish others' is laughable. Therefore, without worldly aspirations, safeguard your ethical conduct. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

In America, you find a lot of people who want to practise the Buddha-dharma, love the idea of bodhicitta, want to save all sentient beings, want to practise Tantra and do Dzogchen. But when you tell them to stop lying, sleeping around with other people, or drinking and drugging, they get really offended. The above verse is a warning that is exactly against this — wanting to do all sorts of high practices and thinking that we can get some results without a good foundation of ethical discipline.

How in the world can we cultivate bodhicitta and help others if we are not even willing to restrain our negative actions that will harm them? Ethical conduct is the foundation of our well-being; without it, we will not have good rebirths with conducive circumstances for practising the Dharma, let alone gain any realisations that would help us accomplish others' well-being. Keeping ethical conduct is worthwhile because it accrues so much benefit not only in future lives but in this life too. We get along better with other people and our mind is much happier.

Ethical conduct can be of body, speech and mind. The Pratimoksha vows, some of the monastic vows and the five lay precepts govern physical and verbal actions. The Bodhisattva and Tantric vows also focus on physical and verbal actions, but especially highlight the acts at the level of the mind. Even the Pratimoksha vows get us to look at the mind because we have to look at why we may do things that contradict the vows that we have taken. Taking vows is a very good practice for increasing mindfulness of our actions and how we want to be in this world, and for increasing our alertness or vigilance, which checks up and sees how we are doing. As our mindfulness and alertness get firmer in the field of ethical conduct,

there is a carry-over effect in our meditation because these two mental factors are very important for developing concentration. The carry-over effect from ethics into concentration eventually helps us to develop wisdom.

We also want to make sure that we have a bodhicitta motivation behind our ethical conduct instead of worldly aspirations like wanting others to know that we are pure and holy. That is just ego contamination and conceit over ethical conduct. Another worldly aspiration is keeping ethical conduct simply because we want a good rebirth. Ethical conduct as a Bodhisattva practice is for the longer-term goal of accomplishing others' welfare by attaining full awakening. 🍃



February 14

Practising Patience

To Bodhisattvas who want a wealth of virtue, those who harm are like a precious treasure. Therefore, towards all cultivate patience without hostility. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Bodhisattvas are a bit different from us. When we meet a person who is obnoxious or harms us, someone who is rude, sarcastic or lazy, who criticises us, interferes with our happiness, or blames us for things that we did not do, beats us up, disappoints us, or does anything else we do not like, we want to get as far away from the person as possible. We are upset, we are angry, we are offended, we are resentful, and we want to harm the person in some way. We blame the other person for our hostility, but it is due to the anger and the seed of anger in us. As long as we have those, we are going to find somebody to be upset with no matter what others do.

If Buddhas surrounded us, we would misinterpret their actions and project something onto them just to replay the same habitual emotional patterns of feeling hurt and wanting to harm. For Bodhisattvas — whose primary focus is to free themselves from samsara and eliminate the obscurations that prevent them from seeing all sentient beings as wanting happiness and not wanting to suffer — people who harm them are like precious treasures. Bodhisattvas realise that they need to create a wealth of virtue to attain full Buddhahood, and one of the best ways to create merit is by practising patience. We cannot practise with the people that we like or the people who are kind to us, so those we perceive as being harmful to us are the most valuable for our Dharma practice. Seeing them as precious treasures will enable us to let go of our hostility and hurt and develop love, compassion, and tolerance for them. Practising the far-reaching attitude of patience is what will take us across this ocean of samsara, so we need to prioritise it rather than take revenge or put the people who harm us in their place.

We should try and understand the disadvantages of anger and the benefits of cherishing others. Anger has two functions — it prevents our good karma from

ripening while creating a lot of negative karma. Looking deeply at anger, we can see how it makes us unhappy now and in the future by bringing horrible rebirths and preventing our good karma from ripening. When we notice ourselves getting angry or spiteful, instead of assuming that the emotion is right and there is nothing we can do besides suppressing it, we can call our mind back to a reasonable state where we ask ourselves, “Does this benefit me?” If we do this enough, we will begin to get a gut feeling of how anger does not help us and is in fact our enemy. 🍵



February 15

A Happy Mind

Seeing even Hearers and Solitary Realisers, who accomplish only their own good, strive as if to put out a fire on their head, for the sake of all living beings make enthusiastic effort, the source of all good qualities. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

When we really have an idea of what cyclic existence is, there will not be any equivocation or ambiguity about what we should do. Our priorities will be very clear and we will put all our energy towards doing what we need to, instead of lounging around wasting time and getting distracted and depressed. Joyous effort helps us on the method side of the path through practising generosity, ethical conduct and patience, and also on the wisdom side of the path because it takes delight in virtue, from which so many other good qualities follow.

Sentient beings have a skewed way of thinking that all work has to be miserable. Viewing Dharma practice as work, or something we must do like eating spinach as a kid, really impairs our practice and makes us unhappy. If we examine our experience when we practise the Dharma, we find that we are actually happier.

Creating new habits and letting go of the old ones does take energy, but so many of our old habits make us totally miserable. We need to carefully examine the experiences that we think bring us happiness and determine to what degree we are actually happy and to what degree something else is going on. One example is thinking that sleeping brings happiness. If we are not even awake to enjoy it, why do we call sleeping pleasure? We should look at how we feel when we are taking care of ourselves in a healthy, productive way or looking out for the welfare of others. If somebody asks for our help and we choose to do something else, we are aware that we would not let ourselves help the person for just five minutes. But if we say yes and do whatever the person needs, even for half an hour, we feel

so much better about ourselves. We get to connect with others by helping them and doing something different from what we ordinarily do.

It is important to make sure that our mind is happy doing whatever we are doing. Even if we are doing something only because we must and we are unhappy, at least we can put it in a Dharma framework, like, “I’m offering service,” or, “I’m overcoming my attachment to pleasure.” In this way, we can take joy in the action and transform it into something virtuous. Doing things with joyous effort is very different from pushing ourselves because it transforms the mental attitude of “I should” into “I want to”, which makes whatever we are doing joyful. This training takes a while, but eventually we find that we can be happy doing many kinds of things that we never could have imagined enjoying previously. ☁



February 16

The Union of Serenity and Insight

Understanding that disturbing emotions are destroyed by special insight with serenity, cultivate concentration which surpasses the four formless absorptions. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

We need to develop the far-reaching practice of meditative stabilisation or concentration. To eliminate ignorance, which is the source of all afflictions that create karma and keep us in cyclic existence, we need the union of special insight and serenity. Special insight is a very penetrating mind that can investigate and analyse, though not necessarily intellectually, how things actually exist. But we also need a very concentrated mind of serenity, which is the first step on a whole step-by-step path through which we develop concentration.

There are nine stages in the development of serenity, which vary according to how much concentration you have, how long you can stay on the object, and whether you have interference like falling asleep, distraction, agitation, laxity, not applying the antidote or over applying it. With serenity, there is mental and physical pliancy and bliss, and you can direct your mind to any virtuous object for as long as you want. Serenity is a preparatory stage to the first of the four form realms, which are deeper states of concentration known as jhana states in Pali, dhyana in Sanskrit, chan in Chinese, and zen in Japanese. Each of the jhanas is a deeper state of concentration, and there are different factors that you cultivate in each and different factors that you leave aside. Above the four form realms are the four formless realms. The sutras say beings who are born into these deep states of concentration do not have a gross physical form, though they are said in Tantra to have a subtle type of body. These beings meditate on infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception. This final state, also known as the peak of samsara, is the highest level of concentration, and beings' minds are so subtle that it is hard to tell if they are perceiving or not.

However, just attaining the four formless absorptions would not lead us to liberation. We also need to develop the analytical wisdom that knows the nature of reality, for only by knowing the true nature of reality can we be removed from samsara completely. We have already developed deep states of concentration in previous lives and have been born in both the form and formless realms many times and stayed in these meditative absorptions for aeons. But because we forgot or neglected to cultivate wisdom, when our karma there ended, we were born back into the desire realm. What surpasses the four formless absorptions is the union of serenity and special insight directly realising emptiness, which we have to develop in order to purify the mind of all defilements. ☁



February 17

The Agent, Object and Action

Since the five perfections without wisdom cannot bring perfect awakening, along with skilful means cultivate the wisdom which does not conceive the three spheres [as real]. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

They often talk about the first five perfections as blind people with legs and wisdom as a person with sight who does not have legs. It is a little extreme as an example, but the idea is that the first five far-reaching practices do not see things in their actual mode of existence, whereas wisdom does. To get to full awakening, we need both the method side of the path — the energy and the merit that moves us towards awakening — and the wisdom side of the path, which removes all the defilements by clearly seeing things as they are. One way to make sure that we have both is to contemplate the three spheres, sometimes called the circle of three, whenever we finish practising the first five far-reaching attitudes.

This involves contemplating that the agent, the object, and the action are empty of inherent existence and arise dependently, they therefore exist only in relationship to each other. It is quite important to do this because things get a bit sticky if the mind has lost the wisdom perspective. We might start grasping our virtue as truly existent: “I’m a truly existent Dharma practitioner who’s wonderful,” or, “I’m a truly existent deity,” if we do Tantra practice. We also contemplate the circle of three when we dedicate merit at the end of the day, remembering that our self who is dedicating the merit, the sentient beings receiving the merit, and the action of dedicating all exist dependently but not inherently.

When we see something, we usually have the feeling that there is an eye consciousness hanging around waiting to perceive something and an object existing out there objectively, and there is a real action of seeing which happens when they come together. But subject and object exist only in relation

to one another since something does not become an eye-consciousness until it perceives an object of sight, and something does not become an object of sight unless it is perceived by an eye-consciousness. Being aware throughout the day of how all things are dependent and come into existence in relation to each other is a very good mindfulness practice to counteract our tendency to view everything as discrete objects existing in and of themselves. 🍄



February 18

Examining Our Own Errors

If you do not examine your errors, you may look like a practitioner but not act as one. Therefore, always examine your errors, and rid yourself of them. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

What keeps us clean, clear and straight on the path? It is so easy for us to fade into complacency or hypocrisy, which I am sure all of us have had enough of in religion, politics and business. The whole point of our Dharma practice is not to look like a practitioner, but to purify our minds and enhance our good qualities. In our worldly ways, we do not care much about what is going on inside and care more about how we look on the outside. It is very easy to slip back into that old habit of, “Do I look like a practitioner? Do I look like I’m holy? Do I look like I’m trying hard? Do I look like I have faith? Do I look like I’m devoted?” We should be careful about trying to look good to avoid criticism or getting praise when our hearts are not completely there yet.

The remedy is to examine our errors and try to counteract them. We should not feel guilty when we see our errors or beat ourselves up because guilt is also related to trying to look good. We must completely pull our minds out of that whole framework that says, “How do I look to other people, and do they approve of me?” Instead, we must do our best to be honest with ourselves and be very sincere in our hearts about what our motivation is and if it needs improvement. Being a hypocrite is very different from “fake it until you make it”, which has some value because we are consciously trying to engage in a form of behaviour that will change our mindset. This motivation is quite different from just trying to look like a good practitioner. It is very important to always look at our minds to see if we are trying to cover up what is going on inside by looking good on the outside, if we are being complacent and smug, or perhaps a little arrogant in our practice. By treating ourselves with kindness and compassion, we can then try and correct our motivation. 🙏

February 19

A Clean, Clear Mind

If through the influence of disturbing emotions, you point out the faults of another Bodhisattva, you are diminished, so do not mention the faults of those who have entered the Great Vehicle. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

We create very strong karma with objects like the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, including both high and low-level Bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas dedicate every moment of their existence to the welfare of all sentient beings, so our minds have to be in a really bad state to see them as an enemy. We do not usually know who a Bodhisattva is and who is not, so if we see someone doing something that seems counterproductive or even negative, we should always comment on the behaviour and not the person. Rather than saying their behaviour is wrong, we can say that it does not make any sense to us, or it does not correspond with the general Buddhist approach.

First, we need to look at our minds to make sure we are not intending to demean or embarrass others, hurt their feelings, or make ourselves look better than them. We can always ask the person whose behaviour has agitated us for clarification and listen to whatever he or she has to say with an open mind. A lot of the judgment and criticism in our minds comes from getting involved in stuff that we really do not need to, so we can be like a bee that goes from flower to flower, taking what is sweet but not damaging anything. It is about directing our focus inwards at our own body, speech and mind, rather than outwards at what other beings have or have not done.

It is much easier to see others as kind and be kind in return when we have a clear mind that does not project so much onto others. Sometimes we have difficulty discriminating between pointing out somebody's faults with a negative mind and speaking about the person's difficulties with a caring mind. If others told you about a problem they are having that does not seem to be getting better, relating their difficulties to someone who can actually

help them can be an act of kindness. If somebody is about to do something negative and you cannot intercede, you can tell another person who can help in order to prevent harm to the person and others.

Relating an incident that happened between you and another person to a third party is only okay if your principal motivation is working through your negative reactions and mental states. Speaking negatively about somebody because we want to ruin the person's reputation and get everybody on our side diminishes us on many levels. I find it hard to trust people who trash others behind their backs because they are probably going to do the same to me. Spending a lot of time picking out the faults of others creates a lot of negative karma, which diminishes our Dharma practice, as well as our love and compassion. Instead, let us use our speech to create harmony and address things directly with the person we have a problem with, whether privately or in a community setting if things might get tense. 🙏



February 20

Relying on the Kindness of Others

Reward and respect cause us to quarrel and make hearing, thinking, and meditating decline. For this reason, give up attachment to the households of friends, relations, and benefactors. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Most monastics are supported due to the kindness of others' donations. There is a tendency sometimes to get attached to benefactors who provide the four requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. If one does not cultivate a sense of contentment in one's practice, there is a tendency to get a little bit spoiled when we hang out a lot around lay people who dote on us and give us lots of offerings and respect. We may become manipulative or try to make friends with people who can provide the things we want or need but are not able to buy for ourselves. Our practice of hearing, thinking and meditating on the Dharma declines when we are too busy socialising with our friends, relations and benefactors. Another potential result is that we become jealous of other monastics with benefactors more generous than ours and do not want to introduce our benefactors to other monastics in case they start giving us less. The remedy for this kind of quarrelsomeness is having a genuine appreciation for the people who support us without any attachment to receiving better or more. We use their donations wisely without wasting them and always dedicate ourselves to their welfare.

Monastics tend naturally to befriend other monastics or Buddhists and have more of such friends as time goes by. I have seen monastics who have remained mentally and emotionally close to their families struggle when their families still want them to go on family vacations and come to family dinners and do lots of things with them. This does not mean we go to the other extreme of dismissing all our previous relationships or being contemptuous of old friends. We remain very indebted to our family and should have lots of respect and appreciation for our parents and help them. Likewise, we need to have an incredible sense of gratitude for our other benefactors since it is due to their kindness that we have the opportunity to practise the Dharma and live this kind of life.

As monastics, it is important that we do not get haughty or arrogant and we should remain humble and appreciative of what others do for us. We pray for their well-being, not only for their health, long life, and the ability to practise in this life, but also that they meet the Dharma in future lives and have the inclination to ordain so that they can quickly attain awakening. We should also rejoice at the merit our benefactors create because it is said that one accumulates an incredible amount of merit when he or she helps the Sangha, which speeds your own awakening. Monastics too can use whatever material means they have to promote the continued existence of the Dharma and the stability of the Sangha. 🙏



February 21

The Power of Speech

Harsh words disturb the minds of others and cause deterioration in a Bodhisattva's conduct. Therefore, give up harsh words which are unpleasant to others. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Harsh words are motivated by harmful thoughts to put others down or humiliate them, make oneself look good, and vent one's anger or internal turbulence. There are other motivations, but they all share an attitude that is more concerned with getting out whatever we want to say rather than how our speech affects others. Basically, it happens when our minds are under the influence of afflictions, and we just want to eliminate our tension by putting it out there. We have not thought about how to communicate our point effectively or what the other person's interests and concerns may be. This disturbs others' minds and causes them to back away from us or shut us out, which we can probably remember from our own experience of being on the receiving end of an unskilful speech.

Uttering harsh words degenerates our conduct by interfering with our spiritual goals of cultivating impartial love and compassion and having an open and non-judgmental mind. Much of the reason why we speak harsh words is that we interpret the words that we hear as harsh, so it is always good to question our perceptions and whether we have understood the other person properly. Sometimes we hear just a little bit and immediately our mind goes into defensive mode, believing the other person is challenging, disrespecting, or mistrusting us. It can be helpful to look at our habitual ways of responding to certain kinds of speech so we can remain present in new situations instead of going into attack mode. Idle talk is also something to be attentive to and be aware of the topics we are talking about and the reasons that we are talking about. 🌸

February 22

Training our Mental Muscles

Habitual disturbing emotions are hard to stop through counteractions. Armed with antidotes, the guards of mindfulness and mental alertness destroy disturbing emotions like attachment as soon as they arise. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Habitual disturbing emotions refer to the afflictions, which are very hard to stop unless we are well-practised in the antidotes. Part of our problem at the beginning is that we do not notice the disturbing attitudes, or we do not know which antidote to apply, or we know the antidote but forget to apply it. We have to keep coming back to spirituality as a practice, since we are trying to counteract habitual tendencies that have existed since beginningless time. Results will come if we have a long-term perspective and are willing to put in the energy to change our minds.

Mindfulness and mental alertness are the tools we use to begin chipping away at the habitual disturbing emotions, and they work very well together. Mindfulness means keeping in mind our precepts, values, and the Bodhisattva practices, which makes it much harder for disturbing emotions to arise and intervene because they first have to usurp our attention. Mental alertness is a kind of introspection or vigilance that acts like a spy and checks to see if we are still on the object of mindfulness. If we have gotten distracted, fallen asleep, or negativities have stolen our attention, mental alertness sounds the burglar alarm so we can apply the antidote. Meditating on impermanence and death is an excellent counterforce for attachment, which sees whatever we are craving as permanent.

We can imagine getting whatever we are craving and going through our life year after year to see if it will still make us happy, especially when we are dying. For anger, irritation or hatred, it is helpful to meditate on patience, which is the ability to remain calm in the face of suffering or harm. Patience can prevent us from compounding our misery by getting angry because we are suffering, then feeling guilty because we are angry, then feeling depressed because we are guilty.

When we are jealous, rejoicing at someone else's good qualities, happiness and fortune is the last thing we want to do, but sometimes we have to deal with our minds like a kicking and screaming child. One antidote for arrogance, conceit and pride is meditating on things that are difficult to understand, like the twelve sources and the eighteen elements. Another is reflecting on the fact that everything we know is due to the kindness of others who taught them to us. All our talents, skills and abilities came our way dependent on other sentient beings, so there is really nothing that is just ours. If we have a good understanding of the lack of true existence, emptiness is a good antidote for all the disturbing emotions. Applying the antidotes is a bit like training our muscles for an athletic event — they are weak at first but get stronger if we keep practising with patience and consistency and do not get discouraged. 🙏



February 23

Accomplishing Others' Good

In brief, whatever you are doing, ask yourself “What’s the state of my mind?”

With constant mindfulness and mental alertness accomplish others’ good. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

What do we need to do on a practical level, not just during our meditation sessions but also in daily life? It is crucial to observe our mind moment by moment to see if it is in a virtuous, non-virtuous or neutral state. We have this precious human life for just a short time, so every moment is important for creating the causes for future happiness. Dharma practice is not just what we do on the meditation cushion. We must be mindful and alert of what is going on in our minds throughout the day because we spend much more time off the cushion than on it, considering we spend almost a third of our life sleeping.

Mindfulness and mental alertness are two of the main ways that keep us on track to create positive karma and avoid creating negative karma. Both mental factors are relevant to higher training in ethical conduct and concentration. In terms of ethical conduct, mindfulness remembers our precepts while mental alertness checks our body, speech and mind to see if we are abiding by them. The four establishments of mindfulness practice help us subdue our physical and verbal actions by being mindful of our body, feelings, consciousness, and phenomena. We apply mindfulness to the mind when developing concentration, which involves learning to subdue the defilements and develop serenity.

When meditating, mindfulness is the mental factor that places our mind firmly on a familiar object so that it does not get distracted. We should always set an intention at the beginning of a meditation session that clearly identifies the object we are going to meditate upon and determine to pay attention to it. Mental alertness is like a little spy that checks up to see if we are focused on the meditation object or if we are getting drowsy, excited or distracted. If this happens, we apply the appropriate antidote and renew our mindfulness on the meditation object.

Accomplishing others' good is the whole purpose of applying mindfulness and mental alertness in the development of ethical conduct and concentration. We must stop harming others before we can accomplish their good and concentrating on bodhicitta during our meditation will help us develop the method side of the path to Buddhahood while concentrating on emptiness and impermanence will help us develop the wisdom side of the path. In this way, we are able to eliminate both self-centred attitude and self-grasping ignorance to accomplish others' good as much as possible. ☸



February 24

Many Ways to Dedicate the Merit

To remove the suffering of limitless beings, understanding the purity of the three spheres, dedicate the virtue from making such effort to awakening. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

We dedicate the merit from our virtue whenever we practise. We can dedicate through the method aspect of the path by compassionately working to remove the suffering of all sentient beings and supporting their awakening. We can also dedicate through the wisdom side of the path if we practise with an awareness of the emptiness and dependence arising of the person creating the merit, the merit created, the awakening being who is dedicating, and the sentient beings receiving the dedication. Dedicating to the highest goal of awakening makes our merit very strong and ensures it will not get exhausted until all sentient beings have been awakened. ☸

February 25

Importance of Aspirations

The practice of making aspirations is very important in life; it is a Bodhisattva practice. Bodhisattvas aspire to do impossible things, but the force of making the aspiration puts their mind in the right direction. If we do not have an aspiration, we will not set out to do anything at all. Even if we cannot complete what we are aspiring for, at least we made some progress towards the goal. It is good to make many aspirations, including the aspiration each morning when we wake up — not to harm others, to benefit them, and to generate bodhicitta. By habituating ourselves with aspirations, some will eventually become action-oriented goals due to determination.

Our Dharma practice really takes off at this stage, because instead of just thinking about something, we are actually determined to do something about it. Everything starts with thinking, so we should make aspirations repeatedly to ingrain them into our minds. We must have a vision of how to create the causes for change, beginning with making an aspiration, repeating the aspiration, then transforming it via determination and putting it into action. ☸



February 26

Rainy Day Reactions

On rainy days, we usually react with all our likes, dislikes and other opinions about the rain. A different perspective that will increase our Dharma wisdom is to see rain as a conditioned thing, as a compounded product of causes that will produce more results in turn. This is the definition of a functioning thing: something that performs a function and is conditioned by and will condition other things. Instead of reacting with “I want”, “I don’t like”, or “I prefer”, we can think about how April showers produce May flowers that are going to produce June flowers. We can apply this perspective to everything we encounter and learn to see people’s words and actions, as well as our reactions to them, as the results of karmic causes and current conditions. This will help pull us out of our inner dialogues like, “Why are they doing this? They’re so stupid!” or, “I really like what they’re doing. They must be fantastic people.”

We can also try to imagine the kinds of circumstances or events people will experience in the future as a result of their current behaviour. This new way of looking at things we encounter in our daily life will really increase our understanding of what conditioned phenomena and dependent origination mean, and it will also increase our understanding of karma and its effects. ☁



February 27

Anger

Attachment is exaggerating the good qualities of someone or something and then holding on to it: “I want this! I need it! I must have it! It’s the source of my happiness—forever!”

Anger is the opposite: “This thing is going to harm me! It’s evil! I’ve got to get away from it or I’ve got to clobber it!” Fight or flight. Anger is based on an exaggeration of a bad quality that is there or a projection of a bad quality that is not there, and the magnitude of the situation gets inflated in our minds so that it is the most horrible thing that is happening in the whole wide world. When we are angry, either at another person or ourselves, by definition the anger is unrealistic because it is based on exaggeration and projection. Yet at the moment we are angry, we do not think, “My mind isn’t perceiving reality as it is.” We think, “I’m perceiving reality completely correctly.”

When somebody criticises you, what does your mind do? Usually one of two things, either, “How dare you say that about me! I am not like that! This person is awful!” or, “Oh no! What is said is true! I really am an awful person! I hate myself! Ugh!” We need to ask ourselves whether these ideas are really true, or are they exaggerations and projections? If we listen to this mind, then we will very likely find ourselves with an unfortunate outcome.

So, what do we do with this mess of anger? Anger is bad news. I am not saying that we are bad people because we are angry. I will repeat that! Being angry does not mean you are bad. I am not saying you should not be angry because “should” does not make any difference in reality. When we are angry, we are angry. The choice is, do we want to continue to be angry and reap the consequences of our anger; or do we want to apply the antidotes to anger and reap the benefits of returning to a balanced, calm state of mind? That is the question before us at the time we are angry.

When you are angry, are you happy? No. Automatically, right there, we see from our own experience that anger is not beneficial for human happiness because we are miserable when we are angry. We are really unhappy.

By understanding the truth of the situation, we can stop and put a nasty outcome on hold. We can avoid the negative karma that comes with anger. We can avoid the hurt feelings and the retaliations. Look at your own experience and see if this is true. 🙏



February 28

Happiness from Within

We should look at some of our wrong conceptions, the various levels of our wrong conceptions, our expectations, and our rules of the universe. One of the misconceptions where we get really stuck is to believe things that by their very nature cannot bring us lasting happiness. We get really stuck there. Like holding a kitten. It is so nice to hold a kitten, but when she starts squirming, eating your food, digging in her claws, and so on, it is not really happiness anymore.

We work hard to get the things we expect to bring us lasting happiness. We do backflips and all sorts of things to get them, thinking, “This is really going to do it for me. If I have this... If I go here... If I do that... If I’m with this person... then I’ll be happy.” But that is not what our experience is, is it? We do these things and they bring some pleasure for a while, but then they get boring, or they become something distasteful. You get tired of sitting there with the cat in your lap. You want to do something else. Or you get tired of the job. Or the job brings with it a whole lot of problems you did not know you would get.

This idea that all these things are going to bring us lasting, ultimate happiness is a misconception that permeates our life and leads to a lot of disappointment, disillusionment and even depression. We are counting on external things and external people that just do not have the ability to do what we want them to do, which is to make us everlastingly happy. This does not mean that you just throw up your hands and say, “There’s no purpose in anything. There’s no enjoyment whatsoever.” That is not true. We all know that there is enjoyment and we can do good things in the world. The problem is when we expect more of things than they can really give us.

We are doing serious spiritual practice when we start to see that real joy and happiness come from transforming the heart. When we transform our hearts, when we transform our minds, we are not so dependent on the outside world for our happiness. That means we become much freer. We can go to different places and do different things and our happiness follows us because our happiness radiates from within our own hearts and is not dependent on the outside. 🌸

February 29 (For the Leap Year)

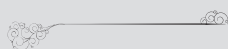
Poor Me Mental States

Very often we get into a “poor me” mental state: “Poor me, this is wrong with my life; poor me, that’s wrong with my life. Everybody else has better opportunities than I do, everybody else can do more than I can... poor me.”

Aside from our regular ignorance and attachment, the “poor me” attitude and putting ourselves down are the two biggest hindrances that we have to our Dharma practice. They even take us away from the Dharma more than anger, because at least we realise we are miserable when we are angry and seek a method to get out of it. But when we are stuck in the “poor me” mentality, we stay with our two feet planted firmly on the ground and create an enormous identity about how things are just so awful for us. We may be totally miserable, but we do not seek any method to get out of it.

One of the most effective ways to waste your precious human life is to feel sorry for yourself, so do not do it! Take it from somebody who has done that. When you catch yourself in that “poor me” mental state, stop it right away and remember to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by your precious human life. 🙏

March



*“Living with an Open Heart”
is a wonderful way to bring
joy to your day.*



March 1

A Kind Heart

Each day, the most important thing for us to do is to develop a kind heart. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has pointed out that people of all religious faiths share this aspiration along with compassion and ethical conduct. Even some people who are not religious support secular ethics because living beings need kindness and compassion.

We are unable to take care of ourselves when we first come into this world and would not be alive today if it were not for the kindness of others. Naturally, we all have a kind heart, but it is also something we must work at developing. I grew up hearing, “Love thy neighbour as thyself”. It sounded like a great idea, but I did not know how to do it until I learnt Buddhist thought-training techniques for developing a kind heart and forgiveness.

Also very useful are Buddhist instructions on working with anger by focusing on others’ good qualities, the benefits of kindness, and how completely dependent we are on the kindness of others. Some days we will be successful with these methods, while on other days we will fall on our faces. All we can do is pick ourselves up, try to relax our minds, and come back to developing a loving attitude. If we keep doing this slowly over time, it becomes much more of a natural reaction and a habit. 🙏

March 2

Refraining from Negative Actions

What are the benefits of taking precepts? There are benefits for society because anytime any one of us restrains from even one negative action, there is that much less negativity put out into the world. Since we are all interdependent and influence each other so much, when we refrain from harmful actions, the people who would be the objects of our harmful actions do not get harmed. We should not underestimate this because we can see how even one person could create incredible damage to society through his negative actions, like Adolf Hitler.

So, if each of us refrains from negative actions, it is quite a contribution towards world peace. Refraining from negative actions creates a sense of peace around us so that people who come into contact with us are not afraid and feel secure that we will not harm them through our body, speech or mind. In this way, taking and keeping precepts definitely influences the environment, the animals, the people, and the whole of society around us in a positive way. 🙏



March 3

Being Angry is Useless

I remember once watching an interview of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the interviewer said, “You were twenty-four when you fled from your country and became a refugee. You haven’t been able to go back. You’ve overseen establishing a government in exile. You’ve watched genocide in your country. You’ve watched ecological devastation in your country. How come you aren’t angry at the Communist Chinese?” And His Holiness replied, “If I were angry, I couldn’t sleep well, I couldn’t eat well, I’d be totally miserable, and what good would it do?”

The interviewer was looking at His Holiness like he had never heard somebody say, “I’m not going to be angry at something like that happening.” Because if you had said the same thing to any other world leader or a terrorist, that person would have taken the ball and run with it, “Yes! They did this, and they did that, and we hate them, and we want revenge, and we’re going to destroy them!”

His Holiness basically said being angry is useless; it does not change anything. I think that is powerful. When we are holding a grudge or when we are beating ourselves up, we are the ones who suffer, and yet all we want is to be happy. Let us allow ourselves to be happy by offering forgiveness to others and ourselves. 🙏

March 4

Change

Today is another day of change. Every day, people are leaving or coming into our lives. Given that everything is impermanent and transitory, let us use our time together to generate compassion and wisdom, help each other along the path, support each other in our practice, and work for the benefit of all sentient beings. 🙏



March 5

Looking at Our Pride

One of the root afflictions that we sometimes suffer from is arrogance or pride, of which there are various kinds. With most of them, we feel superior to others, we appreciate our talents and abilities, and we want others to know about them and recognise them. There is another kind of pride which is the pride of inferiority. In other words, I am special, because I am worse than everybody else. These two kinds of pride often go together because we do not feel good about ourselves. We put on a show to display our good qualities and lord over other people. There is also a kind of pride that comes from association. We are proud not because of our qualities, but because we are associated with someone or something that is really wonderful. We are part of a certain monastery, we are part of a certain company, we know important people, or we have been to special places. Although we are not great, we consider ourselves great because we know someone or something that is. There is another kind of pride, which is just the pride of “I am”. This is the self-grasping at our own person. It is just the pride of being “me”. This one is especially pernicious and gives rise to a lot of the self-centredness that also afflicts us.

It is helpful during our day to be aware of these different kinds of pride and how they surface and to apply the antidotes. The ultimate antidote is the meditation on emptiness, which tries to identify who we think we are — this big “I” that is either better, worse or special in some way. Other antidotes that are sometimes easier to apply are thinking of the disadvantages of arrogance that come from pride or thinking of something quite difficult that we have a hard time understanding. In the case of the pride of inferiority, we can contemplate our precious human life, Buddha potential, love and compassion. There are numerous antidotes to apply, so the thing is to notice which kind of arrogance comes up in our mind and then apply whichever antidote works best in that circumstance. 🍃

March 6

The Great Aspirations of Bodhisattvas

Sometimes you read sutras that say Bodhisattvas will remain in samsara until it ends. Some people conclude that Bodhisattvas do not want to attain full awakening and want to stay in samsara forever. But this is not correct because Arya Bodhisattvas have incredible renunciation and the best way for them to benefit sentient beings is to attain Buddhahood as quickly as possible. Statements like these are meant to show the degree of their compassion and the extent they cherish others, which is so strong that they would be happy to forgo their awakening if it would benefit others. Such statements also refer to the samsaric universe of other sentient beings. From the Mahayana perspective, Bodhisattvas have purified aggregates that enable them to manifest in the polluted world of sentient beings to guide and help us, whilst not being polluted by it themselves.

We also may wonder why we are praying, “May all their negativities ripen upon me, and may I give them all my virtue,” when we cannot take on anybody’s karma according to the law of karmic cause and effect. The real purpose of this verse is to strengthen our compassion and love for sentient beings so that there is absolutely no hesitation on our part to help when we encounter situations where we can do something. This verse will immediately ring in our minds if we are close to realising emptiness on the Path of Seeing and are tempted to attain our liberation and just be done with it.

It is important to remember that these aspirations give us the highest standards for how we ultimately want to be, so we should not compare ourselves to them and conclude they are impossible or useless since we are so far off from the goal. The verses are said in this way, so we imprint the Bodhisattva ideal in our minds again and again, which makes it much easier to adhere to them and not get sidetracked along the path. ☸

March 7

Cyclic Existence

Every day we complain, “I have this to do, I have that to do. I don’t want to do this, I don’t want to do that. I don’t want these problems. Things aren’t going the way I want them to.” We all have this mental talk daily, and we think it is an accurate commentary on our problems, that all these things are not happening the way we want them to. But our real problem is that we are in cyclic existence. Our real problem is that we are born with a body and mind under the control of afflictions and karma. The day-to-day likes, dislikes, difficulties, the crises, and the things that we consider truly horrible — like losing a limb, losing a relative or dying — even these things are not really the actual problem. All these things stem from the fact of being born in cyclic existence.

I find it quite helpful to remember what the real problem is. It is cyclic existence, and if I want to get out, then I must generate the three principal aspects of the path: the determination to be free, the altruistic intention, and the wisdom of realising emptiness.

When we pay attention to the real problem, then the minor problems, the day-to-day irritations and annoyances recede into the background. They do not become problems. They do not disturb our minds anymore because our intention is focused instead on solving the real problem — getting ourselves and, by extension others, out of cyclic existence. Making that shift in our orientation daily can make the mind much more peaceful as we go about our daily business and interactions. ☸

March 8

I Must Say Farewell

Think, therefore, upon seeing and hearing of others' deaths, I am no different. Death will soon come. Its certainty is no doubt, but no certainty as to when. I must say farewell to my body, wealth and friends, but good and bad deeds will follow like shadows.

“I must say farewell to my body.” Wealth, friends and relatives, and our bodies are probably the three things we are most attached to. We want the possessions, the success and comfort that wealth represent. We want friends and relatives for emotional security, success, appreciation, and everything they represent. Our body, which has been with us from the time of birth, that we have never been separated from, that we adore dearly, and spend so much of our lives taking care of, at the time we die, this body stays here, and our consciousness goes on alone with all the karmic seeds that we have created with respect to this body.

We are like guests in the hotel that we call our body during this life, but when we die our body stays here. We cannot take it with us. What have we done with this body to further our aim of Buddhahood? What have we done to create virtuous causes to attain a good rebirth, to get another good body, or great wealth or virtuous friends?

All alone we go to our next life. But we can take actions in this life to support us as we journey through samsara. We can take actions with our body, wealth and friends that help us to create the causes that will ripen into virtuous karma, no matter where we end up in our next lives. 🍃

March 9

All People Can Be My Friend

How do you get rid of the attachment, aversion and apathy that we have for all sentient beings? The usual method they prescribe is by seeing that, if you take a very broad perspective of many lifetimes, everybody has been our friend before, everybody has been our enemy before, and everybody has been a stranger before. Here is an example: if the person on your left gives you a thousand dollars today, she is a friend; and if a person on the right steals money from you, she is your enemy. That is today. Then tomorrow if the person on the right changes her mind and gives you a thousand dollars, and the person on the left steals your money, then the one on the right has become your friend, and the one on the left has become an enemy. It really does not make any sense to have friends and enemies because these categories change all the time.

Even with people, we may feel, “These are my long-term friends,” there are always days when they become enemies. You may love them dearly, but there are some days when they are in the enemy box.

Things are so transient and flexible that these categories just do not make sense, let alone have attachment for the people in the friend category; aversion, anger or hostility in the enemy category, and apathy towards strangers.

Here when we say enemy it does not mean we are fighting a war. It just means somebody you do not get along with. Somebody that you feel threatened by, that you just do not get along with very well. You do not have to have war declared against the person or anything like that.

Now some people say that even if you have developed equanimity, you may still have enemies, but you are not partial against them. Having enemies in the sense that there may be people who try to harm you or get in your way or things like that. In one way, people say, “Well, you still have enemies, but you have a totally different emotional reaction to them.” On the other hand, people say, “You cease

to have enemies because when you are looking at the fact that everybody wants happiness, and that everybody has been kind to you before, and that everybody has been everything to you before, then putting them in a category of a temporary enemy in this life makes no sense.”

If you listen to His Holiness, when he talks about going worldwide and meeting so many people, he always says, “I have friends everywhere.” He does not say, “I have friends everywhere and I have enemies, but I have compassion for them.” ☸



March 10

Identity

It is quite important to remember that we are not our bodies and should not make an identity out of them. You have probably heard people say things like there is a genetic tendency for alcoholism in their family, or they are afraid they will die at a young age since their parents and grandparents died young. We might have observed our tendencies to identify with whatever our body is feeling — pain, illness, injury — and make it who we are. This view is neither realistic nor beneficial; the body is simply part of the basis to designate a self. It is just a guesthouse for the mind to stay in. What is going on in our body does not have to control what goes on in our mind.

Genetic predispositions may influence our body and mind, but we should not take them as predeterminations of what will happen in our lives. Nor should we make too many assumptions based on our age, health status, or any of these things. This is because the more we base our identity on our bodies, the more we trap our minds in a limited view of our possibilities. We will also be more likely to base the identity of other people on their bodies, which is the root of so much prejudice and division amongst human beings.

As Buddhist practitioners trying to develop universal love and compassion, we do not want to start categorising people and then believing they are identical to the categories we put them into. We want to be able to look into everybody's heart and see that everyone wants happiness and to be free of suffering as much as we do. While we can recognise the conventionalities of the body and what is going on with it, we do not have to make an identity out of it. This would only limit our self-confidence and vision of what we can be. Let us not use the body to imprison ourselves or other beings by confusing them with what their body happens to be at this moment. 🍃

March 11

Confused Compassion

Sometimes our idea of compassion gets a little bit confused as fixing other people's problems, so they do not suffer. That is not really it. First, we cannot really fix their problems. They must change their minds, and stop creating negative karma, or doing repeated behaviour that does not work. We can guide them, and we can influence them, but we cannot fix it for them. Sometimes people are not open to the help that we want to give, and if we push, it just backfires. We should keep the door open and wait until they request help.

Sometimes our “compassion” becomes a distraction from working on ourselves. We are so eager to fix other people and prevent their suffering that we do not look at our suffering, and we neglect to purify our minds. When we cannot see our suffering and we do not purify our minds and develop our good qualities, the amount of help and good we can do for other people gets vastly diminished. It is important to understand exactly what compassion is and how to develop it, and to use it properly so that it helps us and others. 🍃



March 12

The Better Motivation

Are we meditating with the thought of gaining happiness in this life, for status, prestige, or having a good story to tell all our friends? That is basically the motivation that most people operate on.

The first level of actual Dharma motivation is when we are seeking a good rebirth. There may be a little bit of seeking happiness in this life, but our motivation is primarily a good rebirth. That is the differentiating line between a worldly activity occupied with the eight worldly concerns and a Dharma activity that looks beyond the happiness of this life. Even if we get a good rebirth, we are still stuck within cyclic existence, getting born again and again according to our karma. If we want to get out of the entire mess, we need the motivation to seek liberation or nirvana. To stop the rebirth that is caused by ignorance and polluted karma is the next level of good motivation.

The best motivation is to go beyond liberation, to get rid of the whole selfish way of thinking about just my liberation: “I want to get out of cyclic existence because I am fed up. We are all on our own here, so good luck everybody. Ciao.” The best motivation is not having an attitude where we are dismissing the situation and the plights of other living beings. They have been kind to us, and they are exactly like us. So, try to do your best every day to generate the motivation of seeking full awakening so we can be of the greatest benefit to sentient beings. I really encourage people first thing in the morning to think, “Today I’m not going to harm anybody. I’m going to benefit others as much as I can, and I want to attain full awakening as my long-term goal so that I can be of greatest benefit to living beings.” We may have a stronger feeling for one of the lower motivations, but we can always remind ourselves, “That’s okay, but it’s insufficient.”

Whatever motivation we keep in our minds will determine whether the actions we do are going to help or hinder us as we travel the path to awakening. The better we can keep this in mind, the better the outcome. ☸

March 13

Accepting Apologies

Sometimes unpleasant words are said when conflicts happen between people. When somebody apologises to us afterward, it is important that we accept the apology and release any anger or grudge we may still hold. It is also important not to rub others' mistakes in their faces by criticising them or continuing to hold ill will.

When others make an apology, it is a time to rejoice, but not because they acknowledged that they were wrong and we can say, "Oh, I'm victorious." Rather, we rejoice because the other person has been able to grow. Expressing regret for their actions helps them to purify the negative karma they had created. By rejoicing, we support them in their virtuous endeavour.

This teaching about accepting apologies comes out very strongly in the Bodhisattva vows. It is included both in the root vows and the secondary vows, so let us remember to accept others' apologies. We can begin this process by remembering when people have apologised to us in the past and asking ourselves if we sincerely accepted the apology. If we have, good. If we have not, then let us accept their apology now and let go of our own stories about the situation. We need to remember to practise gracefully accepting apologies in the present and the future. 🍃



March 14

Appearances

It is good to remember that whatever our senses come into contact with is simply an appearance. We tend to think that the things we see and the people we encounter are all real, that they are “out there”, existing from their side in the way that they appear to us. But that is not exactly how they are. They are simply appearances arising dependently. They are dependent in several ways: on causes and conditions, on their parts, and on the mind that conceives and labels them. It is good to remember this in our daily life, reminding ourselves again and again that things are not real in the way they appear to our senses.

Sometimes we have pleasant appearances, and sometimes we have unpleasant appearances, but our pleasantness or unpleasantness is also dependent on the circumstances and on our karma. When we grasp these appearances to be real, the mind starts “proliferating” — that is, the mind makes up stories about them. We think, “This is good, this is bad. This person likes me, this person doesn’t like me. I like this, I don’t like that.” That is the beginning of our struggles with the world. But this whole story, the scenario that causes us so much suffering, is something created by the mind, and it is dependent on the mind. Our mind is involved in creating our experiences. By remembering this, we stop the struggle, and the proliferation of restless and distressing thoughts dissipates.

While sentient beings appearing to us are mere appearances arising, dependently they still want to be happy. Treating them with kindness is totally appropriate. In addition, treating them kindly helps to create the causes for our pleasant appearances in the future. Try and keep that in mind as you go through the day. Do not make things, people and events so “solid” in your mind. Learn to “play” and relax. 🐾

March 15

Conditionality

Have you ever thought about conditionality and how nothing arises on its own? In our ordinary condition, we know so little about the specific conditions that cause things to happen. Some things that seem like a very big deal turn out not to have too many ramifications, while other things that seem minor go on to have huge ramifications. Everything exists in relation to other things, and we cannot always see the full picture of all the factors at play.

When our afflictions are causing the mind to react very strongly to something, it is helpful to think, “It’s only this life. There are thousands of causes and conditions throughout samsara, so why am I latching onto this one thing and creating a lot of negative karma about it?” However, all our personal actions are very important due to our precious human life, where even small positive actions can have profound long-term effects. This is because karma multiplies, and a small seed can produce many, many fruits in the long term.

Sometimes I think about the person who put the flyer in Bodhi Tree Bookstore in 1975. It was not the only thing that got me involved in the Dharma, but I would not be sitting here today if someone had not done that one small action. Likewise, some things I thought would have a tremendous impact on my life never did. The causal energy we create through our actions is very important, but we should not necessarily make a big deal about experiences that cause a lot of our afflictions to arise. On the other hand, it is good to let virtuous mental states arise during whatever positive experiences we have. ☸

March 16

Refuge and Clarity

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels means we have decided on our spiritual direction in life as well as our goal; in this case nirvana or complete awakening. And we are clear on who we are trusting to guide us there — the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Deciding which spiritual path to follow clarifies much of the confusion in our life because we finally know what we are doing.

Part of taking refuge in the Dharma is understanding that both our happiness and our misery originate in our mind. Our experiences are either due to the karma we created through past actions, which were motivated by our mind, or how we are reacting to current situations. Whether our mind is happy or miserable within a given situation depends heavily on our outlook. The purpose of understanding and owning up to this truth is not to beat up ourselves for having bad karma, but rather to recognise that we can do something about our feelings.

If we find ourselves unhappy, instead of blaming people or things outside of ourselves, we should reflect and ask, “What thought is going on in my mind that is making me unhappy?” Or “What am I holding onto that is making me unhappy?” Taking refuge in the Dharma means knowing our experiences are created by our mind, and by doing this kind of introspection, we can release whatever is making us unhappy or apply the antidote. In this way, we are aware and can care for ourselves in a way that brings happiness to ourselves and all sentient beings we encounter. Taking refuge means having the confidence to work with our mind and applying the methods the Buddha taught to turn things around, so we do not stay stuck in our anger, self-pity or whatever other emotional drama is going on. 🙏

March 17

Listening to Others during Conflicts

Often, what we really need when there is conflict is simply to know that the other person understands where we are coming from. Whether they agree with us is not so important. Sometimes, just knowing that somebody understands where we are coming from enables us to settle down. That is why, when we are trying to benefit others, to be able to listen to them in a non-judgmental way and understand what they are saying is a very good gift.

We do not need to side with them. If our friend comes to us and says, “Guess what somebody did to me!” We do not need to jump on the boat and say, “Yes! You’re completely right. Let’s go clobber that person!” We need to say, “It sounds like you’re angry. Are you needing respect? Are you needing to be heard? Are you needing understanding? Are you needing to have some say in what happens to you?” We just guess at what others might be needing and as soon as they feel like we have heard them and understand what they really want, a lot of the anger disappears. We can see that in ourselves, especially with the people we care about a lot. The most important thing is not that they agree with our idea, not that we really win, but that they understand us, and they respect us.

At the time we are angry, we often think to ourselves “My way is right and you’re ignoring my way! I’m going to fight for my way.” But that is not the real issue. Often, we fight about things that are not the real issue and that are not really important to us. What is important to us may be our autonomy, our ability to make our own decisions, or that somebody respects us or understands where we are coming from. Often that is much more important than the actual issue we are arguing about. 🐼

March 18

Suffering Can Make Us Stronger

We all want happiness, but often it is the difficulties that really shape us and help us grow. Beings in the god realms experience so much sensual pleasure that they never think about practising the Dharma. Even well-off human beings who have very few difficulties do not really know how to relate to the rest of us. It is upsetting for them when things do not go their way since they are used to getting everything they want. Instead of facing our suffering, often we distract ourselves by going to parties, to the movies, reading novels, and watching television. We self-medicate with food, drugs, alcohol and other hedonistic pleasures.

But those who go deeply into their suffering find that it can ennoble them with “far-reaching fortitude”. The fortitude involved in dealing with unpleasant circumstances and physical and mental suffering is precisely what aids our practice to become fully awakened Buddhas. Suffering can also give us an attuned awareness of what others are enduring. For example, it is only when you are in the minority that you clearly see the discrimination, injustice and persecution going on.

Those who are smart about their suffering will accept the reality that we are mortal, fallible and not totally in control. Their pain attunes them to the suffering of others and leads them to ask, “What is the human condition?” “Why does everyone face difficulty?” “What is the meaning of life?” Very often it is suffering that leads people to the Dharma because it smashes through the notion, “I’m a happy person. Everything’s good in my life, and everything will continue going well.” Dharma is useful for dealing with suffering and you can change your experience of a situation if you change the way you look at it. You can reach some internal peace by accepting the reality of the suffering and viewing it as something transcendent.

Sometimes when we suffer, we go into this state of self-pity, thinking, “I am helpless. I am hopeless.” We may not be masters of the situation, but we are not

helpless either. We have a moral responsibility to respond to our suffering in a way that solves problems instead of creating more. By using thought training, we can redeem something bad by turning it into something sacred. People who have suffered can be of great benefit by becoming social activists or getting engaged in social projects. Suffering can make us stronger, and it urges us to find and cultivate resources we did not know about. We should remember this whenever we have any suffering, from stubbing our toe to witnessing mass tragedies involving many other living beings. 🍵



March 19

Seeing Kindness in all Religions

His Holiness the Dalai Lama always says, “My religion is kindness.” Actually, that is the essence of all religions. To whatever extent their teachings accomplish it, kindness is their ultimate purpose. All religions talk about ethical discipline. They all talk about being kind to others. They all talk about generosity and the lack of miserliness, the willingness to share and extend to ourselves. Because of that, it is important to respect all the different faiths and all the different people from those faiths. We can still debate philosophical issues when we talk about the nature of reality, but we can do it without criticising the religion or criticising the people who practise it, because we can see that all those faiths are designed to be of benefit to living beings.

From a Buddhist viewpoint, it is good that there are many different religions; everybody can choose one that best suits him or her. We remember that it is quite a gradual path to awakening, so in different lives and at different times, different beliefs are more suitable to help different people develop a kind heart or to help them develop ethical conduct. Have that open mind and acceptance towards all practitioners of different faiths. 🍃



March 20

A Vision of What We Can Become

What should you do if you cannot relate to Bodhisattvas because they seem so out of the ordinary, like a fantasy? Having a vision of what we can become is very important in our lives, and not only for spiritual practitioners. One of the problems in poor or minority neighbourhoods that are oppressed is that the kids do not have a vision of what they can become. Without a vision of what you can become, you do not do anything.

Maybe you cannot relate to emanating a hundred thousand bodies or visiting a hundred thousand pure lands right now, but there are some qualities that you have a very small amount of right now. Maybe we have a small amount of compassion that reaches out to sentient beings. We do not have the ability to create all these emanations, but we do have some intention in the present to do that. If you take that small intention, nourish it, and feed it, it will grow until eventually, you will accumulate all the other necessary causes and conditions for you to send out emanations.

If you just go from your poor-quality view, which thinks, “I’m nothing,” to looking at the qualities of the tenth ground Bodhisattvas, you will be tempted to think, “It’s hopeless. There is nothing that they and I have in common,” as if those tenth grounders were born that way and never had to start like us! We are full of this kind of wrong idea, and you can see how it comes up in your practice sometimes when you say to yourself, “I’m not making any progress. It’s just the same distraction in every meditation session.”

We have to oppose these wrong ideas. Otherwise, they sneak up and wreak havoc in our practice. By looking at them and our potential, we can begin to find within ourselves the small beginnings of the Buddhas that we can become. ☸

March 21

Seasons and Impermanence

We are transitioning now into a new season. This new season will also change and cycle. The seasons remind us of impermanence and the transience of things.

Often, we think of impermanence as something disadvantageous. The samsaric enjoyments that we have dissipated, they decline, depart from us, or we separate from them, showing us that we cannot hold onto anything at all. Such a way of viewing impermanence really gives rise to renunciation, the wish to be free of cyclic existence.

Impermanence can also indicate our potential. It is because things change that we can become Buddhas. It is because our afflictions are impermanent, as they are produced by causes and those causes can be eliminated. We have what is called the evolutionary Buddha nature that gives us the ability to progress along the various stages of the path to complete awakening.

How we relate to impermanence depends on our minds. If we are trained in the Dharma, then even the impermanence of separating from samsaric pleasures can be a very positive teaching for us, as well as the impermanence of the defilements and the opportunity to progress along the path to full awakening. This can produce much joy in the mind. If we have a mind that is clinging to samsara and desiring worldly pleasure, impermanence is interpreted by our minds in a very disastrous and miserable way. As with everything, it all depends on our attitude, and we are the ones who have the ability to determine what our attitude is and how we relate to things such as impermanence. It is actually the impermanence of our mind that gives us the ability to go from an unhelpful view of impermanence to a very inspiring, helpful view of it. 🌸

March 22

Rest

We have to understand properly what rest means because it does not just mean letting go of our mindfulness, our vigilance, and our mental alertness. Rest does not mean just letting the mind do whatever it wants, indulging in sense-pleasure, and being distracted.

Real rest is when we rest in emptiness, in the nature of reality, when our mind rests in bodhicitta. When the mind rests in emptiness, there is no ignorance, no attachment and no anger. When the mind rests in bodhicitta, there is no attachment and especially no anger, no partiality, bias, or prejudice. When the mind is able to rest from disturbing attitudes in that way, there is real rest, and peace of mind.

Let us understand resting from a Dharma view and not a worldly view. The worldly way of resting often makes the mind much more turbulent. Think a little bit about what rest means and how to rest your body and mind. 🌿



March 23

Pleasing Others

It is completely impossible to please all sentient beings. It is a fruitless endeavour because everybody has different ideas and different ways of doing things. Often sentient beings do not even know what they want. They change their minds all the time. Rather than trying to please them, it is better that we focus on having a kind motivation, an attitude of love and compassion, and acting from a grounded place within ourselves. How they respond, we cannot control.

Similarly, it is impossible for all sentient beings to please us and do what we want them to do, to think what we want them to think. Here too, we should accept that people have different ways of thinking, different dispositions, and different ways of doing things. Not everybody is going to do what we want them to do. Not everybody is going to make us happy. If we can accept this, it does not need to become a cause of suffering.

When we do not accept the diversity of sentient beings and their differences, coupled with the fact that our minds are clouded with confusion, we have many false expectations of wanting to please them and wanting them to please us. If we can accept diversity, there is no suffering involved. We just know this is how it is, and that is okay. We can act with love and compassion and that makes our mind peaceful, and it makes our relationships with other beings harmonious to the extent possible within samsara. ☸

March 24

Monastic Form — Showing Respect

There are several things in the monastic form where we show respect, and there are, in general, several things in Buddhism where we do that. It is very easy for our Western mind to think that this is all about hierarchy, authority, and oppression, and we do not like that very much in our culture. This type of etiquette and form are practices of mindfulness and introspective alertness. They do not really have anything to do with hierarchy and power trips. Rather they help us to look at how our mind is functioning and how our body and speech follow along after that.

For example, when worldly people walk into a room, they think, “Where can I sit so that I’m most comfortable?” That is kind of our natural thought. In fact, it is so natural that we almost do not think about it, or we are not aware that we are thinking about it. When we enter a monastic form or even a Buddhist form as a lay Buddhist practitioner, our introspective alertness becomes more refined, and we notice our way of thinking and acting. We come to understand that all these manifestations or forms of showing respect are ways to help us subdue the self-centred mind that thinks only of our place or our comfort. Instead, the Dharma mind asks, “How can I make somebody else comfortable? Can I set up somebody else’s seat? How can I do something for others?” Monastic form turns the mind towards that and pulls us out of taking care of our own comfort.

We see that when we sit higher than others, or when we sit in a more prominent place, it is very easy for our ignorant minds to start feeling more important. When we look down on others physically, we may also tend to look down on them mentally. When we look down on them, or when our mind does not have any special respect, it becomes very difficult for us to learn anything from them. We see that the way we sit in relationships with our teachers and those we respect facilitates our Dharma practice and facilitates the way that we learn from others. From the side of those sitting higher, they see that their place is because of their role, not because of who they are. There are several practices

they do to ensure their humility. It is important to understand the reasoning behind these protocols and how they benefit our practice and how they make us more aware of our body, speech, and mind and thus enable us to train and transform them. ☁

March 25

Letting Go

Sometimes our mind works in such a way that it takes us quite a long time to let go of something. We may have a certain interpretation of a certain event for a long time and feel hurt or angry about it. Or when our mind is holding onto something strongly, even though we may intellectually know that it is a wrong conception, we are not able to let go at that point. If we keep practising consistently over time, then somehow our mind changes, and one day we might look at the same event that happened in the past, and suddenly, our mind is able to let go. It is quite a sense of relief and peace when that comes.

Knowing that our mind works in this way gives us the ability, even if our mind is still stuck in something, to know that one day we will be able to let it go. Through our previous experience, we know that someday in the future, our outlook on it will change. It just requires more purification, more accumulation of merit, and more continuous practice to change. This enables us to hold things a little bit more lightly, even when our mind is still stuck in them. ☁



March 26

In the News

Some of the situations you see in the news might be difficult, and here is where you really should be careful with your understanding of karma. For example, you see refugees from Syria drowned while trying to cross the Mediterranean. What is the karmic cause for this? First, living in a war-torn country is the karmic result of the cause of killing and physical violence. Having a short life by drowning is also the result of killing, and so forth. Now, does this mean that they deserve to die? No. You really must make sure that in your understanding of karma there is no thought of karma as reward or punishment, and no thought of “they deserve happiness” or “they deserve suffering.” It is simply that certain actions have certain consequences and karmic results, that is all.

You see human traffickers taking these refugees on board and making them pay exorbitant amounts of money, but merely put them on the boat and let them float in the Mediterranean. What kind of karma are they creating? There is a lot of covetousness there. They are doing what they are doing out of greed. There is not very much concern for others’ welfare, and they are being irresponsible in what they are doing. In a way, it is akin to stealing. It is akin to physically harming because even though they are not the ones who are actually doing it, they are creating the circumstances for it. What results are these people going to experience?

They are lying too when they said, “I’m going to take you across and then you’ll get to Greece and you’ll be okay.” They are totally lying through their teeth. What kind of result are these scammers going to experience? Poverty. People will not believe them. They will not have support when they have problems. People will avoid them because of their lying and cheating. When they face difficulties, they will not have support when they need it.

You do not rejoice and say, “Oh, I don’t like those scammers anyway, so go to hell, I’m glad.” No, we do not cultivate that kind of attitude that rejoices in other

people's suffering. But rather, you use it to understand karma and to generate compassion for everybody involved, both the scammers and the refugees who are being scammed. Like us, all of them are trying to be happy, and yet in the middle of their ignorance, they are creating the cause for so much misery.

In that way, you look at the news and it helps you in your Lam-rim meditation, not only with karma but also with the cultivation of compassion and tolerance. These qualities can be very helpful. You think about this, and it really makes the whole thing about karma quite vivid in your mind.

That is a way to transform watching the news or the media. You have to do something with your mind while you are watching these shows. 🌸



March 27

All About Me

Yesterday I got a request from a magazine to reprint something that I had written. The name of the magazine was Me Magazine. It was its first edition. I checked their website and saw that it is a magazine targeted at women aged 40 and older to let them know that everything is “all about me”. It was stated on their website — “It’s all about me” — that is their premise, and the message they are telling all these women. I could not restrain myself. When I wrote back, I gave them permission to use something very small, and I also added, “I’ve been spending years training my mind that it’s not all about me because thinking it is all about me just gives rise to suffering.”

I think it is quite interesting that our society is promoting the idea “It is all about me” and that we, of course, believe it. We, as practitioners, are trying not to believe this, but a lot of people buy into this belief that “It is all about me”, and it is sad how much pain and misery that belief brings. It is like swimming upstream when you are practising the Dharma because we are training our minds against the mainstream belief that it is not all about me. It is all about sentient beings, all about the Bodhisattvas, but not about our egoistic minds. 🙏

March 28

The Four Immeasurables

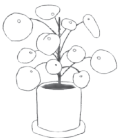
Developing the Four Immeasurables is a prelude to doing the taking-and-giving meditation. Before we can do taking-and-giving, we must have love, compassion, joy, and equanimity for all beings. We practise them so that we have an attitude of friendliness and loving-kindness towards ourselves and other living beings, and then practise compassion towards ourselves and other living beings. From the Four Immeasurables to the taking-and-giving meditation, it is quite a big jump because it is one thing to wish others well, and it is another to give away our own body, wealth, and merit so that they can be well. Similarly, it is one thing to wish others to be free of suffering, and it is another to be willing to take on and experience their suffering ourselves. If you see these differences, then you will see why meditating on the Four Immeasurables is a prelude to taking-and-giving, and why doing the taking-and-giving meditation requires a very special kind of courage. We must first make our minds strong through generating love and compassion, joy and equanimity, and from there, go on to increase those that we are actually willing to give away our happiness and take on others' suffering. 🙏



March 29

Creating Trust

Trust is a very important thing in our relationships with friends and family. One important way of creating trust and good relationships is to always be very truthful in our communication with others, without lying or distorting things or deliberately trying to deceive them. Another way to create trust is to always respect other people's property — treating with care things that belong to others, not taking things when people are not looking and considering them our own, and returning borrowed things to their owners in a timely way. All these small acts in daily life are actually quite big when it comes to developing trust and affection among people and living a happy life. 🌱



March 30

The Mind and Afflictions

One way to make your mind joyful is to think that it is the afflictions that impede your mind from being open and relaxed. When you have this kind of understanding and awareness, the afflictions have nothing to stand on. There is more space in the mind to look at things in a whole variety of ways.

One of those ways could be a mind of compassion. It is true, we all value compassion, and we all want to be compassionate. One of the biggest obstacles we have to be compassionate is that our afflictions get in the way. “I want to be generous,” but then miserliness comes in the mind. “I want to be kind... but I’m angry!” We can see how afflictions that are rooted in self-grasping ignorance impede compassion. When you see an affliction arise and say this is not what I want or this is not the kind of person I want to be, it becomes much easier to let go. That is a virtuous mental state.

Sometimes when you see an affliction in the mind, one part of your mind feels sad and thinks, “I don’t want to be that kind of person.” Then when you think of giving it up, you also become sad because “Who am I going to be without it?” The mind that says, “I’m sad because I have an affliction in my mind, I don’t want to be like that,” is a virtuous mental state. The mind that is grabbing onto: “But if I give that up then people will walk all over me,” or whatever our fear may be, is a non-virtuous state of mind.

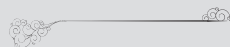
When you identify with that affliction and think, “That’s me”, come back to meditation and ask, “Is that really me?” If my anger is me, then when I say, “I’m walking,” it is the same as saying, “Anger is walking.” And when I say, “I feel benevolent,” it is the same as saying, “Anger feels benevolent,” which is crazy. You begin to look and say, “If I’m my anger, then that’s who I am 24/7. Does that fit the description of who I am?” 🐾

March 31

“Not Sure, Not Sure”

When I was visiting the monastery in Thailand, I often heard Ajahn Anan use a phrase that was a quote from his teacher, Ajahn Chah, “Not sure, not sure”. I think that is quite a nice thing to hold in mind — that nothing is sure. When our mind gets stuck in a tense situation, worrying about this or that, it is good to be able to say, “Not sure, not sure.” What we are afraid of or worried about is not sure to even happen. Similarly, when we are all excited about something, it is good to remember that it is also not sure, and not get too excited about the prospect of samsaric happiness or of something going our way. When we are complacent about practising the Dharma, when we are just taking the good circumstances we have for granted and expecting things to continue the way they are, remembering “not sure, not sure”, wakes us up out of that complacency. It reminds us to use our time wisely while we have good health, while we are alive, and while our mind is functioning well. Remembering “not sure, not sure” can put everything into a good perspective so that we can make our lives meaningful. 🙏

April



*When you have an
“Open Heart, Clear Mind”
you will find that your is path easier.*



April 1

Three Daily Aspirations

Each morning we renew our daily motivation by making three strong aspirations. Setting these three daily motivations is a precious practice that influences our day ahead. We try to hold them in our minds throughout the day so we can recognise and let go of any nasty or selfish thoughts and cultivate positive motivations instead. If you tend to forget to set your motivation when you wake up, put a Post-It note on your bathroom mirror (which is better than looking at your pimples), or the refrigerator (instead of re-reading the coupons ten times), or anywhere else that might help you remember this virtuous thought throughout the day. 🌱



April 2

Renouncing Attachment to Sense Pleasures

The foundation of our spiritual practice is renunciation, which is the mind that wants to be free of dukkha in all its forms, not just the “ouch” kind of suffering, but the whole situation of being under the control of ignorance, afflictions and karma. It is dukkha that makes us take this body in the first place and have a mind filled with afflictions. It is important to develop some renunciation because otherwise, Dharma is just a hobby as we basically are sense pleasure addicts on the fundamental level. We may call ourselves Dharma practitioners, but if we face a choice between Dharma and experiencing pain or a choice between Dharma and a whole lot of sense pleasure, which do we go for? We go for the sense pleasure, and I am not just talking about seeing, hearing and those kinds of things, but the whole emotional gooeyness of relationships. Anytime we are seeking happiness outside of ourselves we are in this kind of mental state.

Our attachment to sense pleasure makes Dharma practice very difficult even though it is what we must overcome to really begin to practise. We are kind of in a catch-22 situation, and it is the same with self-grasping ignorance. We need to repeatedly contemplate and look at this attachment in our lives and not just intellectually. What happens when our mind is constantly drawn to sense pleasure? What happens to our ethical discipline? What happens to our wish to be of benefit to others? What happens to our love and compassion? All these get compromised. What happens to our wish to develop wisdom? We get distracted from it.

It is not a question of whether we are good or bad people, so do not think, “I’m bad because I’m attracted to sense pleasure.” That is totally the wrong way of looking at it. The point is to see how sensual pleasures are antithetical to our deepest spiritual aspirations. It becomes much easier to avoid getting drawn by sense pleasures if we have spent a lot of time focusing on how our attachments are a pain in the neck. Just thinking a little bit about the disadvantages during your morning motivation and forgetting them the rest of the day will not make much of an impact. Only by repeated familiarisation with the disadvantages

can we catch ourselves being captivated by sense objects or relationships and investigate, “What is my experience? What is my intention? What kind of karma will this create in the long term? How does this affect my wish for liberation and awakening?” Our wisdom mind will enter when we stop, evaluate and analyse, and wisdom will prevent us from getting caught up in a guilt trip or self-criticism. ☁



April 3

Antidotes to Attachment

Think about attachment — how we get attached to things, how we act, and what the outcome is — we will begin to see the disadvantages. In meditation, it is very helpful to reflect on examples from your own life: “When I followed attachment, how did it work out in the long term?” This allows you to build up your wisdom of knowing the disadvantages of attachment in your life. Try and remember the disadvantages when attachment comes up when you are about to do something stupid that you know you do not want to do, if not for the belief that “Oh! It’s going to bring so much happiness right now.” This will help us to refrain and develop the ability to restrain ourselves. This is not suppression but it is making a wise decision because we want the long-term benefit, not the long-term disadvantage.

Another antidote for attachment is to think about impermanence and how things are changing. “I might run after this thing of attachment, but it’s not always going to make me happy. Whatever object or possession that I might be tempted to steal or lie in order to get to, is going to break after a while. It’s going to be out of style. It’s changing all the time. I’m going to lose interest in it.” So, it is better not to follow attachment now.

When we see attachment rising, the short-term pleasure is dangling there like the carrot in front of the donkey. Sit in meditation and imagine going through the struggle and really puff up the attachment: “This situation is so wonderful. This person is so great, or the object is so great. All the praise I’m receiving is just over the top and wonderful.” Imagine getting everything that you are attached to, and really living it up in your imagination. Then at the end, ask yourself, “Now are you happy that you have all of this? How long will that happiness last? Will getting all of that bring you long-term happiness?” Sit and look at your whole dream come true. If the object of attachment is not going to bring you happiness forever or make you 100% satisfied with your life, then it is better to use your wisdom and live according to your values and principles and restrain yourself. 🍃

April 4

Choosing Friends Wisely

As we get into the Dharma, the thing is to choose our friends wisely. For me, I guess it was a very natural thing because meeting the Dharma meant I went halfway around the world to India. There was no internet then, so I could not stay in touch with my old friends. Very naturally things started to change. Even with the internet and so on, I cannot spend all day just doing Facebook and texting my old friends. My life shrinks into something that is the size of a smartphone with no real living human beings in it.

As we get into the Dharma, it is very natural that sometimes our friends change. Some of our old friends may remain the same. For some people, they have to find a whole new circle of friends. For others, it is an individual process.

What our parents used to tell us about birds of the same feathers flocking together is true. We want to put ourselves together with people who are going to really encourage our virtuous attributes and people who will comment when we are sloughing off, or when we are getting lazy, when we are getting negligent, or when we are stuck in our anger, or about to do something non-virtuous. These people will tap us on the shoulder and say, “Hey, as a Dharma friend can I remind you of this, that, or the other thing?” In that way, we help each other. 🙏

April 5

Bad Moods

We all go through bad moods from time to time. It is part of our conditioning in cyclic existence. I think one of the main things that is going on when we are in a bad mood is that we want things to be different from the way they are. Things are going one way and our mind is saying, “Sorry, that is not acceptable. Things have to be another way because I want them to be another way.” Not accepting what is happening causes us much misery and grief because no matter how much we sit in our bad mood and complain about how things are, things are the way they are, and what is happening is already happening.

If we do not like what is happening, then we have to come back to our understanding of karma and see that it is a result of our previous actions. If we want things to be different, rather than rejecting what is happening now, we accept it, work with it, let go of our bad mood about it, and instead create the causes for having happiness in the future. If we have a positive attitude that is happy to create the causes for future happiness, then the present bad mood evaporates as we create some acceptance for what is happening now. What is, is. ☁



April 6

Right View

In the Eightfold Noble Path, the first aspect the Buddha spoke about was right view. Sometimes we think that the right view is the view of emptiness and that it comes later in the path. That is true, the right view does include the view of emptiness and the realisation of emptiness does come later in the path, but here when the Buddha taught the right view as the first noble truth, it means having the Buddhist worldview. In other words, it means having the view of karma, rebirth, continuity of mind, and seeing our lives from that viewpoint. Usually, our ordinary worldview includes just this life, and we think, “Here I am, I’m real, and there’s only this life.”

With that kind of worldview, it becomes very difficult to practise the Dharma because our motivation comes out all wrong. It comes out as wanting just the happiness of this life. When we have a worldview that includes multiple rebirths and karma and understanding that where we are born is influenced by the actions we create, then our whole perspective on life changes. How we see ourselves changes. What we see as the purpose of our life changes. This kind of worldview can lead to an understanding of *dukkha* — unsatisfactoriness — and the cause of suffering, which leads to the last two Noble Truths, true cessation, and true path. Having this initial worldview is quite important to having the right intention and the right perspective for practice. It is good to spend a lot of time meditating on these topics that support this worldview, to retrain our mind so that we look at our life experiences from that perspective. 🙏

April 7

Right Intention

Once we have the right view, the first of the Eightfold Noble Path, the next one to cultivate is right intention. That means having the right motivation for living our lives and for practising the Dharma. We want it to be a motivation of renunciation where we are not looking outside for pleasure, support and happiness, but where we are realising that our mind creates our own experience. We want to renounce the dukkha that the mind creates and the causes of dukkha, which are afflictions and karma.

Right intention also means having a motivation of benevolence and non-harm. It is practising the path with the intention of benefiting others and ourselves, not harming, not making waves that stir people up and create conflict. As much as possible, we should have this intention as we go through our lives.

Things we do sometimes stir up conflict and tension even if we do not have the intention to do that. We are talking about the internal intention; not how other people interpret our acts. We do not have any control over that, but we can set our intention to be one of benevolence, non-harmfulness and bodhicitta. With the right view and the right intention, we are all set to begin the practice and really dig into mental transformation. 🌱



April 8

Harmonious Speech

If we have the correct view and correct intention (the first and second aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path), and when we come to correct speech, correct action, and correct livelihood, we will see that negative actions are antithetical to our own wholesome goals. Instead of seeing them as rules that we must follow otherwise we are going to get punished, the wish to abandon negative acts in the body, speech and mind become more earnest. It comes from within instead of feeling like there are regulations being imposed upon us. The whole Buddhist path has to be practised in this manner, in which we have that genuine view and aspiration to complete the path, not because we should, are obligated, or are supposed to, or somebody is going to think poorly of us if we do not.

A harmful action of speech is creating disharmony with our speech, which involves malicious gossip, talking behind people's backs, or saying nasty things about one person to another person. We often do this to vent our anger or when we feel hurt about something somebody did. We talk to somebody else about it, not so much to work out our own emotions, but to get them on our side against the person who hurt us or the person who interfered with our happiness. We create a lot of factions amongst other people by using our speech to get them on our side. This often comes from hurt, anger or jealousy. With negative actions to be abandoned and wholesome ones to be practised, it is interesting to see when and which ones we perform more readily. Observe when and where we lie and create disharmony with our family and co-workers. Note the areas in which we tend to create more negative karma because that will help us clearly see where we need to be careful and pay special attention. Be very mindful. 🙏

April 9

Idle Talk

All the motivations for our speech come from our minds. Transforming how we use our speech involves looking at our minds and how we want to relate to other people. Naturally, we have a lot to purify and a lot to be attentive to as we go throughout the day.

One of the four harmful actions of speech is idle talk, and that is a hard one. Sometimes it is difficult for us to discern between idle talk and valuable talk. Sometimes it has to do with the topic that we are discussing. It could be a frivolous topic that is not of much importance, but we think it is important, which is why we cannot see it as idle talk. Sometimes it is the motivation with which we are speaking. Good or not, we are just talking because it is amusing and something to do and we have a lot of restless energy that just comes out as speaking.

Discerning what is idle talk and what is not requires a great deal of study of our mind. Sometimes we might be talking about politics, sales or television, but it is for a specific purpose with a specific person, and we are aware of what we are doing and the motivation behind it makes sense. In that case, the topic may be quite frivolous, but the motivation makes it so that it is not idle talk. At other times, we may be talking about something meaningful, even the Dharma, but our motivation is one of idle talk because we like to hear ourselves talk, we like to spend time hanging out with people, and we have restless energy. The topic may make it seem like it is a good speech, but the motivation is one of idle talk.

It requires some skillful discernment to really observe our speech and see what is going on and to know when to speak about something and when not to. This is often a practice of trial and error and constantly observing our mind and what is happening in the situation and observing our speech as well. In the process of doing that, we learn what topics are appropriate or inappropriate to speak about to certain people, what times are appropriate or inappropriate times to speak, and so on. 🍵

April 10

Taking Life

On the Noble Eightfold Path, the right view and right intention come under the higher training of wisdom. Then the next three — right speech, right action, and right livelihood — come under the higher training of ethical conduct. The last three — right joyous effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration — come under the higher training in concentration. The whole path is subsumed in the three higher trainings. Now we come to right action, which refers most specifically to the three detrimental actions of the body — killing, stealing, and unwise sexual conduct.

We all understand that killing is taking life and that life is what is cherished most by sentient beings. We understand that intellectually on one level, but on the other hand, you see many ways of justifying killing in our human world. Most of them by the wrong view. In some religions, they say that animals were created for human benefit, therefore killing them is not killing. However, Buddhists do not agree. Another form of killing out of ignorance is animal sacrifice. We think that by killing humans or animals, we appease gods or other powers. Both are examples of killing due to ignorance or bewilderment.

Killing due to attachment would be killing like a hunter does, out of attachment to eating the meat of the animal. Ignorance is probably mixed in there too, with its philosophical justification for taking life. I do not think killing that is motivated by anger needs much explanation. We can often see how when we have a lot of attachment to someone or something, the anger we have towards our object of attachment becomes equally strong.

Sometimes people kill or physically injure the very people that they are most attached to. This is something that happens quite often in domestic violence, either against spouses or children. Those people are the ones that the perpetrator is most attached to. When they do not do what the perpetrator

wants, the latter gets so angry and carried away and ends up destroying the life of his or her very loved ones. We can see here that if we want to free ourselves from anger, we must also work on attachment because it can lead to very harmful consequences. 🍃



April 11

Stealing and Sexual Expression

The next step in the Noble Eightfold Path regarding correct action is abandoning stealing. We usually think of stealing as an armed robbery and say, “Oh, I’d never do that!” This calls for a closer examination of how we use and relate to other people’s property. Instead of calling it stealing, considering it as taking things that have not been freely offered gives us a much broader perspective of what it means. For example, using things at our workplace for personal purposes. Or not paying for things that we are supposed to. It also brings up the broader issue of how we treat things that belong to other people. Do we respect their property? Do we borrow things without asking? Do we replace things that we use with permission? Do we return things that we have borrowed, or do we just forget them and keep them for ourselves in the long run?

All these broader issues are very useful to contemplate because they make us much more aware of how we relate to things that are in our environment that belong to other people. Especially when we are in a place of the Sangha, we need to use Sangha property wisely. It is extremely important not to take things for our use that have not been offered for our personal use. This applies whether one is ordained or not. It means respecting things that belong to the community and the group as a whole.

The last right action is avoiding unwise and unkind sexual behaviour. This is an interesting topic because this is one point where the Buddha spoke differently to lay people than to monastics. For lay people, he recommended certain practices of restraint, for example, not having sexual conduct with others besides one’s spouse. For monastics, he proposed celibacy. Why do you think the Buddha did this, in getting us to look at our sexual expressions? Where does it come from inside of ourselves? What are the motivating factors behind it? What are the results of how we express our sexuality? Look deeper into your own experience with eyes of wisdom. Learn from your own experience and learn from what you observe is happening to people around you. ☁

April 12

Right Livelihood

For lay people, the right livelihood means earning one's living in an ethical way, where one does business honestly, straightforwardly, without cheating others, and without lying. One also does not have an occupation that involves harming, like working for the military, a bomb factory, or an insecticide company.

For monastics, the right livelihood means living on alms and obtaining the four requisites of food, clothing, shelter and medicine in a suitable way. It means not pretending to be a great practitioner when one is not, deceiving others or dropping hints, flattering people, putting them in positions where they cannot say no, or bribery — giving a small gift in order to receive a larger one in return. These are what the lamrim calls the five wrong livelihoods. Right livelihood is something all of us can apply to our lives. Difficulties may come up and nothing is totally karma-free, but we should do the best we can in the situations that we are living in. 🍃



April 13

Right Effort

Next in the Noble Eightfold Path is right joyous effort. It is not just pushing. It is a mind that takes delight in doing what is constructive. Often, we do not really know what joyous effort is.

Our whole school system is directed towards effort and very much imbued with reward and punishment. If you make a lot of effort, you get a reward, but if you do not you are punished. We often bring that mentality into the Dharma and think, “Okay, I’ve got to do this because I’m pleasing somebody else or because some authority said so.” That is the mind that is looking for some reward. Sometimes we think, “I’ve got to practise the Dharma otherwise I’ll go to hell. Otherwise, I’m a terrible person. Otherwise, the sky is going to fall.” That is the mind that is afraid of punishment. Both those motivations of seeking approval as a reward or avoiding some punishments are not conducive to joyous effort. They are only conducive to pushing ourselves and making ourselves a little bit anxious.

Joyous effort is based on a thorough understanding of the path. It is a mind that sees the benefit of practice for self and others, and without pushing, without a lot of shoulds, takes delight in doing the practice.

We need to do some thinking about what joyous effort is and not just assume that we understand this mental state correctly. Often, we confuse joyous effort with pushing. We should know what those two mental states feel like inside of ourselves and how they are manifest in our words and our actions. Only then can we discriminate between when we are making a joyous effort and when we are pushing. This discrimination is crucial to our Dharma practice. 🙏

April 14

Four Ways to Practise

When the Buddha spoke about right joyous effort in the context of the Eightfold Noble Path, he talked about four ways of practising it. The first is when negative or harmful mental states have arisen, apply the antidote and subdue them. The second is to prevent negative mental states from arising. That comes through habituating ourselves with positive ways of looking at things. When we do that, our whole way of interpreting things is transformed. This automatically results in mental afflictions not arising as much or as intensely.

The third aspect of right joyous effort is to lengthen and enrich the constructive mental states that have already arisen. When we have constructive thoughts, we rejoice in them, encourage ourselves and continue contemplating in that way. The fourth aspect is to arise in our mind the constructive mental states that have not yet arisen. This comes very much from continuing with our practice and developing those mental states, deepening our understanding of the path, and developing wisdom and compassion.

In all this discussion about constructive and destructive, positive and negative, it is very helpful not to categorise everything as either black or white. We do need to have discriminating wisdom and discernment to tell these different things apart, so we do not get them all confused. But let us not make everything so rigid that we get very uptight. That is not helpful. 🍃



April 15

Mindfulness of the Body

Right mindfulness involves mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena. One starts with mindfulness of the body and begins by being aware and careful about what our body is doing during the day. It is holding in our minds the way we would like our body to be engaged in virtue and always being aware of what our body is actually doing. When we are walking, we try to be aware of walking, and not have our mind always be fifteen steps ahead of us. If we are working in the garden or the kitchen or doing something else, we are aware of what our body is doing and how we are moving in space.

This can also involve observing our speech and being aware of the volume and tone of our voice. Are we talking at an appropriate time and in an appropriate place? It is through this practice of being aware of what our body is doing throughout the day that our energy gets calmed down. You will see, especially in the Theravada monasteries and Chinese monasteries, people are practising this and being aware of how they are moving through space, how they are speaking, and when they are speaking, it calms your energy and it also calms the environment. Instead of everybody frantically running around doing this and that, not paying attention to where they are, calling across the yard, running to get this and that, they are walking at a reasonable pace being aware of what they are doing and where they are going and what is happening. It brings peace to the environment, and peace to one's physical energy. That makes the mind much more peaceful as well. This kind of mindfulness of the body in daily actions is a core practice in monastic living, a very important one.

We must also be aware of what our body is doing in all four positions — sitting, standing, lying down, and walking. Mindfulness of the body includes understanding what the body is, what its causes are, what its nature is, and what its results are. The purpose of doing this is to get an understanding of what our body is, free from the defilement of attachment and free from the defilement of aversion.

Rather than getting into thinking that this body is beautiful, and my body is going to bring me the ultimate pleasure trip, we let go, but we also let go of the trip that my body is evil and that it is sinful, and I have got to punish it and that I am not worthwhile. Both of those views are to be abandoned because they are both unrealistic ways of seeing the body. The body is just what it is. In mindfulness of the body, we are trying to see it for what it is. Then based on that, we can make wise decisions about how to practise and what is valuable in our lives. 🍃



April 16

Mindfulness of Feelings

The aggregate of feelings — pleasant, unpleasant and neutral — is the principal way that karma ripens. Very often we think the objects that we contact are the causes of feelings and we react to the object. But actually, we are reacting to the feelings. If an object makes us feel pleasurable, we then attribute it to the object and get attached to it. But it is the pleasant feeling that we are attached to. Similarly, when we meet something disagreeable, like an object we do not like, we think that is the cause of our suffering. However it is simply because we cannot stand that unpleasant feelings, so we detest the object and we attribute it as the cause of our displeasure.

In our lives, it appears we are constantly reacting against people and objects. We are actually reacting to the feelings that are associated with them. We are terribly attached to pleasant feelings and will go to almost any length to get them. And we are horribly averse to any unpleasant feelings and totally freak out and do whatever possible to stop them. We are completely controlled by this attachment and aversion to our feelings.

So many afflictions arise in our minds as reactions to feelings. It is quite interesting to sit and observe the feelings singularly. In other words, observe the feeling without associating it with the object. Observe the feeling and try not to react to it with either clinging or hostility, but just experience the feeling as it is without all these reactions that we have around it. When we can do that, then how we experience the feeling begins to change because we can see that if we have an unpleasant feeling and we react to it with hostility, our mind is filled with anger and complaints, which creates a more unpleasant feeling, which we react with more hostility and resentment, and it just spirals on. Similarly, when we have a pleasant feeling and get attached to it, we get into the whole dynamic of wanting, spinning around in our head in a chain reaction to the feelings of pleasure. When we can focus on the feeling as it is without so much reactivity, our mind is much calmer and our experience of those feelings changes. ☁

April 17

Mindfulness of Mind

Next in the four foundations of mindfulness is the mindfulness of the mind, and this is described slightly different in various traditions. His Holiness usually talks about it as becoming aware of the primary consciousnesses, not so much about the mental factors because those are included in mindfulness of phenomena, but the clear and knowing nature of the mind. He explains this in the Mahamudra fashion of just learning to discern the clear and knowing nature of the mind.

In the Theravada tradition, mindfulness of the mind includes all the primary consciousnesses, including mental factors. Becoming aware of what is going on in our mind at any particular time, the particular thoughts that are happening, the emotions that are happening, and what is really going on. This is one of the primary things we do in Dharma practice, always checking the mind to see if it is in a neutral state, a wholesome state, or a harmful state. If it is a harmful one, try to let that go. If it is in a neutral mental state, try to change it into a positive state of mind. When thoughts and emotions arise, just sit and observe where they come from and where they abide. After they vanish, where do they go to? Observe the thoughts.

It is quite interesting to examine this because we always feel that our thoughts are so real, but where do they come from? Where were they before they arose in our minds? Where are they when they are present, and after they vanish, where do they go? 🙏

April 18

Bodhicitta Starts in the Bathroom

We all want to learn how to open our hearts to benefit other living beings and know that our actions matter and influence other people. This is where toilet paper comes in. When you use up the last of the toilet paper, do you install a new roll, or do you just leave the bare cardboard cylinder and let the next person who comes replace it? If you do the second, your bodhicitta practice is not going anywhere.

We may dream about being of great benefit to all mother-sentient beings as long as space endures and manifests many bodies to help them. Yet we feel that taking less than half a minute to put on a new roll is going to cause us so much suffering that we leave it for the next person who comes into the bathroom. We might leave two sheets on the old roll so we can feel completely okay about not putting on a new roll. Or we put on a new roll but do not put the old one in the recycling because that takes an extra ten seconds.

Our ego mind is so tricky and can make up reasons to justify our action, “I’m saving natural resources by leaving the two sheets, and even if I take out the old cardboard roll and leave the two sheets on top of the new roll, the next person may not see them and he or she would really suffer when the roll turns and the two sheets go flying onto the floor. So, I’m leaving the old roll out of kindness and compassion because the next person would be inconvenienced by having to get off to pick up the two sheets.”

Since this same way of thinking can affect so many of our other interactions with people throughout the day, bodhicitta starts in the bathroom. When we get good at changing toilet paper rolls, we can think about changing the hand towel, which at 45 seconds is almost double the effort because you must throw it in the laundry and go to the closet and get a new one. Living as part of a community is valuable because there are all sorts of opportunities to do small things that manifest your deepest heartfelt wish to be kind and compassionate, and give joy to the world. 🌱

April 19

Living in the Present Moment

We hear a lot of talk about “living in the present moment”, but it is hard for us to understand exactly what that means. We tend to think that when we are experiencing something, it will last forever. When we are miserable, we think there is no hope, there is no coming out of the depression, and that it is going to last forever. When things are going well, we also think that they are not going to change; they are just going to keep being wonderful. Yet our actual experience is that things are constantly changing. Because they are created, they are under the influence of causes and conditions. Change is in its very nature.

This is why the Buddha encouraged us to contemplate impermanence and to contemplate our mortality, to know that we are going to die. Doing this helps us to put our priorities in perspective so that we do what is important and do not just get caught up in the wrong view of living in the present moment, thinking that the present moment is all there is and that it will last forever.

Yesterday was stormy, and we might tend to feel that it is always going to be stormy, yet today it is different. Or we might think on a sunny day it is always going to be sunny, and then it becomes stormy. Being aware of this changeable nature helps us to live in a way in which our priorities are established more clearly. We can see that even farmers do not think what is happening today will last forever. When it is raining, they do things to prepare for the work they will do when it is sunny. Yesterday we sharpened tools, even though they are not being used today, we are preparing for a sunny day. On sunny days, we will work in the garden to grow the food we will use on rainy days.

The point is to not get locked into the present by thinking that whatever is happening now is always going to be. In our Dharma practice, when we are happy, we should also do the thought training practices that prepare our minds for when things are not going so well. Then, when we are in a bad or depressed mood, we can realise that it is not permanent, it is not all that exists.

Causes and conditions will automatically function. Therefore, have a sense of hope and optimism about the future knowing that we can change the causes and conditions of our experience. When we have a big view — including past, present and future — it helps us to live in the present in a more suitable way instead of in a closed-minded way. 🙏

April 20

You Can't Handle the Truth

I always feel much better when I can say, “Okay, this is just how I am, and that’s it.” Not in an offensive way that puts it in people’s faces, or rubs in the differences, and not in a way where I am trying to anticipate how they are going to feel and disrespecting them because I am thinking they cannot handle the truth.

As a kid, if you see your parents lie it becomes confusing because they are telling you not to lie, but you are seeing them lie. Then do I trust them? If I see my parents lie, then are they telling me the truth? It is very confusing for kids. Between adults, it really harms trust. I am sure you all had people lying to you.

I think among adults, too, sometimes we do something that we do not feel good about, and then we lie to cover it up. In that case, there are two things. There is the initial thing we did, plus the lie to cover it up. In that kind of situation, I think it is better to be honest with ourselves, just admit what it was that we initially did, do purification practice to purify it, let it go, and then not have to lie to ourselves or anybody else about it.

It is difficult when other people cannot handle the truth, isn’t it? 🌸



April 21

Meditation Hut in Nepal

A friend of mine, another bhikshuni (female monastic) is living up in the Sorokumbu area of Nepal in Tamul, at maybe 10,000 or 12,000 feet high, in a fairly remote village. She sends us offerings from time to time, even though she has very little herself, but she is quite excited about what we are doing here. She recently sent me slides of her hut where she meditates in. She has been up there for some years now, meditating on her own.

Lots of people have the aspiration to go and meditate on their own, but very few can actually do it. She is one of the few who does it. Sometimes we think, “Oh if I could just go meditate on my own, get away from all these obnoxious sentient beings, then I could quieten my mind and gain some realisations and be peaceful. Then I could really benefit others.” We think that going to the mountains to do this will bring that result. Yet when I read her letters, she still has to deal with sentient beings, and she has had a ton of headaches just building the hut where she is going to meditate. She had to crack boulders to build her house out of stone. She did all the woodwork in the house and had to lay concrete on the inside of the stone walls herself. One January, in a windstorm, the whole roof blew off.

It brings home to us that wherever we are and whatever we do, as long as our mind is in samsara, there is going to be headaches, and there is going to be difficulties. She wrote me some letters saying how difficult it was working with the Nepalis who were building her hut, the numerous problems she had with the authorities, and so on. Even if we want to go meditate by ourselves, we are still dependent on sentient beings. Things do not go the way we want, and as long as our mind views and believes these things as problems, they become problems. Wherever we are, if our mind can have a gracious attitude of kindness and compassion, then even the sentient beings that we did not get along with before cease to cause us problems. You see this in the way His Holiness, Zopa Rinpoche or other great masters lived. It is all pointing us back to our practice, to transforming what is within. 🌸

April 22

Intentionally Deceiving Others

Lying or intentionally deceiving others, really brings into focus how we use our speech. Some people see lying as completely justified, and if we ever feel that we must lie about something, it is good to ask ourselves, “What am I doing that I don’t want others to know about?” Usually whatever we are doing is not so good if we do not want other people to know about it. We often justify “little” white lies to ourselves by saying we do not want to hurt other people’s feelings, but some of the things we lie about may not actually hurt anyone’s feelings. For example, if we do not want to take a telephone call, there is nothing wrong with telling whoever answers the phone to tell the caller we are busy and to call back later; we do not need to ask them to lie and tell the caller we are not there.

Exaggerating things or presenting them in an untrue light also falls into the category of lying. Here it is kind of tricky though because we should learn how to distinguish between skillful speech and intentional deception. Of course, we should take care to present issues in ways that other people can understand, especially those who may have different views, backgrounds, or values. But we also have to make sure that we do not fall into misrepresenting the situation or making something appear a certain way that is not true.

For example, we might have forgotten to do something, but when somebody asks us about the situation we say, “Well, I was going to wait and check back later to see if it was still necessary to do.” We do this to save face rather than admit that we had forgotten about it or made a mistake. When people ask us about our behaviour and we explain it in a way that presents us in a positive light, we may think, “Well, I’m just explaining it this way so they’ll understand. I don’t want to make a big deal out of something that’s not really a big deal.” But if we look more closely at our motivation, we might find that we are actually trying to avoid blame by actively covering up something. It is good to pay attention to all these aspects of truthful speech. 🍵

April 23

Kindness and Interdependence

Looking at interdependence, we see how things are dependent on many causes, and how things are interrelated. We also see interdependence when we think about how many people are involved with making and transporting all our daily life requisites that we so often take for granted.

It is incredible to take just one object, for instance, our shirt or the place where we live, and trace it back to see how many living beings were involved in its creation. The people who grew the cotton our shirt is made from, those who harvested and transported the cotton, the people who made the cloth, designed the shirt and stitched it. Many people contributed to the existence of the store where the shirt was purchased. When thinking about everything it takes for us to have a shirt, we get a sense of the kindness of all those living beings. Whether they had the intention to benefit us or not, does not matter. What is important is that due to their efforts, we have the things we need to stay alive. That, in and of itself, indicates that we are the recipients of a great deal of kindness.

Understanding that we have received so much kindness spurs our spiritual practice. It makes us feel connected to people and the environment that we all live in. It is that connection of kindness that touches us and makes us aware of our interdependent relationship with all other living beings. We come to see that others not only contribute to our well-being, but we also have the opportunity to contribute to theirs. This makes us more careful with our motivations and our actions. We do not want to harm them, and we want to benefit them because they have been kind to us.

Just as we depend on others for so many things, they too depend on us. We want what we give to others to be motivated by our kind heart and our genuine wish for their happiness and well-being. 🍃

April 24

Death and Identity

When you hear that somebody is dying, or think about your death, it feels like there is a real, solid person who will be gone soon. If you really examine this idea, you will see that there is no person there to start with, just a body and a mind. The body is not the person, the mind is not the person, and there is no person separating from them. But our mind puts it all together, and voila! There is a real person who is afraid of dying, afraid of losing people, and clings to all these things that cannot possibly be held on to.

The real tragedy of the ignorant mind is that it holds onto things that are impossible to keep, especially our identity, which causes so much suffering. When you meditate on emptiness, the mind relaxes around one's death and others' deaths. But it is still good to go back and forth between the nominally existent person who creates causes and experiences karmic results, and the lack of a findable person who has died or is getting reborn. A person is experiencing the ripening of karma at death, but one that is merely labelled. It is not a human being, and it is definitely not the same personality that we knew popping up, out, and down into another body.

Even in this life, our mind and body are constantly changing. Understanding karma this way helps to keep us living as kind, ethical human beings related to the conventionalities of the world. When we think about emptiness, our mind relaxes when we realise there is nothing to hold on to, nothing to be afraid of, and nothing to lose. 🍃

April 25

Using Suffering to Increase Compassion

Encountering people or animals that are suffering but for which we are unable to do anything about provides a good opportunity for us to practise the Dharma in real life. Feeling helpless and despondent in situations like these can lead to angry thoughts and speech, which only causes more suffering to ourselves and others. Instead of falling into that, we use others' suffering to increase our compassion and determination to practise bodhicitta and become a Buddha for the benefit of others.

When we meet difficult circumstances, instead of thinking the usual, "This is too much, I can't handle it," we can say, "This is the field of my practice and it's going to make my intention to be of benefit even stronger," followed by, "How can I be of benefit?" There are numerous ways we can influence animals or human beings, so they do not create negative actions and have to suffer karmic consequences. Our actions probably will not have a big impact right away but helping people to learn about karma will prevent them from acting, speaking and thinking in harmful ways that result in rebirths with the kind of suffering we do not want them to experience.

We can also encourage them to do more of whatever good actions they are doing to benefit their own and others' lives while creating the cause for a higher rebirth. For example, we can use our distress at seeing animals killed or injured by a massive oil spill to strengthen our resolve not to go fishing, hunting, or eating live seafood meals since the people who do the killing at the restaurants will become vulnerable to the same kinds of suffering in lower rebirths caused by their killing. Then the animals' suffering becomes fuel for our bodhicitta and our efforts to encourage others to live in accord with the law of karma and its effects. We can also do the taking-and-giving practice in which we take in all the animals' suffering and use it to destroy our selfishness, followed by sending out our body, possessions and virtue to stop the oil spill. 🐾

April 26

Healthy or Sick

My body should always be healthy. I will do ten backflips to make sure it is healthy. I must have a special room for yoga. Do not ask me to do yoga in a room that has laminated flooring, even if I have a yoga mat. No. My body is too precious for that. I must have my perfect room for yoga, the right temperature, and good yoga clothes. I cannot do yoga in just any clothes. I must wear my yoga clothes. Especially if I go to a yoga centre, etc.

Then if you go cycling, you must have your cycling clothes. You cannot just put on jeans and a sweatshirt. You must have cycling clothes and a helmet that matches. The helmet must be the same colour as your cycling clothes, or at least blend and offset the subtle colours in your cycling clothes, and so on just to pamper this body.

When we stub our toe, our mind shrieks, “Ahhh!” and borders on a national disaster. Everything that happens to our body, we take great care of. Do you remember when you played softball and you got hit in the stomach? “Oh, I want some attention, this is terrible, look how hurt I am!” You catch a cold and then suddenly you wear all your Alaska gear. You are all bundled up. Even though it is just a cold, you have everything on and perhaps five or ten masks because the thin ones will not do anymore.

I remember in Singapore, if I start coughing, immediately they want to take me to the doctor. What is the doctor going to do if you have a common cold? He is going to say, “Go to bed and sleep.” But, I have got to go to the doctor.

It is just amazing. We fuss so much about this body, don't we? And worry. When it has really severe sicknesses, we go really nuts. You are diagnosed with kidney disease, cancer or a heart condition. Or you get severely injured and you go totally ballistic, “My life is falling apart. How could this happen to me?” Our whole world gets condensed into this body, and that is all that is important. Our Dharma is out the window and worry and anxiety become the air we breathe.

We spend a lot of time taking care of this body, giving this body pleasure and protecting it from harm. From another perspective, we do not actually treat this body very well when in our pursuit of pleasure we do not eat well, and we take all sorts of substances, such as alcohol, recreational drugs, etc. that harm our body. We do not take care of the health of this body because we spend so much time seeking bodily pleasure. We eat too much, we eat the wrong stuff, and we do not exercise (because who wants to get off the couch?) In a Dharma way, if we are going to keep this body clean and healthy, and fit for practice, then we really should watch our diet, mind what we consume, ensure we exercise and go to the doctor when we need to. 🍵



April 27

Basis of Designation

In our daily life, we say things like, “I see the cup,” but when we look, what are we really seeing? We are actually seeing just the colour and the shape. We are seeing the properties of the cup, and based on those properties, we label it as “cup”. Similarly, if we touch the cup, we say, “I touched the cup.” But what are we actually touching? What are we experiencing? We are touching the material from which the cup is made, but are we touching the cup? In other words, is the cup the material from which it is made? It is interesting in our daily life to play with this and when we touch things, to ask ourselves what it is that we are actually touching, or when we see things, to ask ourselves what it is we are actually seeing. Then observe how our mind imputes an object dependent upon those properties, and dependent upon the parts of that object. We are actually confounding the basis of the designation of the object as the object.

Whenever we examine any of the bases of the designation, it too becomes hard to find. Maybe you look at a red cup and say, “I don’t see the cup, but I see the redness of the cup.” But, how do you know you are seeing redness? What do you actually see? There are a lot of different shades of red in there, you are not seeing one kind of blanket colour, or one kind of unified thing. There is redness on the left, and there is redness on the right. You are seeing many different things. Even if we say, “I’m seeing red,” what actually is it that we are seeing? Or if we say, “I’m seeing the roundness of the cup.” What is roundness? Are you seeing the top part of the circle or the bottom part of the circle?

When we look at the cup, we are actually perceiving its attributes and its basis of designation. When we take the attributes as objects in their own right and examine them, we see that we are actually perceiving their bases of designation. On and on we go, and it becomes very difficult to find any smallest particle or any initial attribute from which everything started. This kind of reflection can help us to understand dependent origination and how things are empty of independent existence, empty of inherent existence from their side. ☸

April 28

Contemplating Causality

Look at your ideas about negative karma and positive karma. I am sure we all think our positive karma ripens quickly and finishes swiftly. That it comes and goes very quickly. On the other hand, we think our negative karma is permanent and always functions to produce the result of suffering, and can never be purified, it just always is. Maybe we acquired that concept when we were children, or maybe our minds made it up. We really need to bring out the assumptions and underlying ideas we have about things and ask ourselves if they are true. “Am I grasping onto a permanent cause? Am I holding onto an idea of an external creator whom I’ve got to please? Am I thinking that a discordant cause is the cause of my suffering or my happiness?”

Use reasoning and logic to root out these old assumptions, because they create a very strong emotional block in our practice if they are not challenged. If we have the idea that negative karma is permanent and there is nothing we can do about it, we can easily conclude that we are a bad person. Mistaken actions do not mean you are a bad person — they are not connected, though our mind invents a connection. These kinds of wrong views impede our growth and disturb us on an emotional level. If we believe this irrational logic that ends with “therefore, I’m insufficient, stupid, so forget it”, we will be down all the time.

There are many kinds of causality aside from karmic causality, such as biological causality, chemical causality, and psychological causality. A lack of snow this winter was due to the physical causality of the Gulf Stream moving the water elsewhere, but our living in a place where there is insufficient rainfall is influenced by our karma.

When you contemplate causality, it loosens things up in your mind and you realise that they are not concrete. If they are dependent on causes they cannot support themselves and only exist because the causes for them exist. The whole idea of

causality means change, so if we can change those causes, we can change the results. It is possible to remove the causes of negativity and suffering because they are all based on wrong views. If we develop the wisdom that understands things the way they are, those wrong views will be eliminated. Realising this opens a whole field in which you can play because things are not cast in concrete. This gives us much more enthusiasm and helps us to be more compassionate because it is easier to be kinder to others when our mind is happy. 🍄



April 29

Have You Ever Seen an Unhappy Buddha?

It is important to understand what being kind to ourselves means in the Buddhist context because in a worldly way it usually means being self-indulgent. In Buddhism, it means doing what is best for ourselves in the long run, and practising the Buddhist path falls into this. The basis of the path is taking refuge in the Three Jewels and taking and keeping the precepts, which are the foremost ways we can practise taking care of and protecting ourselves. The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha provide a path to get us out of the unsatisfactory conditions of this life. By practising this path, we cast off the blinders that keep us trapped and become awakened to the peace and joy that is nirvana. Have you ever seen an unhappy Buddha? 🙏



April 30

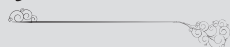
Cherishing Others versus the Self-Centred Mind

When the Buddha talked about the causes of happiness and the causes of suffering, he spoke quite a bit about how much the self-centred mind, and the self-absorbed mind cause suffering and prevent happiness. He also spoke a great deal about how the mind that cherishes others is the cause of happiness. When he did this, he was not just thinking about happiness in the world and giving happiness to others, but about how we as individuals experience happiness. In other words, when our mind is really wrapped around ourselves — what we want, what we think, and how we struggle hard to make everything the way we want it, that self-centred mind by itself causes us a great deal of stress and unhappiness. In addition, it creates the karma that brings about more misery in future lives.

The mind that genuinely cherishes others is a mind that is happy and joyful. It is a mind that is very free. With that mind, we derive happiness right now and create the karma to meet pleasant situations again in the future.

It is very interesting to spend some time in meditation looking at our own lives and examining how the self-absorbed mind makes us unhappy and how the mind that genuinely cherishes others makes us joyful. When I am talking about genuinely cherishing others, it does not mean doing something out of obligation or trying to please others because you want them to like you. It comes from a place inside of us that respects and appreciates others. We should review our lives and see if that is true or not in our own experiences. ☸

May



Ever wonder

“How to Free Your Mind”?

Ask the Buddha!



May 1

To be Enjoyed and Loved by Sentient Beings

May I be beloved by beings and may they be more beloved by me than myself. May their bad deeds ripen upon me and may all my virtue, without exception, ripen upon them.

When we do the taking-and-giving meditation, we are transforming our body, possessions and virtue into all the material things people need, as well as their ability to make connections and in turn experience love and affection. It is not saying, “May I be loved by beings,” in the usual egotistical sense of, “May they like me because I’m emotionally needy and can’t stand on my own two feet.” Rather, we wish for an affectionate connection with them in which we can benefit them and lead them on the path.

The statement “may they be more loved by me than myself” does not mean putting ourselves down and believing we are worthless. It means that instead of us just following our self-centred mind like the donkey with the ring in its nose that is being led here and there by the self-preoccupied mind, we cherish others more than ourselves because this frees us from the bonds of our self-centredness. When we think only about ourselves, we use others and any love or affection we have for them only because they will give us something. If we approach others with the attitude “what can I get out of them?”, we will never be satisfied because we are not believing in ourselves. We are thinking it is other people’s job to fill us up.

We must learn how to love ourselves as valuable human beings with Buddha potential who can contribute to the welfare of both ourselves and others. Instead of just being involved in our needs and wants, we can ask, “How can I help you? What can I share with you? How can I listen to what’s important to you and what you need?” Many psychological studies have verified that we feel much happier and more fulfilled when we are able to be generous and contribute to the well-being of others. However, we still have to learn it, so let us try and go in that direction when we engage with others. ☁

May 2

Sweet Constraints

Whatever we are doing in life, we need constraints to make things go well, rest our afflicted mind goes nuts and does not care who we harm, even ourselves. We voluntarily undertake “sweet constraints” because we have seen their purpose and the reason for them — they are good for us, they nurture the best in us and help us grow. In Buddhism, we never see our precepts as something imposed on us from outside, rather we have voluntarily chosen to take them because we realise that we need to restrain our body, speech and mind. In that way, the precepts become protective guidelines that help us to grow in a good direction and live together in good relationships with other people.

Dharma practitioners want to take precepts because we see that good rules nurture us and keep us from doing what we do not want to do anyway. Everyday habits, how we live our lives, how we treat the people around us — this is the indication of what is happening in our Dharma practice. Precepts help us from being too hedonistic, using more than our fair share, going to sensual extremes, and running around after this and that pleasure. Precepts also prevent us from going to emotional extremes where we view ourselves as saviours and others as evil enemies to be destroyed or believing our feelings are the most important in the world and we must tell them to everybody. We are moving away from samsara by taking our precepts — the lay or pratimoksha precepts, the bodhisattva precepts, and the tantric precepts — and we use them as the basis for proceeding along the path to awakening. 🙏

May 3

Are You Angry?

When my friend comes along and says, “Oh, Chodron! Are you angry? Are you upset? Is something wrong?” In my mind, I go, “No! I’m not angry! Get out of here! Mind your own business!”

At that moment, what I really want inside more than anything is to be able to connect with the person. The way I am acting is pushing the person away. Quite amazing, isn’t it? Our behaviour brings about the very opposite of what we really want at that moment. Think about it. When you are really angry at a friend or a family member, what is it you really want underneath? Are you wanting to hurt them? No. You are wanting to connect with them, aren’t you? But you are not able to do so at that moment because something had happened. Yet, what we say and do often prevents communication from occurring between us because we are so locked in our anger. Has that ever occurred to you?

A real friend is someone who will tell us that we are going down the wrong path. However, when we are wrong, we do not want to talk to that friend at that time because that friend who really cares for us has become an enemy since he or she is saying we are at fault for this situation. If we talk to a friend and our friend says, “You kind of contributed to that,” that person is no longer our friend. We only want to talk to people who are going to say, “You’re right. How could they do that? They’re so awful. You have every right to be angry. How are we going to get even?” We only talk to the people who we know are going to agree with our view, because that is our childish definition of a friend: You agree with my ideas. You do not tell me when I have a problem. You do not tell me that something is my responsibility. You side with me against somebody else even if I am wrong.

We may frame our retaliation as compassion that will in turn stop our enemies from doing the same thing again and hurting somebody else. So, we punch the person in the nose for somebody else’s benefit, when actually our motivation

is, “I hope his nose breaks!” But we are too polite to say that publicly, so we gloss it over with, “I’m so compassionate and this is for his own good and blah, blah, blah.”

Usually, when we are angry, we are very focused on, “What should I do? I need to do something.” I have discovered that when I am angry, that is not the time to decide what to do, because I am too angry to see the situation clearly. That is the time when I should calm my mind down, and when my mind is calm, then I can look at the situation and see a constructive way to respond. But when I am angry, I cannot clearly see a constructive way to response. The mind is too confused. 🙏

May 4

Impermanence

The Buddha spoke of gross impermanence and subtle impermanence. Gross impermanence refers to the big changes that we can see. Death is part of gross impermanence, as are all the changes that we see and know. Then there is subtle impermanence, the momentary change that is automatically going on where things arise, abide, and disintegrate — all at the same time, all at the same moment, not enduring for another second.

We live amidst this subtle and gross impermanence. This is the nature of functioning things. We use that awareness to give energy to our Dharma practice. Through the awareness of death, for example, we realise how important it is to practise. Through the experience of friends dying, we leaving them, or other kinds of gross impermanence, we understand the importance of not being attached. Instead, we can look back on relationships, events, and situations and simply rejoice that they happened, and that we had that opportunity to share the Dharma and others in the way we did. We take what we had learnt with us into the future, into the continuing impermanence of our lives. We bring that same non-attachment, coupled with loving kindness, into all our new relationships, which are also changing moment by moment. In this way, we make what we do meaningful without our minds getting attached. ☁



May 5

Expressing Anger

Think about how we express ourselves when we are angry. It is fine to let others know that we are angry, we do not need to stuff it down, but we need to be careful about how we express the anger. If we own our anger and just say such and such happened, or you did this and that and I reacted in anger because this was the effect your actions had on me, that is owning our anger and also stating to the other person that we want to work on it. But when we express our anger simply by insulting others or imputing motivations to them that they do not have, or accusing them of having certain personality traits, that is not conducive to good communication.

We need to look at how we express our anger. Sometimes when we are angry, we will say, “Why did you do that?” But I think before we ask that question, we have to ask ourselves, “Is it really important to me why the person did that?” Sometimes it might be important, and we really need to understand why somebody did something to work out a better solution. Sometimes we say, “Why did you do this?” almost like a rhetorical question because whatever they say, we are still going to be angry. It is said as a way to accuse the other person. We need to work on our anger internally and try to resolve it, but it is okay to tell somebody else that we are angry because of something that happened in a situation. Nonetheless, we should be careful about how we say it so that we are talking about ourselves and how we are feeling and not imputing motivations and meanings to others’ words and actions. 🧘

May 6

Positive Contribution

A group of us at the Abbey were talking about what had originally brought us to the Buddha's teachings. It was interesting to hear that, in one way or another, we all came to the Dharma because of deep admiration for the loving, compassionate motivation of bodhicitta. We all felt that the purpose, meaning and value of our lives had something to do with expanding our hearts to care for all sentient beings and then making an actual positive contribution for their benefit. Each of us has different talents and abilities. According to our karma, we each have different opportunities to benefit others. The actual way in which we offer benefits will differ accordingly. But our motivation is one thing that we all share and that we want to enhance and increase as our practice deepens.

So many different causes and effects need to be created for the Dharma to exist in our world. Some of these are created through our sitting practice. Others are created when we use our unique abilities and talents in a practical way, for example by transcribing and editing Dharma talks, constructing buildings to be used for Dharma purposes, working on the website, cooking for Dharma events, and so on.

Explore to see what your unique abilities are and rejoice in the abilities and talents of others, knowing that one person alone cannot make everything happen. It is all of us working together for something that goes way beyond us as individuals and way beyond our life span.

Think big and help the Dharma exist on our planet for many generations to come. Think of all the sentient beings who will benefit from that as the ripple effect propagates. Also, when we contribute to sustaining the Dharma, we will reap the benefit in our future lives in a practical way. If we are born on this Earth in the future, we will be able to take advantage of the monasteries, Dharma centres, websites, books and so forth that we had helped to create in our previous lives. Of course, we will also benefit karmically by acting with bodhicitta, and that will lead to our awakening. 🍃

May 7

Motivations to Set Every Morning

Every morning we set a motivation and think that today, the most important thing I must do is to guard my body, speech and mind so that I do not harm anybody through what I do, what I say, or even what I think. That is the most important thing — more important than anything else today.

The second most important thing is to be of benefit to others as much as possible. Thoroughly cultivate that as your motivation simply for being alive today. Our purpose for being alive is not just to keep this body alive, to eat and sleep, and have pleasure. We have a higher purpose, a higher meaning: to really work for the benefit of living beings. If the purpose of our life is simply to keep the body alive and have pleasure, then at the end of our life, we have nothing to show for it. The body dies and all the pleasures, like last night's dream, are gone. But if we work for higher motivation, higher purpose, do what is beneficial for all living beings, then there is happiness and benefit now.

At the end of our lives, the benefit that we have given to others continues, as do all the imprints of the attitude of kindness, the attitude of care towards others. All the imprints of having generated that positive mind go on with us into the next life. Even at the time of death, that kind heart brings incredible benefits and carries through into the next life.

The third motivation, our long-term purpose, is to become fully awakened. In other words, to have the wisdom, compassion and skill so that in the long-term, we will be able to be of the greatest benefit to all living beings, even being able to lead them on the path to awakening. We change and develop a kind heart that positively influences every single living being we encounter, and through that influence on them, it spreads out to all the people they know.

Spending one day with a positive, long-term motivation may seem like a small thing, but when we think of the ripple effect it has now, and the benefit it has in future lives and for progressing along the path to liberation and awakening, we see that even one day spent with such motivations of kindness and of directly and indirectly benefiting sentient beings has tremendous outcomes and many good results. 🍃



May 8

Our Own Reality Isn't Everyone's Reality

We all have our version of reality, which we also think is everybody else's version of reality. We believe that our thoughts, interpretations and emotional reactions to different situations go across the board and that everybody thinks and feels like we do. And if they do not, then something is wrong with them, because our way of thinking and feeling is obviously the only one that is correct and appropriate to the situation. This kind of view gets us into a lot of trouble because we are, “knocking our heads against the wall”, as my mother puts it. Since the wall is not going to budge, it is only our heads that are going to get hurt.

We have all sorts of unrealistic expectations that are symptomatic of our rigid minds and fixed ways of thinking, particularly grasping at true existence. Just because an object appears truly existent, we project something onto it and believe it is objectively out there by itself. There are so many layers of this process. For example, when I look at a recorder and think, “Ah, this is a good recorder,” I assume everybody else thinks it is a good recorder too. But everybody has different preferences, so forget it! That is one level of grasping at true existence — a truly existent good recorder. Even getting rid of this idea, we are still not aware that we are thinking of it as a recorder. An even deeper layer is that we are not seeing the recorder as a dependent arising event, but rather something that has “recorder-ness” from its side. And a final layer of grasping at true existence is the thought, “I love it, and it means I'm important because I possess it.” It is just amazing how we get stuck in all this stuff.

When we hear teachings and try to put them into practice, we realise that how we think is not reality and that how we experience the world is not some kind of objective reality. Rather, it is an event conditioned by our karma, our habitual patterns, the physical body that we have taken, and so on. With all these conditioning, nothing we perceive really exists out there objectively. 🍃

May 9

Kindness of Strangers

Not long ago, a friend wrote to me that she had to go to the emergency room. She had some stomach pain but the kindness of all the people in the emergency room touched and surprised her. It was not just kindness in the sense of their provision of services for her and doing their job but it was the way they did it and that they really took special care of her and shared something from their own lives.

What made her realise was the kindness of people who had been strangers, and when she walks down the street or drives down the road, she now sees all the other strangers as equally kind. In other words, she had realised that all the people who are strangers can now, in a finger snap, show the same kind of kindness to her as those people in that emergency room.

She began to see that there is no hard and fast category between stranger and helper and that we are quite interdependent with others. We may similarly be strangers to others but then suddenly we meet them in some kind of situation and have the opportunity to be kind to them. The whole thing is to slow down and be aware of how much we influence one another and the impact of our actions on others. We then will have a chance to return that kindness when we encounter others who were previously strangers. 🍵



May 10

Maintaining Awareness of Death

When we hear about someone who died unexpectedly, we should remember, “I too am aging, and I could even die today.” Most people who die on any given day do not wake up in the morning and think, “I’m going to die today.” Even those in the hospital or a palliative care or hospice facility will think, “Well, I’m dying, but it’s going to happen later, not today.”

When we listen to teachings on death, the mind is always going, “This teaching doesn’t directly pertain to me at the moment because death is going to come later.” This kind of mind makes it very difficult to immerse ourselves in the Dharma and to practise purely. The appearances of this life are so strong that we get carried away and forget that we could die at any time. We should always take the news of others’ deaths as personal instructions to maintain this awareness and ask ourselves if we are prepared for death: “Are we content with our Dharma practice? Have we sufficiently purified our negative karma? Have we created enough merit? Do we know how to guide our minds when we are dying? What practice will we do, and are we even going to remember to practise when the moment arrives?” Asking ourselves these questions will give us a lot of energy to practise in a pure way without getting side-tracked by the eight worldly concerns. If we can do this, it is a breeze when death actually comes. For great practitioners, death is like going on a picnic.

A former abbot of one of the branches of Drepung Monastery spent eighteen days in clear light meditation after dying. Death for him was happy and joyful because it offered the opportunity to meditate on the clear light of death. This is the kind of person we want to be when we die, rather than one who is clutching and clinging to something ungraspable. Then at the time of death, we can say, “Wow! Oh, how nice! Meditation in clear light, and then I get to go forward and continue working for the benefit of sentient beings!” To be able to relax and enjoy our death, we need to maintain an awareness of death at every moment of our lives. ☸

May 11

Miscarriages and Karma

One of the inmates that I corresponded with when he was previously incarcerated was out, subsequently gotten married, and he and his spouse were expecting a child. The baby was about four months when he died in the womb, and they had to induce labour to expel the baby. They were really upset and devastated because they loved this child even though they had never met face to face. We were talking about it, and I was saying to him that grief does not have to be overwhelming, consuming, and such. It is a process of adapting to a change that you did not want and did not expect. We talked about how grief is so often due to attachment to a future we imagined that turned out not to be so. I explained to him how when we are born we have a karmic lifespan of how long we live. If there is the ripening of a very severe heavy karma, then we die before that karmic lifespan has been fulfilled.

They say that in such a case when the person is reborn, there is often a miscarriage or a stillbirth, or the baby dies when it is quite young because it had that little bit of human karma left from a previous life to experience. I was really saying to him, please understand that this is the baby's karma, and it is not his fault and it is not his wife's fault. Often in cases of miscarriage or stillbirth, people blame themselves thinking, "If only," or, "If I had done this," or, "If he or she had done that..." Thinking in such a manner is completely useless because you cannot prove any of it and it is only going to create an unnecessary heaviness and distance between people in the family, whereas right now you really need to come together and support each other.

We talked about saying prayers for the child to have a good rebirth with precious human life and the conditions to meet fully qualified teachers and attain awakening quickly. He was very firm and repeated several times in the conversation, "Please also dedicate the Abbey's prayers for all other families who are experiencing this now. I do not want it to seem like it is just me and my sorrow. There are so many other families out there." He recounted that the hospital said 15% of all pregnancies ended in such a manner. I advised him to take this experience, even

as tragic as it is, and really practise the Dharma, by remembering that death can happen at any time and so therefore it is important to be ready when death comes. Death is a transition, just like birth is too. In this way, we can go on in our lives with hope and optimism and learn from whatever had happened in the past. 🙏

May 12

Refuge and Precepts

The day you take refuge is a very special day in your life. When you take refuge in the Triple Gem, you are very clear about your spiritual path and its purpose, meaning, and direction in your life. Having clarity on these issues is very important for inner peace of mind and well-being. Similarly, taking precepts means you are making a major decision about what you want and do not want in your life. These decisions are coming voluntarily because of your wisdom and contemplation of what has worked in your life so far and what has not. Getting to the point where you are ready to take refuge and precepts is quite wonderful, and it indicates a certain amount of spiritual and personal growth. You might have all kinds of ideals that you want to actualise immediately, but taking refuge and precepts is about setting yourself on a worthwhile and positive direction in life and going step-by-step. Having our ethical decisions already thought out makes the mind much more peaceful and clearer when we encounter difficult situations. ☸



May 13

The Lion of Pride

Dwelling in the mountains of wrong views of selfhood, puffed up with holding itself superior, it claws other beings with contempt: The Lion of Pride. Please protect us from this danger!

Pride is one of the greatest dangers that we face as spiritual practitioners. We watch lions strutting through their turf, growling at every being that they come across. Humans, like lions, also parade around, showing off to everyone they meet, looking down on others, or more correctly, wanting others to look up at them. If pride and arrogance get big enough, they stop people from learning from others and make them think that only they have relevant information, and only they can lead.

Lions have sharp, deadly claws that they use to feel strong and keep others cowed. Humans use contempt, which can lead them to harm others, especially those they consider inferior. Pride makes humans, like lions, challenge others to see who the best is. And if there is a possibility that the other person is better than them, they become jealous.

Tibetans tell a story about an intelligent rabbit that got the better of an arrogant lion. One full moon, a rabbit visited a lion and told him of a creature that was much more magnificent than him. Disbelieving the rabbit, the lion immediately wanted to confront this creature. The rabbit brought the lion to a well and told him to look down. Upon seeing his own reflection, the lion began to display his magnificence and strength. The being in the well did the same. Then the lion growled angrily, and the being in the well returned the threat. Determined to get the better of this creature, the lion pounced on his own reflection. Needless to say, he drowned in the well.

The best way to combat pride is to consider a subject that you do not know much about. If we can recognise that we have some limitations, our pride cannot

strut around saying it is the be-all, end-all of everything. Another antidote is to recognise that those beings that we look down on, compete with, or are jealous of, have all been our parents in previous lives, and our teachers and coaches in this life who helped us to develop the talents or gifts that we have now. We did not achieve this alone.

When we focus on the kindness of others and recognise that all of us are suffering together, it gives us more energy to try to solve problems, instead of creating them by keeping others at arm's length. Our mind is the source of this arrogance and we need to direct our energy towards taming this pride instead of letting it roar at others and cause misery not only in our own lives but in the lives of those around us. 🍄



May 14

The Elephant of Ignorance

Not tamed by the sharp hooks of mindfulness and vigilance, dulled by the maddening liquor of sensual pleasures, it enters the wrong paths and shows its harmful tusks: the elephant of ignorance — please protect us from this danger!

Ignorance is what keeps us attached to cyclic existence. It wants, it gets angry, and it is not satisfied. Think of a very large elephant that is mad and has no control over itself. Put that elephant into a crowd and watch it rage around. This is what our mind is like when it is out of control. Can you see how others can be hurt?

When our mind is out of control, it gets us into all kinds of trouble. We do not focus on what can give us pleasure in the long-run, but focus only on the intoxicants of this life and the here and now. This can lead us to undertake unethical actions to get this fleeting pleasure, which includes harming others. It leads us away from the path to awakening.

If we use mindfulness and vigilance we can protect ourselves and others from this unruly, obnoxious, huge beast. We can tame and harness this energy to help us proceed along the path. We must keep reminding ourselves of what is important by using mindfulness. We use vigilance to constantly check to see where our mind is and if it is going in the right direction. 🐘

May 15

The Fire of Anger

The danger to the mind is evident when you are angry in the presence of others. When you are angry, does it feel like you are burning up? You have no control over what is going to come out of your mouth. Your mind gets extremely focused on whatever object that had set you off. Sometimes, people will say that you have steam coming out from your ears when they see that you are really angry. Your face gets red. These are all good indications that you are really, really mad.

Anger burns up good karma. At the same time, it produces negative karma. It quickly destroys merit, harmony and trust between people. When you have inappropriate attention, your mind stays on one non-virtuous object and it fans the flames of your anger higher and higher, only to attain the power to burn away a great amount of positive merit.

Anger causes us to harm not only ourselves but anyone who gets in our way. We must work on patience in order to combat anger. Patience is the ability to remain calm in the face of harm or suffering and is the antidote to anger. It gives us a chance to let compassion and open-mindedness prevail in our minds, which helps us to cool down and overcome anger. With patience, we are able to act firmly — sometimes with peaceful strength and other times with assertive compassion. ☸



May 16

The Snake of Jealousy

Lurking in its dark pit of ignorance, unable to bear the wealth and excellence of others, it swiftly injects them with its cruel poison: the snake of jealousy — please protect us from this danger.

Having the snake of jealousy lurking in its dark pit of ignorance means that we are not seeing reality for what it really is. It makes us think we will be happy if we destroy the happiness of others. Such behaviour is self-defeating.

The danger of jealousy to the mind is obvious. When we are unable to bear the wealth and excellence of others, our minds and hearts will be filled with poison. We try to demolish their happiness and good fortune and in the process harm ourselves and them. Spiteful jealousy not only lessens our self-respect but also keeps us bound in pain.

Is it really so bad if others are talented, successful and happy? Why can we not rejoice in their fortunate circumstances instead of trying to find a way to destroy them? Rejoicing in the good fortune of others is the antidote to jealousy. When others are happy, why not join in? With all the suffering we already have in the world, why would we want to add to it, when all we have to do is open our hearts and let ourselves be happy about someone else's goodness and happiness?

It is also a great way to collect merit without lifting a finger. Imagine that! Rejoicing makes us feel good, makes others feel good, and helps us to accumulate the merit we need in order to become awakened. ☸

May 17

The Thieves of Wrong Views

Roaming the fearful wilds of inferior practice and the barren wastes of absolutism and nihilism, they sack the towns and hermitages of benefit and bliss: the thieves of wrong views — please protect us from this danger!

The danger of wrong views of the mind is that they prevent you from seeing the proper path to awakening. They steal your attention just like a thief does. If this happens we are left in a very poor position to find the happiness and peace of nirvana. In fact, wrong views will take us in the opposite direction that we want to go. Spiritual poverty is more dangerous than material poverty, for it affects not just the happiness of this life but the happiness of many future lives as well.

Our biggest obstacle is ignorance. In order to overcome it, we need to follow the middle way. If we have wrong views, the path we follow could lead to absolutism, seeing things as inherently existent, or nihilism, believing that nothing exists at all. These views destroy our respect for ethical living and make us reckless in practising constructive actions and abandoning harmful ones. It destroys the wisdom and merit that we have already collected and prevents us from collecting more.

This is where study comes in. Finding the appropriate teacher and the correct path is the only way to keep these thieves from leading us in the wrong direction. We need to study the teachings carefully with an open mind to understand them and apply them to situations around us in an unbiased way. 🙏

May 18

The Chains of Miserliness

“Binding embodied beings in the unbearable prison of cyclic existence with no freedom, it locks them in craving’s tight embrace. The chain of miserliness — please protect us from this danger.”

We must acknowledge that craving and miserliness keep us locked up in the prison of cyclic existence if we are to get anywhere in our practice. Our usual assessment of our situation is more like, “What’s cyclic existence? I have no idea. Why am I alive? Well, I never thought of it. What’s the purpose of my life? I haven’t thought about that either. What happens after death? I don’t want to think about that; it’s too scary.” Some people conclude that life’s purpose is to eat, drink and be merry, or sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Many just live on in an automatic manner.

One of the first things we must do in our Dharma practice is to examine our situation in order to counteract our usual view of “Yes, there’s *samsara*, but as long as I have a good life and I’m comfortable and people like me, a little bit of suffering is okay. I’m not in an unbearable prison because I have lots of freedom — I can say anything I want, do anything I want, and have anything I want. Sometimes there are problems, but they’re all the fault of others, and since there’s nothing much I can do, I’ll just enjoy myself.” Even if we have been practising the Dharma for a while, our view can be, “Well, live day-by-day, try and avoid suffering, have happiness, say a few mantras, and that’s good enough.”

We have to develop a new self-image of somebody born into cyclic existence due to ignorance, anger and attachment, who thinks he or she is truly existent rather than merely imputed, and who wants only happiness and not suffering but does not take much interest in others or how one’s actions affect others. We do not think of ourselves as somebody who could die today. Instead, we figure that our death will be planned-out, easy, and perfect when it comes. Until

we change our image of who we are and what our situation is, miserliness would not be seen as much of a problem. We figure that the more we keep for ourselves, the more we will have, though we will give just enough so that we do not look like a cheapskate. To see miserliness and craving as a problem, we should reflect on what cyclic existence means and how to go about getting out of this situation. 🍄



May 19

The Flood of Attachment

Sweeping us in the torrent of cyclic existence, conditioned by the propelling winds of karma, we are tossed in the waves of birth, aging, sickness and death: The flood of attachment — please protect us from this danger!

The danger of attachment to your mind is grave. Think of being helplessly caught in a tsunami. It tosses you about, slamming you against any debris that happens to be nearby. It is overwhelming. You have no control whatsoever. It tosses you from side to side and very soon you are exhausted for trying to fight it. It drowns you unless you can grab hold of something to pull yourself out of it.

This is what attachment does. It keeps you helpless in cyclic existence, powerfully swept along by the current of time and space. Our obsession with what we cling to prevents peace, the peace of nirvana. The biggest attachment we have, that keeps us violently tossing about, is our attachment to this body and life.

We need to look at our attachments and figure out what it is that keeps us wanting more. What do we think will make us happy? If we get what we are attached to, will that bring us everlasting happiness? We need to reach out and grab a hold of the life preserver that Buddhism gives us. If we can grab it and use it in the way it is meant to be used, we can pull ourselves out of this endless sea of samsara and find safety on nirvana's shore.

We do this by contemplating the transient nature of all things. Nothing is going to last forever. Therefore, even if we manage to grab hold of what we want, we will eventually lose it or desire to replace it with something new and better. Reflecting on the disadvantages of cyclic existence is another good antidote. When we look at samsara closely, can we see its unsatisfactory nature of it? Can we see the suffering that it brings to all sentient beings? Even if today

is a good day, that does not mean tomorrow will be. We still have to keep struggling against pain and change and the all-pervasive conditioning that keeps us trapped in cyclic existence. Only by really examining our situation can we find the path that will allow us to get out of this current situation that we are in and find the path to true happiness. 🌱



May 20

The Carnivorous Demon of Doubt

Roaming in the space of darkest confusion, tormenting those who strive for ultimate aims, it is viciously lethal to liberation. The carnivorous demon of doubt — please protect us from this danger!

Doubt can confuse us and lead us in circles so that we get absolutely nowhere. If this doubt is in relation to our practice, it will hinder us from moving forward. It eats our time and prevents us from attaining awakening. It is called a carnivorous demon because it eats away our chances of getting out of samsara and being of benefit to all sentient beings.

The doubt that we are trying to be aware of is the doubt that can come when we perceive that, due to our practice, others question our sanity: “People think that going to a retreat is a waste of time. Maybe they’re right. Maybe I will go to the beach with my friends instead.”

We cannot see straight. The path goes this way, but we are not sure. We doubt our ability to practise. We doubt the teachings and the teachers. We go around and around getting nowhere. We cannot get off this merry-go-round in our life, so we cannot get off the merry-go-round of samsara which is making us dizzy and sick. What do we do?

First, we calm the mind. Meditation is helpful. Meditating on the breath brings us to a calm and peaceful place. We then slowly start to dissect our doubt. We study the Buddha’s teachings from a place of logic and clarity to find our motivation and to reach an accurate conclusion about the teachings. Instead of the mind being in a dark, dismal hole of doubt, let the light of the teachings in and rest within that, without the demon destroying your future. 🙏

May 21

Creating the Karmic Causes for Wealth

We wind up hoarding the most amazing things out of the fear of losing them. I personally have had to force myself to give away little containers that I saved for paperclips and other stationery. Once, after a discussion on generosity, I gave people the assignment to go through one closet or set of drawers and take out the things they did not use and give them away. This assignment was difficult for people. Some could not even get to the closet or chest of drawers. Some people got there and discovered things they had not used for years and had forgotten about, such as a souvenir t-shirt from a trip to Mexico. But they clung to it again once they saw it and could not give it away.

Some people got the things into a box but could not get the box into their car. Other people got the box into their car but could not get the box out of their car to a charity. Always there was something that interfered. Clearly at play was the self-centred mind of stinginess and miserliness, which karmically creates the cause for us to be poor. We do not need to go home and empty everything, but we should not pass up an amazing opportunity to create the karmic cause for wealth by giving away things we do not need, or things that other people may need more. Let us remember how good it feels when we overcome our self-centredness. 🍃



May 22

Remember Our Mortality

Think, therefore, upon seeing and hearing of others' deaths, "I am no different, death will soon come, its certainty is no doubt, but no certainty as to when. I must say farewell to my body, wealth and friends, but good and bad deeds will follow like shadows. From bad will come the long and unbearable pain of the three lower realms; from good the lighter, happier realms from which to swiftly enter the echelons of awakening." Know this and think upon it day after day.

People who are dying today think that today they are not going to die. Even if you are terminally ill in the hospital you always think it is not going to be today. It is going to be tomorrow. Or the next day. Or in a week. People do not think, "Oh, it's going to happen today, and by this evening I won't be here." Our ignorance is so thick that we cannot see that possibility.

When we are well and healthy, we do not think, "Well, by this evening I won't be here." Strokes, brain aneurysms, heart attacks, car accidents, those things and more happen to other people. Until one day they happen to us.

There is no certainty that none of the above will happen to us because that is exactly the way other people felt before something happened to them. We really do not know.

Here at the Abbey many people contact us when somebody is very ill or when someone has died. Either they want counselling, or they want us to make prayers and offerings, etc on their loved one's behalf after somebody dies. We hear many stories about how people died. Young people, old people, middle-aged people. It is quite amazing.

Sometimes we hear about the death of an elderly, and we just go, "Oh, well this person is in his 80s or 90s, so that is natural. That is okay." But from the point of

view of the deceased, it was not okay, as he still wants to be alive. In our mind, we may say, “Dying at the age of 80 or 90 makes sense.” Until we think of somebody who we care about is of that age, and then we go, “Oh, 80? 90? That is too young to die. You need to be older to die.” Strange, isn’t it?

Remember that death is certain, the time of death is uncertain, and without remembering death we will not create any virtue. That is the big thing. Remembering our mortality helps us to set our values and priorities and pulls us out of our lethargy and complacency. When we remember our mortality, it wakes us up and asks us to question the meaning of our life. 🌸



May 23

Dependent Arising

Quite a prominent thing in Buddhism is dependent arising, or interdependence, where everyone and everything is in constant flux and constantly in relationship to each other, affecting each other, and being affected by other things. That is just the nature of things; we are not solid, concrete entities. It is not that our skin surrounds us and protects us from everything else in the world and the world does not affect us and we do not affect the world. But rather, all the elements of which we are composed affect the world and the things in our environment. What we think and do affects other people. What they think and do affects us. There is a constant interrelationship.

When we see this, we realise that we are conditioned by what we have encountered in our life and by the people around us, but we see that we are also conditioning them in return. If we look inside, we should ask ourselves, “How do I condition others? What can I do to increase their happiness and their well-being? How can I contribute in a positive and useful way to the benefit of others, considering that we are so interdependent?”

Here is where the themes of love and compassion come in so prominently. When we have an attitude of love and compassion, our body, speech and mind act out that motivation, and our influence and contribution to the world become very positive. Having a positive contribution does not necessarily mean that everything and everybody becomes like what we want them to be. It is more like, from our side, we have a good motivation, and we feel good about it and at the same time, we realise we are not the only conditioning factor in other people’s lives. We put out what we can, take delight and rejoice in that. Then we let go in terms of expecting results because we see that there are so many other causes and conditions going on that we do not have influence over. This kind of attitude helps us to remain much more peaceful as we relate to the people and things in our life, and it is also a more peaceful way to relate to ourselves because we have a very happy and positive motivation for the things that we do. 🙏

May 24

Benefits of Ethical Conduct

To attain liberation, we need higher training in wisdom. For wisdom, we need higher training in concentration, and finally for concentration, we need higher training in ethical conduct. Ethical conduct involves the development of two mental factors that are particularly important for concentration, the first is mindfulness, and the second is vigilance. Mindfulness is what keeps your mind on the object of meditation, while vigilance checks to see if you are still on the object or if your mind has gotten distracted or fallen asleep. Regarding the practice of ethical conduct, mindfulness involves remembering our precepts and holding in mind how we want to behave. Vigilance then checks to see if we are keeping our precepts well and what is going on with our body, speech and mind. By developing these two mental factors while keeping ethical conduct, we build a foundation for concentration, which aids us to develop the wisdom leading to liberation. ☸



May 25

Long-Term and Short-Term Benefit

When we are deciding what action to take in different situations, there are always a short-term and a long-term benefits, or a short-term and a long-term disadvantages. There are four permutations for this. If something is of a short-term benefit or long-term benefit, do it. If something is of a short-term or long-term disadvantage, do not do it. The tricky ones are: if it is of a short-term benefit, but long-term disadvantage; or short-term disadvantage but long-term benefit, then what do you do?

In the first case, you attain some happiness and pleasure in the short term, but in the long term, it is not really going to bring something good for you or others. Our rational mind says, “You go for the long-term benefit.” However, when we are under the influence of attachment what do we do? We go for the short-term benefit. Then, we wind up with a long-term disadvantage. Similarly, in the other situation, if it is of short-term discomfort, but long-term benefit, clearly, we should work for the long-term benefit. But when our mind is under the influence of attachment or anger, what do we do? Sometimes we will do what is harmful in the long term.

Let us say you are mad at somebody. Somebody hurt you. Your mind says, “I just want to get my revenge!” You know this is not going to do you any good. It is going to create a whole lot of problems, like getting arrested. But when you are under the influence of anger and your mind is not thinking clearly, you may do short-term harm and lose out on the long-term benefit.

Attachment and anger confuse the mind, and this is a good example of how they work. They make us do things that will bring us long-term problems for the sake of a little short-term happiness. They make us do things to avoid a little bit of short-term unhappiness while we miss out on the long-term benefit. That is why anger and attachment are things we really have to take note of in our lives and then learn the antidotes to them. In many situations, thinking about the disadvantages is a very good antidote. 🧘

May 26

Judging vs Forgiving

Think about how important it is when we look at any situation of violence to open our minds to see the circumstances of not only the victim but also the person we label the victimiser. Those are simply labels. If we look inside the hearts of both parties, there is a lot of misery and both of them are under the control of their mental afflictions and karma. Looking at our own experience, we can see how we are also controlled by our mental afflictions and karma, we just happen to have a little bit of clarity from time to time to be able to realise this. Therefore, there is no reason to judge, condemn or throw others out because we understand very deeply what their situation is.

It is not that anybody ever really wishes anyone harm. People's minds may get overpowered by confusion, anger or hatred, but that is the disturbing attitude. These people basically want to be happy themselves but in their confusion, think that certain behaviours will bring them happiness. But it is not actually the person who wants to cause harm. They are afflicted by mental attitudes that are making them do things that afflict other people. It is the disturbing attitudes and the negative emotions that are the difficulty. We can point our finger at those and say get rid of them, but not the person. When we can really put that in our hearts, our minds are really free of a lot of anger and hatred, it prevents the judgmental mind, and it enables a lot of acts of forgiveness. When there is forgiveness, there is a lot of healing. 🙏

May 27

Self Equals Others

Like others, we are very much the same. Whenever we contemplate anything about our minds or the minds of others or our samsara or the samsara of others, we should apply it to both ourselves and others. When we see other people doing foolish things, instead of pointing the finger and accusing them, reflect on how we do those same foolish things and find that place in us that does that and realise what makes us do those actions. Try to transform it. By doing so, we use the behaviour of others, even if it is mistaken, as something to propel us along the path and help us to understand ourselves better. We also avoid judging others.

When we find confusion in our minds, rather than thinking we are the only one who has ever been confused, recognise that what we have experienced is also experienced by all sentient beings. By doing so, we avoid spiralling around ourselves, and in addition, able to generate compassion for others when we see them going through the same difficult emotion that we have gone through. This same thing applies to good qualities. When we see good qualities in others and recognise that we have the seeds of these same qualities in ourselves, it energises us to develop these qualities. When we see good qualities in ourselves, instead of getting arrogant, use them for the benefit of others and realise that others also have the seeds of these good qualities and therefore respect them. 🙏

May 28

Pray for Problems

When you are doing the thought training practice sincerely, you pray to have problems, and you pray to have difficulties because all those situations act as fuel to increase your bodhicitta. This is so because when we have problems, we look at them and see that they are the result of our own negative karma and that was created under the influence of the self-centred mind. The problems are due to that self-centred, self-preoccupied mind. With these problems come the difficulties, the painful feelings that arise in the mind.

We should give all of that suffering, all the physical and mental discomfort, to the self-centred attitude and say, “You’re the one who created the cause for it. Now you experience this.” We give all our suffering to the self-centred attitude because it is the one that is responsible for the sufferings. In that way, because that self-centred attitude is not who we are, our minds can remain happy as we give the problems away. In that way, too, because our mind remains peaceful, we stop creating more negative karma which will result in more problems.

When we get upset by our problems, we get angry, frustrated, and resentful, we create more negative karma, which brings more problems, all under the influence of the self-centred thought. By giving all the pain and inconvenience to the self-centred thought, we stop the continuum of creating negative karma and instead destroy our real enemy, the self-centredness. That enables us to cultivate bodhicitta in our mind in a much stronger way. 🙏

May 29

Peace and Ethics

We want peace in our environment, with the people we work with, the place we live, and the community we live in. Our responsibility for that is to take care of our ethical behaviour. That is kind of the bottom line. Of course, to do that, one must take care of one's mind. It is much easier to take care of and avoid the harmful actions of the body and speech than it is to transform the mind. That is why we start out by working with our bodies and speech and learn to restrain those harmful actions. When we do this, we have less regret, less remorse, and the mind is clear so that we can start working on the mind itself and transforming it.

Especially at the beginning, it takes a lot of effort because not only is the mind uncontrolled, but so are our actions of body and speech. Therefore, we start with the body and speech because those are easier and then we progress to working with our mind. When we are working with our body and speech, we are also trying to work with our mind. We start with what is easier instead of expecting ourselves to be instant Buddhas or have instant samadhi. We start with what is going on in our daily life by refraining from harmful actions and using them to reflect on what is going on in our minds. 🙏

May 30

Creating Identities

The innate sense of self is that very raw feeling of “I”, not just the conventional self, but the innate self-grasping of an independent “I”. The acquired self-grasping, a person’s basis, refers to all the identities we build about ourselves on that basis. For example, it becomes, I am this gender, I am this nationality, I have this kind of temperament, I am the occupation I have, and all these other identities that we learn in this life and make up images for. Look at the one about career — I am a doctor, I am a monastic, I am a garbage collector — whatever it is, we associate the self with that, we are that, and then we give meaning to whatever that label is. We think of ourselves in a certain way and create an identity of this life for ourselves in that way. All these create a ton of problems for us because when people do not treat us the way we think we should be treated according to that label, we get very offended. We blame them, we are insulted or we get arrogant, and on and on. You can see how that kind of identity depends on just the very raw sense of an independent “I”. Without it, we are not going to make up stories about “I am this” and “I am that”.

We are attached to some kind of independent, almost visceral feeling of an independent “I”. An “I” that does not need the body or the mind, can set itself up and stand on its own. That is the innate one and that one is the one that is the root of cyclic existence that we want to eliminate. It is very good as things happen during the day to be aware of the sense of “I” that comes up. Whenever our acquired one comes up — let us say we are offended because someone does not treat us the way we feel we should be treated according to the identity we are hanging on to at that moment — watch how that created identity sets us up for anger and attachment. Then, look beyond that to see how that sense of “I am”, the innate one, is the real root of the thing.

You can also see that at the time of death all these acquired identities slip away, except the sense of “I am” and that is the one that makes karma ripen and creates the craving and grasping at the time of death, which propels us into the next rebirth. That is the one that we want to be aware of and challenge its existence to see if it really exists or not. 🧘



May 31

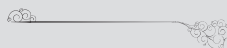
Two Ways of Seeing the Body

In one context, when we look at our body, our body is just a bunch of filth. It is a factory producing filth because everything that comes out of our body we will always want to cleanse away. Even the inside of our body looks rather disgusting. It is only the skin that we think looks nice. Yet if we pile the skin somewhere else, it really is nothing attractive. In one way, we look at our body and see it as something totally undesirable, to be given up because it is the source of a lot of dukkha. We see our body like that in the context of the Four Noble Truths and try to generate renunciation, the mind that gives up the suffering of samsara and aspires for liberation.

In another context, we see our bodies very differently. When we meditate on our precious human life, we see this body as something very special, to be taken care of because it is the basis upon which we can practise the Dharma. Here we contemplate our fortune in having a human body, which gives us the opportunity to enhance the state of our mind and purify it and develop all the good qualities. In one way, we are looking at our body as something to be relinquished, something that is a big pain in the neck, and in another way, we are looking at our body as something very fortunate, to be taken care of.

The question then arises: are these two ways of looking at the body contradictory? The answer is no. They actually fit together quite nicely. It is just that we are seeing the body in different ways, depending on different contexts, depending upon what kind of perspective we are trying to train our minds in. These two views of the body are not contradictory. In the context of precious human life, the context of our being in samsara, the human body is precious, and we are fortunate to have it. However, in the context of our being enslaved by the twelve links, afflictions and karma, coupled with the suffering we experience as a result of them, the body is then seen as the source of dukkha and something to give up attachment to. Depending upon how we are trying to train our minds, we see our bodies in two different ways. But these ways are not contradictory. 🙏

June



*“Don’t Believe Everything
You Think”*



June 1

Overcoming Confusion

When we look at the value of this precious human life and everything we can do with it and then remember our mortality, it helps us to make good decisions and set our priorities. When we know we have limited time, we are not going to waste it. We are going to use our time for what is valuable instead of getting involved in stupid things we may regret later. This insight is very valuable.

As I travel around the world and meet people, many ask me for advice about all sorts of problems: “What do I do with this problem at work, with my relationship, friendship, with status or money?” They have a lot of confusion, not knowing the situation clearly, and are unable to make wise choices. This is because the mind is clinging to the happiness of this life and getting confused about how to attain it.

Somebody may say, “I want to have extensive wealth,” and then gets confused over which career to go for. That is the kind of confusion people suffer from when there are a lot of opportunities. The mind does not know how to focus on what is important and is all over the place, “I want everything, all at once. Without ifs, ands, or buts, and without having to give up anything, or having to exert myself too hard.”

Some people have a very nice, well-off family and go on vacations, but the hotel is never good enough. The food at the resort is never good enough. The travel takes too long, and they come back exhausted.

Think about what is important in your life. Is having a lot of money really the most important thing in your life? Is it what is going to bring you ultimate happiness? Is going on all these vacations the thing that you need to do to keep your friends? If you do not go on vacations like your friends, are they going to think you do not fit in with them? Question these things and think about what is really of ultimate value in your life, given that we are not going to live forever. If we can really think clearly about this, and what is of value, then often much of our confusion drifts away and we know what to do. We become more satisfied

because we realise, “If this is what I want, I am not going to be able to have everything all at once, so I am choosing what is most important. If that means relinquishing something, that is okay, because I know what is important. I want to focus on what is meaningful and important in life.” That brings us a certain clarity, a certain kind of satisfaction. 🌿



June 2

How Tara Helps Us

To those within her refuge, every happiness and joy, for those beset by suffering, every assistance. Noble Tara, I bow before you.

The purpose of offering praise to one of the Buddhas is to create merit and to make oneself humble. For those who take refuge in Tara, who turn to her for spiritual direction, they receive happiness and joy. Not because Tara is some independent creator god that fills your stockings up every morning with whatever you want. Tara teaches us about karma and about how our mind works, thus empowering us to create the causes of happiness and abandon the causes of suffering. When we think of the way the Buddhas benefit us, it is primarily through their speech or their teachings. By hearing the teachings, it gives us the power to change our own experience by putting the teachings into practice.

The Buddhas cannot help us by crawling into our minds and making us think differently, changing the synapses in our brains, or creating an awakening pill. If that were possible, the Buddhas would have done it already. Their half of the bargain is they teach, and our half is we practise. That is where the challenges come from. From the side of the Buddhas, there is no hesitancy, no impediments to teaching. From our side, there are impediments to hearing, even getting to where the teachings are.

Sometimes people will go to the Abbey and before even entering the meditation hall or hearing one teaching, they suddenly say, “Oops! I’ve got to go!”. The real issue is to first overcome our impediments: to physically get ourselves to where the teachings are, then listen attentively instead of spacing out, doodling, or falling asleep, and recall the teachings and contemplating them to get the correct understanding, and finally practise them.

These are all steps that we must do, nobody else can do them for us. We cannot hire somebody else to listen to the teachings, remember them, and put them into practice for us. We can have all the money and employees in the world, but it does not do us any good in terms of Dharma practice. Just like eating and sleeping, we have to do these ourselves. To receive every happiness and joy, we must listen and practise on our own. ☁



June 3

The Essence of Human Life Is What Tara Teaches

For those beset by suffering, every assistance is offered.

If we are beset by suffering, if we are experiencing the drawbacks of samsaric existence, Tara assists us in overcoming that. The drawbacks to samsara can be described in three ways.

One is just outright pain: physical and mental pain that nobody likes and everybody wants to get rid of.

The second one is the unsatisfactoriness of change, meaning that we are in contact with things that give us some pleasure, but that pleasure does not last. If it were real pleasure, the more we are in touch with that situation or object, the more pleasurable it would be. But that is not the case. For instance, the more we eat, at a certain point, our stomach begins to hurt. The more you are with the person whom you thought is fantastic 24/7, the more you wish, “Gee it would be nice to talk to somebody else for a change.” None of these brings us real lasting happiness. They are all dependent, so we are frequently left dissatisfied.

The third kind of unsatisfactory condition in samsara is that our body and mind are under the influence of afflictions and karma. If you have a body and mind under the influence of ignorance, afflictions and polluted karma, that is never going to bring happiness. Ignorance and afflictions do not see things accurately, so they are not going to bring good results. Being in that state means that even when we are not experiencing gross pain, we are on the edge of the cliff all the time. Any small change in our circumstances and our whole feeling of happiness instantly changes.

If we are in this kind of situation, which all samsaric beings are, Tara offers us every assistance. The way she helps is by teaching us what to practise and what to abandon: in other words, the law of karma and its effects. She teaches

us bodhicitta. She teaches us the wisdom of realising emptiness. By practising love, compassion and bodhicitta, we get along much better with others, and we are more peaceful within ourselves. By gaining the wisdom of understanding emptiness, we cease these afflictive and crazy mental states — these impulses that pop into our mind that are not well thought out and which we think are going to bring us happiness but instead create one mess or another. We begin to do away with those. It is through Tara's guidance and teachings that we become empowered to create the causes of temporal and ultimate happiness, and abandon the causes of temporal and ultimate suffering.

That is how Tara guides us, and how all the Buddhas guide us. Isn't it wonderful that there are beings in this universe who can do that? If there were nobody who could teach us about karma, and nobody who could teach us about the essence of reality, then it will be really hopeless for us. Having these Buddhas who can really guide us gives us a lot of hope and optimism. ☁



June 4

Deflating Our Pride

You of fine features, you have gained this opportune and leisured human form. If you follow me, who speaks to help others, listen well, I have something to say.

Most of us have pride that needs deflating before we will listen to the teachings. It is often our pride that divides us from the teachings with this critical mind of “Well, I just do not believe that. Which idiot would believe that? I know what is best. I’m intelligent.” We often do not accept the teachings that we are given because of our arrogance. This is something that I wonder about sometimes as Buddhism enters America. Some teachers do not believe in rebirth. They admitted that Buddha taught it, but they do not believe it. Others say that the Buddha did not even teach it, although it is quite clear he did.

It is an interesting point to think about because it has to do with how receptive we are to listen to the teachings. How much do we step back and insert our own ifs, ands, or buts because we are not quite ready to take something to heart? I am not saying that something is wrong with us. We are where we are at, and we can only listen to what we are capable of listening to, and we cannot be somewhere on the path where we are not. That is very clear. It is not to say somebody is wrong, or somebody is bad, or they are negative. It is just a matter of us looking within and asking ourselves, “How receptive am I to the teachings? How much do the teachings hit at sensitive points in my psychological makeup that make me push the message away?” There are lots of teachings that do, otherwise, they are not going to shake us up.

If we come out of a Dharma teaching feeling light, love, and bliss, and everything is perfect, then nothing in our completely deluded mind has changed. But when we come out of a Dharma teaching saying, “What were they saying? What in the world does that mean? How does it apply to me?” then that teaching is having some kind of effect. 🍃

June 5

Death is Definite

Death is definite. We first begin recalling that everybody must die, and it does not matter who you are. Throughout history people have died, so there is not going to be any reason why we are going to be exceptions. Even people who were holy beings in previous lives died. It happens to everybody. Our social status, education, privilege, wealth and so forth do not matter. Forget them. Death is the great equaliser. It happens to everybody.

There is no place to go where we will not die. We just sent this spacecraft to Pluto and took pictures, and I am sure somebody had this thought, “Maybe if we send people to Pluto they won’t die there, or maybe Pluto is too far away, we will send people to the moon and they will not die there, or perhaps we will go somewhere else.” That will not work either because the fact that you have a body that is borne from afflictions and karma, means that it is in the process of decaying and will eventually cease, regardless of where the body is at. So, it does not matter where you go.

We always think, “Death will not come so soon. I haven’t practised the Dharma yet. It’ll become definite later. In the meantime, I’m too busy and I’ve too many exciting things to do in my life.”

At the beginning of our lives, we pass most of our time as kids. We do not know any better. We do not know the Dharma. We do not know much, so we spend time playing. That goes on for a good 20-odd years. Just playing and be carefree. Nowadays, it does not really end when you are 20 either.

In the second period of your life, you finally settle down. You hold a job, you get married, you have kids, you work to support your family and children, and you do everything as a parent and keep a family together. You also do everything you need to do to be successful in your career because it is not only family that is important, it is also about career, status, etc. You spend a good period of your life achieving that.

Finally, when it is time to retire, sometimes you do not retire. In Singapore, they make you retire. But in the States, they do not. It is interesting. They arrange for it. They lay you off. Then you spend that time playing poker or golf, visiting your grandchildren, or trying to decipher the numbers on your Medicare bills. Then death comes, and we are not prepared. 🧘



June 6

Taking our Medicine: The Dharma

We have our altar, we have our Dharma books, and we have notebooks full of notes, but we never read any of them. We never sit down on the cushion. We have all the medicines, but we do not take them, so we do not get well. We fill the prescription and get the medicine, but we do not take it. We put it there right on our nightstands, because we think, “Those pills look so pretty but they probably don’t taste good. I’ll just look at them, that’ll make me feel better.”

Then enters the nurse, one of your Dharma friends, who says, “You know, you’re looking worse than you did before.” And we go, “Oh no, I’m feeling fine, everything’s great.” Your friend keeps bugging you and says, “Your temper’s worse, and everybody sees that.” Finally, your friend succeeds in convincing you that you need to take the medicine. This kind friend, the Sangha, crushes the medicine, makes it digestible by mixing it in the chocolate cake batter, and then giving us a piece of the chocolate cake at the end for taking our medicine. And we start to get well.

We have got to take the medicine. Otherwise getting well just does not happen. The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha can help us, but even if they put the medicine in our mouths, we still have to swallow it. Nobody can swallow it for us. This is where personal responsibility comes in. We are in a predicament, others can help us, but we have the responsibility to do our part. Otherwise, when death comes, although we have a beautiful altar, tons of Dharma books and e-books, and even more notebooks filled with notes, we have been miserable our whole lives, because we have not read or practised any of the teachings. We just look at our altar and we go, “Look at my beautiful altar. That’s a picture of me with the guru. Don’t we look good together? He not only signed the photo but he dedicated it to me so it has my name on it.”

But when we are lying in our death bed, what good does that photo do for us? Zero. What really helps us at the time of death is our individual practice. Death is the real test of our practice. Since we cannot escape death, we had better practise. 🙏

June 7

Valuing Our Intelligence

When we appreciate the Dharma for what it can do for us, we appreciate our lives. When we believe that there are other realms of existence, the Dharma helps us to understand the preciousness of our human life. When we do not think of the other realms, or think only of the animal realm, we may say, “Okay, I could be born as a cat at the Abbey. Ignorance is bliss, they say, and I can sleep all day, and nobody bosses me around.” There is no appreciation for the preciousness of having human intelligence and the possibilities we have as a human being. Think about the fact that we could be born as another life form and what it would be like to experience that life form. If we think of our mind being trapped in the body of another life form, we will then really appreciate our precious human life.

If it is difficult for us to think of other life forms, start by thinking of being 90 years old and senile your whole life. Or imagine your whole life as a one-year-old or a two-year-old and never being able to evolve past that. That is still human, but would you want to stay in a baby’s body or an elder’s body for several decades?

If we really aspire for liberation, we see that when we are stuck in certain bodies, the mind is very limited and what the mind can do is so narrow and confined. It is quite helpful to think like this, otherwise we take our present experience for granted, and we think that we have always had the intelligence and ability we now have and will always have it. Have you ever had a fever and been delirious and could not think straight? What would it be like to experience that mental state your whole life? Part of our problem with not appreciating our precious human life and its meaning is that the appearance of the present moment is so strong that we think it is permanent, and it is going to last forever. That is a big problem in our minds. We take everything for granted and complain that it is not better. We get involved in all our petty problems because we do not think that there is any long-term meaning to our lives. 🍃

June 8

Thinking about Rebirth

Not believing in rebirth, we would not appreciate our present life. If we believe in rebirth, that we can be reborn in other life forms, that “I’m not always me,” we ease into emptiness. But when we feel, “I’m always going to be who I am now,” we grasp at permanence and an inherent existence. The mind is completely absorbed in the root of samsara, gets angry at other people who talk about rebirth, and tells them that they are completely nuts. Even if people cannot initially believe in rebirth, they need to keep it on the back burner. Keep an open mind and see if the idea of rebirth can help you understand some things about your life.

Before I became a Buddhist, as a little kid, I asked, “Why am I born the way I am?” It was very clear to me that I had a fortunate life growing up in middle-class America that most other people in the world did not have. And I thought, “Why am I born with this fortune? It’s certainly not fair. Why am I born the way I am?”

Later, when I became the kind of adult that my parents had not planned on me in becoming, I also asked, “How did this come about?” If life’s growth is only about nature and nurture, we all should have grown up to be the exact adults that our parents wanted us to be.

But are any of us exactly what our parents wanted us to be? We all have our personalities, don’t we? We have our thoughts. We have our values and goals. How come that happens? There must be some other factors besides genes and conditioning of this life.

Thinking about rebirth helps us to understand why we are the way we are and helps us to think, “Okay, according to the law of cause and effect, if I am the way I am because I created certain causes in the past, then the causes I’m creating now are going to influence what I shall become in the future.” We all

understand that in terms of our initial upbringing. That is why our parents wanted us to get a good education. If you get a good education, you get a good career, you make a lot of money, then you are happy. That is their way of seeing things. We grew up with some faith in causes and conditions. But our faith in causes and conditions apply only in this life. It is quite narrow. What about future lives? What about previous lives? Can we expand our minds to include a larger system of cause and effect? ☁



June 9

The Meaning of Our Lives

Look at our precious human life. Look at how we have human intelligence, and how spectacular it is if we direct it in a valuable way. If we do not ethically direct our human intelligence, then we become worse than animals. Animals will only kill and harm others if they are threatened. Human beings do it for fun, for sport, for power, and for no good reason at all. Animals would never harm others the way human beings do.

If we really value our human intelligence, then we must look at how we are using it. What causes am I creating? What happens if I do not have this human intelligence? What can I do then? What happens if I were severely impaired physically or mentally, such that I cannot understand the Dharma? What happens if my mind were so rigid in my preconceptions that whenever I hear Dharma teachings, I reject them straightaway because they are not aligned with my opinions? All these conditions bring big problems for us.

Then contemplate this: What do you think will happen if we have deep spiritual yearning but lived in a world in which the Buddha had not appeared, and there were no teachings? Or a world in which there is no Sangha community, no scriptures, and no teachers? You have this very fervent spiritual longing, and although you have all the other conditions for a good life, you cannot encounter a path that makes sense to you. Or what happens if we were born as a person with no spiritual interest at all but focused completely on making money, being famous, and having a good sex life? What happens if those are the goals of our lives and we spend our whole life chasing after these without any thought for the happiness of others, or our future lives?

Contemplate the circumstances of our lives, and how easily they could have been something different. If I had been born as my parents, I would not be sitting here right now because they had a whole different way of thinking and whole different goals in their lives.

An awareness of our precious human life and the meaning that can be derived in terms of Dharma, completely revolutionises how we feel about being alive. If we understand it well, we will never ever get depressed again. When we get depressed, what are we thinking about? Ourselves and our present condition? Thinking about the precious human life and the meaning of our lives pulls us out of that. If we understand the meaning of our lives in this way, we will wake up every day feeling, “Wow! This is amazing. I’m so fortunate, and I can do so much.” 🍃



June 10

The Certainty of Death

Death will definitely come and will quickly come. Should you neglect to train your thoughts again and again on such certainties you will grow no virtuous mind, and even if you do, it will be spent on the enjoyment of the glories of this life.

Death will definitely come. True. It is what we see all around us, and what we see in our own lives. But still, we have some resistance to this. Or we say, “Well, maybe it’ll come, but quickly? Absolutely impossible. I have too many things I want to do. There are so many things going on for me in my life. I’m too busy, I don’t have time to die. I’m involved in so many projects and have so many friends. I am so embedded in this world; how can I possibly die? Anyway, if I die all these people would protest, and surely, I would stay alive.” That is what we do, don’t we? We protest and then the situation changes.

The thing is that the Lord of Death does not wait. He does not care very much either. When it is time to die, goodbye. That is it. Convenient or inconvenient, it does not matter to him. It is time to go.

It is helpful to meditate on this — that death is definite, but the time of death is indefinite. This chips away any resistance we have. The only thing that will go with us when we die is our karma and mental habits, not our possessions, not our friends or relatives, and not our bodies. That means nothing can stop us from dying. Nothing can stop death when it is coming. 🙏

June 11

What Are We Looking for in the Teachings?

It is interesting sometimes to ask ourselves what we are looking for in the teachings. Are we looking to hear teachings so that we feel good afterwards? If that is your motivation for listening to teachings, you are not going to feel good. When I teach you about the precious human life and how fortunate we are not born as hell beings, animals and hungry ghosts, you will roll your eyes and say, “But I don’t believe in those. I don’t even want to think about them.” You will not be happy either when the talk turns to death. “I don’t want to hear about death.” Or about the disadvantages of samsara. “I don’t want to hear about how you have to separate from everything that you like, and you don’t get what you want.” In reality, this is how our lives are, but we still say, “Don’t tell me that!” So what is our motivation for approaching the teachings? Are we seeking liberation or are we seeking to feel good afterwards?

Some people really like doing the visualisations and the mantra recitations as very often you will come out from the practice, feeling quite blissful. But if that is what your mind is seeking, we need to ask ourselves if our motivation matches with what we say at the start of the prayer — by practising generosity and other far-reaching practices, may I attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. I am not saying it is bad to feel good after your meditation session, but that we should not use feeling good as the criteria for a productive meditation session. Sometimes they give us adverse effects when we feel we do not understand certain things or ourselves. It is this process of questioning and pushing our buttons so that we must look deeper that produces a lot of growth, and not merely the glossing over of “Isn’t this Dharma path wonderful? I feel so good.”

We can recite the Four Immeasurables: May all sentient beings have happiness and its causes; (“Oh wonderful.”) May all sentient beings be free of suffering and its causes; (“Very wonderful.”) May all sentient beings not be separated from

sorrowless bliss; (“Oh, I’m floating on a cloud.”) May all sentient beings abide in equanimity, free of bias, attachment and anger (“Wonderful, that’s an ideal world. That’s what I want.”).

If you just stay there, you feel good. But when you come out of your meditation, your mind falls back to its habitual tendencies — “Somebody left his dirty dish in the sink. Who does this person think he is, leaving it for me to clean up? This is totally unacceptable. I have to tell the person off for his benefit because he is just misbehaving.” All our feel-good Four Immeasurables are thrown out of the window at this point, and we are not even able to admit our anger or see our absence of equanimity, let alone love, compassion and joy. The feel-good aspect and the reality of the mind becomes far apart. We must start to cultivate a different way of looking at things. 🍃



June 12

Priorities

Is it logical to believe that if we think about death it will really happen and if we do not think about it, it will not happen? If so, when we do not think about death we will not be prepared when it happens. This is just like taking your driving test without any practice. Not a smart decision, don't you think?

The reason we think about death is not to feel and become panicky, fearful, paralysed and full of dread. The fact that we are mortal, when we really think about death it can invigorate our lives to ponder our priorities. If we realise that we are going to die, and that our health and life span are limited, we will consider prioritising our accomplishments. We will do what is most important because we do not know when death will come knocking at our door.

We always say to ourselves, "I have to do this and that. I have to pick my kids up at school. I have to go to work early." In actual fact, the only thing we ever have to do is die. Everything else is totally optional in our lives. I think this language of saying, "I have to" indicates how little freedom we see in our lives. We feel the pressure and we succumb to that pressure, by saying "I have to". In reality, we have choices about all these things.

If you choose not to pick your child up at school, that is going to have a certain result that you do not want to see. It is good to recognise that it is a choice. Rather than complaining that you have to do it, say, "I'm choosing to pick my child up at school because I want my child to be safe." In this way, you do it with a good reason, instead of resentment and obligation.

Spend some time reflecting on this and consider, "What are my priorities in life? When I die, what do I want to look back on?" Not looking back as in "reminiscing", but looking back in terms of, "How did I spend my life? What did I spend my time doing, thinking, feeling and talking about?" When we do that, it becomes clear what our priorities are because we realise that we spend a lot

of time doing things that are totally inconsequential, and in fact the next day we even forget that we did them and it does not really matter if we did them or not. But if we are applying a good motivation to doing those things, some can become actual virtuous activities. Think about it, and think about what is important in your life, what you choose to do, and what you choose not to do. 🌵



June 13

Be in the Moment

Many times — maybe even most of the time — our mind is dwelling on the past or the future. The mind that is in the past or future does not directly perceive things. It is a conceptual mind that is remembering or projecting. Conceptual minds can be very useful, as they allow us to learn about emptiness and the Dharma. They can also be very troublesome because they mistake their object for the real thing. When we are thinking about a certain person, we confuse the mental image of that person with the actual person. That is why we can think about somebody who is not in the same room and get very angry at him, be very attached to him, or create all sorts of stories about him in our minds. It is the same with remembering the past and anticipating the future — they are all a bunch of stories projected by our conceptual mind.

It is important to notice when our conceptualising starts causing emotional turmoil and brings us back to what is happening now. If you think about it, every moment of life can be good if you learn to take it moment by moment. (As you are reading these words, you are probably sitting in a place that hopefully is at least safe, maybe even comfortable with kind people around you.) So, what is the point of lamenting about things that hurt us in the past or worrying about what could happen in the future? Your mind is probably going to say, “But what about when I am dying, or if I have a car accident? Everything is going to be really bad then, so I’d better think about it now!” On the contrary, your mind is going to be much calmer in those situations if you can stay with what is happening in the moment.

What throws the mind into pandemonium when we are sick, dying, or in an accident is our fear of the future. If you are lying in a hospital bed in pain, you can reflect, “Well, I’m in a hospital bed and in pain, but there are people around me who understand my situation and are trying to be kind and helpful. Plus, I still have the power of my Dharma practice to tame my mind, so this is okay.” It is not always easy to get the mind to stay in the present, but with some practice we can train it to stay with the body and what is happening, instead of letting it dwell on the past or fly off into the future with all the conceptual whirling we do. Then we will be able to manage situations well. 🐾

June 14

He Opened His Heart

There was a man who had spent quite a long time in prison. He shared with us, in front of 25 other inmates, a little bit of what he had gone through in the past months. He had suffered a stroke and that changed his practice intensely. He turned his attention towards the other inmates and expressed much love and kindness towards them. He was so thankful that the others accepted and supported him over his difficult situation that he cried.

In the end, he gave an offering and sang a song for all with a joyful heart. I knew he must have done something very wrong that landed him in prison. That probably must have caused a lot of guilt in him initially. But through learning the Dharma, he experienced kindness and joy at heart, and had learnt to open his heart to the other inmates. He showed me an example of what forgiveness can do for oneself and others. ☁



June 15

Our Most Precious Possession

Sometimes, we hear of people who commit suicide, which is such a waste of human potential. One person who was quite wealthy left most of his estate to charity but killed himself. Another young person who had served in the military in Iraq or Afghanistan had a substance abuse problem when he came back. This completely alienated his family, and he ended up jumping off a bridge in Spokane. These are incredible tragedies. They had a human life and the ability to learn the Dharma, but they never had the karma to actually meet the Dharma. Instead, their intelligence got warped by their experiences, and feeling delusional, they wound up thinking that death would alleviate their pain. Unfortunately, it does not.

When you start watching your peers die, not from accidents but from illnesses that inflict on us as we age, it becomes more vivid that your death is approaching. There is no way to avoid death. Time becomes our most precious possession. Time is not an unlimited supply. We do not know when it is going to run out.

It is only with the time we have that we can create virtue, purify non-virtue, learn the Dharma, and contribute to the welfare of others. Our body, possessions and other things all come and go. They are not very important. But our time becomes very important. How we choose to spend our time, and the motivations we want to have when we are doing certain activities, become much more important. It becomes clear to us that in whatever we do, we need to generate a good motivation. Continuously cultivate a bodhicitta motivation and dedicate. Although these do not stop death from coming, but they can help us prepare for death. ☸

June 16

Giving Up Grasping

Think, therefore, upon seeing and hearing of others' deaths, "I am no different, death will soon come, its certainty is no doubt, but no certainty as to when. I must say farewell to my body, wealth and friends, but good and bad deeds will follow like shadows."

At the time of death, we must say farewell to our body, wealth and friends. Some people may say, "Hmm, that sounds kind of tough." While to others, it poses no problem at all. Personally, I think it is tough. Just ask ourselves this: "Are we okay with giving up our body, wealth, friends and family?" No, we are not okay with that at all. We have a tremendous sense of possession, "These are mine and I need them. I want them. They're my source of happiness and pleasure. I don't want to give them up."

This is our attitude in life. However, the phenomenon of death does not give us a choice. It says, "Whether you like it or not, it is time to give things up." Then what do we do? Do we just wait until the moment of death comes and then deal with it? Or do we practise giving things up, and lessen our attachment now so that when the time of death comes it is not going to be a problem for us?

The great masters say, "Practise now." Develop a heart of renunciation now. Here we are not talking about renouncing happiness. Buddhism is not about giving up happiness but finding a way to a stable state of happiness. What we are renouncing is dukkha, all the unsatisfactory things in life. When we do not see unsatisfactory things as unsatisfactory, and instead see them as the cause of happiness, problems occur for us. We have a very limited view of things.

Have you ever wondered, "Why do I have a body?" It is an interesting question. "How did I get this body? What does it mean to have a body?" We pamper our bodies to bits, but why do we have it in the first place? We do not usually ask that question. If we do, then we say, "Well, it's who I am. You can't separate me from

my body. I am my body.” or “It’s my body and I’m in union-oneness with what’s mine.” We just assume that the body is always here and that our whole identity is based on this body. At the time of death, when we must separate from this body, the mind goes, “Ahhhh! Who am I going to be if I don’t have a body? My whole life I’ve spent with this body.”

Because of this intense grasping of wanting to exist, when we lose this body, our basis of existence, how do we solve the problem? We cling to another one. That is what ripens the karma that throws us into another rebirth. Cannot have this body anymore? Just grab another one. But we do not realise that as soon as we grab another body, we put ourselves in the same position that we are in now, which is to live with a compounded body that gets old, sick and dies. ☁



June 17

Difficult Choices

A friend of mine comes from a Christian family. It so happened that her brother is gay and he revealed his orientation to his mother. His mother said this situation made her realise how homophobic she was and how she had to change her mind. Clearly, my friend loved her brother and did not want to alienate or lose him.

Her brother, too, faced a difficult situation. But at some point, one has to make a decision and be at peace with it. There are a lot of risks, and you do not want to divide people, but it is uncomfortable in a relationship in which you cannot talk honestly. It is very difficult. Trying to live your life protecting other people by being oversensitive to what you think they may feel, is different from just being courteous to others. Also, it is different from not putting it into their faces. We should not just think about what the effect of our decision on others will be, but the effect on ourselves for doing that.

There are so many situations in life where you have to choose between two unfavourable options. There are many situations in which you cannot have the best of what you want. The thing is to really look within and see what is more important to us, then go forward and accept the outcome. Part of the difficulty is not wanting either outcome and trying to find a solution that avoids either outcome, which is unrealistic. When you face difficult situations, ask yourself, “Well, I have to face one outcome or the other, so which one do I prefer? How do I want it to be?” Also tell yourself, “I have the skills, resources and abilities to face whatever outcomes there are. It may not be pleasant, but it is also not going to last forever. And I get certain benefits from making the choice that I chose.”

I think we often get really messed up when we are trying to have an outcome-free decision. Outcome-free decisions do not always come so easily. They do not often exist. These are difficult choices. But difficult choices make us grow up. If we do not face difficult choices, we would be infants all the time. 🍷

June 18

Letting Go of Worldly Concerns

Death will definitely come and will quickly come. Should you neglect to train your thoughts again and again on such certainties you will grow no virtuous mind, and even if you do, it will be spent on the enjoyment of the glories of this life.

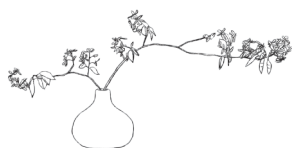
The eight worldly concerns and the concern for happiness of only in this life prevent us from creating any virtue at all. When we do create virtue, these concerns can pollute our virtue so that it becomes half virtue and half non-virtue.

I received an email from an attendee of my talk on the mindfulness craze where I quoted one executive from Google who said that it really disturbed him when other people made the world better than what he could do. In other words, it means we have to be the ones that make the world a better place, better than anybody else. This attendee said the quote jumped out at him. He realised he really needed to be careful because he was developing a new program with a good motivation of wanting to help benefit people, and that Google executive's comment made him realise that he had to ensure that he kept his motivation pure, and not for it to become a competition with others who could improve the educational system more or do the program better. I thought he was quite sharp because that is a very good example of how in wanting to create virtue, our mind can get hooked on wanting a good reputation, and then the virtue diminishes.

We need to be careful when we are creating virtue so as not to compete with other people or get jealous of them. All of that simply relates to our attachment to the happiness of this life — attachment to a good reputation, and aversion to a bad reputation. Our mind becomes like the minds of those who want a good reputation because they sell golf clubs, have a good golf game, got the outstanding award for being the best correctional official in the prison that month, etc. It is all reputation.

Attachment to reputation is one of the most difficult attachments to overcome. Great meditators say that attachment to food is easy to let go of, but attachment

to reputation is much more difficult. You could go into your retreat place and be content with the food you eat but have the mind thinking, “I wonder what the town people think of me. Do they know what a great practitioner I am? Do they think that I have realisations now? When I finish my retreat, will the town people think that I’m hot stuff because I’ve done this retreat? Maybe I’ll even have a new title. Maybe I should learn to look holy.” It is very seductive. ☁



June 19

Gratitude for the Buddha's Teachings

People had so much merit to be born at a time when Buddha's teachings exist. Although we did not have the fortune to be born during Buddha's time, we have the fortune to receive his teachings from a pure lineage that goes back to him. We should be thinking with gratitude of the kindness of the Buddha, for being on this planet and teaching us the Dharma.

What would happen to us if the Buddha did not manifest and teach? It is not as if the Dharma is automatically going to exist in our world. There are so many places in this universe where the Dharma does not exist, where the teachings are not present. If you are born in that place, you might have an incredible spiritual longing, incredible desire, and absolutely no opportunity to meet the Dharma. It is interesting to reflect, "If we had not met the Dharma, what would have happened to us? What would our lives be like?" I do not know about you, but my life would have been a total mess. I would have harmed many people in the course of living out my self-centred impulses, creating much negative karma, and headed surely towards the hell realm in my future life.

The fact that the Buddha appeared and gave us a chance to meet the teachings has completely reversed the course I was headed for, and I assume yours as well. Realising this, you would really feel a lot of gratitude to the Buddha for what he did and to the whole lineage of teachers, including our teachers who preserved these teachings for us so that we could come in contact with them. 🙏

June 20

Contentment and Generosity

There are two components to life that are very important. One is cultivating a sense of contentment and satisfaction with what we have and the other is cultivating delight in giving. These two go very much together.

When we are on the receiving end, we should try to really be contented with what we receive and develop a sense of gratitude towards those making offerings to us instead of a mind that is dissatisfied and wants more or better.

When we give, we should give not out of obligation or responsibility, but with a true sense of delight in sharing what we have. If we live together with others, let us always keep both contentment and generosity in mind. 🙏



June 21

Working Only for the Happiness of This Life

It is important to think about the fact that we are mortal, and that we do not know when we are going to die. Contemplating this, we ask ourselves, “What’s the meaning of my life? What are the priorities in my life?”

If we do not contemplate uncertainties, like the fact that we are going to die, we will not grow a virtuous mind. Why not? Because we are going to be totally distracted from seeking happiness in this life.

Every person has an individualised version of the happiness he or she wants in this life. For some people, it is drinking and drugging. For some, it is camping in nature. For others, it is music, or bonsai trees. You name it, we all have different version of the sort of happiness we want in this life. No matter what the version is, the motivation is the same. It is seeking our own personal happiness right now.

There is nothing wrong with that, just that it consumes a whole lot of our time. We consume the virtue that has led to us having our present good conditions. If our interest is just the happiness of this life, we are not creating any new virtue. And since all happiness depends on virtue, we are not creating causes for future happiness.

When we work only for the happiness of this life, our mind gets preoccupied with a lot of very disturbing attitudes and emotions. When our whole focus is “I want what I want when I want it, and I want to do what I want to do when I want to do it”, there is a lot of attachment to what we want to do and what we want to have. And if it does not happen, if something gets in the way, or if we get sick, we get angry. We have so much attachment and clinging that we will do whatever we need to obtain what we want, and this can involve trampling on other people. If we are motivated only by the wish for our own personal happiness in this life, we will end up creating a lot of negative karma, wasting our precious human life,

and not creating any new virtuous karma. We end up making little use of the virtuous karma that we had from the past that is ripening in our present good circumstances.

If we reflect on our motivation of working only for the happiness of this life, it does not have any real advantages in the long term. If we are fortunate, we get the happiness we want in this life, or you can work very hard for it and may not get it. There is no guarantee. People can work hard for wealth, fame, and all the desirable, nice things they want, but it is not guaranteed they will get them. When we ponder about this, we see that just working for the happiness of this life does not really have any great purpose and meaning. 🍵



June 22

Moving Towards Our Spiritual Goals

Knowing what we do not want to do is just half of the equation. We cannot go forward in the Dharma just based on knowing what we do not want to do. We have to know what we want to do. We must know something about the Three Jewels of Refuge, especially the Dharma refuge, which is the true path, and the true cessation. We must have some idea of what true cessation is, what nirvana is, what the path is and know the advantages of following the path, the advantages of attaining nirvana, and the benefits of generating bodhicitta. We should also know very clearly what we are heading for. Why do we want to understand the emptiness of inherent existence? Why do we want to generate bodhicitta? Why do we want to generate renunciation? We have to understand why and feel very strongly about it so that it is not just, “Hey I don’t want to do that. I want to do this. This is worthwhile. This is valuable.”

This aspiration to do something wonderful with our lives gives us a lot of energy and a lot of happiness. It is not just “I’m tired of drinking and drugging, what else is new?” What are the advantages of practising the Dharma? Where do we want to go by practising the Dharma?

Think deeply about this. If we do not, then we spend a lot of time on the enjoyment of the glories of this life. “The glories of this life” means chocolate cake. We all have our version of a chocolate cake. Of course, it does not literally mean chocolate cake. It means whatever it is that appeals to us. For one person, it might be sleeping 12 hours a day. For another, it might be food, beauty, sex, material goods, etc. We all have different things we are attached to, don’t we? Things we are sure to have little virtue in them.

There is no guarantee that we will get the happiness in this life even if we work very hard for it. But when we work for the goal of liberation, the rewards are endless. 🍷

June 23

Communicating Wisely and Kindly

Are we using our speech kindly or harshly? Do we use our speech to hurt people's feelings, break their trust, and so on, or do we inspire people and give them confidence and point out their good qualities? We should consider this carefully because the karma and the problems we create for ourselves when we misuse speech are an important part of why we are still trapped in samsara.

Harsh speech includes using speech to denigrate people or tell them off when we lose our temper and say all sorts of incredible things that we never would have said before. Another way of looking at harsh speech is when we shut down and do not say anything. Speech really involves communication, so for those of us who implode rather than explode, maybe the harshness of our speech comes out by the way we withdraw and do not communicate. Instead, we communicate that we are rejecting or distancing ourselves from people by ignoring and turning our backs on them.

How we communicate with others should always be an important method to practising our path. Kindness, truthfulness, and connecting with others is the only way to reach our goal of being of benefit to all sentient beings. 🙏

June 24

Avoiding the Trigger

When you have an afflictive emotion, stop and reflect, “What was it that triggered it?” You are always going to have the seed and inappropriate attention. Now, see what else comes in there. Very often it is a habit.

When we are exposed to the media, and we are not mindful, we absorb unquestioningly whatever we see in the media for how things are and how we should be. This becomes very dangerous.

If there are certain special objects that really tick you off, or really trigger an affliction, then do not look at the media which focuses on that object. For instance, if you have a lot of sexual energy and it is difficult, do not go to the movies and watch love stories. If you have a lot of violent energy, do not watch violent films and war movies. Be careful of what you expose yourself to. ☁



June 25

Be Happier with Less

It is very good to look at our lives periodically and think about how we can be happier with less. This is especially true if everybody also has less since psychological studies have found that we judge our happiness and wealth in comparison to everyone else's. So, if we all go down a notch together, everyone will still feel they have enough and nobody will get jealous or envious. By not consuming so much, we also become more creative in how we find entertainment, do more things with our family and friends, and help one another more by sharing and giving things away. In the process, we build stronger relationships that bring us much more happiness than filling our living spaces with a lot of stuff that we do not need or getting upset when we cannot get the next new thing. Instead of being fearful about the economy, we can be satisfied with what we have, which is so much more than what most people on this planet have. If we can get through our sometimes very thick skulls, we actually can be happier with less, we will have fewer problems and will be much more contented. ☁



June 26

Taking Care of Our Body

We spend so much time beautifying this body. We wear jewellery — both men and women adorn themselves with jewellery. We take care of our hair. We grow it long or cut it short, or colour and perm it, constantly fussing about it. Before I was ordained, I used to imagine, if I die now and they put me in a casket with my long beautiful hair, people will look and say, “Oh, she has such beautiful hair.” It is this absurdity that finally got me mentally okay with chopping off my locks. What good will my beautiful hair do for me when I am dead? Zero. Yet so much time and energy are wasted.

We think about the shape of our body and our weight. If we are too thin we want to beef up. If we are too fat, we want to slim down. How much time do we spend when we want to go out to eat? I do not know if your family is like my family. First, we talk about what food to eat — Italian, Chinese, Thai? Maybe Pizza Hut for something quick and cheap. We spend so much time discussing which restaurant to go to. Then once at the restaurant, we spend another half an hour discussing what to order, or giving specific instructions to the waiter or waitress. We do all these just to nourish this body. But when the food comes, we eat it without paying much attention to it. Except we may say it is really good. Then, after the meal, we say, “I ate so much, I feel sick. But it was so delicious.” That is to nourish the body. That is dining out.

What about the time we spend going to the grocery store and cooking the food? We check ads for discounts. We cut out the coupons, then visit a particular supermarket to save money using these coupons. Then we spend money on petrol and pollute the universe more by driving across town to the other supermarket with different coupons for other things where we can save another nickel, dime, or maybe a quarter. We should look at the amount of time we spend just keeping this body alive with food, clothing and other things. 🍽️

June 27

A Good Relationship

How many hours do we have to sleep? Most people sleep eight hours. That means one-third of our lives is spent unconscious. Think about that. If you live to be 60, it means you have spent 20 years sleeping. That is outrageous. What about people who sleep nine, ten, or twelve hours? Not just one-third of their lives, but more spent on sleeping. You are not even awake to enjoy how good you feel when you are asleep. Sleeping is funny, isn't it? You go to sleep, you are unconscious. There is absolutely no pleasure during all those hours you are unconscious. Then you wake up and say how good you feel having slept that long. But you were totally blacked out.

We must have a bed that is not too soft. If it is too soft our back hurts. Not too hard. If it is too hard our back also hurts. We must have a bed at the right angle according to what our body likes.

Then, you need a rug right under your bed. A rug to step your feet on. And just enough blankets. The room must be of a certain temperature when we are sleeping. When we are awake, the temperature has to be right too. Especially during a retreat, the temperature of the room is of utmost importance. You get up and open the window because it is too stuffy, and the person next to you stands up and closes the window because it is too cold. Wait until you get hot flushes! You want half of the window open and the other half closed because half of your body feels warm and the other half feels cold. Then it switches after 30 seconds. But the temperature has got to be exactly how I want it. Not too hot, not too cold. You have some work to do on cutting the attachment to this body if you are going to die peacefully.

What about the karma we create in protecting this body? The karma we create in pleasuring this body? The karma created out of attachment? We kill others to protect this body. We steal from others to protect this body. We have unwise and unkind sexual relationships to give pleasure to the body. Lie to protect the

body. Talk behind other people's backs, speak harshly, all these things solely to give this body pleasure and protect it from harm. At the end of this life, the body stays here. It becomes a rotten, stinking corpse that nobody wants to go near. Our consciousness goes on alone carrying all the karma that we have created with it.

I think there is something important to meditate on here. If we can have a good relationship with our body, we can free ourselves from creating so much destructive karma and have a whole lot more time to practise for a mind that is much more relaxed and at peace. 🍃



June 28

Clean Environment

Our environment is a reflection of our mind. We are born into a certain environment due to the karma that we created in a previous life. The Buddhist teachings talk about the environmental result of various actions, so we can see that our environment is related to our actions, which come from the mind. How we relate to our present environment also comes from our minds. For example, you can visualise snowflakes as many Chenrezigs or Guanyin Bodhisattvas falling all around you, then dissolving into you, and you become blissful and compassionate like Chenrezig. Or your mind can say, “Argh, I don’t like snow.” Whichever way you think and how you feel as a result of that is completely up to you. Snow does not exist as being inherently awful or inherently beautiful. We experience it according to how our mind interprets it.

The way in which we care for our environment is also a reflection of our minds. For example, once a friend showed me her room. It was completely immaculate — there was completely no clutter, nothing at all. Then, when she had to take something out of a drawer, the drawer was jammed full of stuff! Some of us are like that — we appear tidy externally while internally there is a mess that we need to clean up. For others, their whole environment is a mess. Clothes are everywhere, the floor is dirty, the furniture is dusty, and dishes are piled up in the sink. That too is a reflection of our mind. How much we care about the environment we live in, shows how much we care about the people we live with too. Do we help them live in a pleasant place?

It is important for us to take care of the environment as a symbol of our state of mind. Since we practise compassion, we need to keep the environment around us clean as an offering to all the people with whom we live with. Be aware of your compassionate intention as you move through the day. How do you relate to the environment? How do you relate to the sentient beings in it? Do you expect others to clean up after you? You may not care if your mess is there, but is it kind to leave it there for others to stumble over?

Similarly, take care of your mind. Develop a sense of gratitude for the possessions that you have. Be grateful for all the sentient beings in so many different countries who made the things you have and use. Feel kindness towards those who gave them to you, and then show that kindness in how you speak to others and how you care for our common environment. Treat things well as a practice of mindfulness and compassion. The more you can imagine the environment as a pure land and make it one, the more you create the karmic cause to be reborn in a pure land. Our environment, our mind, our karma — all these things are related to one another. ☸



June 29

Like a Bird Taking Off from a Ship

At the end of the day, what does the body do? It dies. We have taken so much care of it for a good number of years, and then what happens in the end? It completely betrays us and dies. It does not tell us when it is going to die, or how it is going to die. We cannot schedule it. It would be convenient to schedule death, wouldn't it? You could finish all your projects and have visualisations of your dream death. Plan it. Have everything you want in front of you. Free yourself of everything you do not want. Then make sure the bed is very comfortable before you lie down to face death.

How much time and energy do we spend worrying, with attachment and anxiety over this body? From a Dharma viewpoint, the body is simply the basis for having a precious human life. We need to keep it clean and take care of it so we can practise the Dharma. That is all. We do not need to pamper it. We do not need to do ascetic trips. Just clean and take care of it so we can use it to practise the Dharma. When it is time to die, we let go with ease and a peaceful goodbye.

Lama Yeshe used to share this story that you want to be like a bird taking off from a ship in the middle of the ocean. You just take off like the bird does. The bird does not look back and think, “Oh god, can I fly off this ship?” It does not start to flap and look back saying, “Oh, this precious ship. Where do I go now?” The bird just goes. That is the way we want to be. We have some work to do on reducing the attachment to this body if we want to die peacefully. 🕊

June 30

Avoiding a Culture of Lying

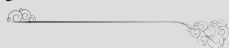
In a recent newspaper article, there was one letter from a young gay man who said his father had suspected his homosexuality. The young man adamantly told his father he was not gay because his father had said that if his son were gay then he would no longer fund his college education, would kick him out of the house, and not speak to him again. Obviously, it is quite a threat, isn't it? This young man was asking what the ethical thing is to do in this situation. I was quite surprised at the response.

Three different people responded. One of them said, "Your father is not doing his duty if he doesn't send you to college because part of parental duty is to support the child's education. If your father is threatening not to do his duty, you have every right to lie because you deserve that college education." The other two people said something similar — not so much about the father doing his duty, but like "Why does going to college have to be such a traumatic thing, just go ahead and lie to your father, and after you finish college, tell him the truth and pay him back the money."

I am not so sure about these answers because it promotes a culture of lying in our minds. I do not know about you, but when I lie, I do not feel good inside. I tried to lie when I was a kid, and I was a failure at it. I tried to lie to my parents, but I could not do it. I was able to cover things up by not telling them things I thought they did not need to know. I also kept my privacy and did not tell them things that were going to upset them. But I could not say purple when something was pink. I could not say "was" when it "was not".

As for the young man, he is hiding by not telling his parents. On the other hand, he knows his parents better than I do. He is trying to protect his relationship, which is important. Eventually, his father is going to find out, isn't he? 🐾

July



*“Buddhism for Beginners”
is the start to the correct path of
awakening.*



July 1

Skilful Means

A few years ago, when we first moved into the Abbey, the Mennonite church around the corner was having an open house or a fair, and we went. I was talking to the minister's wife and she said, "What's your image of god? Do you believe in god?" I was not going to say "No." That would stop the relationship and would not help in anything. So, I did not answer that question. I said, "Just like you, we find that ethical conduct is really important, so we teach about not killing, not lying, etc. We teach about forgiveness. We teach about love and compassion. So many of our teachings and our values correspond with yours." She was very happy with that answer.

What I said was completely true. I just did not answer her question because I do not think it would have been skilful to give a direct answer to that question. It would have unnecessarily harmed a relationship.

If she had really pressed on I would have said, "You know, there are a lot of different definitions of 'god'. If you see god as a holy being who has knowledge and abilities that human beings do not have, then yes, Buddhists believe that there are holy beings like that. We call them 'Buddhas', not gods. If you believe that god is the principle of love — not even a creator or anything, just the principle of love — definitely Buddhists assert that. If you think of god as a creator, then that's where we have a little bit of a difference." I would put that at the very end, showing a little difference, and then go back to something we all agree on. 🍵

July 2

Windows of Opportunity

It is wonderful to get teachings based on the stories of the Buddha's life. There is so much richness in it. There are certain points in his story that kind of haunt me, that I go back and think about again and again.

One of those points is about the relationship between Siddhārtha (who later becomes the Buddha) and his two meditation teachers. That is really a fascinating point in the story for me — once the prince left the palace, he was clear that he wanted to pursue an understanding and overcome suffering. That was his intent, and he met a meditation teacher who took him to great levels of concentration. So much so that Siddhārtha surpassed him, and he was invited to stay and be the co-teacher of that community. But prince Siddhartha, who was on his way to becoming a Buddha, was very clear about what his intention was, and he was not in any way distracted by that invitation. It was like, “Thank you very much for the offer, but on I go.”

Then he met the second meditation teacher who, again, took him to very deep levels of meditation that might have even seemed like liberation to the teacher because the afflictions were so suppressed. But Siddhārtha knew this was not the end goal. And even though he was once again invited to stay and co-lead that community, he chose not to do it. Fortunately for us, he continued his journey and achieved his ultimate goal, which is how we got his great teachings.

Two things stand out for me. First, he was so clear about what his goal was that he was not in the least bit distracted by the invitation to do something slightly off the course. The second thing that haunts me is that after he achieved his awakening, he saw that some people might understand what he was talking about. The first two people he thought of were the teachers who had taught him meditation, but both had recently passed away. So that opportunity to learn from him was completely gone. How do we recognise, know and discern what a real opportunity is? The Buddha could have gone off to co-lead a community and hold off attaining enlightenment in a future life, but the Buddha did not do that.

At the same time, I could see how easy it would be to think, “Oh well, the Abbey is there, Venerable Chodron is there, they are always going to be there, I’m not quite ready yet to be ordained maybe someday in the future I’ll go there.” I can see the window of opportunity close. I was talking to one nun the other day who told me her story about coming to the Abbey. She said, “There is something else you should know. I’ve seen several situations where the person had the right circumstances for ordaining but the window of opportunity closed before she took it. And it never came again.” 🍄



July 3

Real Friends

Using our speech to create disharmony is called divisive speech. This is often done by talking behind other people's backs and saying all sorts of things to turn one person against another. We often do this when we are upset with somebody. Somebody did something we do not like. Rather than approaching the person to talk about what happened and work it out, we talk to everybody else, except the person concerned. In the process, we create a big mess.

I have a problem with Joe over here. I do not talk to Joe, because that would be too simple. I talk to Susan, Janice, Herman, Craig, and other people and tell them what Joe did. Because they are my friends, they are going to side with me and agree with me about how horrible Joe was and how we have really got to do something about it. If they do not agree with me, then they would not be my friends.

This is part of the definition, in worldly ways, of friendship, isn't it? You stick up for me no matter who criticises me be it right or wrong. In a Dharma way, both parties are in error there. If we talk to the people who are not involved in the conflict, trying to get them on our side against the other person, we are creating disharmony between them and the other person. If our friends whom we talk to agree with us, whether we are right or wrong, who encourages us to be angrier and justifying our anger, then they are not real friends because they are encouraging an unwholesome mental state in us.

When we have a problem with Joe, if we do not feel ready yet to talk to Joe it is okay to go to our friend and say, "I have a situation with Joe, I need to talk to someone about it in order to clarify my mind and let go of the anger I have so that I can go and work it out with him." It is okay because we are being perfectly clean and clear that our motivation is not to get our friend on our side. Our motivation is to discuss it and get some wise advice from our friend because we are owning our anger. If we are not owning our anger and our

friend comes back and says, “It sounds like you’re really angry. Let’s talk about your anger and leave the situation of Joe for later,” then that friend is really being a good friend because the actual problem is our anger. The problem is not so much what Joe had done.

We must be very clear about owning our own afflictive emotions, otherwise, it creates disharmony. Similarly, just agreeing with others because they are our friend does not mean that we are being a good friend because sometimes we are encouraging their anger, rather than saying something that wakes them up to what is going on in their mind. 🌿



July 4

Is Our Mind Free?

We value freedom a lot. Being free is very important to Americans and other people throughout the world. There are different kinds of freedom, and we usually want the kind of freedom where we can do, have, be or go whatever and wherever we want and whenever we want it. But if we only consider freedom to be the ability to do all of that, we are constantly frustrated because we cannot do, have, be or go whatever, wherever and whenever we want it. We may have a lot of Constitutional freedoms, but we still feel frustrated because it is impossible to get our way all the time.

Instead, we need to look within and see if our mind is free because even if we have the freedom to express ourselves however we want, is our mind really free? We might think, “Well, nobody can crawl inside my mind and take over it, so, yes, my mind is free.” But if we really observe, our mind is completely under the control of ignorance, attachment and anger. One person says something we like, and we are happy, and another says what we do not like and we get upset. Somebody does something and we become jealous, while another does something else, and we think we are better than them. In this way, our mind is not free at all because disturbing emotions are popping up all the time beyond our control. To think that we are free because we can go to the department store and buy anything we want is kind of crazy, isn’t it? Our mind is controlled by attachment, yet we think we are free to go and buy whatever we want. Or the whole issue of “hate speech”, where in the United States, we have the freedom to say we hate certain people, criticise them, or express other outrageous things, so we think we are free, but our mind is totally controlled by hatred, jealousy and vengefulness.

If we really value freedom, we must create a free state inside our hearts by opposing ignorance, anger and attachment. We principally need to oppose our ignorance, which is the ruler of the whole thing and the dictator that will not let any freedom exist in our hearts and minds. We need to bring the same spirit and fervour that Americans feel on the Fourth of July about winning the American

Revolution. Instead of revolting against the British (who are now our allies), we are going to overthrow self-grasping ignorance. Instead of throwing tea into the river, we must throw our attachment and hatred overboard and then have real freedom. It is with this kind of “gung-ho” enthusiasm that we should approach towards the teachings on emptiness. ☁️



July 5

Strengthening our Practice

There are four things the great masters encourage us to do to strengthen our practice. First, work hard to create virtuous karma. Put our energies into using our body, speech and mind in virtuous ways that do not cause harm to ourselves or others. That is the basic requirement of the path and the basic thing of being a good human being. If our body, speech, and mind are all over the place, it is not going to work.

Our speech sometimes can be bad. We need to take care of it by abandoning the four destructive actions of speech: lying, creating disharmony, harsh words and idle talk. We should also cultivate right speech by speaking truthfully, using our speech to create harmony amongst people who are divided, or to keep people who are together, united. We should speak kindly, pointing out people's good qualities to them so that they are encouraged. And speak at appropriate times about appropriate topics. We should make right speech fundamental in our lives.

Second, “confess previous wrongs”. We have all made tons of mistakes, haven't we? Instead of feeling guilty and unworthy, or having low self-esteem and carrying all that emotional baggage, we do purification practices. Be responsible for what you did, purify the karma through revealing, confessing, and making amends at least in your mind, and hold a determination not to do it again, and then do remedial action. In that way, we can put the past to rest, instead of letting it constantly weigh us down, especially in terms of our own destructive actions. Do not wait until we die to do it but do it every day. If there is something during the day that we regret doing, in the evening or as soon as we regret it, feel that regret and do the four opponent powers. Then move on instead of letting things weigh us down and accumulate emotional baggage.

Third, “strengthen your precepts again and again”. Sometimes there is discussion about whether lay people can retake their five precepts. Lama Yeshe always let people do it, but I have heard other teachers say no. It is a very good thing

to do to strengthen your precepts. When you feel like you are getting lazy and your mind is all over the place, take the one-day precepts, especially the eight Mahayana precepts. That really gets you back on track.

Lastly, “dedicate all merit for awakening”. Dedicate all the merits we create during the day in the evening. But you do not have to wait until the evening. That is why at the end of all the teachings, at the end of all the meditation sessions, we always do dedication verses. ☁



July 6

Harsh Speech

Harsh speech occurs when we insult people, criticise them, yell, scream, ridicule, make fun of them, and point out their mistakes, all done with the intention to hurt these people or to release our anger. We usually think of harsh speech taking place only when someone completely flies off the handle. It can also be very harsh when we ridicule people, tease them about things they are sensitive about, or say sweetly just the thing that we know is going to hurt them. Harsh speech is communication we use that is designed to hurt people's feelings and humiliate them in the presence of others. It can be done out of jealousy, anger, or sometimes out of attachment and ignorance. But it always results in other people's feelings being hurt.

Now does that mean that whenever other people's feelings are hurt, it is because our speech was harsh? No. It has to have a negative motivation that wishes to hurt others or humiliate them. Many a time, we may say things, but people are incredibly super-sensitive, and everything gets taken as criticism or as making fun of them. These things are not harsh speech on our part. Sometimes we may be asking a question and somebody gets all rankled about us asking that question. Or you ask for some information and people get defensive and think you are criticising them. In these situations, that is not harsh speech, and we certainly are not responsible for other people's flare-ups because of it. We may learn that a person is sensitive about certain things, so walk delicately in those areas, but it is not necessarily negative karma on our part.

We need to look at ourselves when we are on the receiving end and we get defensive in a finger snap. People say "Good morning" in the wrong tone of voice and we get all upset about it. We need to look at how we inhibit free communication with other people from our side through our habitual misunderstandings and super-sensitivity.

In our introspection on how to create good communication with other people, which is what I think we all want to achieve, we come to see that sometimes we are the ones who put up the barriers and then complain that other people are mean. ☁



July 7

Idle Talk

Idle talk occurs when we are just jabbering for the sake of jabbering, on and on about inconsequential things that often are objects of attachment for us. Like sales and where to buy cheap things. Politics can devolve into that. Sports. Food. Talking about what this person does and that person does, just for the sake of talking about them, not for the sake of sharing information that may be helpful to share. Basically, using our speech to waste a lot of time.

Does this mean that every time we talk to somebody we need to have a serious, intimate, and meaningful discussion? No. When you work with people you want to foster a friendly feeling in your workplace, so often you chit-chat a little bit about this and that, just as a way of paying attention to each other, acknowledging each other's presence, and sharing a little bit with the other person. That kind of communication is okay if we are aware that we are doing it and why we are doing it. Sometimes, we may first begin with the awareness that we are doing it and then it just devolves into continuous idle talk about so many unnecessary things, such as giving advice, opinions, and telling others what to do.

Sometimes you would wind up on the telephone with somebody who goes on and on, and it is hard to end the call even though you have something you need to do. Sometimes, people also write constant long emails and use them to chat. Likewise, for texting, people just use it for lots and lots of idle talk from what I have observed. 🍷

July 8

Overcoming Ignorance

From bad will come the long and unbearable pain of the three lower realms; from good the higher, happier realms from which to swiftly enter the echelons of awakening. Know this and think upon it day after day.

Happiness always comes from virtue; it never comes from non-virtue. Pain always comes from non-virtue, never from virtue. Similarly, virtue always produces happiness, never suffering, and non-virtue always produces suffering, never happiness. This is the first quality of karma.

We hear this and we say, “Yes, it makes a lot of sense.” When we are about to do something non-virtuous do we think about this? No. If attachment is in our minds, we are thinking about how to get what we want. If we are upset or angry about something, we are thinking about how to eliminate our stress and anger. We are not thinking about the long-term results. Very often we do not even think about the short-term results.

We should train ourselves to slow down and think about the results of our actions because once karma is created it does not vanish. This is the second quality of karma. It leaves an energy trace, a karmic seed, or a “having happened” stamp in our mind that influences our future lives and our future in this life. It does not disappear. If we purify it, negative karma will diminish. If we get angry and have wrong views, our virtuous karma will also diminish in power. But things do not vanish.

A third quality is that results increase, like from a small seed you can get a big tree, and from a small action, we can get a big result.

The fourth one is if you do not create the cause, you do not get the result. We want lots of stuff, and we are willing to pray, “May this come about, may that come about,” but we inadvertently create karma when prayers are answered.

However, if we do not think about doing prayers or aspiring for things but practise the Dharma and create virtues and abandoning non-virtues; it is like, “Come on, can’t things just happen without causes?” Somehow our intellectual understanding of how karma works does not match our actions, and we get very sloppy.

When we create non-virtue, we never think, “This is going to lead me to a horrible rebirth,” or, “This is going to interfere with my conditions to practise the Dharma,” or, “This is going to obscure my mind more, so I’m going to find it harder to realise emptiness.” We do not think like that. We just go ahead and do whatever non-virtuous action we want, thinking, “Oh it doesn’t matter, it’s only a small thing.” Similarly, with creating virtue, we are like, “Well, I’ll just pray, and I’ll offer money for people to do prayers and pujas, and that is good enough, isn’t it?” We also need to restrain ourselves from the ten non-virtues and put our energy into creating the ten virtuous pathways of action. There is often a disconnect in our minds. We need to watch out for this. ☁



July 9

Creating the Causes

Sometimes, those who have been in the Dharma for a long time experience a disconnect. They do not really think that their actions are going to bring results. Somehow, they think that they can just do what they want, and they will get a result in this lifetime. When we do and say nasty things to other people, we are surprised that they get upset with us. We steal people's stuff, why are they getting upset? Somebody is sleeping around, why is my spouse upset? Somehow, we are not connecting causes and results, even though we teach our children, "You have to go to school so you can get a good education, which will result in getting a good job, making a good living, and having happiness." We say this to our kids, and we believe in cause and effect for the kids. But what about us?

As for thinking about the effects beyond this life, we are really unconvinced, aren't we? It is kind of pathetic when one thinks about how long we have been in the Dharma and how much we talk about karma. People do all sorts of things and we go, "I guess they did not have the karma to meet the Dharma. They did not have the karma for this good thing to happen. Their good karma ran out. They were in an accident because of the ripening of some bad karma." We say that about other people, but do we relate it to ourselves? Do we think about creating the cause for our future happiness with what we are doing right now? Do we put the time into sincerely purifying negativities to cut that rush of energy? No. Don't you think it is strange?

One of the inmates whom I wrote to, in reflecting on how he wound up with a 20-year sentence for drug dealing, said he had made all these decisions in his life without thinking about the results that would come. He regretted he had made such small choices that later created big results. He was not even aware that he was actually doing it. Then he somehow got surprised when the result came.

We really have to do a lot of meditation on karma and its effects and gain some confidence in it. Not just some intellectual understanding. Really use it so that

we start monitoring our actions, and happily restrain ourselves when we need to, saying, “Good, I’m glad I caught myself before I do this negative action and wound up with some suffering.” We need to nudge ourselves along to create some more virtue, knowing that it is the cause of happiness and that we do not need to worry about when that happiness is going to come. Just be contented with creating that cause, and then let the good causes bring good results. ☁



July 10

Having a Kind Heart

The importance of having a kind heart is something His Holiness would start with, talk about in the middle, and end with. He made precious human life, ethics, and everything else fit around the theme of having a kind heart, because one of His Holiness' mottos is: "My religion is kindness".

I think we should look at this in the way His Holiness the Dalai Lama does. If we have a kind heart, then our ethical conduct flows very naturally from that. If you have a kind heart, you will not harm others, so you keep good ethical discipline. If you have a kind heart, you want to benefit them, so you do all the actions that create positive energy. If you have a kind heart, you do not want to harm yourself too, so you do not do self-sabotaging things. The whole thing revolves around having a kind heart towards ourselves as well as everybody else. In our culture, we hear about a kind heart, but we always hear about it in reference to being kind to others. As a culture, we tend to be very hard on ourselves. We have somehow the wrong idea that to be kind to others, we have to be hard on ourselves. In order to be compassionate, we have to suffer. Do these two ideas really go together? Is it wrong or selfish to have any bit of positive feelings for ourselves? This idea is embedded in our culture. But it is not found in Buddhism at all.

In fact, it is seen more as a win-win situation in Buddhism because if you are kind to yourself, it makes it easier to be kind to others and vice versa. You practise both together. If there is happiness, we look at the happiness of everybody, not just the happiness of others where oneself is neglected. Likewise for love and compassion, people think, "If there is love and compassion for you, then I cannot have it for myself because that is selfish. If I have compassion for myself, then I am just going to have to hurt you." It is a divisive way of thinking, isn't it? Making it seem like ourselves and others are diametrically opposed, and that if one party gets something the other party loses. In Buddhism, things are not viewed this way.

We need to work on cutting down these rigid ideas of us and them, and all the competition, jealousy and arrogance that come out of that. It should be based on seeing all of us as alike in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering.

If we say, “Have a kind heart,” it should go towards everybody, and “everybody” includes us. It is not only us, but it also includes the rest of the world. As His Holiness reminds us, we believe in democracy, so there is us on one side and other sentient beings on the other; and if there is an issue and we have to vote on whose interest is more important — mine or everybody else’s — then, believing in a democracy where the majority prevails, we should take care of others, because there are more of others than of ourselves. This does not mean that we neglect and deprecate ourselves. It just means that we should open our eyes and see there is the rest of the world out there. It is not all about me. ☁



July 11

Taking Refuge

Live as best as you can in the five lifelong precepts, praised by the Buddha as the basis of lay life. Take the eight one-day precepts at times and guard them dearly.

Contemplate a precious human life, death and karma. See that you are in a clearly unstable situation, not knowing where you are going to get reborn, and completely under the control of previously created karma. We do not know how in the world it is going to ripen, we realise that we need to seek guidance, and so we seek guidance from the Three Jewels.

Refuge means getting clear in our minds the traditions we are following, whose teachings we are following, and having a very clear idea of where we are going spiritually.

While it is so easy for us to say, “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha,” actually taking refuge means understanding deeply what the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are, why they are reliable sources of refuge, and why it will benefit us to rely upon them. To understand this, we should do some study and learn the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

When I was a baby Buddhist, I had a little bit of understanding but not very much. I remember one of the senior Tibetan monks in Kopan coming into the office one day and I remember him saying, “When these people hear about the miraculous and wonderful qualities of the Three Jewels, they will definitely take refuge.” I remember thinking, “Not me.” Just hearing about wonderful qualities, for me, does not necessarily inspire faith. I must know how it is possible to develop those qualities, and then I can have faith that some people do. This is just the way my mind thinks.

In Buddhism, faith does not mean blind faith. It does not mean blind acceptance. There are three kinds of faith. With the first kind, we admire the qualities of the Three Jewels. With the second, we aspire to gain those qualities ourselves,

and the third kind is based on confidence that the path is possible from some understanding of it. Faith, also translated as trust or confidence, is something that grows in us and has causes. We have to create the causes for it. It is not something that we just say, “I have respect for my teacher and my teacher said this, so I believe it.” Those are called “modest faculty” disciples, who accept teachings because somebody else said so. If we want to penetrate more deeply, then we have to investigate for ourselves.

For me, refuge really grew. I took refuge early, but it is something that grew over the years and is still growing now. We may take refuge in a ceremony, the official thing that makes you a Buddhist, but the refuge is really something that we learn about and deepen our understanding of until we become the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. First, we realise the Dharma. Then we become an Arya Sangha. Lastly, we become a Buddha. But it is a process that grows until we become the Three Jewels ourselves, in our mind stream. ☸



July 12

Faith

If somebody is telling me about some other people, “Oh they’re this and this,” I want to get to know them so I can see what they really are like. That is because in the religion I grew up with a lot of holy figures who had a lot of excellent qualities, but what I was really looking for was how to develop these qualities in me. Descriptions of people having miraculous abilities, super-knowledge, or whatever, do not personally inspire faith in the Three Jewels because the religion I grew up with had lots of miracles. When I came to Buddhism, I wanted to know how it is possible to develop these qualities. If I knew how it was possible, then I could accept that the Buddha existed. How do you have altruistic love, compassion and equanimity for everybody? How in the world do you get your mind to be like that? Nobody had ever taught me how. I did not understand how that was possible.

I did not grow up in a Buddhist family, so I do not have the kind of instinctive faith that you often get from your childhood, but I wanted to know, “How do we know it’s possible to develop these qualities?” I will believe other people have them, and I believe I can gain those by practising that path, too. Without knowing that, why should I trust what they are saying, and why should I practise that path? Or at least why should I practise that path with a lot of vigour?

I remember in the early years I was going, “How do I know the Buddha really exists? Lots of people say so, but how do I know?” For me, the growth of faith I depended very much on was having some personal taste of the teachings. When I practised the antidotes to anger, self-centredness, or attachment, I saw that they had a positive effect on my mind and lessened my attachment, anger and selfishness. Even if it was just a little, that effect instilled faith in me — that the path worked and that little bit that I had practised worked. This helped me to think, “Maybe it is possible to become like the holy beings.” But it really took a lot of time. It started that way with my personal experience.

And as I studied more, I began to understand the layout of the path, what the mind was, what the hindrances or obscuration to the mind were, and how those could be removed. This gave me much more confidence, faith and trust that there were holy beings and that there was a path that worked. ☁



July 13

The Medicine of the Dharma

The Dharma is the real refuge. What we need to do first is take refuge in the causal three refuges: the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha that are at the moment external to us. Only when we had realised the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha inside of us, then we would already be free. So we need to start by taking refuge in the external Dharma, the Sangha members, and the Buddha Jewel.

We are like a patient, somebody who is sick. Our disease is samsara. We go to the Buddha, who is like the doctor, and the Buddha gives us a diagnosis, and says, “You’re suffering from the first noble truth, dukkha, and the causes. The true origins causing all of these are rooted in the chief ‘spiritual virus’, which is ignorance. You need to take the medicine, which is the true path to gain the realisations of the path, specifically the wisdom realising emptiness, which will lead you to a state of health, which is true cessations, the cessations of all the dukkha and its causes.”

The Buddha diagnoses the illness and prescribes the Dharma as the medicine to take. Being limited beings, we get the prescription and we go to the pharmacy, we get the pills, but we forget how to take them. One blue in the morning, two pink in the afternoon, and half a tab of the green one in between. We need help. The Sangha is the help, the people who help us to take the medicine, who crush it up and mix it with the Abbey’s applesauce and put it in the spoon and go, “open wide.” This helps us to take the medicine. 🍵

July 14

Bodhisattvas Wash Others' Dishes

If people are really practising, when they saw themselves getting mad at the person who left the dirty dish in the sink, they would say, “I’m angry. Why? What am I thinking? Oh, I have this whole story I’m telling myself, that people are deliberately wanting to harm me. They are looking down on me. They expect me to be their slave. I have a little bit of pride because I think I’m too good for that. My love does not stretch that far, to wash somebody else’s dish. Unless, of course, they make three prostrations and say, “thank you” afterwards. Then I might consider it.”

However, they would be able to look at what is going on in their mind and correct their attitude by remembering, “Oh, I’m practising the Bodhisattva path, so I am the servant of others. This is somebody else who has been kind to me in my many previous lives. What is so bad about washing a dish? All it takes is 30 seconds. Whereas this story that I’m making up is taking up an hour of my time.”

This is real practice, dealing with those things when they come up, transforming the mind, and seeing where we are at. Just sitting on the cushion, chanting, and looking holy is not what it is about. To “practise Dharma” means to transform your mind. ☸

July 15

Making an Effort

As you are doing refuge practice, what you want to aim for is to deepen your wisdom and your compassion. The purpose of the practice is not just to generate a lot of emotional faith, but it is to really understand the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, what they are, what our relationship is with them, and then faith will naturally come and the inspiration to practise will naturally come from that.

We are not sitting there trying to go, “I’ve got to make myself have faith.” That is not going to work. Really think about the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Then think, “I have the possibility to develop those same qualities. The Buddha was not always a Buddha primordially, he was just like me. He practised, and I just kept playing poker or exercising my thumbs. He created the cause, and I did not, but we have the same potential, I can also attain Buddhahood.”

Think, what did the Buddha practise? The two key elements are wisdom and compassion. We practise both based on a determination to be free from cyclic existence. There you have the three principal aspects of the path, and you see how they fit into your practice of refuge. 🍃



July 16

The Eight Mahayana Precepts

With such thoughts make efforts in the refuge and live as best as you can in the five lifelong precepts, praised by the Buddha as the basis of lay life. Take the eight one-day precepts at times and guard them dearly.

The eight Mahayana precepts are just like the five lay precepts with additional requirements. Both involve no killing, no stealing, no lying, and no taking of intoxicants. But instead of the lay precepts to avoid unkind and unwise sexual behaviour, for these 24 hours, it is celibacy.

The next Mahayana precept is not sitting on high, expensive beds or seats. In ancient India, everybody sat on the floor. If you were sitting higher, it was because you were an important person. In order to not fall prey to arrogance or conceit, do not sit on high or expensive beds and thrones. In our culture, people sit on chairs and that is usually not a sign of being arrogant unless, of course, you sit up there while everybody else is on the floor and you are looking down at others and feeling superior. In our culture, it would be coming into the room and sitting at the head of the table. Abandon this because it creates arrogance.

The next precept has two parts. One part is not singing, dancing and playing music. Although these are not naturally negative actions, they are abandoned for one day because it takes a lot of time to sing, dance, and play music. When you sit down to meditate, you are replaying the songs, the dance steps, and the entertainment. Although the precept just says “singing, dancing and playing music,” it includes all sorts of entertainment: watching movies and things that are entertaining just for the heck of it.

The second part is not wearing perfumes, garlands, or ornaments. Perfumes, garlands and ornaments draw attention to ourselves. We want to make ourselves attractive so that others are attracted to us. It is very distracting for Dharma practice.

The eighth one is not to eat at inappropriate times. Any time after mid-day is inappropriate. So, from then until dawn the next day, only take beverages. Beverages mean thin beverages. You can add a little bit of milk to some tea, that is fine, but not a whole glass of milk. No yoghurt. You can have fruit juice if it is strained, without pulp in it. You can have sweets that just dissolve in your mouth, but not things you chew. You can have vegetable broth, passed through a tea strainer (not a noodle strainer).

Those are the eight precepts. It is very good to take them. You can do it any day you want. It is especially good if you feel like your practice is losing energy, or you have been really, really distracted and your mind is all over the place. Or if you did something that you do not feel so good about doing and you know you need to get yourself back on track, then take the precepts for one day. It is really, good practice. 🍵



July 17

Making Wise Decisions

If what you do brings on suffering eventually, though it may appear as happiness at that moment, do not do it. After all, food that is beautifully cooked but mixed with poison is left untouched, is it not?

When faced with making a decision, what do people usually do? We usually do the one which brings happiness now but pain in the future. This is called being stupid. It is what we do because we are so addicted to current happiness. We do not think about the long-term results of our actions.

We may talk a lot about karma but when it comes to deciding whether we want to sacrifice our immediate pleasure to create virtue for something good in the future, or for liberation and awakening, we do not want to give up our temporary pleasure. We make the choice: “Suffering in the future — we will deal with that when it comes because it may not even come.” Inside, although we talk about believing in karma, in our hearts we are not sure if we really believe in karma. Or we kind of believe, but karma is going to be different for us, like all our small things, we will just purify them later.

You can really see how difficult this is. In many areas of health, the doctor will give people instructions on how to care for their bodies, and because they see that following these instructions do not bring them the immediate pleasure they want, they ignore the instructions and then suffer from a lot of diseases and debilitation later. 🙏

July 18

Water off a Duck's Back

I was working with Lama Yeshe once, and people were coming in, one person said this, and another complained about that, and he just listened to all of them but did not react. It was like water off a duck's back. He heard it and handled what was important. But he did not react.

People may say all kinds of things. It is important to be able to differentiate what information is important that we need to deal with at that moment or later, and what information to completely disregard. They say you have to pick your battles. Every time somebody says something, and you go, "This is something to be dealt with and I have to correct this person," you are going to become unbearable. Sometimes, you just have to let things go. You have to really let it go now, instead of exploding later on. Clearly, when you are suppressing it and stacking it up, it is not like water off a duck's back. It is going into the container of "my grudges to throw at somebody next time we argue". That is not very helpful.

Sometimes people tell us stuff and we respond to it and put ourselves in the middle of their emotional trip, which is not at all helpful. Some people love to do that. They throw out hooks and they want to hook us into their drama, and you have to know when to just let it go, not bite the hook, and not to insert ourselves in something that is somebody else's problem to work out.

For example, A comes to me and complains about B, and then I get all worked up, "A is unhappy because B did something that A is unhappy about, so we have two unhappy people, and I had better fix it and make everybody happy because if they are not happy, I will get too anxious in this environment." I try to placate A, then I go to B and I say, "You said this and that and A is mad at you because of it..." Instead of placating B, B gets mad, and goes to A and says, "So-and-so told me that you said this and that about me." Then A says, "Well, yes, I did," or, "No I didn't, so-and-so exaggerated it." Then they both get mad at you for exaggerating it. Such drama is none of our business.

If somebody comes to us speaking badly or venting, it is good if we can help the person to calm down. If we can help others look at their anger and realise that they are angry and apply the Dharma antidotes, that is also good. But we do not need to get involved, going back and forth between the two parties, trying to fix their problem which we have taken on as our problem when it is none of our business. ☁



July 19

Progressing Day by Day

The real benefit of dedicating the merit we create is that the merit is protected from being destroyed by anger or wrong views, and it sets our merit to go in the direction that we want, so it will ripen the way we want. It is important to dedicate to the highest, long-term goal of full awakening. If you dedicate to that, the merit does not get used up until it is attained, and in the process, you get a good rebirth and good conditions. If you only dedicate yourself to a good rebirth and good conditions, the merit ripens in that coming lifetime and finishes. It is very important to have the long-term goal of full awakening in mind.

When we live by generating good motivation in the morning, being mindful of our precepts, and having introspective awareness during the day, and we do purification practice and dedicate the merit in the evening, we are going to improve day by day.

We acknowledge that whatever mistakes we had made, we learn from them and determine not to do them again. The next day we try again and do better, though sometimes we may regress or slip up. But if we practise in this manner continuously, trying to perform what is wholesome, purify what is not, and dedicate the merit, we will progress. As we progress, that progression becomes evident to the people around us because we are much nicer people to be around. In our minds, we find that we are much happier people than we were before. We can see the progress happen in terms of our own experience as well.

His Holiness always advises us not to look for your progress on a day-by-day basis, but observe over a period of one year, two years, or a longer period. Think about what you were like a year ago, two years ago, or five years ago, and you will really see the change. I think some of you have been practising longer than that and you can see the change in yourselves, and the people who live with you can see the change in you too. This is a very good feedback.

You begin initially with an understanding that is quite intellectual. Then you gain some experience, contemplate it again and again, and it becomes an understanding that is less intellectual and more experiential. It becomes an understanding that you really live by and have a lot of confidence in. You can observe the change in your mind in that way too.

When we first begin to practise we may say, “Is it really possible to get rid of the self-centred ego? I do not think that is possible.” As you practise and you start to apply the antidotes, you can see that you are making progress, and that gives you confidence based on your own experience. Your self-centred thoughts may not be completely gone, but they are certainly fewer than before. That is progress, and we should really rejoice about that. ☁



July 20

Relying on the Dharma

To conclude: you are born alone and die alone, friends and relations are therefore unreliable, Dharma alone is the supreme reliance.

What more can I add to that? It is said so succinctly, and it is so true, isn't it? We are born alone. Even if you were part of a set of twins or triplets, or even if you live your whole life surrounded by other living beings who promise never to abandon you, can they fulfil that promise? We are born alone, and we die alone. Even if everybody dies together at the same time, each of us has our own experience. Nobody else really shares our experience with us in the same way.

Others can be lovely people who promise all sorts of things, but how can they fulfil those promises when they themselves are impermanent and under the influence of afflictions and karma?

Others may mean well but what can they really do in the long-term or even in the short-term, when they have no control over their minds, their afflictions come and go, and their karma is ripening here, there, and everywhere? Can they really protect us from suffering?

We might have a big dog or even a bodyguard who says, "I'm going to protect you from anybody who tries to hurt you," but even then, that living being too can easily be injured and die. So, how can he protect us from suffering when he cannot even prevent his own body from injury and death?

People promise to protect us from mental pain: "I'm going to love you forever. I'm going to support you forever." But do they? They are under the influence of afflictions. Their minds bobble up and down. One moment, they like us and want to be with us always, the next moment they get mad at us and never want to be with us. All these things are controlled by other conditions, they

are not self-generated things that we have control over. The mind changes. Karma changes. The only real protection is our Dharma practice, because who knows what we will wind up experiencing in this life?

It is very interesting when you read people's biographies. Some people start with horrible circumstances when they are young, and by the time they are old, they have a very nice life. Others start with a wonderful life when young, and then as they age, negative karma ripens, and they experience a lot of pain and suffering. For instance, the aristocrats in China wound up being imprisoned, beaten, and tortured simply because they were from the upper classes during the communist and cultural revolutions. Nobody saw this coming. When somebody is born, nobody could have said, "You know, you are going to be imprisoned and tortured by the time you are 40 years old." ☁



July 21

How Do You Get to be a Good Practitioner?

How do you get to be a good practitioner? By starting where we are now and learning, practicing, and constantly familiarising ourselves with the teachings. We gain the ability to transform adversity, so it becomes an aid on the path.

When we do not understand the power of the Dharma, which is the one true thing we can rely on, we take refuge in human beings who do not have the ability to protect us, just as we do not have the ability to protect them. We can have a lot of compassion for others, but when their karma is strong, what can we do to overcome their karma? We can plant seeds, but those seeds are going to take a while to ripen. It is similar to us.

We pray to the Buddha to change the external situation without realising that the very thing that we need to change is our mind. We have all had the experience of being in a wonderful external situation and still feeling miserable. Have you had that experience? You are in a beautiful environment with people you like, and yet you are miserable? It is not about changing the outside world. It is about changing what is inside.

One of the signs by which you can measure your practice and your progress is to see how much you are ready to accept the external situation and work on your mind instead of always trying to change everything on the outside. If you can change the external situation, do it if it is easy to. But do not spend all your life's energy trying to change the external situation because you are never going to get it to what you want it to be, and no other person is ever going to be what you want them to be. Let us get into changing ourselves instead. 🙏

July 22

Be Transparent

Be transparent and do not be defensive because everybody knows our faults anyway. When somebody gives you some feedback, listen. If what they say is right, say, “Thank you very much, I’m working on it.” There is no need to try and paint a pretty picture of, “Well I really didn’t mean this, and this got a little out of hand, and blah blah blah,” instead of just saying, “You’re right, I didn’t tell the complete truth.” Just say what it is and do not feel ashamed about it rather than try to justify and get defensive when everybody knows what happened anyway.

If others have a gross misunderstanding concerning you, by all means, correct that and give them the proper information. Transparency works very well for us psychologically rather than covering things up. If we broke a precept, there it is. Then we stop all this self-recrimination, guilt and shame that gets in the way of practice. It is important to confess and just say “Here it is,” instead of, “Well, I did that but it is really that person’s fault.” Let us own up to our mistakes but do not own what is not our responsibility. 🍄



July 23

Transforming Stubborn Resistance

Transforming stubborn resistance in our mind is a very important skill to cultivate because we all have to do things throughout our lives that we do not like doing them. I remember once when the Sravasti Abbey community was working together to clean up the garbage left by various workers at the Gotami House. People were laughing and having a good time even though going through garbage is not something one would ordinarily think of as fun. If someone had asked for volunteers, many probably would have gone the other way and left it for others to do. But the experience showed me that if we can overcome our resistance, we can enjoy doing things that we previously thought we would not. Stubbornly saying, “I don’t want to do it,” hampers our spiritual progress because we miss an opportunity to work with our mind and change it for the better.

When we are mad at someone or are experiencing craving, we need to devote effort to working with our unpleasant state of mind, rather than thinking, “Transforming my mind is so hard and these people are idiots anyway, so I’m just going to do something else that I enjoy.” If we take this lousy attitude into our Dharma practice, we clearly are not going to get very far because whenever something comes up that we do not like to do, we will exit right, exit left, or go underground to escape the situation. We also leave other people holding the bag, which is not in line with our aspiration to be of benefit to all sentient beings. Community life is helpful because it affords many opportunities for us to rise to the occasion and practise transforming our minds by pulling ourselves out of very stubborn, resistant mind states. 🙏

July 24

Big View

It is important to have a big view and to think big. That was Lama Yeshe's way of doing things. Not just to think big this life, but to think big beyond this life.

We are not just this body and identity that we have in this life. There is a continuity of consciousness that has been going on since the beginningless past and will continue infinitely into the future, although there is not a solid me associated with that consciousness. Still, even though there is no solid person, cause-and-effect functions and the actions that are done in one life influence what is to be experienced in the next life and many future lives after that. Similarly, what we experience in this life is due to actions we have created in the past. The more we can have this enlarged view of the continuity of consciousness and the functioning of cause-and-effect — yet realising there is no solid person — the more attentive and relaxed the mind becomes. The more we can see things in this way, the more we will appreciate the functioning of cause-and-effect, and we will appreciate the lack of any concrete person.

As you go through the day, try to hold that view as much as you can. Especially try to remember that who you think you are, is basically a hallucination created by the mind. Therefore, there is not much sense in getting attached to this big “I” we have created that we think it is the centre of the universe. Better just to let go of that view of “I” and instead, open to this ever-flowing interconnectedness. 🍃

July 25

Guilt

It is important to realise that guilt from the Buddhist viewpoint is a hindrance to liberation and awakening. While regret is something beneficial because we realise our mistaken actions, guilt is not beneficial because it gets into a lot of self-blame and an exaggerated sense of self saying, “I am so bad. I am the worst.” It is important to differentiate between guilt, regret and generate regret, which lets you heal, forgive and apologise.

There is also guilt-tripping. When guilt-tripping is going on, one person is trying to make the other person feel responsible for one’s unhappiness. From a Buddhist viewpoint, we are all responsible for our unhappiness. Nobody else is responsible for it. It is not fair or legitimate or suitable for us to guilt-trip somebody else and try to make them feel bad about what they have done. Instead, we should recognise how our karma put us in this situation and how our delusions are responding to this situation. That is not blaming ourselves. Sometimes in this life, we did not do anything that caused a situation or made us deserve it, but karmically we have some responsibility, and we are responsible for how we react to the situation in the present. Trying to guilt-trip somebody else is really not suitable from the Buddhist viewpoint. Similarly, if other people try to guilt-trip us, we have no reason to buy into it.

If other people try to make us feel bad about what we are doing because either they do not like it, they want us to do something else, they are unhappy and they want to blame it on us and make us feel bad; there is no reason for us to let that stick because it is their projection and their confusion. We take responsibility for our actions, and if we had indeed done something incorrectly in a situation, we acknowledge that. We are not responsible for other people’s feelings because we cannot make them feel anything. We are responsible for our bad motivations, but if we had acted with good intentions and they are still upset or angry, there is no reason for us to feel guilty about it. If they try to guilt-trip us, that is quite manipulative, and we will concede if we buy into it.

Sometimes we fall very much into our old habits of how we emotionally react to things, either blaming or guilt-tripping someone else or letting ourselves be guilt-tripped or feeling guilty. In the beginning, we may get rather confused about it all because the old habits and emotions are there. But when you bring your wisdom into the situation, and if you really think about it, then over time you will be able to really clarify things — what is your responsibility, and what is somebody else’s responsibility? That makes human relationships much clearer. 🌱



July 26

Conviction in the Path

We woke up today, and so the day started well. We have another day to practise, but because we do not know how long we will live or when death will come, we need to be fully present in our lives and make wise decisions. Because what we do now has long-term effects in the future, it is important to take care of our mental, verbal, and physical actions.

Sometimes that might mean experiencing a little bit of discomfort in this life to have the opportunity to engage in Dharma practice, so that we create good causes that will benefit our future lives that lead us to liberation and the full awakening of Buddhahood. Sometimes Buddhahood may seem abstract or far away. We may say, “How do I know if it even exists? How do I know that I’m capable of obtaining it?”

The more we understand how ignorance the root of dukkha (unsatisfactory conditions or suffering) is, the more we will investigate how it operates. We will notice how it grasps objects and will question if that is correct. Through deep reflection, we will see that wisdom apprehends objects in the opposite way to ignorance, and thus we will gain confidence that it is possible to eliminate ignorance by generating the wisdom that accords with reality. This wisdom can then eradicate all the mental afflictions and their latencies, making it possible for us to attain full awakening.

Do not just accept the existence of Buddhahood on blind faith. Really think about the root cause of our present situation in cyclic existence. See if it can be eliminated and then learn the path to do so. Consider what your mind will be like when it is free from afflictions. Through such reflection, we will gain conviction based on understanding that awakening is possible and that the Three Jewels exist. 🙏

July 27

Mudita the Moose

When we encounter other sentient beings throughout the day, it is good to remember that they are not their current body and mind. One afternoon, a friend and I were walking back from the forest surrounding the Abbey. We came across Mudita the moose walking along Middle Way Path with his huge rack. He was a little shy and trotted up the path and away from us. Then he turned around and looked at us just as intently as we looked at him. We share a universe with so many different kinds of sentient beings like Mudita, all of whom have been our parents in previous lives. We have been in very intimate relationships with them and received lots of kindness from them.

When we meet them again in this life, instead of just seeing them as that body or label, we should think, “There’s somebody to whom I’ve been very close in the past and who has been kind to me.” Or at least we can think, “There’s somebody who is just like me in wanting happiness and not wanting to suffer.” Therefore, whether you see grasshoppers, moose, peacocks, somebody you like, or somebody you do not like, let the feeling arise, “I want to be kind and have compassion for them.” In this way, we practise developing compassion to the point where we generate bodhicitta, the wish to attain awakening as soon as possible for the benefit of all beings. 🌱



July 28

Attachment

In the teachings, the analogy for attachment is honey on a razor blade. The honey tastes so sweet and delicious as you are licking it off the blade, but you are also cutting your tongue and hurting yourself. This is the deceptive quality of attachment, which lures us into thinking that it brings happiness because generally there is a happy feeling in the mind when attachment is present. We are so addicted to the low-grade happiness of this life that we do not realise we are inflicting suffering. It is not enough to remember the disadvantages of attachment intellectually; we need to examine our lives and find many examples of what happens after we become attached to something.

The things we have done out of attachment probably have brought us sense pleasures, a feeling that we were loved and being special, or that we belonged, and people appreciated us. But did that attachment bring ultimate happiness, or were we eventually left feeling disillusioned and disappointed with our hopes and expectations unmet? What kind of negative actions have we done under the influence of attachment?

In the long-term, isn't attachment to the body at the time of death propels us to take another rebirth and all the suffering this entails? When we realise attachment is an enemy that is afflicting us instead of a sweet friend, we will want to destroy it instead of cooperating with it. This takes some work on our part, but thinking about the effects of attachment in a personal way can be very effective. 🙏

July 29

Guarding the Senses

Whenever we are in a very busy environment, we should take care of our minds by guarding our senses. Guarding the senses entails being aware of where they go — where we direct our eyes, what sounds we pay attention to, what smells we are fixated on, what tastes we are longing for, and what tactile sensations we are imagining and craving. This specifically applies to the five senses because they are the ones that are in contact with the external world.

But the practice will also affect the sixth sense, the mental sense, and all the preconceptions that arise in our mind due to contact with a lot of external phenomena. The process of guarding the senses is a basic monastic practice that we do at Sravasti Abbey, but we especially practise it when we go into town. In town, there are billboards, and music and many people instead of the butterflies, knapweed, and deer that we see around the Abbey. We have to take care not to let our eyes, ears, and imagination go all over the place, but have to try to stay very centered with our breathing and our motivation of kindness. 🌸



July 30

Dependent Arising and Compassion

Dependent arising usually comes up on the wisdom side of the path. But it also features prominently when we are cultivating bodhicitta, which involves recognising dukkha, or unsatisfactory conditions, for what it is, and reflecting on the kindness we have received from all sentient beings. First, we have to see our situation in samsara and want to be free. Then we can reflect on how it is also the situation of all other sentient beings and want them to be free of it too.

When examining our own “stuckness” in samsara, we contemplate the twelve links of dependent arising, how each link depends on the previous link, and how the origin of each rebirth can be traced back to ignorance. Meditating on dependent arising helps us see how our unsatisfactory conditions do not happen causelessly — they are not created by other people (believe it or not), or an external creator with a map of how the universe is supposed to function.

The Buddha largely gave the teaching on dependent arising to show that there is no external creator of our situation. Our situation is all rooted in the mind, the ignorant mind. From ignorance comes conditioned action, from which comes the consciousness upon which the karmic seed is placed. From there comes name and form when there is conception in the womb, and so on, ending in birth. In dependence on birth, there is aging and death, with many more cycles of the twelve-links created in between. By understanding dependent arising in this context, we realise that we and all other sentient beings are in the same boat and want all of us to be free. The real meaning of self-compassion is not sleeping late and having breakfast in bed but wanting to get ourselves out of samsara. Compassion for others is then extending that same wish to them. 🍵

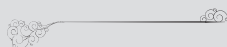
July 31

Benefits of a Renunciate Life

Whether we are lay people or monastics, having the opportunity to live a simple lifestyle and the discipline that enables us to do so is a very precious opportunity that will benefit society, future generations, and ourselves. Even a small group of individuals can have a positive impact on the world by refraining from over-consumption, not harming others, and trying to calm the mind that is always saying, “Me, me, me, I, I, I, mine, mine, mine, gimme, gimme, gimme.” This is because we are all related and we are all interconnected. Let us challenge our personal and collective suffering by consciously subduing and transforming our self-centered minds, our minds of greed, and arrogance. 🍃



August



*Yes, Buddhism has “One
Teacher, Many Traditions.”
Something for everyone!*



August 1

Five Contemplations

We do five contemplations before each meal. I contemplate all the causes and conditions and the kindness of others by which I have received this food. It starts with all those little beings, like worms and insects who help to grow the food. It goes on to the people who planted the food, the ones who harvested it, who processed it, who packaged it, who transported it, and the beings who made the vehicles that transported it, whether a ship, plane or car. All the beings who made the roads, the docks, and the airports. The beings who bought it and donated it to the Abbey. All the mothers and fathers, the grandmothers and grandfathers of all the other people who are in that lineage. We can also contemplate our karma that brought us to the Abbey where the meal is being served.

I contemplate my own practice, constantly trying to improve it. We need to stop every day and ask ourselves how we did in our practice today. Part of our practice is to stop, look and see where we are and what we need to do to progress along the path. Not just going through the motions, we must actually put them into practice.

I contemplate my mind, cautiously guarding it against greed, wrongdoings, and other defilements. There are antidotes for these defilements that we should be looking at. His Holiness says if we investigate our mind at times when we are very selfish and preoccupied with ourselves to the exclusion of others, we shall find that these disturbing negative minds are the root of this behaviour. Since they greatly disturb our minds, the moment we notice that we are coming under their influence, we should apply the antidotes to them. We must guard our minds and always apply antidotes when needed. We do not just say the words, we must actually sit down and apply them.

I contemplate this food, treating it as wondrous medicine to nourish my body. Food is one of the basics we need, and we cannot live without it. A lot of times we take food for granted, but there are many starving beings in this world who

will die today because they do not have the food that they need to eat. They will lose the opportunity to practise the Dharma. Imagine how it would be if you were starving and someone offered this food to you and it would save your life, at least for now.

I contemplate the aim of Buddhahood, accepting and consuming this food in order to accomplish it. The aim of our life right now should be bodhicitta — to become fully awakened as quickly as possible to be of benefit to all sentient beings. We should accept and appreciate this food, all the beings and causes and conditions that made it possible so that we can have this opportunity to look at our mind and our practice for us to grow in wisdom and compassion and eventually become a Buddha so that we may help all sentient beings be free of suffering. We need to actually take time to look at each of these points and make them come alive inside our hearts and minds. We need to really contemplate, think about, and meditate on these to make them important in this life. 🍲



August 2

When Others Misunderstand Our Actions

Sometimes when we reach out to help others, they misinterpret our gesture and instead blame us. Or sometimes people misunderstand our actions and become upset and angry for no apparent reason. In these kinds of situations, it is important for us to examine the motivation for our behaviour and whether we were negligent in any way or had some subtle hostility which we have not owned up to. If we find that we did something wrong, of course, it is best to apologise. But if our motivation was clear and our actions were not intended to be harmful, we simply have to practise patience and compassion and realise that the person is overcome by their afflictions and buying into their karmic vision at that moment. We must stay firm, have a compassionate attitude, and try to communicate as best as we can. Sometimes it may be best to give the person some space because it is difficult to communicate when a mind is like that. 🍵



August 3

Buddha nature

We are not our actions. The person and the action are two different things. You have to learn to differentiate a person's harmful actions from the person. The action can be outrageous, negative, harmful and disgusting. But that does not mean the person who did it is outrageous, harmful, negative and disgusting. Why? Because that person has Buddha nature. He has the possibility to become a fully awakened one. The fundamental basic nature of his mind is something pure and untainted, that can never be tainted. We can never say a person is evil. We can never say a person is hopeless. Never. That is like saying he does not have Buddha nature. That is like saying the Buddha was a liar and he did not know what he was talking about when he said that all sentient beings have the possibility to be fully awakened.

Everybody, no matter what they do, still has that fundamentally pure nature of mind. That means the person is not evil and he is not hopeless or helpless. He can do something. It is very important to remember the pure nature of the mind. First, it establishes a very firm basis on which we can have self-esteem because the pure nature of the mind is always there. Furthermore, it cannot be tainted. It is a reason for me to respect every other living being and not discriminate among them. I can still say what they did was awful, but I do not have to hate them for doing it. I can still say, "I made a mistake," but it does not mean I am an awful person. That is really, really, important. 🙏

August 4

Optimism and Renunciation

In studying the disadvantages of samsara, it almost seems as if we are at odds with the methods we are being taught to cultivate renunciation. Optimism is different from attachment to life's pleasure. There is confusion when considering this in the context of the teachings about the disadvantages of cyclic existence. An optimistic attitude about things going on in our lives, which is also a completely realistic attitude says, "What can I learn, how can I benefit, how can I receive, how can I connect with other people?" That is a beneficial attitude, and everybody's lives would be much better if they had an optimistic attitude instead of always presupposing the worst.

When we talk about the disadvantages of cyclic existence, that too is a realistic attitude. We are not being pessimistic. We are seeing what cyclic existence is and what it is not. We are cultivating a certain disillusionment with cyclic existence, but that disillusionment is counteracting the mind that says, "I'm going to find ultimate pleasure, delight, happiness and bliss in cyclic existence." That is actually an unrealistic attitude because that is never going to happen. We need to see cyclic existence for what it is so that we can deal with it in a practical way, which is to cultivate the wish and the determination to get out of it and to overcome it.

That does not mean we approach life in a pessimistic way, always assuming that the worst is going to happen. That is an unrealistic attitude because it is jumping to conclusions. Optimism is beneficial, it has realism in it. Being optimistic does not mean that we think we are going to find everlasting bliss and joy in samsara, because that is never going to happen. We become optimistic about attaining liberation, about generating bodhicitta, and about attaining full awakening, which is a good state, a state of lasting happiness that we can attain, and that we can go towards.

Is developing the renunciation of samsara realistic? We are not staying in a "samsara stinks" mentality, we are cultivating the optimism that will lead us to

develop our good qualities, give up our afflictions, and attain full awakening. At the same time, while we are in samsara, on a day-to-day basis, we try and have a positive motivation that is beneficial and realistic. The optimism that we have the potential to get out of cyclic existence is included in renunciation.

Talking about optimism implies an acceptance of understanding the nature of cyclic existence, rather than a denial. To experience our difficulties and have optimism around our capacity to be able to change or appreciate the kindness of the people around us means that we have already accepted that implicitly as opposed to pushing it away. That is what helps to generate the determination to be free. We must accept what is and have a positive attitude about how we go forward. ☁



August 5

How Fortunate We Are

Even though today might be a cloudy day, when we look out of the window, it is still very beautiful. How fortunate we are to be here with this beauty of nature around us. More importantly, how fortunate we are to be here with a precious human life. Every morning when I look out of the window and I see the beauty, I always think of the inmates that I write to and visit. It makes me think just how a glance out of a window, that we take for granted, is something that would be ecstatic for them in the environment that they are living in.

Similarly, all the myriad sentient beings in the lower realms, all those who lack precious human lives in the upper realms, for them just to have one day of opportunity that we have to practise the Dharma would be miraculous for them. Let us really appreciate the opportunity that we have which is the result of our previous karma. When we see the beauty of nature around us, let us offer it to all the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and all the sentient beings. When we see our fortune of having a precious human life, let us dedicate our time and energy to actualising the three principal aspects of the path in our minds, and to unite our minds with bodhicitta. 🙏



August 6

The Best Learning

“The best learning is realising the truth of no self.”

What is the best learning? Realising no self. Not memorising all the points, knowing how to say all the words without understanding them. Why is it realising no self? Because that is the only realisation that cuts the root of cyclic existence. Bodhicitta and all our other practices on the method side of the path are very important. That is how we create merit. Without bodhicitta, we cannot become a fully awakened Buddha. Without the realisation of emptiness, we cannot cut the root of samsara; bodhicitta cannot cut that root. Only the mind that directly cognises the opposite of what ignorance cognises can cut the root of ignorance.

Ignorance grasps at inherent existence. This wisdom realises the opposite of the absence and the emptiness of inherent existence. It is also one of the most difficult things to realise. His Holiness talks about it in terms of his own life. He says emptiness is more difficult to understand than bodhicitta, but bodhicitta is more difficult to realise. Interesting. But that does not mean that emptiness is a snap of the fingers, because if it were, then we would have attained liberation a long time ago. It takes a lot of work and a lot of contemplation. If you are finding the teachings on emptiness difficult for you, start out by contemplating impermanence. That is a very good way to ease yourself into a better understanding of how things exist, and from there it is easier to get to emptiness.

With impermanence, there is gross impermanence, like sunrises, sunsets and death. Then there is subtle impermanence, the fact that things arise, abide and cease in every split second. When you look at it, you cannot find a split second. We have this image, one moment, second moment, and third moment as if they are nice little discreet moments with glue holding them together so they form a continuity. But the more you look into it, it can really help you understand emptiness. When you think about subtle impermanence and the fact that things

change from moment to moment, automatically the question comes, “Well then, what is it that goes from one moment to the next?” If they are not the same through and through, then can you say that there is an essence that goes from one moment to the next moment? That leads you into emptiness, which is the key to eliminating ignorance and the doorway to awakening. 🌱



August 7

Why Do Things Have Subtle Impermanence?

One way that leads you to begin realising emptiness is when you look at subtle impermanence. Why do things have subtle impermanence? Because they are dependent on causes and conditions. That means that things do not exist under their power. They cannot support themselves because they are completely dependent on the causes and conditions that they arise from. Something that is completely dependent on something else cannot have its own inherent essence.

An inherent essence is just sitting there: “I’m ME. Inherently. Sitting here. That’s it. Not dependent on anything else.” That is the way we feel. But the moment we start looking into whether we really exist as an independent entity in any way, we begin to see that in any way we look, we are completely dependent on other things. We are dependent on our bodies and our minds. We are dependent on our parents. We are dependent on society. We are dependent on this whole makeup. Everything around us conditions who we are, and we exist in a relationship to it.

We are not one single little ball in this whole sea of dependent things, this one thing that is in the center, that is independent and should be able to control the rest of the mess.

You start to see, “Well actually, no, I’m not this little blob here...” And forget controlling anything! You get some feeling of how things change, that they do not have an inherent essence.

Lama Yeshe used to look at us and say, “Emptiness is not somewhere some place far away in another universe. It’s right here, dear.” It is your very nature; you just do not see it. ☁

August 8

Who's Walking?

“The best learning is realising the truth of no self.”

To have a complete realisation of emptiness, you not only have to realise that things are not inherently existent, you must also realise that they do exist dependently. When you are walking, ask yourself, “Why do I say, ‘I’m walking?’” On what basis is it said, “I’m walking?” You should think about that for a while. It is usually because your body is walking. “I’m walking because the body is walking.” But also, I am not the body.

You are thinking. Why do I say I am thinking? Because the mind is thinking. It is okay to say, “I’m thinking.” On one hand, this establishes that there is an “I”, because these activities are going on and you can label them. On the other hand, if you shift and you start applying analysis, I say “I’m thinking” because the mind is thinking, yet I am not the mind. You can go all sorts of different ways with this.

When I am feeling tired, there is the tired feeling, and then the suffering of feeling tired is my mental feeling. The feeling of tiredness is the physical feeling derived from the body. The suffering from feeling tired is mental because I am sitting there saying to myself, “I’m so tired, I’m so exhausted.” At that point, I am not even feeling the physical sensation of tiredness because I am too involved in telling myself I am mentally tired and feeling the mental suffering of being tired. It is interesting to look at that, the difference between the physical feeling of being tired and the mental suffering you go through telling yourself you are tired when you are no longer actually feeling tired.

Then you go back to the physical feeling and you say, “On what basis do I say, ‘I’m tired?’” It is very interesting to sit there because you are saying, “I’m tired.” What are the physical sensations that label us “tired”? You may never have thought about this before. We are usually so out of touch with our experience that we are

not even sure, even when we start to look for those physical sensations. Here I am not talking about the feeling, I am just talking about the sensation, the physical data on which we say, “I’m tired.” What is that?

When you do a little bit of analysis, it will bring you to: “Here are all these things based on why I say I’m tired”, but being tired is not any of those things in and of themselves. When I build on top of that, “Oh I’m so tired,” on what basis is all that suffering coming from? What is the basis of that? It is very interesting to start examining. 🍃



August 9

What Do I Mean When I Say...

You say, “I’m mad.” How do I know I am mad? I say, “Oh, I’m really angry.” How do I know I am angry? What data, physical and mental basis of designation is “anger”? What is going on in your body? What is going on in your mind? What is the flavour or tune of your mind? Look at all the different factors on which we say “anger”. Are any of those in and of themselves anger? No.

On top of that, you say, “I’m angry.” Who is the “I” that is angry? Are you anger? Or do you have anger? Because “I’m angry” is neither of them. When you say, “I’m angry.” I have anger, so are the “I” and the “anger” separate? Or, are the “I” and the “anger” in a union? Is it either of those? What is this “anger” anyway? Do not think about whatever incident it was, just focus on your experience.

You can do this for many different experiences that you have during the day. “I’m sleepy”, “I’m angry”, “I’m attached”, “I’m daydreaming”.... Whatever it is, look at the basis of designation. It is quite interesting. This is the basis of designation, there is the object designated, but that object designated is not the same as the basis of designation.

Saying, “My stomach hurts,” and, “My heart is beating fast,” is different from saying, “I’m angry,” or, “I have this particular mood in my mind.” Get in touch with that mood, that feeling, and see what are the mental sensation and that mental experience and why do we call that “anger”?

It is interesting to do some exploration this way. It leads you into understanding emptiness and dependent arising. It also helps us release some of our incredible tightness about what we happen to be feeling that day.

You know how it is when you wake up and you say, “I feel tired.” That gives you a completely blank check for the whole day to sign out. I do not have to try to

do anything today because I told myself I am tired. I cannot do anything today. Same when we say, “I’m angry.” Instead, if we really ponder, “What do I mean when I say those words?” We start to see the whole build-up of lots of stuff in our minds. 🌱



August 10

The Best Discipline

“The best discipline is taming your mind stream.”

Taming our mind stream is the essence of the whole practice. We really need to put some effort into it. That is important. It is not going to happen by just wishing, “Well, gee, I wish my mind would get tamed,” or, “Buddha, Buddha, Buddha please make my mind calm,” or, “When are the scientists going to develop the pill that will give me samadhi?” Taming our minds is going to come about through making effort ourselves.

Making effort is different from pushing ourselves. This is quite important. I remember once I went to a Montessori school and we were showing the kids how to meditate, and there was a little girl in the front row who was squeezing her eyes shut. That is not making effort. That is having a tight mind. That is trying too hard. That is pushing yourself. There definitely has to be an element of self-acceptance in this and a certain degree of mental relaxation, but also a mind that stays on track.

Relaxation does not mean falling asleep and staying on track does not mean you are galloping on a horse. You want the middle way somehow between those, where you are consistent in doing your practice and there is self-acceptance, and as you keep trying you keep going deeper. That is a very important element of this whole thing. 🍵

August 11

The Six Causes of Afflictions: Seeds of Afflictions

“The best discipline is taming your mind stream.”

To tame our mind stream we must reduce our afflictions. That is one of the main things. To reduce them we have to know what causes them. To eliminate them, we need to know what causes them.

The lamrim talks about six factors that cause the arising of afflictions. Here, what we are talking about is the manifest afflictions. What causes afflictions to manifest in our mind so that they take control of our mind and pull us here and there, and make us create karma. We are talking about the gross afflictions that we succumb to all the time.

One of the factors that causes them is that we have the predisposition, or the seed, of the affliction. The “seed of the affliction” is a potency for the affliction to arise. Right now, you are not angry, but that does not mean that anger is gone from your mind stream altogether. There is just no manifest anger right now. You can have manifest anger, then a period of no anger, and then something triggers it and you have manifest anger again. What is it that connects the first anger with the second anger? You have the seed of the anger. When it is not manifested, it goes into the form of potency, and when it is triggered later, it comes up as manifest.

That seed is part of the afflictive obscurations that we want to get rid of. What this means is as long as we have the seeds of the different afflictions in our mind stream, we need to be very careful because any kind of cooperative condition can provoke them, and they become manifest. ☸

August 12

The Six Causes of Afflictions: Contact with the Object

You may be going along completely fine, but as soon as you smell those chocolate chip cookies, an attachment arises. Today I did not smell them, no attachment. Yesterday I smelled them, attachment. Contact with the object.

This is one of the reasons why, when you are doing a retreat, you try to go to a quiet place. Because when you are at home you have contact with all the objects that give rise to your attachment, to your anger, to your jealousy, to your arrogance, and to all these kinds of things. This is not an escape method from reality. Avoiding the object gives you some mental space to be able to go deeper in your practice and understand how the afflictions arise, understand how they are based on ignorance, and understand how the wisdom of realising emptiness counteracts the ignorance, then you cultivate that wisdom. You are not escaping. It is like taking a break so that you can really develop your strong antidotal powers.

If you want to be a doctor, just having the motivation to be a doctor is not going to make you one. In the same way, just having the motivation not to have afflictions arise is not going to make them not arise. If you want to be a doctor you have to do something, you have to go to medical school. You would not want somebody who has not been to medical school and with a surgery internship to operate on you. In the same way, we need a break to go deeper in our practice to develop antidotes to the afflictions. That is why we go to a quieter place for retreats.

We can see that effect quite immediately in our practice. When we have some distance from the object, the affliction related to that object does not arise so easily. Of course, if our mind thinks about the object, then the affliction arises. You can be 100 million miles away and think about the chocolate chip cookies and the affliction will arise. ☁

August 13

The Six Causes of Afflictions: Inappropriate Attention

There is a third factor that makes the afflictions arise in addition to the seed of the afflictions and contact. It is called inappropriate attention. This is a mental factor that exaggerates the good qualities, and the bad qualities, or projects qualities that are not there, and triggers the affliction to arise. You are not near your boyfriend, but you think of him, and boom! Why? Because the inappropriate attention is projecting that what is actually foul is beautiful. That what is in the nature of suffering is happiness. That what is impermanent is permanent. What does not have its own nature has its own inherent nature. This inappropriate attention is distorting how we cognise the object and produces affliction.

Inappropriate attention is something that we really have to try to work on in our practice, in order to calm it down. When you have an affliction arising in your meditation, instead of just trotting after it like it is the sergeant and you are just following instructions, stop and ask, “Am I seeing this object correctly? Here is this person. What is she (or he) really? Skin, bones, flesh, blood, and a mind stream. Is there anything that is pure in all of that? Is there anything that is clean in all of that? What am I desiring?”

Then you watch how your mind goes, “Oh, but being with that person is going to make me happy!” Then you stop and say, “What kind of happiness is that?” Is it true happiness? Or is it just the happiness that is making my gross suffering go down a bit? Is it happiness that is going to last a long time? Or is it happiness that is going to change with changing circumstances? Or happiness that will change because my mind gets tired of it? This kind of happiness, after a while, becomes actually unpleasant! You start doing this questioning process of, “Am I seeing this object correctly?” By taking a long hard look at the object of attachment, you begin to see things as they really are. 🙏

August 14

Is It Happening Now?

You are sitting and meditating a million miles and 20 years away from what somebody in grade school said to you that hurt your feelings tremendously. But suddenly you remember Suzie Jones or Bobby Smith in fifth grade said, “Dada dada,” to me, and, “Ahhhhh! I’m so angry at him, he destroyed my self-confidence... He didn’t pick me to be a member of his team, and he told everybody why — because I was so awful.” You have been holding onto this for 20, 30 or 40 years.

Stop and ask yourself, “Am I seeing this situation correctly?” Why do I have to experience so much pain as an adult because Suzie Jones or Bobby Smith did such and such to me when I was in fifth grade? Is it happening now? No. Was it really such a catastrophe that nobody else on the entire planet has ever experienced? I think everybody in fifth grade has gone through something like that. Why am I, all these years later still so upset about it?

The mind responds, “Well he did this to me.” But then you start remembering the thought training teachings and reflect how he may have said or done that, but it happened to me because I created the karma in a previous lifetime (or earlier this lifetime) for that to happen. If I created the karma, why am I so mad at Suzie and Bobby? Why don’t I distrust my self-centred thought that made me create that negative karma that brought that suffering upon me?

Because Bobby and Suzie were kids, they were just the co-operative condition. Their minds were ruled by afflictions. The real cause is my karma which was caused by my self-grasping and self-centredness. Why don’t I point my finger at those? Why don’t I drop the anger at Bobby and Suzie, and put some energy into eliminating my self-centredness and my self-grasping? That would do me a lot better than holding onto these hurt feelings and hatred for Bobby and Suzie for another 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 years. Because I really do not want to die with my last thought being of what somebody said to me in fifth grade. If I do not want to die with that being my last thought, why do I keep holding onto that now? 🐾

August 15

The Six Causes of Afflictions: Bad Friends

“The best discipline is taming your mind stream.”

The fourth cause of afflictions that arise is detrimental influence, which chiefly refers to “bad friends”. It does not necessarily have to be friends, but whoever negatively influences you. It could even be a family member. In fact, very often the people we consider “bad friends” are people whom we are very friendly with and whom we want to be our friends in a worldly idea of friendship.

In a Buddhist context, a bad friend is somebody who is going to incite your afflictions: they want to take you drinking, gambling, and out to the movies and a show to have a good time. They are the people who say, “Ah, save your money, don’t make a donation to the charity or the temple, keep it for yourself, we’ll go on a cruise in the Caribbean, we’ll go backpacking in the Himalayas.” These are the people who, in a worldly way, wish the best for us. They want us to have a good time. But because they do not have the Dharma perspective on life, their idea of happiness is not the same as the Dharma idea of happiness. They are not thinking about our future lives. They are not thinking about what kind of karma we are going to create. They are just looking at, “You’re my friend and I want you to be happy right now.” That criteria for Dharma friendship does not work, because that criteria can take us away from the Dharma.

A bad friend would be somebody who criticises the Three Jewels, or tells you to go get a life and not waste your time going to a retreat, or not waste your time being a monastic, go out and have a boyfriend, have a career, and make a life for yourself. We should be careful about who we associate with because those people can either trigger our virtuous seeds or our non-virtuous seeds to arise. We must be careful about this. 🙏

August 16

Are You Changing?

One of the things that people often comment on at the beginning of their practice is that as they start to practise, they start to change, and their friendships are not the same as they were before. What their friends want to do is not necessarily what they want to do. What they want to do, their friends do not really want to do. These new Dharma practitioners say, “What’s happening? Is Dharma taking me away from my friends? That’s no good.” or, “What’s wrong with me that I don’t want to do what I used to do? They’re my friends forever. (Actually, they aren’t, but we think they are) And it would be terrible for me to abandon them....” All sorts of confusion come into their heads.

This is very typical and normal. It does not have to be a problem, because even without the Dharma — let us say that you never met the Dharma — are all your friendships going to stay the same forever? Are the people that you are friends with now necessarily going to be your friends in five years or ten years? If you moved across the country to get another job, are you going to stay in touch with these people and be as close to them as you are now? In a normal life, our friendships ebb, grow, change, morph and everything else. It is nothing to get all upset about. It is just a very natural kind of process when they start to change because of the Dharma.

It does not mean that we must cut off our old friends: “You are bad for me, get out of here!” Come on, they are kind sentient beings. We are kind to them. We are compassionate. We are polite. But as our values change, the way we relate to them is obviously going to change. There is nothing wrong with that as it is a very natural thing. It is nothing to blame the Dharma on. It is nothing to feel guilty about. It is just impermanence at work in our world. 🌸

August 17

Changing Moment to Moment

Everything that is produced or compounded comes about through causes and conditions. Therefore, it is impermanent — that is, it changes moment by moment. Why? Since the causal energy is changing each moment, the result must also be in the nature of change. Since the causal energy comes to an end, so must its result.

At the beginning of the day, it is good to reflect, “Everything that arises due to causes and conditions is transient. I’m changing from moment to moment. My friends are transient and changing moment to moment too. All the things I’m trying to achieve are transient, impermanent, and changing.” Thinking in this way helps us to see that there is no use in clinging to any of these things. Letting our negative emotions hook onto any of these things is useless since they are all changing into something else.

That does not mean we stop caring about others or that we become apathetic. Rather, we see that getting worked up, aggravated, stressed, and anxious about these things is inappropriate. It is like trying to stop a waterfall from flowing or the wind from blowing. When things are in the nature of change, the only appropriate response is to relax and try to guide how they change with compassion. 🍃



August 18

Practice at Your Own Level

We have heard from a few people that they have gotten into the Dharma and now have Dharma friends, but their Dharma friends want to go out to the pub, to go smoke a joint, to go to the movies, to go to the casinos, or whatever. Then you get really confused because “hey, these are my Dharma friends, they are the ones I meditate with, we have the same teacher, we do all these things together, how come they are acting like that? Are they really my friends? What is the story? How come they are acting like this?”

People practise the Dharma according to their own ability and in terms of their own comfort level. For those people who are still doing a lot of the things that they used to do before they met the Dharma, they are practising at their comfort level, according to their ability. Your comfort level might be much broader. Your ability might be much broader. You are not interested in doing the same kinds of things that they are still doing. No need to be disillusioned with them. No need to be angry. No need to think that there is something wrong with you. It is just that you are both practising at different levels of the path.

If those people are doing that, you do not have to feel obliged to join them. Find the people who are doing, and abstaining from doing the same things that you want to do and abstain from doing. Within a big Dharma group, go for the people whom you have more in common with. You do not need to criticise anybody. “They are just doing things that do not interest me, and I want to do this.”

Remember, not everybody who is a Buddhist is a Buddha. People really have different levels of comfort in practising. 🙏

August 19

The Six Causes of Afflictions: The Media

I have had some friends in media, and when I bring up what I consider to be an obvious fact, that media tells us who we are and shapes who we are, the response they say is, “No, we don’t, we’re just responding to what people want.” They see themselves as just responding to what people in society want, but it goes the other way even more powerfully because what we see in the media is what we have taken on since the time we were children. It has conditioned us to think about who we should be and how we should think and act.

Much of that influence is detrimental. When we look, starting with the cartoons we watch when we were children, the cartoons are violent, and we learn to laugh at one cartoon figure clobbering another one. We do not see examples in the media of people helping each other. We see examples of people quarrelling. We see examples of people fighting. We do not see examples of how people reconcile after difficulties by having genuine communication and working things out. We do not see examples of co-operation, or even compromise.

The way the media tells us how we should act as women, and how we should act and look as men, is very, very harmful. The models we see in the advertisements all have these beautiful bodies, and in fact, the people who appear in the pictures do not even look the same as the pictures in the magazine because the magazine pictures have been altered. Everybody looks better. Nobody has freckles or moles. Everybody looks slimmer. Everybody’s hair is of the same colour. The models do not even look like the pictures in real life. Yet this is presented to us as how we should look.

The same goes for men. You see the pictures in magazines, and you are taught you should look and act a certain way. Nobody is like that. What it does is it develops an attitude inside of us that we are not good enough because we do not look like the people in the ads, we do not look like the movie stars. We do not look like the sports heroes. And these instill in us the feeling of: “I’m not good

enough.” This has been inculcated in us since the time we are very little, largely due to the media, and this becomes a major obstacle to people’s happiness and to Dharma practice, and it certainly is the cause of a lot of our afflictions. When we do not feel like we are good enough, it provokes our attachment to what we think we should look like, which makes us act in certain ways. It provokes anger and resentment. It provokes jealousy. It is basically a disaster for us in terms of our psychological well-being.

Responsible media has to show examples of how to get along with people. How to forgive ourselves. How to forgive others. How to co-operate. How to generate tolerance instead of always negatively dwelling on everything. We need to be much more careful about how we relate to the media in terms of what we watch, and even when we watch stuff, how we interpret it, and how we take it in. ☁



August 20

Meditating on the Media

Since we cannot always avoid verbal stimuli, we should develop an antidote to the afflictions in order to calm them if they get triggered. When you sit down to watch some media, whether you are watching the news, a documentary, or a movie, have a determination beforehand: “I’m going to watch this in terms of karma.” Then you watch the whole story as it unfolds and think of not only the kind of karma these different characters are creating by anger, lust, jealousy and any of the different mental factors, but look at the actions — harsh words, lying, physical violence, coveting, etc. Watch the whole movie, analyse all these things, and give names to all the events that are going on.

Instead of getting caught up, and triggering your afflictions, you are stepping back and watching, “That is what this affliction looks like. That is what I look like when I am under the influence of that affliction.” Look what that affliction makes you do. “They are lying, they are creating disharmony in relationships.” What are the results? Look at the results in this life, as it is very helpful to see the results of the actions right now. But do not stop with that. Think, “What are the karmic results? What kinds of rebirths are these people going to have? What kinds of situations are they going to face in the future?”

Everybody in the news is doing whatever they are doing because they are trying to be happy and they think it is the right thing to do. At some level, they have a “good motivation”. It is not necessarily a virtuous motivation, but they are doing it because they are trying to be happy and they think that is the path to happiness. Then you think about the karmic results, and you see the suffering that these people will experience, and then you can link them together. “This action brings this result.”

Or you do it the other way, you look at the news and see the situation or the difficulties somebody is facing, and you think about what kind of action was

done in the past that created the cause to produce this kind of problem. Karma becomes real for you. It beats getting mad at the people in the news. And it beats getting discouraged by watching the news. You just make it a whole lamrim teaching on karma and its effects. 🙏



August 21

Higher Kind of Bliss

When we contemplate emptiness, we are very happy to hear that emptiness will alleviate our suffering. But when we start to think that our samsaric happiness is similarly empty and similarly illusory, we get a little nervous. We are not so comfortable with that, we feel that being empty is going to take away our happiness. That kind of thought arises in the mind because we have not yet recognised samsaric happiness as having the nature of dukkha. We are still thinking of dukkha as physical suffering or gross mental suffering. Part of the problem is translating “dukkha” as “suffering”. It is hard for us to think that happiness is suffering. If we think that the happiness in cyclic existence is unsatisfactory, that different kinds of happiness exist, and that we have the potential to experience that happiness, then it makes some sense.

Observe in your mind when you are contemplating emptiness. Are you a little uncomfortable, thinking that all your achievements in life are empty, and all those good relationships and all that happiness you felt are also empty? Do you think that there is some absolute ultimate joy in all those experiences that your mind is still hanging onto in one way or another? Notice if that is going on in your mind, and if it is, then come back and contemplate the nature of samsara, see that those experiences are unsatisfactory, and know that there is a higher kind of bliss and joy to be experienced through Dharma practice. 🙏

August 22

Mesmerised

Sports matches are incredible to watch when you look at them in terms of karma. Look at the people's motivation and what kind of results are going to come out from those motivations. Here are these people being famous, the result of good karma, but so many of them are confused because of the fame, confused because of the wealth, and they wind up acting poorly. They are experiencing the result of good karma, and at the same time, using that as the opportunity to create negative karma.

Then you watch the audience, people getting so excited about a ball. It is just a ball. And they are totally mesmerised by where this ball has got to be. Whether it is golf, baseball or football. In hockey, there is a puck. It is just fascinating to watch. Look at all these people with human lives and human intelligence, and this is what they think is important. You want to cry when you see it. ☁



August 23

The Six Causes of Afflictions: Working with Habitual Emotional Patterns

Habit, habitual thinking, and habitual action. We see these a lot. We are creatures of habit. It is very interesting to trace in our meditation the kinds of actions we do habitually, and the kinds of mental attitudes we habitually have. It is remarkable when you start to see the patterns in your life and how much you “run automatic”.

Here is a situation that comes up very often in our lives. We put the glass upside-down, they want it right-side-up, and we take it personally. We feel exasperated, angry, resentful and depressed — running completely on automatic. We never stop to think, “Well, what was the content of what the person said? Can I respond to the content?” Instead, immediately we take everything as a personal comment on who we are. Then self-grasping flares up. Self-centredness flares up. We respond in our usual pattern of emotional response, which of course triggers our usual pattern of verbal response. Which is, we back away and feel sorry for ourselves. We criticise the other person. We talk about the other person behind their back to vent whatever we are feeling.

Do you see this in yourself? When is it going to happen when everyone approves 105% of everything we did? We are always going to hear remarks about how to improve, or what people found inconvenient. We have a choice. We can continue to run on our self-centred automatic, or we can rev up our introspective awareness and try and change these habits.

It is very helpful, in your meditation, to look at what emotional habits you have. One way to do that is to see what distracts you. Where does your mind go? When you are not on the object of meditation, what is your mind thinking about? Initially, you will say, “Well, I was thinking about the project I was doing.” You were not thinking about the project. You were thinking about what someone else said about the project, and what that meant for you and your value as a human being.

Initially, we do not even realise what we are thinking about. We think that we are thinking about the project, but we are thinking about ourselves. We should look at these things and learn to recognise what they actually are. It is very helpful. Make a list, if you must, in case you forget (we do not need to make a list of other people's faults as we always remember those). But these kinds of things we tend to forget. It can be very helpful. ☁



August 24

Habits of Jealousy and Resentment

Look at situations that happen often in your life. Maybe it is a situation of somebody complimenting you for something, like “Good job, well done.” Immediately, what is your habit? “I’m the best one in the world.” Instead of just saying, “Thank you,” or thinking to ourselves, “I could only do that because of all the people who taught me and encouraged me,” we take it personally and puff ourselves up, and think that we are somebody special and that people should treat us in a certain way. Without even realising it, we have become rather arrogant. When we become arrogant, we are the perfect target for other people to shoot down, because nobody likes somebody who is arrogant. Then other people get angry at us, or they get jealous of us.

That is another pattern: “Every time somebody does something better than I do or gets credit for something that I do not get credit for, it is not fair.” And we get jealous. There is no awareness that getting jealous is a habit. What we think is, “That person had the success that was not deserved. That is an objective reality.” We do not think, “My subjective habit is ‘every time somebody has some success or gets to do something I do not get to do, I get jealous’.” Look at it and watch how much it comes up: this person, running on automatic, getting jealous.

Whenever somebody gets jealous of us, what do we do? We resent it. “Why are you jealous of me? I’m not doing anything to try and be extra special, why are you criticising me and being jealous of me?” What is functioning here? What is our habit? It is the self-centred mind taking everything everybody does as a personal comment on who we are. We are resentful.

People have different habits of what they do when they are resentful. Some people get very quiet, other people let the whole world know, some people compete, and some people back away. We all have different habitual patterns that are motivated by our resentment. We are operating on our habits, and the other person is operating on his/her habit. And we wonder why we have problems. It is very helpful just to look at these habits we have.

Part of it is our habitual ways of interpreting things. This refers to inappropriate awareness, how I always interpret certain things to mean this and such about me or this and such is that person's motivation. These are patterns of interpretation. Then there are patterns of emotional response to whatever we have interpreted. Plus, a third pattern is how we act after that habitual emotional response comes.

Can you think of an example? 🍵



August 25

What is Wrong with a Little Bit of Pleasure ?

“The best discipline is taming your mind stream.”

What are some of the remedies for taming the afflictions? Of course, wisdom in realising emptiness is the ultimate antidote to use, but since that one is more difficult, then we start with easier things.

If we start with attachment, the antidote they always give is remembering impermanence. We look at whatever it is we are attached to and think how this thing does not last very long, and how the pleasure we get from it does not last very long.

It is very interesting because we are attached to something and we say to ourselves, “Oh, the pleasure does not last very long, that is true. But I want it anyway.” Then we go for it. What is wrong with having some pleasure? The Buddha did not teach us that we should all suffer. He was an ascetic for six years and he realised that does not work. “Since he does not want us to suffer, so what is wrong with a little bit of pleasure?” That is what goes through our minds, right?

Before we can even apply the antidote of meditating on impermanence and before we can even get there, we should answer this question: “What is wrong with pleasure?” Well, the answer is, nothing is wrong with pleasure. Pleasure is not a problem. The problem is our craving, clinging, and attachment to that pleasure. Do not blame the pleasure but look at your own life and see what happens when you get attached to that pleasure. What goes on in your mind? What do you say? What do you do to get that pleasure? To get the object that you think gives you that pleasure?

What we really want is the pleasure. But we think that the pleasure is inherent in the object, so we transfer our attachment to the object, “I want that object because there is pleasure inside of it that I can get.” What we really want is the pleasure, but we put our attention on the object.

There are all sorts of things to look at here, we must go back and remember that there is nothing wrong with pleasure, but how does attachment cause problems?

Spend some time thinking about how your various attachments cause you problems. I am sure there is more than one thing you are attached to. We must get over this obstacle in our minds of, “Well, what’s wrong with pleasure?” It is not the pleasure. It is the attachment. 🍵



August 26

Anger Creates a Lot of Our Problems

Anger creates a lot of problems in our lives. Before we get into the antidotes, we must spend some time seeing the disadvantages of the afflictions because if we do not see the disadvantages, we have no impetus to apply the antidotes. Then it becomes, “Well, I should get rid of this emotion, but actually I really like it.” It is very good to spend some time thinking about the disadvantages. Think of the disadvantages in terms of creating negative karma and causing lower rebirths; and by reinforcing those different emotions, it just creates more and more obscuration on the mind and it becomes more difficult to generate bodhicitta and more difficult to realise emptiness.

For all the afflictions, you have problems in terms of how they cause negative karma which results in unfortunate rebirth, how they block bodhicitta, and how they block wisdom. They might block it in different ways. How are you going to generate bodhicitta if you have anger? Bodhicitta is based on love and compassion, and anger is the opposite of that. If you are really harbouring a lot of grudges, anger, defensiveness and resentment, bodhicitta is going to be difficult.

Meditating on bodhicitta could be part of your antidote to anger. I am not saying you must get rid of the gross afflictions before you do other meditations, because the other meditations are part of the antidotes. But you can see that it is hard to generate the antidote when the affliction is powerful. 🙏

August 27

Justifying Our Anger

What keeps us from dealing with our anger so often is when we feel it is justified. “Any normal, regular person would be upset by this. If I am not upset, the other person is going to stomp all over me, they are going to take advantage of me. For their own benefit, they need to be stopped, because otherwise, they’re going to create so much negative karma. Out of compassion, I’m going to slam them.”

We justify our anger. “I do not need to apply an antidote. I need to put this person in his place.” This fear of being taken advantage of is something very strong in us. “Wow, somebody is going to trounce me if I am not careful.” Any slight thing somebody does becomes a big thing that you have got to get angry about and stand up for yourself. Otherwise, they will just continue taking advantage of you.

At airports, I run into this a lot. Some people think that they are going to get where we are going faster if they cut in front of me in the queue. “That is okay, go ahead.” Also, when you are driving, let the other person go ahead, rather than crash your car and get all excited with road rage. It really does not matter. Unfortunately, most people are like, “That is my place on the highway that is not moving.”

Another way in which I see people not wanting to oppose their anger is similar but a little bit different. They see a situation of injustice and think, “If I do not get angry about it and do something, nobody will do anything, and the injustice will continue.” Many people feel like anger is the only motivating factor we can have to correct injustice in the world. I really disagree with that. Compassion can be something very, very strong that makes you intercede. You intercede in a completely different way if you are compassionate than if you are angry.

These are some of the arguments that I hear from people as to why they do not want to do anything with their anger, and why they think their anger is good.

Before we even think about applying the antidotes to the anger, we should overcome these kinds of justifications and rationalisations in our minds. When we are angry, we have lots of good reasons on why we should be, don't we? Chief of which is, "I am right and they are wrong." Or "They need to respect me and they are not." Can we look at disrespect or injustice with compassion, without needing to get angry about it? 🌱



August 28

Acting on our Anger with Compassion

When we are angry, we do not think very clearly, and we do not plan what we are going to say very well, so it often comes out as a mess. This applies to situations where somebody is getting abused, injustice, or any of the social situations in the world that we feel strongly about. We can get so angry about them, but when we act out of our anger, we are not acting very clearly. Whereas if we have compassion, not only for the person who is the victim but compassion for the perpetrator, we can act with some clarity of mind in a way that maybe the perpetrator would hear. Whereas if we act with anger usually the perpetrator would not hear it — they get defensive and they get more aggressive.

This really hit me many years ago when I was in Tibet and we had gone to Ganden Monastery. It is up on a hill outside of Lhasa — and it was hard getting up that hill in this bus we were on. Lots of switchbacks. We arrived at the top and were shocked and disheartened by what we found. Only ruins. Most of Ganden was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese and Tibetans who cooperated with them, put in so much effort to get up that hill to destroy the Dharma. I thought, “If I had put that much effort into practicing the Dharma as they put into destroying it, I would have gotten somewhere.”

It made me have compassion for the people who did this because I realised that, especially on the part of the People’s Liberation Army, it was mostly young boys from a village who wanted some work so they could bring some funds home to the family because they were poor. They enlisted in the army and got sent to Tibet where none of them wanted to be given orders. They did not think about what they were doing and just did as they were told. Certainly, they created a whole lot of negative karma. I am not justifying what they did. But when I thought of where they came from, how they were raised, how they did not have a clue, and about the whole turmoil in China

and Tibet during that time, I could not help but have some compassion for them. I take that into social situations that are happening today and think of having compassion for not only the Muslims whom people are saying so many horrible things about but for the people who are being so discriminatory. I have some compassion for them because they think that talking and thinking that way is going to bring them happiness and bring well-being to the country. They do not realise what they are doing. With compassion for them and compassion for the Muslims, we can speak up and say, “No, this is not the way we want our country to be. Our country is inclusive. Our country welcomes everybody, and everybody can be a citizen.” 🙏



August 29

Antidotes to Jealousy

The antidote for jealousy is rejoicing, which of course you do not want to do when you are jealous. Sometimes the pain of jealousy forces us to do that. Jealousy is extremely painful. You feel totally trapped by it. And it is such a disgusting state of mind. For anger, you can go to a friend and say, “Oh, I want to vent because they did this and this and this.” You cannot go to a friend and say, “I’m so jealous,” because it is such a disgusting mind and who wants to even admit having it? If we cannot admit having it, that makes it very difficult to oppose it. We must be able to admit it, not only to ourselves but to others. It is not very wise to tell the person we are jealous of them. That does not work very well as you are projecting things on them, and as soon as you tell them you are jealous of them, they will start projecting stuff on you, and then everything gets really messed up. It is better not to do that, but to try and deal with it internally.

One thing that works very well with jealousy is to imagine, “I’m really jealous of somebody because they get to do (whatever), or they have certain qualities.” Ask yourself, “What would happen if I were that person? What would my life be like if I were that person? I’m so jealous of them, I want to be them, I want to have those opportunities, so okay, I’m going to switch and be them.” What is your life going to be like having all of the conditions that that person has?

Whatever it is that we are jealous of, it always comes with some drawbacks. If we really see: “If I change positions with that person, do I want to have his kind of personality? Do I want to follow through on all the opportunities that I get now when I’m them?” Really switch places and see, “Do I want to be that person?” The answer is usually, “No. I have enough problems already, I don’t need their problems.” Because whoever we are jealous of, they have their own set of problems. They have their own suffering. Sometimes their suffering and their problems come from the qualities and opportunities that we are jealous of. If you really imagine switching places with them, then you say, “Do I want to deal with all the disadvantages too?”

You should look at the whole situation when you are jealous of somebody and see if you really want the whole thing or not. Because usually when we are jealous, we are exaggerating the good qualities of whatever we are jealous of: “Oh, that only has good qualities if only I could do that.” So be very careful of what you want, be careful of what you are jealous of, because you might get it. Then you really have to deal with what it is like. ☁



August 30

The Self-Centred Mind

“The best discipline is taming your mind stream.”

With taming the mind stream, one of the principal things to tame is the self-centred attitude, the mind that thinks, “I’m the centre of the universe, my happiness and suffering are more important than others, my ideas are the best ones, and whatever I want should come about that way.” The self-centred attitude differs from the self-grasping ignorance. Self-grasping ignorance projects a false mode of existence onto the self, thinking that it is inherently existent.

The self-centred attitude and the self-grasping ignorance are very good friends. They help each other a lot in us ordinary beings, because we grasp at ourselves as being some inherently existent person, and from there we take off into attachment and anger, “What I want is more important, what I don’t like, I should have my way,” etc. They collaborate on creating a mess.

However, we can eliminate the gross levels and subtle levels of self-centredness which block us from becoming Buddhas. They block us from entering the Bodhisattva path because the subtle level of self-centredness is, “I’m just looking out for my liberation.” You can be free of the self-grasping but still, have that subtle self-centeredness. Since we all want to enter the Mahayana path, and that self-centred thought is what prevents us from generating bodhicitta, then clearly, we have to oppose it.

One of the best ways to oppose it is to remember its defects. You can start out looking at the defects, how they influence you in this life, and then progress from there; how they create problems to having a peaceful death, a good rebirth; how they make it difficult to enter the Bodhisattva path and to attain full awakening. Be aware of how the self-centred attitude acts in you and what it causes you to do, say, think and feel. ☁

August 31

Disadvantages of the Self-Centered Attitude

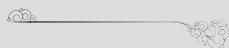
“The best discipline is taming your mind stream.

The self-centred attitude makes our mind very narrow because we only focused on ourselves and getting our way or getting rid of what we do not like. The mind does not take into consideration the big picture. You do things and say things out of that narrow mind. Afterwards when you realise how limited and unkind the self-centred attitude has made us, the self-centred attitude chips in again and criticises us for being such a jerk. Wherever you turn, the self-centred attitude has something that it pulls out of its pocket to make us miserable.

One Geshe I met when I was in Dharamsala talked about how narrow our mind goes, and how it makes everything that happens to “me” blow up out of proportion. He was very sick one year, and when he was just lying there because he could not do very much, he questioned about the big picture. He was thinking that there was more going on — what is in front of him, what is at the back of him, and what are on both sides. He said that what is in front of him is his future lives. What is at the back is his previous lives. What are on both sides are other sentient beings’ experiences. He said that when he started thinking about all of that when he was lying there so sick, his mind relaxed because he saw that whatever suffering he was having was actually quite small compared to the big picture of all sentient beings, and even the big picture of his own past and future lives.

Similarly, to get so excited over present happiness is also out of proportion because, compared to the past and future lives and all sentient beings, it is just some small thing. Why get too excited, why get too down, neither of them makes much sense. This big picture is a real thing that counteracts the complete blinders that the self-centred attitude puts on us. 🍃

September



*When you live an “Open
Hearted Life” you will have
happiness within.*



September 1

Antidotes to the Judgmental Mind

One of the ways that the self-centered mind manifests is in the judgmental and critical mind, the mind that looks at what other people are doing and say, “Why are they doing that? They should be doing this.”

It is easy for us to look at what other people are doing and judge them. Judging, in one way, does not feel so good because it is a negative state of mind, but the conclusion of judging is, “I am better than they are.” And that part feels good. It is a weird thing. “I am better because I am not doing that.” However the state of mind that likes to pick at people feels yucky.

What do we do with that kind of mind? When I see people doing things, I say, “This is none of my business.” What I have realised is that we pay attention very often to things that are none of our business, but for things that are our business; or when somebody obviously needs help, we do not pay attention. What we pay attention to in other people is not very consistent. “They are doing something so bad, look at what kind of people they are.” We pay attention to that. But when somebody is struggling to carry something, we walk right by them. When somebody is working very hard and has to meet a deadline, we just go home when we can, or when somebody is not feeling well, we think “Well, he can handle it himself.”

It is funny how we pay attention to things that are not our business and we do not pay attention to where we can help. We should keep our energy inside and realise the only one we can actually control is ourselves. We can learn from observing others, but it is not our business unless there is the chance to stop somebody from creating negative karma, harming somebody else, or if somebody genuinely needs help. I then remind myself, “Let us not pay attention to things that are not my business and try and look with an eye of care on others and see what I can do that would be helpful.”

What I find more helpful is to admit that I could have also done that very action which I am judging others of, or I could very possibly have done it in this life. We have done everything. We cannot really look at somebody else and say, “Well I would never do that.” As long as we have afflictions in our minds, we could. Very often the things we notice in other people are what we do not like in ourselves. We are quite tuned into those qualities in ourselves, so it is easy to pick them out in other people. I find it helpful to say, “Well, that’s what I look like when I’m doing that.” Instead of having a microscope focusing on the other person, it is having a mirror that is reflecting on myself, “How do I look when I’m doing that, do I want to be that kind of person?” Clearly, no. Let us learn from watching what this other person is doing, take that and change ourselves. I find that something very helpful to think about. ☁



September 2

Bodhicitta, the Best Gift

“The best excellence is to have great altruism.”

What is the best thing that we can give to sentient beings? It is developing bodhicitta. When they praise the Buddha as a reliable guide, it is because he has the intention to benefit sentient beings, he is the teacher, and the protector. We need to start with bodhicitta and when you have a very strong bodhicitta, then you are going to look for a way to liberate yourself and others from samsara. You then search for the teachings on emptiness, which become what actually liberates the mind, and in turn teach others. By that, you become an awakened one, someone who has gone to bliss. This enables you to become the protector of sentient beings.

How does the Buddha protect us? How will we protect others when we become buddhas? The principal way is by teaching the Dharma. It all comes from that altruistic intention, that initial motivation.

That is why every morning when we wake up, we say this to ourselves, “As much as possible I am not going to harm anybody. As much as possible I am going to benefit others. I am going to generate bodhicitta and act from it as much as I can throughout the day.”

We are not Bodhisattvas yet, we are Bodhisattva-wanna-bes. As wanna-bes we train ourselves. That training is very helpful and it will affect all our actions. Throughout the day, we recall that motivation as much as we can. In the evening, we check back to see how we have done. We confess where we messed up, but rejoice in what we have done well. We dedicate the merit, and we go on. That makes a very full practise.

Throughout your day whenever you have difficulties, if you stop and come back to seek refuge and bodhicitta to the first two things we do in the morning, at the beginning of any practice and the last two things at night, then we can really

settle our minds because we are coming back to what is most important in our lives. Generating bodhicitta brings all the happiness in the world, and it is free. Nobody can take it away from us no matter where we go and no matter what situation we encounter. When we have cultivated bodhicitta in our minds, we are going to be happy wherever we are; but if we cultivate self-centeredness in our minds, we are going to be unhappy no matter where we are. So, let us go for the former. 🍃



September 3

The Importance of Developing Equanimity

“The best excellence is to have great altruism.”

When we think about bodhicitta and try and cultivate it, it becomes completely clear that without equanimity, bodhicitta is impossible. Equanimity is the first prelude, it is neither included in the seven-point-cause-and-effect instructions nor in equalising and exchanging self with others. These are the two primary methods to develop bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta requires us to have acceptance and great compassion for each and every living being, no matter who they are, how they treat us, what their political views are, and the stuff that we usually use to discern who is on my side and whom I need to be suspicious and afraid of. With bodhicitta you cannot have suspicion and fear of sentient beings, and you cannot play favourites. It just does not work. I am not even talking practically, when you are trying to teach people. Clearly that does not work. But in your mind, you cannot develop love and compassion with partiality. The two do not go together, they do not compute.

I think it is very important that we pay a lot of attention into developing equanimity. Love makes people feel good. Compassion is a little harder because you must look at their suffering. Love goes with love, light and bliss, which we all want to have them quickly, cheaply and easily. But to even have equal-hearted love for people we have to get rid of the partial mind that is attached to the people we like (our friends, and maybe our relatives), get rid of the anger at the people who are our enemies, and the apathy towards strangers. Yet when we look at our experience all day long and throughout the year, we are constantly evaluating people and putting them in one of those three categories, and then being attached to the friends, having aversion and dislike for the enemies, and not caring at all about the strangers.

I think the meaning of equanimity boils down to the same thing if you developed real, genuine equanimity. You would see everybody as a friend but know that some

people at this moment do not reciprocate that feeling towards you. From your side, you would not call them an enemy; you just know they do not reciprocate right now, but you still see them as a friend. This happens in normal life too, doesn't it? We have friends, people who we see as friends, who may have stopped liking us a long time ago, but we still have warm feelings for them, "It is a friend, it is just something that happened temporarily." ☁



September 4

Meditating on Sentient Beings as Mother

When meditating about the kindness of our mothers, the kindness of our parents, and the kindness of sentient beings, it is important not to develop attachment especially for our present-life parents. Rather we see that all sentient beings have been our parents before and that we have had this very close and intimate relationship with all of them. When we contemplate that, it takes away the usual perceptions we have that other people are different from us, or they are strangers that “I do not know them, they are separate, I cannot understand them, and they cannot understand me.” Instead we realise that they are not strangers that are unknown to us after all. That enables feelings of closeness to arise in our hearts, and when we feel close to others and see their kindness to us, automatically the wish to repay them and wanting them to be happy comes to our mind.

When we really think of the kindness of our parents, we acknowledge that since we were born, we have been the recipient of a lot of kindness. Recognising that is very important because it helps us feel connected and related to others. Otherwise, we go through life with this chip on our shoulders, thinking, “Nobody has been kind to me. I have always been pushed away and neglected. I cannot relate to anybody.” That is just rubbish in the mind. There is no benefit in holding onto those kinds of thoughts, interpretations, and stories that our mind has made up. It is better to bring our mind back to the more realistic picture of actually being the recipient of a tremendous amount of kindness in this life and infinite previous lives, and we will continue to have close relationships and receive kindness from others in future lives from now until awakening. 🙏

September 5

Friend, Enemy, Stranger

Look closely at the criteria we use to put people in the attachment category, the aversion category, or the apathy category. Look really deeply, who do we have an attachment for? It is always the people who are nice to ME. They are nice to me, they agree with my ideas, and they think I am great, when other people criticise me, they give me support, and when I suffer losses, they comfort me. They are the people who do what I like, they think well of me, they agree with my ideas, and they do not criticise me in public.

In fact, they praise me in public and tell other people all my good qualities. Even if I am in a bad mood, they still care about me. These people are terrific on their own. I am impartial and happen to meet these people that are so wonderful. But it also happens that they are so wonderful to me because they do all these things for me.

Coincidentally, the people who are my enemies, that I do not like, are the ones who criticise me, who blame me when I did not do anything wrong or if I do something wrong. They are supposed to be patient, tolerant and forgiving, but they are not. They criticise me in public. They talk about me behind my back. They steal my stuff. They do not support me. They are mean. I walk into the room, and they turn away. Sometimes they might even punch me in the nose. “Coincidentally” these are the people who are mean to me. But when I look at them, I think I am seeing them objectively, this is who they really are. That is why I cannot understand why in the world somebody else would like that person. Or why in the world somebody else would not like somebody whom I am very attached to, whom I think is the cream of the crop.

Everybody else? They are just obstacles that I must navigate around. You know when you are driving on the highway, they are no real people in cars who have emotions and needs. They are just people who are in your way that you have to get around to get to where you are going. When you get on a plane, everybody

else is a competitor for the seat you want. Those people are just strangers, they do not count. People at the gas station, who cares? All the people who do the electric power, the sewer system, and all that, we do not know them, they are strangers, who cares? The garbage collectors, we do not know them, so we do not care.

When I look at how I get into friend, enemy, stranger, attachment, aversion, and apathy, it is not that these people have those qualities in them. It is that I am judging and evaluating everybody in terms of how they relate to ME at this very moment, and I see them as inherently existent, permanent, concrete, and the way they are from their position. 🍵



September 6

Seeing the Kindness of All Sentient Beings

When you reflect on the kindness of your present-life parents, think of all other sentient beings who had also been your parents in past lives and had been kind in the same way. You are not stuck on your relationship with the parents of this life, but you are generalising it. You use your parents in this life as an example. You can look around nature and see how parents take care of their young.

When you look around and see people taking care of their young, always relate it and think, “They’ve taken care of me in that way too, when I was born as an animal, when I was born as a human being, they have always shown me kindness, protecting me, showing me how to do things, teaching me what I needed to learn in order to have a good life.” When we reflect on this deeply and really feel ourselves to be the recipient of all of the kindness, a feeling of wanting to repay the kindness comes without effort. It makes sense, doesn’t it? When we really feel like “Wow, I have received so much,” then it does not take much to say, “I want to give back, I want to show love, affection and gratitude for all those beings who showed that to me.”

When applying it towards everybody, of course, it is easier to think that your friends and the people you like have been your parents, but then to think that the spiders, the gas station attendant, and all these different beings born in different realms have been our parents is a little more of a stretch.

It is important to remember that this goes towards all sentient beings, not just towards the parents of this life. Because if we keep it just towards the parents of this life, it can sometimes devolve into attachment and clinging, rather than the kind of love and gratitude that we really want to create in a Dharma sense. It is very important to remember that it goes towards everybody. 🙏

September 7

Heart-warming Love

Heart-warming love is slightly different from regular love. Regular love is wanting someone to have happiness and the causes of happiness. Heart-warming love is seeing them as lovable and wanting them to have happiness and the causes of happiness. It is a kind of love that you need to cultivate to really see somebody as lovable, or worthy of your affection. And to remember that love is not this thing that they sing about on the radio, with “I can’t live without you and I’m going to die if you’re not a part of my life...”. Everybody else is fine without that person; it is seeing people as worthy of love simply because they exist and because at some time or another in our previous lifetimes they had been very kind to us.

It brings a feeling of a certain kind of closeness and familiarity. Normally when we see people we keep them at arm’s length, especially with the way the world is becoming now with everybody in this country armed to the teeth. The armed people are suspicious that everybody else is going to be a terrorist. Those of us who do not carry guns are afraid of all the people who carry guns. I am more afraid of them than I am of terrorists, to tell you the truth.

We do not want to go through our whole lives being suspicious and guarded by other sentient beings. That is no way to live. If you are going to get shot, you might as well at least have a kind attitude towards the person. The attitude of suspicion does not protect you from anything. It just makes you unhappy and miserable. If we can have a feeling of closeness with others, it cuts apart all this alienation: “Everything is so globalised. How do I fit in? I do not know anybody and who are these people anyway?” It overcomes all the prejudice of putting people into narrow groups and saying we do not want them in the country or in my group. We start to realise that everybody wants happiness as we do, and everybody wants to be free of suffering as we do. There is no difference. They all have been kind to us. They are certainly worthy of having happiness and its causes. They are worthy of our kind attitude towards them. This is especially important now when you really think of what is going on in society. 🍷

September 8

Having Compassion

Having compassion is extremely important in our society. Compassion is wanting someone to be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. Having that compassion, we do not want to inflict pain deliberately on others out of anger. We see that anger does no good in bringing about harmony in society or in terms of getting what we want. We can bully people all we want and make them afraid of us, but that does not bring about what we really want, which is close relationships. People often confuse the fear of somebody with respect for that person. They think if somebody fears me that means they respect me. No, they are totally different emotions. Compassion, more than ever, is really needed, in our world. Everybody is worthy of compassion.

Let us face it, the Constitution said everybody is created equal, but they are only equal in one sense. If you are a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, rich male, then you are all equal. Everybody else does not cut it.

Actually, the fact is that everybody is equal in the sense of being a human who is worthy of respect, so we need to show that respect for everybody. We also need to recognise that everybody is not born with the same opportunities.

Much of the situation we are born into is dependent on previous karma. We are not born with equal opportunity. We must have some compassion for people who are born with less opportunity than us and those who are born with more opportunity than we have but misuse it. These people have different problems because when they are born as children of somebody who is rich and famous, they have a whole other different set of problems than somebody who is born from very modest parents.

Having compassion means having a heart that sees that everybody faces challenges in samsara and wishes that everybody be free of their misery and

its causes. We really need this now. It is not a nice philosophical idea to sit on our cushion and get blissed out. It is something that we really need to deal with in this world. We can provide that by working on our minds. It is not something we can do by faking it. We have to really cultivate it. 🙏



September 9

Rebirth and Emptiness

It is a big step, to see all different sentient beings as lovable and to do this necessitates the understanding of rebirth. You can have some good results without an understanding of rebirth, but it is not going to have the same impact if you started really looking at sentient beings and thinking that you have had very close, very protective and very caring relationships with them multiple times since beginningless time.

If you only look at them as who they are in this life, then of course the appearance of an inherently existent jerk is quite strong, and you do not think of them as a karmic bubble. If you only think of this life, there is no karma, we are just born by accident as who we are and then die, we go out of existence. If you really think of people as being products of karma, then they cannot be any kind of inherently existent personality or person. They are just a manifestation of whatever karmic seeds that happen to ripen at that time, and whatever karmic seeds are ripening during their whole lifetime that influence their habitual actions, their attitudes, where they grow up, and what they are conditioned to in this lifetime. Thinking this way gives you a much broader view, and it is quite helpful in terms of understanding that sentient beings are not inherently existent with some kind of solid personality.

It is only because sentient beings are empty of inherent existence that they can be in different forms and different relationships with us in different lifetimes and even in different situations in this lifetime. Seeing this reinforces that they are not some kind of concrete personality, which we had in all sorts of relationships. It goes back and forth that way. It helps, especially if you have a problem with some people in this life, to think that whoever they are, they have not always been this kind of people in this life but have been all sorts of other people in their previous lives. I might be having a problem with them in this life, but in previous lives, we were very close. In future lives, we are going to be very close. That helps us broaden our minds and gives us some space for us to think about having a

different relationship with somebody because we know this person is not who they appear to be at that particular moment in this life. What we are labelling “this person” is the general “I” that is labelled in dependence upon the “I”s in all the different lifetimes. It gives us some room of not feeling cornered and trapped with the same kind of negative attitude towards somebody. Similarly, we do not feel cornered and trapped by the same attachment and feelings of obligation and expectations because all these relationships are changing all the time. ☁



September 10

Atisha's Mom

They say Atisha, whenever he met different sentient beings, in his mind he would say, “That’s my mother,” a kind of, “Hello, mom,” and immediately adopt that feeling of closeness and intimacy with that person. I think His Holiness has that kind of attitude with people, this automatic feeling of warmth. It is possible for us to also develop this attitude.

Let us say you had a really close relationship with your mother, father, or whoever brought you up and then something happened, and you were separated from them for many, many years. One day you were walking down the street and see this very old person sitting on the street begging, and you realise, “Oh my goodness, that is my mother (father, babysitter, whoever it is). They are sitting on the curb and begging.” You feel surprised, but would you just walk by that beggar if you realised it was the same person who took care of you when you were a baby? No way. No matter how that beggar looked you would say, “Mom (dad, or whoever it is), I am going to help you.” Automatically that feeling of love is going to come for that person, even though they are dirty, have not taken a shower in a few weeks, and they are wearing old, ragged clothes. Once you recognise them as having been your kind parent in this life, all the prejudice goes away, and all the apathy goes away because you recognise them.

In the same way, if we really train ourselves to see that all sentient beings have been our parents and remember their kindness, then when we see other sentient beings, there is that same feeling of recognising this person as the being who was your kind mother, or father, or babysitter, or caregiver, and that same feeling of warmth and affection comes up towards them. I think it is quite helpful if we can train our minds to look at sentient beings in that way. 🙏

September 11

The Great Resolve

The great resolve is making a strong determination to get involved in making the situation of sentient beings better. It is like, you are standing on the edge of a pool and somebody is drowning. You go, “Oh my goodness, somebody is drowning, quick, save him.” You have compassion, you do not want him to drown, but you are not jumping in yourself. Whereas the person with great resolve jumps in without any thought.

I was so impressed with this one man. A child had fallen onto the subway tracks, and this man in a split second, even though he had his child with him, jumped on the tracks and laid on top of that child. The subway ran right over them but did not kill them. This guy did it without hesitation. It was just spontaneous. He was really a hero. That is making the resolve that “I am going to do something. I am not standing by and wishing for it. It is not just in my mind, but I am doing something.”

At this point, it leads you to ask, “Well, in my present state am I really capable of doing whatever I can? I have all these wishes to be able to benefit sentient beings, but am I capable of fulfilling them? I have this love and compassion and can make that commitment to get involved, but do I have the capability to really carry through? Do I have the knowledge to do it? Do I have sufficient compassion? Do I have the skill to do it?”

You realise, “No, I am kind of one screwed-up sentient being myself. If I am really going to carry out what I would like to carry out, what I have committed myself to carrying out, then I have to work on myself. I have to free myself from all the hindrances and develop all the good qualities in myself. Although I can help now, the help I am able to give is limited. If I am able to purify my mind completely, and gain all the excellent qualities, then the help that I am able to give will be limitless.” This then leads us to the aspiration for Buddhahood. ☸

September 12

Heart Advice for Practitioners

Have a long-term view. Be content to create the causes in your practice by following the teachings and stop waiting for grandiose flashes of insight to occur and for instances of samadhi that you can go tell everyone you have had. Just be content to do your practice. Study, because studying is important. If we do not study, we do not know how to meditate, we do not know what the Dharma is. We wind up making up our path, and that is dangerous. It is important to study not only the sutras but from the great commentators and the learned masters.

Have a good motivation for our practice. Make cultivating motivations a chief focus. If we have a good motivation of wanting to achieve liberation, wanting to work for sentient beings, and to attain full awakening, then that long-term motivation will sustain us through the ups and downs of practice. If our motivation in the back of our mind is to have peak experiences or to become a Dharma teacher or something like that, that motivation will not sustain our practice and it also contaminates our practice with worldly gain and wanting to be somebody. “I am practicing so that I can be a Dharma teacher, then I will have a career.” Dharma is not a career. Dharma is our life.

Remember the kindness of others all the time, and really make that a chief meditation. This helps the mind so much, reflecting on the kindness of others. It makes relationships with others easier, reduces anger, reduces competition, and reduces jealousy. Thinking of the kindness of others brings much contentment to the mind. Not only the kindness of parents, teachers and friends, but the kindness of strangers and the kindness of people who harm us as well.

When you ask others for guidance, listen to the guidance they give you. But think for yourself. When others ask you for help in the Dharma, really listen to them before saying something. Try to hear when people ask you questions, what their real question is, what their real concern is, and address that.

Differentiate between what is Dharma and what is religious institutions. A religious institution is something formed by human beings, so religious institutions are going to have difficulties and so on. I see our job as going deep in our refuge and deep in our practice. Having as much of a religious institution as is necessary is only to encourage practice. In other words, our purpose is not to create, reinforce and be a team member of a religious institution, our aim is inner transformation. Do not confuse the two things. If your refuge is in the institution, and when the institution has a problem, your refuge gets shaky. But if your refuge is in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, then you know that even when the institution has problems, you can bring compassion and wisdom to those problems without letting those problems discourage or cause you to lose faith in anything. 🙏



September 13

Acknowledge Our Mistakes

Consider a situation in which we make a mistake, and someone notices it. If that person were to come along and tell us we have a nose on our face, would we be angry? No. Why not? Because our nose is obvious. It is there for the world to see. Someone merely saw and commented upon it. Our faults and mistakes are similar. They are obvious, and people see them. A person noticing them is merely commenting on what is evident to everyone. Why should we get angry? If we are not upset when someone says we have a nose, why should we be when they tell us we have faults?

We would be more relaxed if we acknowledged, “Yes, you are right. I have made a mistake,” or, “Yes, I have that bad habit.” Instead of putting on a show of, “I’m perfect, so how dare you say that!” we could just admit our error and apologise. Having faults means we are normal, not hopeless. Frequently, acknowledging our errors and apologising diffuses the situation.

It is hard for us to say, “I’m sorry,” isn’t it? Our pride often prevents us from admitting our mistakes, even though both we and the other person know we made them. We feel that we will lose face by apologising or we will become less important or worthwhile. We fear the other person will have power over us if we admit our mistakes. To defend ourselves, we then attack back, diverting the attention from ourselves to the other. This strategy — which does not resolve the conflict — is commonly practised in kindergarten playgrounds, as well as in national and international politics.

Contrary to our fearful misconceptions, apologising indicates inner strength not weakness. We have enough honesty and self-confidence that we do not pretend to be faultless. We can admit our mistakes. So many tense situations can be diffused by the simple words, “I’m sorry”. Often all the other person wants is for us to acknowledge his or her pain and our role in it. 🐾

September 14

Exploder or Imploder

When we get angry at another person, we explode on that person, or we implode on ourselves. How many of you are exploders? How many of you are imploders? How many of you do both? There is usually one we do more than the other. When you get angry at another person, if you are an exploder, the solution is, “I’m right. You’re wrong. You change and nothing else is acceptable, because I’m right.” We will fight with the other person, have the last word and we will inflict our damage.

Sometimes we implode and we are mad at ourselves, but we are still mad at the other person too. This behaviour is very much where we hold it all in. We are mad. But instead of yelling, screaming, and throwing things, we disappear into the woodwork. We shrink. We back out. We close the door. “I do not want to talk to you. I am not going to talk to you. I am going to sit in my room and sulk because I am so mad. Who do they think they are talking to me like that? But maybe what they say is true. My feelings are so hurt. I am not going to talk to them. I hate them. They are so inconsiderate. They do not even care that I am so angry, and I am miserable. They do not care that they hurt my feelings. They are such awful people. They are deserving of my hatred.”

Sometimes when I get really angry at something or a situation, I do not explode nor implode, but I will go and talk about the situation with people whom I know will take on my view of things — who will reinforce my side of the story. Is that implosion or is that explosion?

It is a secretive way of explosion because what you are doing is to hurt that person. But the way you do it is by getting everybody else on your side. “The more people that I tell to, who agree with me about how awful that person was by doing that to me, then the righter I am and the more they are going to suffer because many others would not like them.”

Of course, they are off eating watermelon and lying at the beach living their life. We are busy getting all our duckies in a row. Getting ready for the battle which is only in our minds. We are the losers and we have already lost the war if we allow anger to rule. 🙏



September 15

The Power of Optimism

We were told a story about someone being on the 16th hole of a golf course and hearing a frog croaking. They went looking for it and found it. One of its legs was stuck in a sprinkler and he tried to get it out. The frog was going to die if it stayed there. So, they cut off the frog's leg, because it was the only way to keep it alive, took it home, and nurtured it. They had this little pond that they had created, put this frog in the pond, and it healed. It lived for four months in this pond until one September when there was a sudden freeze, and the frog froze there and died.

When we heard the story my heart went, "This poor frog, it died like that, frozen in the water." Our friend was going, "It was so wonderful that it came and lived for four months with us."

What an instance of the glass half full and the glass half empty. Whenever we talked about any of the living beings on their land it was with so much love and total acceptance of their impermanence, that they were not going to be there forever. They were temporary creatures and however long they were there, they were delighted.

Now that is really the Dharma perspective. That is totally how His Holiness looks at life. Whereas so many of us get bogged down in "what could have been but was not" or "what should have been, but is not". They are just looking at what was and being happy about it. "Wow, the frog did not die on the golf course, it lived four more months with us in a happy way in this pool." And our friends just rejoiced at that.

This is really an important thing for us to learn. Whether we are working with others or whether we are looking at world affairs, we always look at what is going well and what has happened that we can rejoice at, without looking at the

“woulda, coulda, shouldas”, which make no difference. I have always felt that way about grief, too. Instead of grieving for a future that we are never going to have, rejoice that we had somebody in our lives for as long as we did, feel good about that, and send them on with love. Just be happy about what was. Look at the goodness in the world and see that. 🌱



September 16

Make Our Lives Vivid

When we meditate on death, we must be very clear about what the correct conclusion is. People who do not know the Dharma can fall into a panicky fear of death, and people who do understand the Dharma properly go to wise concern about death. It is very important we discriminate between the two, and not just assume that because we are Dharma practitioners we automatically understand the meditation properly, because we do not always. I have seen it happen; people meditate on death and then they are sobbing because they are thinking of their family dying, thinking of their death, thinking of their friends dying, and are filled with feelings of loss and grief.

It is very clear these feelings are attachment to our life and attachment to the people we love. It is also based on the view of permanence, on people being permanent and on people never ceasing to exist. When the reality of that gross impermanence hits them in the face they fall into fear or despair.

Being ordinary beings, sometimes that fear or that grief comes up. What we must do when it does is to not fall prey to it but learn to think about death from the Dharma viewpoint. Meditate on the correct way to view death and understand the incredible opportunity that we have with this life to practise the Dharma. Given how short this life is, and how short this opportunity is, it is important that we make use of it and do not waste it by doing silly things. That is the purpose of the meditation on death in Buddhism; that makes our minds and our lives very vivid.

When we have an awareness of death, our life is alive because we really cherish and make use of every moment. With attachment, we tend to live on automatically and be spaced out. If we understand death properly, we know that reality liberates our mind from taking our lives for granted, from reifying other people and ourselves and making them permanent. It frees us from all this grief and despair and motivates us to want to practice in order to attain liberation from samsara. 🙏

September 17

Generating Wealth

When you imagine all sorts of wealth coming, our usual attitude is to think of material wealth. I was thinking that it should not be just material wealth we think about, but the fear of not having enough material things controls us. When there is a sense of poverty in our mind, we become tight, fearful, and miserly and do not want to share the material things we have. Yet the actual karmic cause of wealth is generosity. Many people feel poor in terms of love, friendship, acceptance, or appreciation, so poverty is not just material things. The best way to get more friends is to generously give care and affection to others.

We also need Dharma teachings, Dharma teachers, and Dharma friends. We can create the conditions for them by organising events, inviting teachers, helping to publish Dharma books, and helping to get the teachings out there in one way or another. The service we offer to our teachers becomes the cause to have Dharma teachers in the future.

When we practise generosity, all fear of poverty goes away because our mind becomes more expansive when we are generous. When you give, you have a worldview where there is not a fixed pie but there is enough for everybody. This changes your attitude and how you perceive and experience the situation. An expansive and generous mind is the opposite of a fearful mind.

In my own experience, I have found that when my behaviour changes, the outside circumstance changes. Offering care and affection to others has come back to me even in this life. I also know for myself that because of a very materially stingy streak in myself, the first years of my ordination were extremely difficult materially to the point where I had to ration toilet paper because I did not have enough money to buy more. One day, sitting there I realised the material suffering that I had was due to my attitude of miserliness. So, I sat down and had a good long Dharma talk with myself and began to really nudge myself to become a bit more generous. And now I see in this lifetime, I do not lack anything. I remember coming back from India and being with some of my friends. They had kids, and

both had jobs. We were driving to eat at a restaurant and stopped by a photo shop to pick up family photos. While we were driving there, they were telling me how broke they are and how they feel so poor. It became so evident how poverty is a mental state — it is not what you have. 🍵



September 18

Interfaith Dialogue

All religions are worthy of respect because all have something in them that is conducive to the welfare of human beings. They are all based on ethical conduct, like not killing or stealing, but having love, compassion, and forgiveness. Even if someone is not religious, these basic principles can help them live a good life, which is why His Holiness the Dali Lama emphasises secular ethics. His Holiness says, “My religion is kindness,” because kindness is the first thing we encountered when we are born. Kindness is what sustains us throughout our lives, and kindness is what we can give to others. Different religions have different rules and regulations, and their sacred texts may have been written in different historical times and cultures, but most contain the same basic teachings on how to live a good human life and create a peaceful society. This is so much the case that it is as if we are criticising the Buddha’s teachings when we criticise other religious teachings with a high degree of commonality.

We do not have to say that all religions lead to the same goal or reach the same conclusion. Theological differences do exist, but it is usually because one set of theological reasons for cultivating love, compassion, and ethical discipline makes sense to one group of people, while other sets work better for other groups. We can debate, but it should be for increasing our understanding rather than criticising another faith and its followers. I am not qualified to comment on the ultimate aims of other faiths because I have not yet actualised emptiness or bodhicitta — the goal of my Buddhist faith. Nevertheless, I feel very comfortable going to other religious services and enjoying the company of people who are thinking about more than just “me, I, my, and mine”. Our common belief that our life has a larger purpose than our sense pleasure enables us to have dialogue and respect each other. For these reasons, it is very important that we not only get along with people of different faiths but actively learn about them. We must speak out in our communities to counter any religious intolerance, hatred, or just general fear-mongering. 🙏

September 19

Catnip and Human Sense Pleasure

One time, a supporter of the Abbey gave our cats some catnip seeds and a toy mouse with a built-in laser pointer. Manjushri loved chasing the red dot around even though there was nothing to catch, and even our older cat Achala watched the dot intently. It made me think that this is exactly how we are with sense pleasure. There is no real happiness in the object and nothing to hold on to, but our mind becomes captivated by whatever we think is beautiful and we follow it around wherever it goes. If it is a person, our eyes are always on the person. If it is a piece of fudge, we are watching who else is going up to the table to take it. It is very helpful to remember that all this is total illusion and that chasing after a sense pleasure is only going to make us dizzy. Let us be human beings rather than kitties that chase things that do not bring any long-term happiness. 🐾



September 20

Living Mindfully

Right after my mother passed away, I got an email from my sister saying that my dad was feeling sad and guilty because he felt that he should have hugged and kissed my mom more before she died. It reminded me of when I was in the play “Our Town” in high school. In the last scene, Emily has died and gone to the afterlife and is looking back on the scenes of her everyday life. She is really feeling the poignancy of how people operate on automatic and take life for granted, “Here are the same people I see every day; they are always going to be there; they are just fixtures in my life.” So often we move past each other like robots until somebody dies. We look back and say, “Wow, I could have connected with that person more,” or “I could have been kinder to that person,” or “I could have shown more affection to that person.”

One of the purposes of the meditation on death is to help us continually bear our mortality in mind so that we are always on top of things and realise that when we are with somebody, it might be the last time. We would not take things for granted and we will pay more attention to what is going on in our life and the people in it instead of just moving along in a kind of ignorant stupor. When we have this kind of intention in our lives, we show our affection when it is appropriate and would not feel guilty if we do not because we have been mindful, thoughtful and conscientious of what we are doing. This kind of attentiveness also saves us from committing a lot of non-virtue and helps create a lot of virtue. Otherwise, if we just move through life with the intention of minimising pain or irritation, we are liable to experience a lot of shocks and regrets when a situation changes drastically, or people suddenly are not here anymore. It is important to always be on top of things in this way and think long-term when making decisions. 🍃

September 21

Kindness and the Critical Mind

Kindness is highly regarded throughout the world and is valuable from any perspective, but sometimes we have inner difficulties with letting our kindness shine through. One of the biggest problems is a critical or judgmental mind that is always generating commentary on other people's behaviour, thoughts and imputing motivations onto them that we are not even sure if they have. This type of mind creates a lot of difficulties for us in the sense of preventing our inner mental peace and preventing us from acting with kindness towards others.

The reflection on impermanence and death is quite helpful for subduing the judgmental mind. When we look at our life from the perspective of death, we will see that this kind of judgment, bias, prejudice and complaining does not serve any purpose at all. If we ask, "Do I want to be thinking about this when I die?" usually the answer will be no. When we look at what we are judging, we will see that the conditions are changing very rapidly, so spending a lot of time forming opinions about things is not a very good use of our time. Thinking along this line will help us subdue the judgmental mind, which in turn helps us to be kinder. 🌱



September 22

Renunciants and Helping Society

As Dharma practitioners, we all start out hearing the same teachings. But I have noticed that after some years of everybody getting the same basic teachings, some people are interested in particular teachings and practices, while others are more interested in other teachings and practices. What was so incredible about the Buddha's teaching is that he gave a variety of teachings according to the disposition of many different sentient beings. Especially within the Mahayana tradition, where we are talking about being of benefit to all sentient beings and are looking at the long-term. Our life is not just about studying, meditating, and getting liberated, it is also about how to offer service to sentient beings and help society.

People have all sorts of different karma, so we need to have space for everyone to see what their talents and their ways of practicing are. Some people may use their talents to practise medicine, while others offer service to the monastery or use their talent in some other way.

It is quite good that there are a whole variety of ways the lives of Buddhist practitioners can unfold, both lay people and monastics. In Singapore, many people would ask me why the monks in Burma and Tibet were protesting and how horrible they thought it was. This is because, in the Singaporean society, monastics are not supposed to have anything to do with the political or social life of the country. I would explain that the monks are protesting because they are the conscience of that society, and they are the only ones who can express that what their government is doing is causing suffering. Each culture has a very different take on these issues and different people have different ways of thinking. We cannot say one size fits all. 🙏

September 23

Creatures of Habit and Adapting to Change

Ironically, the nature of everything is change but we do not adapt to it very well. We are very much creatures of habit and routine, and often we get shaky when our routine gets disrupted. We have been changing since we were born, things keep on changing, and yet we are always kind of thrown when things change. We are very happy and can adjust quickly when the desired change happens. On the other hand, a change that we do not want seems like a huge surprise when it happens, and it is very hard to adjust.

Our reaction to a change is all based on whether we want it or not, which is not very reliable because change happens regardless of our wishes. Our preconceptions and expectations of how things are supposed to be are what make a change so hard, and without them, we are much more flexible and can adapt to what is happening. We can use the meditation on impermanence and death to adjust to things more readily. After bumping our heads on the wall a great number of times, we might actually learn to say, “Okay, I didn’t have the day planned like this, but things are the way they are, so let’s just deal with them.” 🍵



September 24

Changing Perspectives

The pleasantness or unpleasantness of something, goodness or badness, happiness or suffering are all completely dependent on the situation. The desirability of something does not exist inherently in that object but rather exists as a dependent arising, and depending on the entire circumstance. This is something quite powerful to think about again and again in our lives, especially when we get attached to something. It seems like the thing is desirable from its own side, but we should remember that it is not because the thing ceases to be desirable if the situation gets tweaked a little bit. Similarly, hearing certain words in one situation might be undesirable, but not in another.

I saw this a lot when I was living in India. There might be certain people you do not usually get along with very well, but when you are travelling together you get along very well. You need one another to watch the luggage and do all sorts of things, so the whole relationship completely changes from what it was before. Relationships and objects are not concrete and solid; they exist embedded within a whole environment and appear desirable or undesirable in dependence upon the whole dependent arising.

How we view the dependent arising is so dependent on our mind. One morning while our new monastic residence was being built, I thought, “How nice! I’m so glad to hear the hum of machines.” But if we were not building a monastic residence, and it was in the middle of retreat time, I probably would not go, “Oh, thank goodness,” if I heard construction machinery. If I were in a bad mood, I would also probably think, “Oh god, why do these machines have to make so much noise? Can’t they build the monastic residence in silence?” All this just goes to show how things are empty of true existence — nothing is there on its own. 🙏

September 25

Identifying the Object of Negation

Identifying the object of negation when we meditate on emptiness is difficult simply because it is present much of the time. We live much of our lives grasping at things that appear inherently existent, especially ourselves, but it is hard to recognise this because it happens so naturally. There is nothing new about this process, nothing special. It is easier to recognise the grosser kind of self-centred thought when we are being particularly selfish. We might get a little defensive if someone were to point it out to us, but sometimes we can get to the point where we can acknowledge, “Yes, there’s that self-centred thought again.” This is only the gross object of negation of a self-sufficient, substantially existent person, not the subtler one of an inherently existent person, which we do not even notice because it is there most of the time.

When something disturbing happens in our day, instead of thinking about how troublesome the other person is, we can use the opportunity to stop and ask, “What is my idea of self at this point? Where is the object of negation here?” To use an example from the Abbey community, say you are putting wood chips in the garden and somebody comes up and says to do it another way. Suddenly, you get tight and your whole existence is invested in the way the wood chips are put in the garden. At this point it would be good to stop and ask, “How does the ‘I’ appear to exist at this moment?” 🍄



September 26

Encouraging Ethical Behavior

We all make mistakes. We can have remorse or regret for our mistakes, and then we make amends. When something is going on between two people, it does not matter who started it. I remember when I was a kid, whenever I quarrelled with my brother, my defense against getting blamed by my parents was, “HE started it!” But it never worked because it does not matter who started it, or what the story is. What is important is what your response is. Somebody can tear you to bits, but our responsibility is how we respond. Do we respond by getting angry, throwing something at the person, shouting and screaming? We must be responsible for our behaviour regardless of what the other person did to trigger it because we make ourselves victims by blaming other people. That means, “I have no free will, every way I act, everything I feel is dictated by other people.”

We dig ourselves into a pit and make ourselves into victims. It is no wonder we are unhappy. What the other person did is not part of your thing. You have to be concerned with what YOU did.

The action that we have remorse for can be repaired by good behaviour. We take responsibility for what we did, we apologise, we do something kind, and we repair the relationship. It does not matter whether the other person apologises to us or not. Our business is to clean up our side by apologising for what we did or forgiving people. It is the same way with our precepts. My precepts are my business, and I am not looking at how everybody else is doing while being totally ignorant of whether I am keeping my precepts or not. Of course, if somebody does something outrageous, then we should go and talk to them and bring it up. But our primary thing is mindfulness and introspective awareness of oneself.

You can see how the feeling of remorse is very healing because it allows us to own up our actions, regret them, empathise with the other person, and then want to do something to repair the relationship. In contrast, a person who feels shame backs away from the incident, does not engage, and sits there feeling awful. If we

ever feel shame, remember that is not a helpful attitude, it is a wrong conception, and shift our mind into regret and remorse. A practice like Vajrasattva helps us to overcome shame by seeing that shame was the response of a child who did not know how to think properly and that we do not need to stay stuck in that. The action was inappropriate, but that does not mean I am a bad person; we purify and then let it go. 🙏



September 27

Speaking at Appropriate Times

The ten virtues that are related to speech include speaking truthfully, using our speech to create harmony, speaking with kindness, and speaking at appropriate times. This latter one is the opposite of idle talk. Refraining from idle talk requires some finesse and quite a bit of mindfulness because some thoughts come out of our mouths immediately without us having assessed the situation — whether it is a convenient time for the other person, whether it is an appropriate place, whether we have thought about what we want to say, and whether we are speaking meaningfully. A lot of the time this impulsive speech becomes idle talk, and in bad situations, it becomes harsh speech or lying or speech that creates disharmony. It is very important that we learn to speak at appropriate times and moderate how much we say, our volume, and our tone of voice. The content, the timing, the delivery, the motivation — all these aspects of speech require us to slow down and think a bit. It is really a deep practice.

Let us put it at the top of our list and think about it as we are walking around today. Determining what is appropriate to say also includes not making assumptions and explaining things well to somebody. Sometimes we get the idea that to avoid idle speech we just would not talk much, but under-communicating can create a lot of misunderstandings. If we are working on a project with someone, we must communicate about it, or when we are giving instructions, we have to give complete instructions and not just assume other people know what we want. We need to repeat things sometimes because people often do not hear them the first time. It is also good to check with people and make sure they understand what they are supposed to be doing instead of saying one sentence and making assumptions.

It is very hard to restrain ourselves when we have something to say at an inappropriate time. We just want to relieve the stress of keeping it inside, so we say it, but the other person does not hear it, or they hear it but misunderstand us because they were preoccupied or busy doing something else. Then we get a result that we do not want. It is very interesting to sit and watch strong impulses speak, what they feel like in the body, and our motivations behind them. 🐾

September 28

The Concept of Refuge

I have started thinking about refuge more deeply, and one of the interesting things is how our minds fool us. I have been a student for a while, so I am like, “Oh yeah, refuge, I take refuge,” I am doing refuge ngondro, where you repeat the prayer of taking refuge in the Guru, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha over and over, trying to keep your mind alive and learning something. When these opportunities come up to give a talk or go deeper, it is interesting because I start realising I know things only on a very surface level. As I begin to read deeper and think about it, and deeply meditate on it, it is quite fun and enlivening.

The common meaning of the word “refuge” is quite wonderful. It is “to preserve, to protect, to shelter, or give sanctuary from danger or hardship”. This is what thinking about refuge leads us to. We do not have any reason to take refuge unless we understand that we are in a hardship situation and there is some danger.

Right away, refuge brings up this concept of renunciation or the determination to be free. To be free of what? To get refuge from what? Unless we understand our situation very clearly, we have a very weak impetus towards taking refuge. “I don’t want to suffer anymore and so I’ll kind of take refuge.” When we look deeper at the Buddha’s first two noble truths about unsatisfactory conditions, we ask ourselves, “What is it?” It is to be known. The causes of suffering are to be abandoned. The deeper we look at them, the more our impetus towards refuge rises in a very palpable, realistic way in our lives.

Another definition is, “a source of help, relief, or comfort in times of trouble”. Mostly we are constantly in times of trouble. We might get a little relief with chocolate chip cookies, the hot tub, or a nice movie, and for a little while we sort of forget. But as soon as we are out of there, there is still that long list of things that we have to take care of or that conflict we are in.

Interestingly, the root of the word is “fugere” and it means “to run away or to flee from”. This leads us to think, “What do we need to flee from? What do we need to run away from?” Refuge gives us a place to stand so that we can actually look at those questions and start to find the answers. 🌵



September 29

Marinated in Guilt

There is a big difference between regretting our mistakes and feeling guilty. Regret is, “I made a mistake. I am going to learn from it. I put the thing down and I go on.” Guilt is, “Oh god! How could I have done that? I am so terrible. I cannot face the world again. This is just awful. It is all my fault.” We can really get into our guilt thing. Who is the star of the show when I am guilty? Me. I am so important, that I am the worst one.

Some years ago, we were talking about our religions of origin, and we were talking about guilt. The Jews got together in one group, the Catholics in one group, the various types of other Christians in one group and then some people who were not raised with one thing or another were in one group. We talked about guilt and who was raised with the most guilt. There were two groups in the final running. Which ones do you think they were? The Jews and the Catholics. Why do we feel this guilt? This is what we were taught as kids. This is what we are supposed to feel, but you can look at it as an adult. That is the nice thing about being an adult. You can look at what you were raised with and see if it makes sense or not and say, “It makes no sense at all to feel guilty.” Guilt does not help the world and guilt does not help me. You are marinated in guilt as a kid. When you look at it, the story of the guilty mind is total rubbish. Sit down and write out what the guilty mind is telling you and ask yourself, “Is that true?”

When we are angry and depressed, we do not ask if it is true, we believe it and then we just get even more stuck in our hole. Really pull out our wisdom and look at it. “This whole situation fell apart because of me.” Is that true or not? It is not. Because situations are dependent on many different factors, not just one factor or on one person. 🍷

September 30

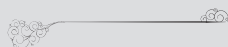
Self-Centered Thought

We all want to be happy, and we do not want to suffer. Yet as sentient beings it seems like we create so much cause for our suffering. Why is this? It is very much rooted in our self-centred thought that just thinks about me, what I want, what makes me feel good, what makes me feel bad, what I like, what I do not like, how people treat me, and how I treat them. The self-centred thought appears to be our friend looking out for our happiness, but in actual fact, it is the source of our misery.

It is the source of our misery in a couple of ways. First of all, this incredible focus on ourselves makes us really sensitive to other people so we are easily offended, easily angered, and easily insulted. Also, the self-centred thought makes us easily distracted because we are on the lookout for what gives us pleasure. We cannot really pay attention to what is happening right now. The self-centred thought causes us misery in the long term as well because, through it, we generate the motivations that lead us to get involved in creating negative karma. If we look at every single negative action we have ever created, that self-centred thought is always behind it.

We have got to see that the self-centred thought is not us, it is not who we are. We do not need to feel guilty and blame ourselves for having it because that is just another self-centred thought. What we have got to do is to see it as the thing that prevents our happiness, and because we want to be happy, then we have got to be on the lookout for that self-centred thought and counteract it whenever we can. We counteract it by thinking of its faults and by thinking of the benefits of caring for others. In that way, our hearts open and from that bodhicitta comes. This is something to be practised in all our activities every day, not just in the meditation hall. As we relate to everybody, let us help one another to do this. 🙏

October



*When you're "Working with
Anger" remember the
goodness within and without.*



October 1

Opinion Factory

Once again, we wake up in the morning, which is good news because we have another day to practise the Dharma, to cultivate our hearts of kindness, and to let go of the misconceptions that cloud our minds. It is good to take a moment and rejoice about this. It is good to keep our mind coming back to look at what is positive in our situation because often the opinion factory starts working in the opposite way, especially when we encounter a new situation with people we do not know. Then sometimes the opinion factory starts going, “Hmm, what are these people doing? I like this, I do not like that. I do not know about this thing. What do they want out of me? What do they expect of me? Do I fit in? Do they like me? Do I like them?” We get all tangled up in these kinds of thoughts, opinions and insecurities.

If these thoughts arise in the mind when you are in a new situation, it is good to try and say, “Oh yes, hello,” and then let them go and come back to the goodness of the situation. For example, if you are coming to visit the Abbey, reflect on the opportunity that you have to practise, to meet new people who understand the spiritual side of you and those who will support that, and to be in a place where people are trying to practise pure ethical discipline and cultivate loving kindness and compassion. Rather than letting the mind proliferate with all kinds of hopes and fears, come back to what is and simply be grateful for it and rejoice. 🙏

October 2

Apologising

One thing that frequently comes to the mind is relationships and how we have treated people in the past. You do not need to provoke it; it comes up by itself. Do not dwell on it, but when you see that you have acted in an inappropriate way to somebody, purify your attitude, generate a feeling of love and compassion towards him, and apologise to him. If you can, write to him, or when you see this happen, call and talk to him. If you cannot, at least apologise in your mind. With people, if they are still alive and we make an effort to apologise to them, it relieves our minds and enables us to open our hearts to them instead of remaining proudly defiant with our heels dug in about how we were right and they were wrong. It banishes that obstructive mind.

From the other person's point of view, he may or may not be hurt, and he may or may not be angry. We do not know, but if our last communication with him was something hostile, or if there was a pattern of repeated hostility (even if the last communication was not hostile), then the next time when we see that person, he may still have that in mind and he is probably going to relate to us in a particular way. If we do not want that person to relate to us in that way, then it is good to let him know that our attitude has changed.

If somebody is very antagonistic to you, how do you usually relate to that person? Often, we just stay away from him. Similarly, if we relate that way to somebody else, then he will think, "Whoa, somebody is really mad at me, I had better stay clear." Yet, if our mind changes and we do not let him know that our mind has changed, he will continue to relate to us as though we were angry with him. Whereas, if we apologise and let him know that our mind has changed; he would not be relating to us as if we were still angry with him when he relates to us in the future. This makes a big difference in our relationships with people. It makes a difference in how other people feel inside. Sometimes, somebody may be hurt or may be angry. If we apologise, it gives him the space to let go. No matter what he feels, it alleviates our minds from the pain of holding on to a grudge.

This comes up in retreat, and it comes up in ordinary life. It is something to bear in mind so that we can counteract that tendency to say, “Even if I was angry, even if I told them off and I was rude, they should know I did not mean it and forgive me.” or “I do not need to apologise as I reacted that way because it was really their fault,” which is just tremendous arrogance. Keep that in mind, let our mind soften, and let our speech and our actions reflect that. 🍃



October 3

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is important — forgiving others and also forgiving ourselves. All forgiveness means is I am going to stop being angry about it. We see that anger is making us suffer. Somebody may have done something horrible to us, something painful and harmful, but forgiveness means that I am not going to be angry about it. When we are holding that anger as a grudge and we want to retaliate, or when we are turning the anger inwards on ourselves and we are feeling guilty, that anger is keeping us in prison. We do not need external walls in our prison, our thoughts can do it.

We can look at a mistake or a mistaken action and call it for what it is without being angry. This is something many people do not realise. They think as soon as there is something that they do not like or as soon as there is something that they think is unfair, the only way they can respond is to be angry about it. But that is not true. We can respond in many different ways.

What happened in the past is not happening now. They did it once, but every day when we go through it again, our thought is doing it to us again. When we say, “No this happened in the past. It is not happening now. I need to make peace with the past. I need to forgive what people did in the past. Have some compassion for them for what they did. They were wanting to be happy and they were so confused that they thought harming other living beings was going to make them happy.” Isn’t that a situation for compassion for the total confusion in somebody else’s mind? It really is. All that person was trying to do was to be happy. But wow! They were in so much confusion and so much internal pain. They thought they were going to bring happiness to themselves, but instead they brought about the exact opposite and harmed me and other people in the process. 🙏

October 4

Dealing with Health Issues

Fear often arises when we do not feel well or when we are injured. Our minds get tight and start writing the incredible worst-case scenario — because we have the sniffles, we are going to die of pneumonia. Then we think about it, amplify it, get depressed or angry, lash out at others, and generally stay stuck in our fear.

One very good method for dealing with health issues is to realise that karma is involved on two fronts. First, we have the good karma to have a precious human body, which allows us to practise the Dharma. We need to appreciate that fact and take care of our body well so we can practise. Second, when our body is in pain, we must remember that we took this body in samsara, so what can we expect? Certainly not everlasting bliss.

When physical difficulties arise, it is due to karma created in a previous life. We may not know exactly what we did, but we can get an idea of the kind of actions we may have done by studying books about karma. Then we need to make a strong determination not to do it again because we do not like the result that we are experiencing. When we keep our minds focused on that, we would not be afraid of what is going to happen to our health. The mind that is focused on taking responsibility and having the determination to oppose our self-centeredness cannot at the same time indulge in self-centred melodramas about the fearful states of our health.

Another way to combat fear, particularly about health, is to generate compassion for other people who are experiencing similar or even worse health difficulties and doing the taking and giving meditation. This is a way of pulling the mind out of ruminating with inappropriate attention, creating all sorts of afflicted states of mind, and directing it to respond with compassion, the determination to be free from samsara, and responsibility for our negativities. We should practise like this before we fall extremely ill so these views get habituated in our minds.

I remember some years ago, I had a severe infection in my big toe, and I was living in a rural area in France. Nobody could take me to the ER until the next day, so I spent the whole night in the meditation hall thinking of how the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas endured pain for the benefit of sentient beings and how they grew their compassion using these kinds of situations. This was the only thing that kept me afloat that whole night until the following morning. Keeping your mind on a virtuous topic gives you ways to deal with uncomfortable situations and prevents fear, anger, self-pity, and everything else that usually comes up when your body is injured or ill. 🙏



October 5

Birthdays

Birthdays in our culture are a rather strange phenomenon. They are usually all about the person who is born, and so we really like to celebrate our birthdays. But our birthdays should be a celebration and a thank you to our parents because it is our parents who gave us this body, who kept us alive when we were infants and who brought us up. It is a day to express a lot of gratitude to our parents. Why do we celebrate our birthdays? We are a year closer to death, so why are we celebrating?

A birthday is also a good reminder of impermanence and samsara. Birth is said to be one of the sufferings of samsara. On the other hand, we can see our birth, given that we are in samsara, as something fortunate because we have the opportunity to encounter and practise the Dharma. Having that precious human life is really something to celebrate. Our having it is due to the good karma created by whoever we were in previous lives, so we should thank all those people we were in previous lives for practising. It is also due to our parents giving us this body, our teachers who help us learn the Dharma and put it into practice, and all sentient beings who are in the field with whom we practise. On our birthdays, it is good to remember all these various aspects of what it means to be born. 🙏

October 6

Kindness of Our Parents and All Beings

When I went to Australia, I wanted to see a kangaroo but there was no time. Instead, my kind hosts gave me a stuffed mama kangaroo with a baby in its pouch. I thought about how the baby kangaroo would grow up and become the mama kangaroo's size, maybe even bigger, but it would always remain the baby and be very grateful to its mama and papa for everything they did.

Likewise, in our Dharma practice, we take care of our parents of this lifetime while remembering that throughout beginningless time all sentient beings have been our kind parents. For this reason, we work for the benefit of all sentient beings and try to spread our love and compassion to everybody. 🙏



October 7

Counteracting Attachments to Persons

Geshe-la said during one of his teachings that he had struggled with raising his sister's children because they were very naughty and rebellious. Sensing his aggravation, his brother had told him, "This is only a relationship of this life, so cool down. You're doing the best you can." That is a very good perspective to take, not only towards difficult relationships but also those where there are a lot of attachments. In both relationships, we are making the person way too solid, believing that there is a real self and then getting attached or upset with it. We did not have this relationship with them in our previous lives and would not in future lives. If we do meet again, we will have a different kind of relationship because conditions will be different and so will be our personalities. We will be strangers, maybe even enemies.

This life comes and goes very quickly, so there is no reason to make everything concrete. Thinking in this way can be very helpful for working on relationships that involve a lot of attachment and clinging, or aversion and discomfort. Some people may say, "That doesn't work for me," but that is because they have never meditated on it or only thought about it when they were in the middle of an emotion. You cannot take in any new information in the heat of the moment, so you should work with these techniques during your daily meditation session when your mind is calm. It may take a lot of practice, but we will be able to maintain an even mind when the people we are attached to are having difficulties, dying, or when people whom we do not like are doing trips on us. 🙏

October 8

Getting Clear About Our Opportunities

I was thinking about how much our Dharma practice gives us in terms of discerning what really is an opportunity for us. First, holding precepts helps to clarify where we want to go. Somebody says, “I want you to come run my bar.” or “I want you to come to be the lead singer in this rock and roll band.” Those decisions are clearly made. That is the first level of trying to discern what is an opportunity.

The more we spend our time thinking about the meditation on death and impermanence, the more it makes us think about what is important, what we value, and what we want to have done. There is an interesting exercise someone proposed once. If I knew I were going to die 1,000 days from today, what do I want to accomplish in those 1,000 days? That makes things get way narrower. Then if an opportunity comes that fulfils one of those things, with no hesitation, you will do it. Doing that meditation, amongst its many other benefits, makes us clear about what is important and how to take the opportunities when they come.

Look at the meditations on developing bodhicitta. We get very clear that we want to develop equanimity, and we want to develop love and compassion for every single being. We want to do what is beneficial for larger groups than “me” or “me and my best friend” or “me and my little group”. As we begin to expand our awareness and then our commitment to being of benefit to a wider and wider range of people, it also gets clearer what opportunities are going to benefit whom. We can better assess how great the benefit of any particular opportunity would be. The Buddha could look at a wonderful opportunity to co-lead a meditation community and say very clearly, “Well, it’s good for these guys but it doesn’t really help all sentient beings. I think I’ll keep going.”

Our decisions and our opportunities may not be that big right this minute, but they will be someday. It is important to use the Dharma as a way of assessing what we do and how we make our choices. When we have thought about

it, when that window opens, we do not waste time going, “Well, should I or shouldn’t I do that?” If the window is only open this long, and we spend a lot of time procrastinating that is an opportunity we have lost for this life.

It is a practical application of Dharma. How we use this thinking to guide ourselves moment by moment and to see the opportunities as they arise. Because they come all the time. They come every day. Which ones do we take? Which ones are for the benefit of ourselves and all beings? And which ones can we just say, “Well, I must have been a rock singer sometime, but not in this life.” ☁



October 9

Cherishing Others

Today let us think about the benefits of cherishing others. When we cherish others, others benefit, but the benefit is not just theirs, the benefit comes back to us. We all share an environment together. When we help others in the environment, it makes the environment more pleasant for us to live in. This goes for groups, for society, and for the whole planet, because if our actions make others unhappy, then we must live with unhappy people. If our minds are concerned with the benefit, welfare, and happiness of others, they are happy and then we get to live with happy people. That is why His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, “If you want to be selfish, be wisely selfish and take care of others,” because it definitely returns to us.

That is how it comes back in this lifetime. If we think beyond this life, cherishing others is what enables us to create good karma, which leads to a precious human life in the future. Cherishing others enables us to create an incredible amount of merit through the force of bodhicitta. When an action is done with a bodhicitta mind — a mind that wishes to become a Buddha as soon as possible, to benefit every being — we create great karma from benefiting that many people. If we have a positive motivation but it does not include everybody, we also create good karma, but it is not as vast and will take much longer to ripen the mind and make it more receptive to the teachings. With an attitude of bodhicitta, that ripening process speeds up. Cherishing others is what helps a Mahayana practitioner progress along that path and attain full awakening.

We always say we want to become a Buddha, but we never hear of a Buddha who cares only for himself or herself. One of the attributes we admire most about Buddhas is their complete altruism and their ability to cherish others as much as themselves. We want to emulate that and have a mind that is as joyful as the Buddha’s from cherishing others. But we have to know what cherishing others mean. It does not just mean pleasing people. Pleasing people is often done with a self-centred mind. When we really cherish others, we very often have to do difficult things. We may have to learn to communicate in

an unfamiliar way, that makes our ego squirm. We may have to open up and explain things more. We may have to tell people that we cannot do what they want because what they want is not beneficial in the long run, or it is not beneficial for many beings.

Learning how to cherish others happens in our minds first, then we have to understand what that means when we put it into practice. Practically, it takes a great deal of courage to do what is beneficial for others in the long-term. This is something to think about as we go through the day. 🍄



October 10

Benefit of Precepts

Precepts are very precious because if we are going to actualise the complete meaning of the Buddha's teachings in our minds and really transform our minds, we have to start with the basics, which are subduing our harmful verbal and physical actions. Precepts deal with that, pointing out to us specific behaviours to abandon. The precepts do not just work with the body and speech, because to keep the precepts, we have to work with the mind, and in particular with the mind of attachment. By keeping the precepts and subduing the mind of attachment, it becomes possible to generate the real determination to be free from samsara, and real renunciation (because renunciation wants to be free of attachment and it sees attachment as the cause of suffering and as an enemy).

Subduing attachment through keeping precepts also enables us to generate bodhicitta because attachment to our happiness is a big obstacle to generating bodhicitta. Similarly, keeping the precepts is an aid to realising emptiness, because attachment is one of the things that we are trying to get rid of by realising emptiness — seeing a person that we are attached to as empty, the object we are clinging to as empty, and so on. By using the meditations on emptiness on bodhicitta and renunciation to subdue attachment, we keep the precepts while we also begin to actualise the training of the three principal aspects of the path. Whatever level of precepts we have, we are quite fortunate. The mind that aspires to have more precepts is very virtuous because we see the benefit and we see the precepts as a protection. 🙏

October 11

Expanding Merit

When I lived in Singapore in 1987, the man who was the benefactor of the first book I ever published called “I Wonder Why” told me he was fine with generating bodhicitta at the beginning of meditations. However, he was reluctant at the conclusion to give his merit to sentient beings because he felt that he did not have enough to give away. He had the wrong conception that merit is gone forever once you give it away. However, dedicating our merit and virtue to the welfare of all beings actually expands it because it is a practice of generosity. This is especially so since we are dedicating to our own and others’ awakening and all the good circumstances conducive to this.

After hearing this explanation, he wanted to dedicate his merit. We dedicate not only our merit but also our body and possessions, and to overcome any reluctance, we need to remember how much better we feel about ourselves when we are generous, as many scientific studies have concluded. 🙏

October 12

First Snow of Winter

During the first good snowstorm of the season, I like to think that the snowflakes are little Chenrezigs falling. When we do the Chenrezig practice, we imagine light from Chenrezig coming into us or we are sending out light to awaken others and pacify their minds. They become small Chenrezigs, which fall into us like snowflakes. This is a much different experience of falling snow than the one I had a few years ago, where I was rather afraid because I did not have the right kind of clothes. We tend to live in our little world and believe it to be an objective reality and then wonder why other people are not responding in the same way. It is all up to us how we choose to look at a situation, and if we are going to come up with our little scene, let us try to always create one of compassion and wisdom. 🌨



October 13

Mere Labels

It is quite interesting to have an awareness of dependent arising throughout the day. Since we are trying to control the universe, we look at things and think, “It is out there with its own essence, and I am in here all by myself with my own essence.” We need to recognise how we pick things out of the environment and make them into objects by labelling and designating. These objects exist in relationship to other objects — things do not radiate what they are from their own side. For example, we do not label the *thangka* “blue” because it is radiating out its nature of blueness, but because our mind is picking the blue colour out and contrasting it with the yellow and green colours. In this way, everything we see is embedded within a whole network of existence, including the “I”. Sitting here is not a little me with my own independent entity and personality, but rather a constructed identity completely embedded within the larger social structure and the way human beings view things.

The reason why people often freak out so much at the time of death is because they are losing the whole context in which their identity is embedded. When they do not have external things to distinguish themselves, there is the feeling that it has all just disappeared and gone into nothingness.

Our identities exist conventionally, and we can use labels like nationality, gender, height and weight. But these things mean something only in relation to other things, which also exist only in relation to other things. Going through our lives trying to defend an identity that does not have any existence on its own is like trying to convince people that there is a ghost sitting next to you when you come out of the haunted house at Disneyland. 🐼

October 14

Ethics and a Happy Mind

There is a close relationship between a happy mind and keeping good ethical conduct. It is important to keep our mind happy when we are practising the Dharma and keeping ethical conduct helps us to do just that. When we have good ethical conduct, there is no guilt or regret in the mind, and no turmoil that worries, “Should I have done this? Should I not have done that?” All the ruminating and mulling that so often plague us stop with good ethical conduct. The absence of self-doubt and remorse creates a very happy state of mind and frees up much space to do other things with our minds. When we have a happy mind, we automatically keep good ethical conduct as well. When we look at our life we will have a feeling of rejoicing because we know that we spent it well, and are accumulating a lot of good karma and virtue. 🍃



October 15

Dedication for a Meaningful Life

Don Wackerly, one of our Dharma friends whom some of us had been writing to for several years was executed in Oklahoma yesterday. How do you rejoice and be sad at the same time, which is actually possible? Being his pen pal for over the past three years, one of the things that I realised when he got more and more into practising the Dharma and working on his mind and heart; he started having this very profound question towards the end of his life, “Was my life meaningful and did it have a purpose?” Much like the rest of us, he made some detours in his life and ended up doing some rather confusing, not-very-helpful things, that did not answer the question very well. But I think that at the end of his life, from what we have seen from the support, the love, and the people that he had touched, specifically by his courage to continue to transform his mind in the middle of a challenging and difficult experience, that indeed, in the end, Don Wackerly had a profoundly purposeful and meaningful life.

We have this dedication prayer that Lama Zopa wrote, and we say it after we do our eight Mahayana precepts and dedicate it any time after a big, auspicious celebration or event of some kind. Don had some time yesterday to say his final parting words. I have a feeling that if he had this dedication in front of him it might have been something that he would have enjoyed being able to say. I believe very much that he was successful as far as having purpose and meaning in his life.

“Whatever actions I do, eating, walking, sitting, sleeping, working, and so forth, and whatever I experience in life, up or down, happy or unhappy, healthy or sick... Whether I have a terminal disease or don’t, whether my life is peaceful and harmonious, or with discord and difficulties, whether I am successful or fail, rich or poor, praised or criticised, whether I am living or dying or even born in a horrible rebirth, whether I live long or not, may my life be beneficial for all beings. The main purpose of my life is not simply to be rich, respected, famous, healthy and peaceful. The meaning of my life is to benefit all sentient beings. Therefore, from now on may whatever actions I do be beneficial for all sentient beings. May whatever I experience in life, happiness or suffering, be dedicated to actualising the path to awakening in my mind, and may my actions and experiences cause all sentient beings to attain full awakening quickly.”

I have a feeling that he was working very seriously so that whatever he had experienced in life, happiness or suffering, would be dedicated to actualising the path, not only in his own mind but in all the sentient beings who came within his parameters.

I think that he had a meaningful life when everything was said and done. So, to Don Wackerly, “I rejoice at the purpose of your life.” 🍄



October 16

Creating Karma

Here we are together at the breakfast table, blown by the winds of karma. It is not by accident, it is not predestined, and it is not under somebody's master plan. It is due to causes and conditions, and specifically due to our previous actions, that we find ourselves here. The events in our lives are conditioned by the causes and specifically the karma that came before them. Sometimes we have happiness, sometimes we have misery, and sometimes the feeling is neutral, but from a Buddhist perspective, what happens to us is not so important. How we react to what happens is important. What happens has been conditioned, and we are experiencing it right now, but how we react to what we experience is creating the cause for the future. By being aware of how we react, and how we respond to things, we can either create the causes of suffering or the causes of happiness.

With our ignorant minds, when we have a pleasant ripening of karma, we usually react with attachment, thus creating more negative karma for the future. When we have an unhappy ripening, an unhappy experience, we react with hostility, thus creating more negative karma for the future. When we practise the thought training teachings, we are trying to train our minds to respond to whatever happens with a Dharma mind, that is, with a mind that sees the experience as empty and yet appearing, and with a mind that sees it through the eyes of compassion. We try to train our minds to respond to all circumstances with the feeling of compassion for the others involved and with the perspective of wisdom, of understanding the situation. In that way, we create the two collections, or accumulations, of merit and wisdom. That result does not hinge on what happens to us, but on how we respond to what happens. ☸

October 17

What Can You Rely On?

Suffering is defined in three different ways. The “ouch” suffering is the most common. The second kind of suffering is the suffering of change. I really like this thing that is happening right now, and I start grabbing onto it. Right away it is not so much fun anymore and I am grasping and worrying and thinking. In a case of cookies: well that cookie was good so the second one is going to be better and the third one is going to be great. Now I am heading towards some difficult stomach problems. The third kind of suffering, which is the most difficult for us to grasp, is just simply being in these bodies where we have no control over death. None of us want it, but it happens to everyone and that is where we are heading to. We do not know when and where we are going, and where our consciousness will be after death. There is also aging. I did not sign up to be 65, but here I am.

These are some of the things that we are thinking about fleeing from in this life and our future lives. What can you rely on? You want to find something reliable, not from out of the frying pan and into the fire, as we say. Which is mostly what we do. I take refuge in relationship A until that person does not do what I want, and now I am jumping over to refuge in relationship B! That is what will be the answer! But that person does not do what I want either. So maybe C, D or E. Well, good luck.

What are we taking refuge in? What are people taking refuge in? What am I taking refuge in at this moment? We take refuge all day. We rely on things all day. I was riding on an airplane and I realised, in a certain way, I am taking refuge in this airline pilot, this airline, their safety precautions, and in the people that check and build the airplanes. I stepped onto this plane and said, “Okay, take me up 30,000 feet and fly me around.”

Watch the kind of things that people grab. Relationships are really big. Entertainment. Food. Distractions. This is what we do. This is so human. When

we get to our death, which of these things are we going to say, “I wished I had done a lot more. I wished I had seen a lot more movies. I wish I had read a lot more novels.” Or are we going to say, “I wished I had been kinder to people. I wish I had studied some more about what reality is, and the situation that I am in.” 🐚

October 18

People Do Care

“Nobody loves me!” It is a big one we tell ourselves. “Nobody loves me!” Is that true or not? I think people love us. Our friends love us. Our pets love us. Sometimes we get into a mental state where we cannot see how much other people loved us, but they still love us. And we begin to see that our holding on to this idea of “nobody loves me” prevents us from accepting other people’s love. Other people are there and they love us and they want to show us their love, their care and affection, but I am kind of scared or I feel vulnerable. I do not want to let them in. So, I tell myself I am unlovable and they must be stupid for caring about me. When I look at that and ask myself, “Is that true? Is that true? Really? Nobody loves me?” I mean everybody has people who love them. Everybody does. I mean even Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung; and we have not done anything as bad as what they did. And yet people loved them. People do care about us. It is important to realise that. ☁



October 19

Self-Centeredness

Our whole life revolves around ourselves. We think of ourselves all the time. In particular, we get an identity from the social situations that we find ourselves in. A lot of the thought that revolves around ourselves centres on the topics of, “How do I fit in? Do I belong? Do they like me, or do they not like me? Do they realise how wonderful I am? Do they see through all my junk inside? Do they appreciate me? Do they recognise my talents? Do they honour me? Do they respect me? Do they treat me well?” And on and on. Always thinking about ourselves, always trying to fit in and get some acknowledgment from other people, and continuously getting upset when we do not feel like we are acknowledged the way we should be. Competing with other people, being arrogant to them, and being jealous of them.

This whole psychological mess that we find ourselves in and all these thoughts that we waste our time thinking are all centred on the concept of “I”. We need to check to see if that “I” that we are so protective of actually exists. That is one thing to challenge. Another thing to challenge is if it is the centre of the universe and if it is actually so important. The third thing is, instead of trying to get our feeling of self-respect from how we think other people think of us, we must inculcate confidence in our Buddha nature, and our potential to become a fully awakened being and act from that space. If we have some confidence in that Buddha nature, we know that there is no big “I” in there to have to prove or to be insecure about. Instead, we can open our hearts and care for others and in that way progress along the path and have a mind that is a lot more peaceful at the same time. 🙏

October 20

Same

Every morning we come here and sit around this table to have breakfast. The external situation is pretty much the same. Sitting in the room with pretty much the same people at the same time of the day. Yet we notice from day to day how much our mental states and moods fluctuate. One day we come to the table and we are happy. The next day we are falling asleep and grumpy. The next day we are looking forward to something. The next day we are bummed out because somebody said something we did not like.

From one day to the next, the external situation is pretty much the same. The internal one goes up and down, up and down, back and forth, what Lama Yeshe used to call a yoyo mind. When we watch this from day to day, it becomes clear that what we experience in our lives comes from the thoughts that we have. The thoughts, and the emotions, come from inside of us. It is not from outside.

Lama Zopa often uses the expression, “Reality is at the tip of a thought”. I think what he means is that what we think, how we interpret something, and how we explain it to ourselves generate various emotions in our reactions to things. Our moods are our responsibility, along with what we think and how we look at something — whether we look at it in terms of what benefits us right now, what we like, and what we want, or whether we look at it in a long-term view of Dharma practice and heading towards awakening. Also, whether we look at it in the sense of benefiting others right now. There are so many different perspectives, and depending on which one we have, it is how we experience things. It can be kind of amusing to watch how the mind changes day to day, even though every morning we are just sitting here around the kitchen table with the same people. 🍵

October 21

Nothing “Real”

When we look at the world and the people around us or even at ourselves, we feel everything is so real and so concrete. There are real people, there are real problems, there are real this and real that. But all these things, ourselves included, exist only by being labelled. They exist in dependence upon the mind, not as outside, objective entities. It is the mind that contributes to creating these things, that puts pieces together, develops a conception, gives a name, creates meaning, and reacts to that meaning that we create.

Things do appear and exist on the nominal level, but if we are able to see that all these things are not real objective entities, that there is nothing objective out there to grasp onto or to fight with, then there is no one in here to protect and to gratify. If we can understand this, then our minds can be relaxed about a lot of things. Not only do we go forward on our spiritual path towards liberation, but we become more capable of benefiting all beings. 🙏

October 22

Consistent Effort

Dharma practice is the actual way to bring about happiness in ourselves and others. It takes real consistent effort to practise the Dharma when you consider that we have had afflictions in our minds since beginningless time and we are well habituated with them. We see that it is going to take a while to cleanse our minds, so we must have a long-term attitude that is willing to engage in a way to create the causes for happiness and to remove the causes of suffering.

Patience in practising the path as well as joyous effort that keeps us going a long time are very important qualities. To keep the effort joyous, it is important to think about the benefits of attaining awakening and the disadvantages of remaining in samsara. When the benefits become clear, then we see that it is the only way to go, and we put our energy into it. It does not matter how long it takes because we know we are doing something wonderful and valuable for ourselves and others in the long term. 🍃



October 23

Proliferation

When I was in Thailand, there was one word that the translator translated as proliferation. It sounded very much like the Tibetan word, *namtok*, which used to be translated as superstitious thought and later was translated as preconceptions. But I like the word proliferation. For me, I get the visual image of one little soap bubble, and then suddenly they just explode all over the place, and soon there are millions of them. That is what our mind does. It proliferates all the time. Somebody looks at us in a certain way, somebody says one sentence, and instantly our mind proliferates. It makes this incredible story, we then draw on all our previous proliferations of something similar, and we create more proliferations. Then we develop hopes and fears for the future, and we develop many thoughts about what this person is like and how he act towards me, how I should act towards him, how I feel about him, and how I wish the whole thing were different. The mind just proliferates.

I found it very helpful just to have that word, proliferation. As soon as I could say to myself, “I’m proliferating,” then it became very easy to press the stop button, to stop proliferating. That is all. You can also have the image of nuclear proliferation. It just takes one country with one tiny little weapon, and then another one, and then another one, and you will have this whole nuclear proliferation. That is exactly what the mind does. It just proliferates and builds this whole thing that it believes is reality, and it gets itself stuck into this proliferated reality of its own creation. Whereas it is easier when we notice that the mind is ruminating, or making up stories and proliferating, to press the stop button and say, “I don’t need to do this.” Then it is finished. Especially when you see yourself proliferating in certain habitual ways that you already know the outcome: “I am really sensitive to this issue; I will just follow it and create this story.” Press the stop button. “I do not need to do this, it is just proliferation.” ☁

October 24

Quiet Place

Have you ever had this experience? You walk outside, and suddenly, the silence strikes you because it is in such sharp contrast to the chatter that is going on in your mind. We live in a very quiet place. We walk outside and it is pretty quiet — a few birds chirping, and the sun shining. Then suddenly the chatter in the mind stops because we see that it is just chatter. It is in such stark contrast to the silence that is outside. We want to learn to notice that chatter before we even walk outside. We want to be able to find that quiet place inside ourselves and keep it with us so that even when we are in a place where there is a lot of noise, the mind can be quiet.

All that mental chatter is basically negative conceptualisation. If we were thinking about emptiness or developing compassion with that kind of mental activity, fine! Continue that outside, inside and everywhere. But most of the time what is going on is, “I like this. I don’t like this. I want this. I don’t want that. Why does this person do this? Why don’t they do that?” This kind of mental activity makes the mind stressful as well as accumulates negative karma and wastes a great deal of time. As soon as we can catch it and be aware of what is going on in our mind, and come back to that silent space inside, the more peaceful we will be. Our lives will be more productive in terms of having the Dharma grow in our hearts, and we will be more focused on whatever daily activities we are doing. We would then not be so distracted. 🍵



October 25

Karma

“Inspire us to eagerly endeavour to practise the means for abandoning negativities and accumulating virtues”. This is referring to karma. Actions, that is what karma means. Actions and their effects.

Karma and its effects refer to the ethical dimension of our actions and the results that we experience due to those ethical dimensions. The first attribute of karma is that positive results come from constructive actions and painful results come from destructive actions. The Buddha did not make up the system of causality, he only observed it. He started looking at the results and the happiness that sentient beings experienced, and then labelled the actions that brought about happiness “constructive actions”. When sentient beings experienced suffering, those causes were labelled “destructive actions”. This is important to understand, that things are labelled constructive or destructive in relation to the results that they bring. There is no reward or punishment. It is a system of dependent arising. These results come from the causes.

The second attribute of karma is that a small cause can grow into a big result. Sometimes we tend to think, “It is just a small negative action, does not matter if I do it.” Wrong. It is very important when there is the potential for a small negative karma, avoid creating it. Or if we have created it, purify it. Similarly, when there are opportunities to engage in small virtuous actions, sometimes we get lazy, “It is just a small one.” Wrong. You can create a small action and get a very plentiful result.

The third attribute of karma is that, if you do not create the cause, you do not get the result. We might think that all we need to do is offer prayers to the Buddha and then these realisations are going to grow in our minds. No. If we want a good future life, liberation, or awakening, a prayer may be a good cooperative condition to make a karmic seed ripen. But we have got to create the principal causes, those karmic seeds, by doing the practice.

The fourth attribute of karma is that it will definitely bring its result. It does not get lost. Rather, in the case of destructive karmic seeds, unless we do purification practice, those karmic seeds will eventually ripen. In the same way, our positive, constructive karmic seeds will definitely ripen into happiness unless we impede those by having wrong views or anger. This is why it is so important to know the antidotes to anger because anger interferes with the ripening of our virtuous karma and can shatter it.

This teaching is very practical. The more we understand it, the more it is going to change how we live in our daily life. But it is good to make examples of the four attributes of karma in your mind and see how they affect the way you live your life. ☸



October 26

Three Non-Virtues of Body

The first non-virtue of body is killing, which is taking the life of another being. We have to be careful with this one because there are a lot of instances where we ask other people to kill for us, like when we hire an exterminator. These kinds of things create a very heavy negative karma.

Also, rejoicing at killing is certainly not anything virtuous. It may not be a complete action of killing, but if we read in the newspapers that so-and-so got killed, or they killed so many terrorists, and we think, “Fantastic!” or if we rejoice at capital punishment, we get some negative karma from it. Rejoicing in the negativities of others is not something good. It certainly plants the seed to enable us to do that in the future. Whatever we rejoice at, even if we have not done it, we are going to be open to doing later.

The second non-virtue of body is taking what has not been freely given to us. We usually think of robbery or burglary, but it is also borrowing something and keeping it for ourselves without intending to return it, not paying taxes or fees that we are supposed to pay.

If you take material from your workplace for your private use that was not offered to you by your boss, that is stealing, isn't it? So is using other people's credit cards or phone cards. It could involve cheating people, or lying and stealing. It is interesting how people fudge enough to take something that is not really theirs or lie to get something they want, thinking “Everybody does it. Nobody sees it as negative.” Except not everybody really does it, we just think they do. There are lots of ways we tell ourselves that this is actually mine and I deserve it.

The third non-virtue that we do physically is unwise and unkind sexual behaviour. This one is principally going outside of one's relationship, or if you are not in a relationship going with somebody who is. This is quite damaging to families, to oneself, and to others. It includes any kind of sexual behaviour that is going to

be damaging to others physically or mentally, like having a sexual relationship without taking care to prevent STDs. That is irresponsible sexuality. Or seeing other people as objects and sleeping with them for one's own pleasure.

We need to abandon these things or do the opposite, like protecting life, protecting others' possessions, and using sexuality wisely and kindly.

It is very helpful to do a little life review about these. When we have gotten involved in them ask, "What was my mental state? What did I think I was going to get out of doing this? How did I feel afterwards? What am I going to do if a similar situation comes in the future?" Instead of saying, "I'm bad because I do them." This does not help much. We should explore and understand the mental states that lead us to get involved in these actions, and then see what other mental states we need to cultivate so that we do not continue acting in that way. 🍵



October 27

Non-Virtue of Lying

Lying is deliberately saying what we know not to be the case. There are big lies where we want to cover up something we did that we do not want others to know about. In that case, there is a double thing. There is the lie, then there is the thing we do not want others to know about. When we are tempted to lie in that way, we ask ourselves, “What did I do that I don’t want others to know about?” We need to do a little bit of introspection about that because maybe we should not have been doing the action to start with, and then we would not have the need to lie about it.

There are other kinds of lies we do, what we call “little white lies”. They are still lies, aren’t they? They are not telling the truth. Often, people tell these little white lies because they think they are going to, somehow, protect somebody else, but they usually do not. If you are home and you do not want to talk to somebody on the phone you say, “I’m busy, I’ll call you back.” You do not need to say, “Tell them I’m not here.” People will understand you are busy, and you will call them back.

Then there are other lies we do to cover up for ourselves. We did something and we do not really want to own up to it, so we lie to cover it up. Or we do not want to get caught doing some small thing, so we lie. Or we think somebody is going to disapprove of what we are going to do, or they are going to speak harshly to us over some small matter, so we cover it up and lie. That can become quite a pattern in our lives. We should stop and ask ourselves, “Why am I doing this?”

It already involves a presupposition that the other person is going to judge me. I cannot say things honestly because I am sure that, even though it is a small thing, somebody is going to disapprove, somebody is going to judge me, or somebody is going to criticise me. That is pretending that we are mind-

readers, isn't it? It is not trusting the other person very much, that they are going to respond in an understanding way. It is also not being honest about what we are doing and taking responsibility for it.

It is good to just say things and hope people will understand. If they do not, then you talk about it, explain it and then they understand. What is so detrimental about lying is that it destroys trust. If somebody tells you a big lie, and you find out about it later, do you trust that person afterwards? Forget it. Much better just to monitor our actions, be truthful about what we do, and move on. 🍄



October 28

Disharmonious Speech

Causing disharmony with our speech is telling one person what another person said to create friction between them. What you say can be true or it can be false. If it is false, it is also lying. But even if it is true, if you say it with the intention of splitting these people up, then it becomes very destructive.

This happens quite frequently in workplaces. Maybe we are jealous of somebody else, we want the promotion, we want the praise, or we think we should get the recognition and not them. So, we tell bad stories about the person that we are jealous of with hopes that people would not like that person and will think badly of him, maybe even fire him. Then we will get the position, or we will get the promotion.

It can also happen in relationships. You marry into a family and you are jealous of one of the relatives because he has more influence over your spouse than you do, or than you think you do, and so you try and split your spouse from the rest of his family. Or the rest of the family tries to split your spouse up from you.

This is whenever people make factions and try to get other people on their side. It can even happen in a Dharma centre. You may be jealous of somebody else, want more power, more control, want to look like a better Dharma student, or want a better reputation, so you put that somebody else down or tell his faults, or other negative actions. It is quite a serious thing, making unfounded accusations with the intention to divide people.

It can even happen if we get into a quarrel with somebody, and we tell our friends and want them to side with us against the other person. That is what friends are for, right? If they do not side with us, why are they our friends? So, we then go to our friends and say, “This person did blah, blah, blah, you side with me, right? Right. Good.” Now we both turn and aim our guns at this person. It may look like we are just sharing our troubles or venting, but in our mind, “I want somebody on my side against that person.”

It is fine to go to other people when we need to talk about our problems, but we should always say, “I’m coming to talk to you because I have a problem with anger. I’m not saying that any of this is the reality of who the other person is. But I want to talk with you because I need help working on my anger.” Present it that way.

Otherwise, we are doing what we did in sixth grade. Remember that? Get everybody on our side, then go on the playground and trash somebody else. Then everybody else bands together and trashes us. So, let us graduate from sixth grade. It is about time. Instead of using our speech to create disharmony, use it to repair relationships, deepen relationships that other parties have with each other, and create harmony amongst human beings. 🌱



October 29

Harsh Speech

Harsh speech is when you say things that are hurtful to other people. It includes when we are angry, and we yell and scream. You can also use harsh speech in a very pleasant tone of voice, the way it often happens in families when you know something that somebody is sensitive about, and you say it ever so sweetly that you know is going to get to them.

It can be things that put people down, that ridicule them. We also have to be careful what we say to kids. I notice sometimes adults really do not speak so well to kids, in the sense of putting them down, criticising them, and telling them they are stupid. Or playing on their gullibility, making them afraid by telling them there is a boogiemán who is going to come to get them. Kids get very afraid, and I consider that harsh speech as well.

It is something we really have to look out for especially when we get angry, because harsh speech just comes out of our mouths before we even know what is going on. Doesn't it? Sometimes we say the worst things to the people we care the most about. It is really something to try and be careful of.

Harsh speech has four parts to be a complete action of having the power to throw a rebirth: 1) The object, to whom you are speaking, 2) The motivation, which includes recognising that object and having the intention to speak those words, 3) Having an afflicted state of mind — sometimes we speak harsh words out of attachment, or ignorance, but mostly it is out of anger, and 4) The action of speaking and the conclusion of the action, which is that the other person understands.

Harsh speech not only harms others, but it also harms ourselves. So, we must remember that every time we hurt somebody else's feelings with a bad intention, we are putting negative karma on our minds. Sometimes we do not have a bad intention but they are super sensitive. In that case that is not our responsibility, we do not create bad karma. 🙏

October 30

Emails as Harsh Speech

It often comes up: What about writing an email? Is that an act of body or speech? It is your body that is typing but it is considered speech because it is communication. There is a lot of harsh speech coming out through emails. It gives you some distance between you and the other person. You can just type it out, spell out all your rubbish, click “send”, and you do not have to be there when they read it. You can either read their response or just delete it because you do not care. Email gives you more freedom to say harsher, meaner and crueller things. It is something very much to be attentive to.

Sometimes when you get a certain email, you feel inspired to write back with some harsh speech. This inspiration comes up when we know exactly what we are going to say as soon as possible. If only we had so much inspiration for our Dharma practice as we do for writing harsh speeches! So, you sit down and you write it, you click “send”, and then you go... “Did I really write that? Ugh.” You realise the other person is not going to be happy; he is going to write something back, and you are going to have a bigger problem on your hands than you had before. What I have learnt is to try not to respond to those kinds of emails. Do not send those emails right away, because it can be quite hurtful to other people. Let them sit for a day, or at least a few hours. If I do respond, I put them in the “draft” box instead of clicking “send”. I inevitably come back when my mind is calmer and rewrite it or delete it and start over again. It is a good thing to do. 🙏

October 31

Idle Talk

Idle talk. We can talk all day long. “Blah blah blah...” Hopefully, we try and watch our speech a little, like watch the topics we talk about, and the amount of talk we do.

You can tell when you are on the phone with some people that they are talking to you and also doing a few other things. They talk very well, but you wonder how much they are really understanding the conversation.

If you sit down to have a conversation then it has got to be something interesting or you are not going to keep sitting there. If it is something interesting, then hopefully it is something worthwhile. We should try and have conversations where there is real sharing with other people.

That does not mean all our conversations must be heart-to-heart and meaningful discussions. But at least in our minds we can try and relate it to the Dharma in one way or another and be careful about the topics we talk about. Whatever we talk about usually comes to us in our meditation later.

That is why we keep silent during retreats, because when you talk before you sit down and meditate, you will remember the conversation, and think: “I forgot to tell them that.” or, “I should have said this...” or, “They said that, I wonder what they really meant by that...” The mind starts spinning off in meditation to a conversation of idle talk that we just had.

There are certain times, certain circumstances, and with certain people where the way you connect is just by chit-chatting. If you do that, just be aware that that is what you are doing. Have a specific reason why you are doing it. Do it for only a certain amount of time, and do not spend hours, or even an hour doing it because your whole life can go by, and you do not even remember what you talked about the next day. It is information overload.

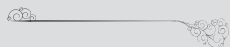
The amount of time we can spend talking about food just amazes me. When you go to visit family, you sit for hours talking about what restaurant you are going to, what food you are going to cook, and what you like. When you sit down to eat the food that you have just talked about for hours, you are still talking with each other so you are not really tasting the food that you just got done talking about.

We should also monitor how long we talk. We have all been on the phone with somebody who just cannot be quiet. We never feel like that is us. But maybe other people do, and they wish we would be quiet after a while because we are going blah blah blah, on and on, and repeating ourselves, telling the same old stories about this and that like we have told the last time.

That does not mean to just shut up completely, rather be careful and aware of who we are talking to, about what topic, and for what purpose. 🍷



November



*Create “Good Karma”
by understanding the wisdom
of your heart.*



November 1

Coveting and Ill Will

Coveting is the greedy mind of attachment that says, “I want, I want, I want.” Or how we say it in America, “I need, I need, I need.” It can be for material things and wealth. It can be for relationships and sex. It can be for reputation, praise, popularity and status. It can be for anything. You can see that if we have attachment in the mind and when we do not take care of it and we ruminate on it, it becomes coveting. Coveting then inspires us to do physical and verbal things to get what we want or to eliminate the hindrances to get what we want. Coveting could transform into stealing, motivate unwise sexual behaviour or harsh words because we want something so we are going to bad-rap somebody else.

Ill will (malice) is not just an angry thought. It is anger when it is well developed, and where you are cultivating it with the intention to do something. It could certainly motivate stealing, killing, creating disharmony, harsh words, and all sorts of things.

These are mental non-virtues. Coveting is under attachment, but it is the increase of attachment. It is not just one thought of attachment. It is a huge attachment. Ill will (malice) is in the field of anger, and it is anger when it is really developed.

We commit these mentally — we do not have to say or do anything. If we want to abandon the negative actions of body and speech, then we must work with the mind. We must recognise when our mind is going beyond normal attachment and anger and stop the mental chatter going on in our minds. This gives us a way to break the patterns that keep us locked in samsara. ☸

November 2

Wrong Views

The third mental non-virtue is wrong views, which means wrong views about conventional reality. It is not the wrong view about the ultimate nature, it is the wrong view that our actions do not have any ethical dimensions. Even if they have an ethical dimension, they do not bring results. Even if they bring results, the results are not concordant with the actual actions that are done. It can be wrong views such as there is no Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. Something like this.

Wrong view is in the field of ignorance, and it is ignorance when it is really developed. Wrong view is not doubt. It is not curiosity. It is not the mind that wants to investigate and learn. It is a very stubborn wrong view that comes about because of thinking of something in the wrong way and coming to the wrong conclusion, and then stubbornly holding onto that view in a very close-minded way so that you are not open to hearing anything else.

It is said that wrong view is the most dangerous because if we have wrong views about karma and its effects, then in our mind we give ourselves licence to do the seven non-virtues that are verbal and physical. If we say, “Our actions have no ethical dimension, so we might as well go out and do this and that,” somebody with wrong views could then justify their negative behaviour.

His Holiness, The Dalai Lama has also expanded the meaning of wrong view — usually, it is in the sense of experiencing the results of your actions in future lives. But he says it is a wrong view even if you are living your life now and you think, “I can do something illegal because my actions would not bring results.” It is the kind of mind that does not think about the future results of our actions. That mind gets us into a lot of problems. We do not think. Then we do something, and we have to experience the result of the choices that we have made, even in this life. It can bring a lot of mess into our lives. 🙏

November 3

10 Virtues

Not doing one of the non-virtuous actions is itself doing a virtuous action. If there is an opportunity to kill, to speak harsh words, to blame somebody or whatever it is and you stop yourself, then that already is a virtuous action. The benefit of taking and keeping precepts is that when you make a firm determination not to do certain actions, every moment that you are not doing that action you are consciously abandoning that action, accumulating virtue in your mind stream, and you are accumulating merit.

That is why there is a big difference between two people sitting in a room, one with the precept of not stealing, and the other person without the precept. Both people may not be stealing right now, but the person with the precept is accumulating virtue just by sitting there because he is actively not stealing, whereas the other person is not, so there is no accumulation of virtue for him.

Taking and keeping precepts is very good in this regard. When there are situations that come up where you could act negatively and you restrain yourself because you have respect and concern about the law of karma and its function and the results that you experience, and because you do not want to harm others, then that restraint itself is a virtuous action.

This merit and virtue that we accumulate are very important because these are like the water and fertilizer on the ground of our consciousness. When we plant the seeds of the Dharma they can grow because they have water and fertilizer.

Purifying and creating merit are very important. Especially if you feel like your practice is blah, a little dry, and your mind is bored or whatever, then it is very good to emphasise purification and accumulation of merit more so at those times. Doing this works with your mind to pull you out of that feeling of duuuuhhh-ness. It gets you back on track. ☁

November 4

Karmic Results

Each full karmic action has three results, though one of the results is divided into two, so sometimes you hear about four results. All four results come only if the action has been completed with the four parts and it has not been purified.

The first result is called the ripening result or the maturation result. This is how karma ripens in terms of what rebirth we take, and which realm we are born into. The exact specifics of the rebirth, like who our parents are and that kind of stuff, is also due to karma but is more of a completing result and not the ripening result of the realm that you are born into.

The second result is karma that corresponds to the cause. It corresponds to the cause in two ways. This is the one that is divided into two parts. The first way is that the result corresponds in terms of the experience. In other words, what experience we gave to others, we now experience ourselves. If we criticised others, then it ripens when we are born again as humans, and we get criticised. If we stole from others, the karma ripens that people steal from us. The second corresponding result is in terms of the habitual tendency to do the action. This part is the most serious way that karma ripens because just committing an action once, you get the habit and you keep doing the same thing again and again. Then things get really heavy.

From a karma we created in a past life, we have the tendency to do the same thing in this life again. If it is a non-virtue, then we tend to do a lot of non-virtue in a certain way; if it is a virtuous action we did in the past, then we have the tendency to do a lot of virtue in that particular action again in this lifetime. That habitual tendency is quite important. We can see that in our lives. We can see how kids are born with certain tendencies and despite the encouragement or discouragement from their parents, the tendencies will still remain as a strong imprint within them. Their parents can encourage

the tendencies or discourage them, and that has a strong imprint. We can look at ourselves and see certain virtuous actions that we do very easily, or kind, virtuous mental states that come very easily, that are a result of having developed them in previous lives and having that habitual energy. Whoever we were in a previous life, we can thank them for those parts of ourselves that are virtuous and easier to activate.

Then we have bad habits that we are also well-trained in. That is because in a previous life we did not try to counteract them, we did not apply the antidotes, and we just kept doing them. We developed the habit, so the habit continues. That is why it is important in this life to try and deal with the habitual negative actions that we do so that in our next lives we do not have to carry those things. Or if they are there, they are very weak. If we have habitual virtuous actions, keep doing them because then it is very easy to continue doing them in our next lives. ☁



November 5

Environmental Results of Karma

Whether we are born in a peaceful place or a war-torn place is the result of either abandoning killing or killing. Whether we are born in a place where there is material wealth or whether there is poverty, depends upon whether we have abandoned stealing or have stolen. Specific actions like this will bring specific environmental results. It is quite interesting when you read the environmental results. Creating disharmony with our speech causes you to be born in a dangerous place, like where there are a lot of thorns. A result of harsh speech is being born in an area that is very bumpy, uneven and jagged.

It is very helpful to do some meditation on this, look at actions we do now, and think of what results we are going to get from them in the future. If we do this, it helps discourage us from doing harmful actions but encourages us to keep doing positive ones. That is one way to do it — go from our present actions to the future. Another way to meditate on this is to see what kind of situation we have now, our human rebirth, what kind of things happen to us, what tendencies we have, what kind of environment we were born in, and then trace back to the kinds of karmas we must have created in a previous life that have ripened into our present circumstances, both conducive ones and the ones that are not so conducive. Doing this really gives us a much better understanding of how karma works. It also serves to encourage us to be more mindful of our activities and our thoughts because we realise that we are creating our experience. When we are responsible, it can motivate us to create positive karma. It also helps us to develop more compassion for others because we see often that their habitual actions or the situations they are born into are due to karma, not because the people necessarily did something non-virtuous in this lifetime. Reflecting on this also encourages us to purify and to make strong dedication prayers. 🙏

November 6

Rejoicing in Others' Good Qualities

Rejoicing in other people's good qualities is very important. It is not comparing yourself to others. Comparing ourselves to others digs us into a ditch, especially when we are trying to do Dharma practice. "Oh, that person sits better than I do, that person looks better than I do, that person has more faith than I do, that person is smarter, that person has heard more teachings, that person has done more retreats." Comparing ourselves to others and competing with others is useless in Dharma practice. Just do your practice and when you see good qualities in others, be happy about it, because it is nice that other people have good qualities and are better than us. When you are better than them, so what? Do not make a big deal out of it. Just get out of this whole thing of comparing. We are not having a race to see who gets awakened faster, that is not our motive. Our motivation is to benefit sentient beings. Everybody does that in their own way; we do not need to compete. ☸



November 7

The Challenge of Forgiveness

I have been working on this manuscript and there have been challenges all along with the editors from the publishing house. When I suggested having forgiveness for people who have abused us, they did not like it. In thinking about it, it made me very sad, because the tone coming through the comments was, “This is not suitable. There is too much sexual abuse. Readers will not stand for this.”

That, combined with one time last year I was giving a talk and I spoke a little about forgiveness for abusers and there were about five people in the audience that completely misunderstood what I said. It was as if people think that when you talk about forgiveness it means not holding the abuser accountable or ignoring the abuse or saying the abuse was ok. Clearly, that is not what is going on when you talk about forgiveness. Abusers must be held accountable! People must be prevented from harming other people! It does not mean that abuse is ok and we all overlook it! There is none of that. But that is where some people’s minds perceive when you talk about forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a mental process that you do because you are so tired of hurting and being angry inside yourself. It is where you reach the point where you say, “I have to let go of my hurt and anger because they are turning me into a bitter, unhappy person who is full of hatred, and that is not the kind of person I want to be.” Forgiving means letting go of that. If we can develop compassion for the abuser, then we can heal well. This editor just went through the ceiling when I suggested forgiveness, at some point, when you are ready. Develop compassion for the abuser rather than hatred by getting a sense of their pain and confusion. Anybody who abuses or harms another person is doing so because they are in pain.

It seems for some people, the mind is so focused on the hatred and the hurt that even the idea of considering that a person that abused somebody else,

or a person who murdered somebody else has any other aspect about their character besides that one thing they did. It is as if you are saying everything they did was ok, which it is not.

Is a mind that thinks like that a happy, joyful, contented, and satisfied mind? Or is that a mind of somebody who is in incredible pain and inner torment? It is clearly not somebody who is joyful and happy. If we can see their mental states and have compassion, it liberates us. It frees us from the torture of dwelling in hatred.

Yesterday I was talking to our friend. She told me a story about one young woman in high school who had been raped by a guy. Somehow, she lived. Her life was awful for a period of time. Even though this guy got convicted, she said, “Justice didn’t help me to heal, but forgiveness did.” There is a first-hand experience of somebody who was traumatised and who found that inflicting harm does not solve grief, but forgiveness does. ☁



November 8

One Day There, Next Day Gone

They tell the story of one disciple who said to his master, “Please give me a warning about my own death so I can prepare.” The master said, “Sure, I’ll do that.” As time went by the master got requests to do prayers for various people who had died, and so he told his disciple about each of those deaths and to make prayers for them. Eventually, the disciple got very ill and it became clear that he was terminal and going to die, and he said to the master, “I thought you were going to give me some warning about when I’m going to die.” The master said, “What do you think I was doing all those years telling you about all the other people who were dying?”

Here at the Abbey, we hear amazing stories of how people die totally unexpectedly. There was one family, whose son was 16 years old contacted us. His mom had just asked him what he wanted for dinner because she was going for take-out. Then somehow, we do not know how or what he died from, but by the time his mom got home with the meal, the boy had died. Can you imagine how his parents felt?

There are many, many stories like this. Two young women known by one of our friends were in Nepal during the earthquake. They were never heard from again even though their brothers went there and tried to find them.

Whenever we are asked to make prayers for somebody who died, we should really take it to heart that, “I might die in this same manner, too.” At some time or another people are going to be writing emails saying, “Please make prayers for _____,” using our name. “Please, Thubten Chodron just died, make prayers for her.” Somebody else will respond, “Yeah sure, put her on the prayer list.” In the evening, somebody will read out all the names,

“Well, we’re dedicating for this person, this person, Thubten Chodron, blah blah blah [yawn].” That is how meaningful it is going to be to other people. But it is sure going to be meaningful to us, isn’t it?

The people in your life are going to be gone one day. Find gladness in your heart and share it with everyone you meet. Then, when they are gone, you will have good memories instead of regrets. 🍃



November 9

Happier with Less

Have you ever wondered what exactly people are afraid of when they start worrying about the state of the economy? It seems the tighter and more afraid people get, the more they act in ways that actually make the economy worse, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. It would be better to examine how likely it is that the things we are imagining will happen during an economic downturn will actually happen, and to consider what resources we have — internal and external — to deal with them. Things usually do not turn out to be as bad as we think they are going to be, and even if things get tight, there are always options for how to deal with them.

The main question to ask ourselves is, “Does my happiness depend on the state of the economy?” If we say yes, we should then ask ourselves, “What is the meaning and purpose of my life?” If we link our feeling of happiness to the state of the economy, we are putting ourselves in a situation where we have no power over our happiness since it is dependent on something external. Internal happiness should not and does not depend on the state of the economy.

We can be happier with less and have fewer problems. Having a little less, saving more things, and avoiding over-consumption are very good practices for working with the mind that says, “I want it, so let’s just go to the store and get it.” Many of us have fallen into this bad habit because credit is so available, which ends up feeding so many unrealistic expectations and so much attachment. If all those things that we wanted and got in the past were actually the cause of happiness, we would not have needed to go out and get a second, third, or fourth thing because we would have been perfectly satisfied with the first one. We have become a country of consumer addicts, which does not bring happiness inside and is not good for society. 🍄

So, You Want a Good Reputation

If we really look, so often what trips us up in our sincere quest for the Dharma and for meaning in our lives is simply attachment to the happiness of this life and the eight worldly concerns, particularly reputation. “What are people going to think of me?” If I go on a retreat and come back to work and people say, “What did you do on your vacation time?” and I say, “I went on a retreat.” They say, “You sat in a retreat for two weeks looking at your belly button? Why don’t you get a life?” Suddenly, we feel, “Uh oh, I did something wrong. Other people do not approve of what I did. They do not respect me for what I did. I have got to change my behaviour and become what they expect me to be so that I will have a good reputation. No more meditation retreats. I am going to Bali next year. Then when I come back to work after vacation and say I have gone to Bali, they will say, “Mmm, very good.” Then they will know that I am kind of rich. They will also know that I am really cultured because Bali has many different cultures and different kinds of people. They will know I am sophisticated, and blah blah blah... I will have a very good reputation in my workplace. That is much more important than my future life.”

In the mind, what are they working for? The reputation of this life. Future life? It is like, out of the picture. Future life is too abstract. Liberation and awakening are too abstract. The reputation of this life is so real. Isn’t it? What other people think of me is so real. It is so important. All this awakening business, working for the benefit of sentient beings business, is airy-fairy. It does not benefit anybody. But a good reputation... “Then my colleagues will appreciate me, they’ll respect me. My boss will too. Maybe I’ll get a good promotion, or whatever...”

All the advantages that people see in having a good reputation, how do they benefit you? A good reputation does not increase your lifespan or virtue. It does not get you closer to awakening, does not get you closer to liberation, and does not help you generate bodhicitta. So, what use is it? 🐾

November 11

Our Interdependence with Others

Dependent arising, or interdependence is quite prominent in Buddhism, where everyone and everything is in constant flux and constantly in relationship with each other. Things just are not in the nature of being solid, concrete entities. Rather, all the elements of which we are composed affect the world, while the things in our environment affect us. What we think and do affects other people, and what they think and do affect us. We are unable to take care of ourselves completely without assistance since most of us cannot grow our food, make our clothes, or build our shelter.

To explore this constant interrelationship, we can ask ourselves, “How do I affect others? What can I do to increase their happiness and their well-being? How can I contribute in a positive and useful way to their benefit?” Hear themes of love and compassion feature prominently because our contribution to the world will be very positive if our body, speech, and mind act out of loving and compassionate attitudes.

Making a positive contribution does not mean everything or everyone will turn out how we want them to be. We can feel good about our motivation and rejoice in contributing, regardless of the results, which are subject to many causes and conditions beyond our control. This kind of attitude helps us remain more peaceful as we relate to things and people in our life, including ourselves because we have happy and positive motivations for doing the things we do. Developing our mind and heart is a great way to repay the kindness of sentient beings because the more we are able to act with kind, clear, and wise motivations, the more beneficial our actions become in the short and long term. ☸

November 12

Counteracting Negativities

What should we do when we have been doing something we know is not so good, but part of us does not want to stop? It is amazing how we can rationalise our behaviour in such a way that it appears neutral or even good. It is that kind of mind that makes us feel that the precepts are imposed from outside and the kind of mind that makes us feel guilty because we are not in harmony with ourselves. At times like these, we need to really look inside of ourselves and draw on our wisdom by asking, “The Buddha was omniscient, so why did he say this is something to be abandoned?” Go into this question with a very open, spacious mind, and not one that is already feeling guilty and self-critical. Then we can reflect on how we feel about ourselves after we do the behavior and how we relate to other people. We should look at the long-term effect of the behaviour on the bodies and minds of ourselves and others within the context of this life.

In my work with inmates, the big “ah-ha” moment for them is realising, “My actions have results on other people and on me, in the short-term and the long-term.” We on the outside are probably glad these inmates finally recognised that their actions have harmful results, but how much do we look at the effects of our bad actions? Our motivations are also important because even actions that do not cause physical harm can harm us mentally by increasing our cravings, anger, laziness, resentment, etc. A sign that our good motivations are not so good is when we do not feel at ease inside.

The next thing we can do is look at the kind of karma we are creating for our future lives. Our motivation is the chief factor that determines whether our karma is virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral, as well as its strength. We can ponder for a while and ask ourselves if we want to experience these results in a future life. We can also ask, “Is this behaviour conducive to liberation? Would I want the Buddha — the one whom I am taking refuge in, the one I trust more than anything else — to be doing this behaviour?” If our answer is “no,” we can conclude that the behaviour or thought pattern is not in alignment with our deepest spiritual yearning for liberation.

When we have the force of seeing the disadvantage of something through our wisdom, it becomes much easier to generate antidotes because our mind does not have all this rubbish about guilt and rebellion because somebody else is telling us what to do. Rather it is, “I want to be happy and respect my own spiritual goals, so I want to change.” We may not be able to let the behaviour go right away, but if we can stop justifying or rationalising the behaviour and start familiarising ourselves with our wisdom in daily meditation practice, our minds will change and start wanting to abandon the behaviour. This wisdom will also help us make a strong determination not to do the behaviour in the future. 🍄



November 13

Mindfulness

The Buddha spoke a lot about mindfulness. It is an important mental factor to develop, we need to understand it in the proper context. In our practice, we are aiming for liberation. We want to be free of all unsatisfactory conditions and their causes. This involves developing wisdom and understanding the nature of our reality. Mindfulness plays a big part in that. It is necessary for developing ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom, as well as for remembering our long-term goals.

In terms of ethical conduct, we need to be mindful of what kind of actions, words, and thoughts we want our body, speech, and mind to be engaged in and to be mindful of what actions our body, speech, and mind are actually engaged in. That way we can monitor our behaviour, checking to see if we are acting according to our aspirations. We try to be mindful during the day of what we are doing and saying, what we are thinking and feeling. Simply being aware is not enough. When we notice a corrupted mental state, harmful action or negative words, we need to apply the antidote and bring our mind, our body and speech back in line with our goals.

Being aware and directing our body, speech, and mind in a positive direction for the purpose of liberation and awakening is a tall order to do daily on a moment-to-moment basis. The body and speech do not move without the mind moving. In other words, the mind is the root of all actions. Nonetheless, it is easier to correct the harmful actions of the body and speech first. It is good to start focusing our mindfulness on them, particularly in our speech. Speech is a powerful tool that can bring devastation or benefit, so it is important to be careful with what we say. Let us practise being aware of what we are saying, why we are saying it, how we are saying it, how much we are speaking, and what topics we speak on. Let us remember that our motivation in speaking is to benefit ourselves and others. By practising in this way, our mindfulness grows and takes us step by step towards our goal of liberation and awakening. 🙏

November 14

Clear Communication

One way that we manifest our compassion and attitude towards others is by trying to be clear in our communications. This is sometimes difficult because in our minds, we are not very clear, even though we think we might be. However, later we realise that we are not. Let us try as much as possible, as a manifestation of compassion, to be clear in the sense of saying what we mean, of thinking things through before we speak, and when we are not clear, of acknowledging it and apologising afterwards. This is a way of cultivating transparency and being open, and showing our care and concern for other living beings. 🙏

November 15

The Bodhisattva Path

When you start on the Bodhisattva path, you want to have the identity of one who wants to be of service to whoever is in front of you at that very moment. It is not an identity like a career that we can say, “I am a this. I am a that.” You work certain hours and then after you come home from work, you are different and do not use those skills or talents or have that identity. Rather, when practising on the Bodhisattva path, that “identity” of being of benefit in whatever situation we are in, to whomever we are with, is something that is ongoing, and it assumes different ways at different times.

Sometimes the benefit we show is smiling at somebody, sometimes it is by working on a particular project, sometimes it is by writing something, and sometimes it is by talking with somebody. It is developing a sensitivity of how to be of benefit and then using that in whatever situation arises. That becomes our new “identity” or “career”. It is not something that is only eight hours a day. We want to practise in such a way that it automatically becomes who we are, how we engage and relate to every situation that we are in. Of course, this takes a great deal of training over years. But it provides us with skills to be in this world and wisdom on how to use the variety of skills that we have as human beings. 🌱



November 16

Ensuring a Good Rebirth

Our spiritual goals fall into two camps. The first is “high status”, meaning upper rebirth, and the second is “definite goodness”, meaning attaining liberation or full awakening for Mahayana practitioners. The two are related because chances are we would not attain full awakening in this lifetime and thus need to create a series of good rebirths. Our principal goal is definite goodness, but the most imminent thing is ensuring we get a good rebirth so we can continue practising the Dharma.

When we first meet the Dharma, many want to go directly to definite goodness and skip over karma, but taking shortcuts can get us into trouble. Faith is the cause of good rebirth, and wisdom is the cause of definite goodness. Faith refers to belief in the law of karma or the functioning of our actions and their results. Understanding karma is not obvious at this stage, so we need to cultivate faith in the Buddha and scriptures that encourage us to keep good ethical conduct leading to good rebirths. There are sixteen factors we should bring into our practice for upper rebirth, including abstaining from the ten non-virtues and the three “blameworthy actions to abandon”, while practising three other factors.

The first blameworthy action is taking intoxicants, which often leads to bad decisions and mental fuzziness that makes it difficult to meditate. The second blameworthy action is wrong livelihood, which for lay practitioners includes making or selling armaments, poisons, intoxicants, pornography, or doing anything else that damages others, such as deceiving or cheating clients and customers. Harming others is the third blameworthy action to abandon. This could be harming others physically, short of killing them, like beating them up or giving them a disease through unprotected sex, or harming them emotionally.

The first of three things to practise is “respectful giving”, or making offerings to those who are worthy. Our preceptors, Dharma teachers, people who set

good examples for us, and all sentient beings, in general, are worthy of our generosity. We can be generous by providing material goods, protecting others from danger, loving and supporting people in need, and sharing the Dharma with others.

Next is “honouring those who are worthy of honour”, such as our preceptors and Dharma teachers. We can even pay respect to people who are not our Dharma teachers but who knows more than we do, people with many excellent qualities, or those who create a lot of virtue. The third thing to practise is “love”, which refers to the four immeasurables of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Practising these make our minds joyful and improves our relationships. They also make it easier to practise the preceding factors by changing our attitude and lessening some of our very gross afflictions. ☸



November 17

Trying to Help

I remember once when Lama Yeshe came to the Centre where I was living and he started to ask me about what one person was doing. I did not think it was so good, but I thought, “I don’t want to talk badly about this person behind his back, especially to my teacher, because he is going to think all I am doing is criticising somebody behind their back.” I just kind of waffled and expressed my discomfort. Lama called me on it, and he said, “I need to know what is going on so that I can help these people. If you do not tell me what is going on, I will not be able to help them.” That was a big thing for me to learn. There are situations where you should say that somebody did something negative to someone who actually wants to help them. We do not just let bad situations keep going on and on out of fear of ourselves looking like we are gossiping, creating disharmony, or criticising. We should get our own motivation clear about why we are saying this about somebody else, or why we are asking questions about somebody else. If our motivation is clear, and it is to benefit somebody, then we need to communicate about certain things. We should be very clear that there are certain situations when we have to say things, and by not saying things, it is damaging.

We have to be wise in this and not go to the other extreme and just talk, “This person is negative about this, and this person is..., and they all have problems, and they are all screwed up,” and the result is that I am the only sane one who is the best of all. No, that is creating disharmony. It is also idle talk.

We must watch this because sometimes it is very tempting, especially if a small group of people gang up on one person. It can happen in the workplace or in the family, where everybody talks negatively about that one person behind his back to get everybody else together. That certainly is not good for anybody. If your motivation is to get the person you are speaking to, to turn against someone or to separate people, then it would become a non-virtue of creating disharmony. ☹️

Selflessness

We might think we are all the elements put together with consciousness — the combination of the aggregates. But if none of these parts is the person, how can you come up with a person by putting a bunch of non-persons together? That would be like putting six oranges together and getting a banana, it is not going to work. Part of your mind may say, “Well, if we arrange all the parts in a specific way, that will be ME.” But even if the parts are put together in a certain way, they are still a bunch of things that are not persons. The only conclusion is that the person does not exist inherently. In other words, there is no inherently existent person.

This insight has a powerful impact on you when you notice how you think you exist, and how the “I” appears. You start with a clear perception of the object of negation and how strongly you feel it exists, so when you realise that you do not exist in any of those ways, there is the feeling, “My goodness, everything I have based my whole life on is not there.” If we look, day in and day out we are basing our lives on the assumption that there is a real me. And because there is a real me, I have a right to pursue the things that make me happy, and I have a right to clobber people and things that interfere with my happiness. There are people who are better than I am, so I am jealous of them. There are people who are worse than I am, so I am arrogant towards them. If I do not feel like doing something, I just will not. The rationale for all the afflictions centre around this idea of there being a findable person who must be protected and is entitled to every happiness in the universe without compromising anything.

It can be surprising when you realise that the basis upon which we do everything in life is not findable. But it is a good kind of a surprise because if there is no inherently existent person, there is nobody you must defend when someone criticises you. Whose reputation are you going to be worried about if you cannot find anything solid or concrete? You can also dissect your reputation by thinking about the selflessness of phenomena. A reputation is just other people’s opinions, and of what value? Can you even find their opinions, and do they ever change?

How long do their opinions last? Then we realise, “What am I getting so upset about?” When you think about death, you will not have to freak out because you can see that there is no solid, concrete person that is going to die. In this way, we can begin to see how understanding emptiness can really relieve us of the pain caused by the afflictions. ☸



November 19

Our Words Can Keep Us from Joyous Effort

Joyous effort, or enthusiasm as it is sometimes translated from the Tibetan term “sundro”, is important for our Dharma practice as well as our regular life practice. With joyous effort, the mind is in a good mood, is eager and ready to go, and is happy about what you are doing. You feel satisfied after you have done something and rejoice that you have created virtue and have something to dedicate. You are happy to keep going, but also know how to pace yourself and when to rest.

In contrast, we frequently hear people in modern society say, “I’m overwhelmed.” We seem to think we know what we mean when we say this, but do we ever dissect how it feels to be overwhelmed or where the feeling comes from? Is it the situation that is overwhelming, or is it just the mind saying, “I feel overwhelmed?” I know for myself that as soon as I say, “I feel overwhelmed,” the whole paradigm shifts to, “It is all too much, do not ask anything more from me, I cannot do it. Stop pushing and leave me alone, thank you very much.” It is interesting how I have plenty of energy to stand my ground, dig in my heels, and have a pity party, but no energy to do whatever it is that I feel overwhelmed by.

Another popular expression is, “I need my own space”. Do we mean physical space or mental space? Can somebody else give us mental space, or do we need to give ourselves mental space? We all want “my space” but what exactly is this? Reflecting in this way helps us to understand our mind better, and allows us to see how using certain words and expressions changes our whole experience. In this way, our experiences are not coming from the outside, but rather the words we use to describe them. Therefore, you can have a situation in which one person feels overwhelmed, another person needs his own space, and another person has joyous effort. It is good to think about which words would accompany joyous effort. 🍵

November 20

Karma, Causes and Effects

We live amid this interconnected web of cause and effect in which we are experiencing the results of our previous actions, and at the same time creating the causes for our future experiences. If we can hold this view of how things work in our minds, it helps us to understand our lives and makes us much more attentive to what we are thinking, feeling, saying and doing.

With this view, we realise that we are not just something that popped out of nowhere without causes. Causes and conditions influenced and created what we are. We are not an independent entity that simply comes about without causes and conditions. And our identity that we are so convinced we are, that too is created by causes and conditions, by karma. So, do not take that identity too seriously. It is just a karmic bubble that exists for a few years and then disappears.

At the same time, because what we say, do, think, and feel influence what we become in the future, it is very important to take care of our physical, verbal, and mental actions. If we really care about ourselves, then we will take care of the karma we create because we understand that it is silly to wish for happiness and yet create the causes for suffering. On the other hand, if we want happiness, we know what we need to do to bring about it, so we will engage in those actions. We will take responsibility and deliberately train our body, speech and mind in such a way that they create the causes for happiness. Seeing ourselves as something that is a product of the past and that creates the causes for the future helps us to have a more accurate view of what is going on in our lives. It makes us much more mindful. ☁

November 21

Words on Refuge from Our Teachers

Geshe Sopa never messes around. He scares our self-centeredness in a very nice way. “Living in the bottomless ocean of samsara (the situation we are in) My body is devoured by the sea monsters of insatiable desire (endless desires of I do not want it like that, I want it like this) and other afflictions (endless anger, irritation, confusion arising). Where can I go for refuge today?” He says, “The ocean of samsara is boundless in depth. When you live there, you are eaten up by desire, hatred, and other mental afflictions, just like a small creature is devoured by crocodiles. Beginning immediately, take refuge to be protected from them.”

At the Abbey, we do this beautiful prayer twice a month to renew our refuge and our precepts: *“From beginningless time until the present, in my attempt to find happiness (which is what everyone is doing), I have been taking refuge, but the things I rely upon have not been able to bring me the lasting state of peace and joy that I seek. I have taken refuge in material possessions (if we do not feel good, we go out and buy something, or go to our comfy little home and close the door and shut everybody out, or go for a ride in our new car). I have taken refuge in money, status, reputation, approval, praise, food, sex, music, and a myriad of other things. Then (and this is the key piece) these things have given me some temporal pleasure (We acknowledge that. There is nothing wrong with that. Enjoy all you want. We are here to be happy. If it is responsible.) But they lack the ability in themselves to bring me the lasting happiness. Why? Because they are transient and do not last long. My attachment to these things has in fact made me more dissatisfied, anxious, confused, frustrated, and fearful.”* Think about that.

Pema Chodron wrote, *“Taking refuge in the Dharma is traditionally taking refuge in the teachings of the Buddha. The teachings of the Buddha are ‘Let go and open to your world. Realise that trying to protect your own territory, trying to keep yourself enclosed and safe is fraught with misery and suffering. It will keep you in a very small, dank, smelly, introverted world that gets more and more claustrophobic and more and more misery-producing as you get older.”*

These words are for our benefit. They help us understand where we are at and how to get to where we want to go. They are a gift, just like the gift the Buddha gave to all sentient beings. Enjoy and learn. 🙏



November 22

Question Our Thoughts

Somebody is really sunk in a very deep depression and a lot of self-loathing. Is that an effect of karma? Is karma at play? There are multiple things going on. One factor might be karma. It could be in a previous life we harmed others and we made other people feel fearful. As a result, we have a tendency towards that mental state in this life. Also, it is how we are actively thinking in this life. When we come up with these unrealistic thoughts and we do not question them and we believe them, then we are letting our minds go. There may be a tendency and then we jump in and push it along. That is why it is so important to stop and say, “Is what I’m thinking true or not?” A lot of times, the idea in our mind is rubbish. We are not bad people because we have rubbish thinking. We are just confused people who are trying to be happy. We can give ourselves some compassion and kindness. “You are trying to be happy, but those thoughts are certainly not serving your purpose and they are not true. I have got to let go of those thoughts because they are only thoughts. They are not reality.”

What is a thought? It is an interesting question. It is just some energy. It is nothing tangible. Thinking something does not mean it is real. It does not mean it is true. The really nice thing about meeting the Dharma and being an adult: we can assess what is true and what is not. When we were little kids, we did not have that ability, and whatever adults told us we took it in and believed. But adults are confused sometimes. We need to question a lot of these things that we imbibed when we were kids and really see, “Is this true/ is it not true?” If it is not true, let us throw it out and not let it control our minds and not let it control how we live our lives. Instead of letting them stay around like murky goo in the bottom of our minds, shine the flashlight down. Take out those thoughts and go, “Is that true or not? Rubbish! Throw it out!”

Like the statement, “I made such a horrible mistake. Nobody will ever speak to me again.” Okay, so I made a mistake. Is it the most horrible mistake in the

world? No. Is it true that nobody is going to speak to me again because I did that? No. Is there a way I can purify my mistake and let that go? Yes. Then let us do that. We do purification practice. That is a much better way to live our life as opposed to letting all these incorrect thoughts shape our experience. 🍃



November 23

My Religion is Kindness

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, “My religion is a kind heart.” He is pointing to something universal in all religions and he is pointing beyond the form or the theology into actual practice. While the actual practice may be based on philosophy or theology, the actual transformation of the mind is something that occurs in the heart. It is something that we have to practise to be able to bring it about, for words alone will not do it.

When he is saying, “My religion is kindness,” he is really encouraging us to go inside and develop equanimity, love, compassion, joy and forgiveness, and in that way, transform our hearts. He is not just talking about regular kindness, and being nice to people, he is also talking about the loving-kindness and the compassion that leads to the altruistic intentions of the bodhicitta. While kindness towards people in this life is good, it is only kindness in this life. We will not have the big mind to think broadly and have an attitude of kindness wishing others well in all their future lives, wishing them the happiness and skills, and abilities that full awakening brings. Let us have a big mind when it comes to thinking of what kindness is and think of the long-term as well as the short-term. 🙏

November 24

Giving Thanks vs Feeling Entitled

The purpose of Thanksgiving is to be thankful for all the people and things we have in our lives. Yet our self-centred mind can sabotage this purpose when we think that people should thank us because we are so generous, so kind, so benevolent, so helpful, and so ethical. We never lie, and we never deceive anybody, so everyone should be thankful to have us in their lives. Our egos may go through Thanksgiving Day, and perhaps the rest of the year, with a sense of entitlement. “Everybody should give me everything and do everything I want because I am so great, and when I do the slightest little thing, they should fawn all over me with thank you’s and appreciation and praise.” This kind of mind creates a lot of suffering because it is a bottomless pit that could always yearn more praise and appreciation. Wanting more and better and more and better just breeds a lot of unhappiness because we can never get enough. This attitude also breeds a mind that cannot really see the appreciation that is already given to us.

Once I was working with someone and experienced this kind of thanksgiving mind. I told him that I felt he was not thanking me enough, and he explained that the way he thanks people is by doing small helpful things, not by saying “thank you” or offering verbal praise. Because I had wanted the verbal stuff, I had not noticed the small helpful things he had done. Sometimes people are being kind to us but we do not notice it because we are so fixated on our agenda.

The purpose of Thanksgiving is really to contemplate the interdependence of all sentient beings and how kind others have been to us, no matter what job they do in society or how we benefit from it. We can use the day to develop gratitude for all the sentient beings that have been as kind to us as our mothers and wish to repay that kindness. We know from our own experiences that we feel lousy when we are waiting for other people to be grateful for us, but our heart feels very joyful when we feel gratitude. A verse in the Guru Puja talks about how the Buddhas cherish others while we cherish ourselves, and how much happier Buddhas are than us. Let us keep our Thanksgiving meditation on gratitude going the rest of the year and see how our mind transforms into a happier one. ☁

November 25

Our Motivation for Eating

We always start with the motivation — why are we going to eat? At the Abbey, we recite the five contemplations from the Chinese Buddhist tradition before eating. *“I contemplate all the causes and conditions and the kindness of others by which I have received this food.” “I contemplate my practice, constantly trying to improve it.” “I contemplate my mind, cautiously guarding it from wrongdoing, greed, and other defilements.” “I contemplate this food, treating it as wondrous medicine to nourish my body.” “I contemplate the aim of Buddhahood, accepting and consuming this food in order to accomplish it.”*

The last two particularly remind us why we are eating: *“I contemplate this food, treating it as wondrous medicine to nourish my body.”* We eat to nourish our bodies and maintain our lives, not for pleasure or to impress other people with our bodies. Seeing the food as medicine reminds us that we are nourishing ourselves, though it is not the only reason we eat: *“I contemplate the aim of Buddhahood, accepting and consuming this food in order to accomplish it.”* We fulfill the short-term goal of keeping our bodies alive and healthy for the long-term goal of practicing the path of attaining full awakening, for the benefit of all sentient beings. Saying these contemplations before eating every day is like making a commitment — benefactors offered food to the Abbey out of the kindness of their hearts because they believe in what we are doing, and we have the commitment to them and to all sentient beings to progress on the path to full awakening for their benefit. Remembering our motivation for eating is a great example of applying bodhicitta to our everyday activities. 🍲

November 26

Eating Mindfully

The first three of the five contemplations we use at the Abbey provide us with the right attitude towards the food we are about to eat. *“I contemplate my mind, cautiously guarding it from wrongdoing, greed, and other defilements.”* Examples of wrongdoing while eating would be taking two pieces of food when there are ten people and only ten pieces or taking huge portions so people later in the food line do not get any. Whenever the sangha is given offerings, we should not take a second serving until everyone else has been served.

The mind of greed is something to really watch when we eat. We may take a moderate portion at first but still, be checking other people’s bowls to make sure we can go back and get seconds before they can. *“Cautiously guarding our minds against other defilements”*, refers to the complaining mind that says, “I wish they had made something I like” or “They should have put more/less salt in this food” or “I need more protein/carbs/sugar/caffeine, etc”. We make it our practice to accept whatever is served, even though sometimes it may not accord with our taste buds or digestive systems. Of course, if you are getting sick by eating something, hopefully other people will notice and comment to the cook on your behalf that you are getting very thin and consider cooking something different. But let us face it, no matter what is served it is not going to be exactly what we want to eat that day. It is impossible for the cook to make something that everybody is going to be happy with. It is much nicer to be glad that somebody cooked today and saved us from having to eat PB&J because we are too lazy to make something else. 🍌

November 27

Eating with Gratitude

At the Abbey, we say: *“I contemplate all the causes and conditions and the kindness of others by which I have received this food.”* The original Chinese version does not include “the kindness of others”. It was added because it becomes very obvious when you eat, that food comes from others. Benefactors provide our food at the Abbey, but even as a layperson you are dependent on others for your food. It is planted, harvested, processed, and transported by others. Even if the food comes from our garden, we usually have to buy the seeds and have others help us take care of it. People who eat meat particularly should have a sense of gratitude for the beings that gave their whole lives for their breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

Thinking about causes and conditions can include thinking about the karma that we created so we now have food that can be offered to the Three Jewels. In developed countries, we tend to take the presence of food on the table for granted, which should not be the case. It depends on many causes and conditions in this lifetime, like transportation, easy access to food, and the absence of war. It also depends on our having created the causes to receive the food through previous acts of generosity like sharing food with others. Thinking like this helps us reflect on whether we are being generous in our current life and creating the causes to have food and drink in the future.

“I contemplate my own practice, constantly trying to improve it”: We choose to focus on the purpose of the line, which is getting us to improve our practice. We need to ask ourselves if we are keeping our precepts well and upholding our part of the bargain with our donors who offer us food. Along this line, the Pali canon talks about four groups of people who receive the requisites of food, shelter, clothing, and medicine. Those who do not keep their precepts well yet receive offerings are like thieves, getting what is not theirs. Those who keep their precepts but do not yet have realisations are like debtors taking out a loan so that they can eventually gain realisations. Stream enterers, once-returners, and non-returners are those who partake of their inheritance because they have not yet achieved liberation

but it is in sight because of their realisation of emptiness. Arhats, Buddhas, and eighth, ninth, and tenth-level Bodhisattvas eat the food like owners because they have completed the path and are entirely worthy of the food. 🍽️



November 28

Homage to the Three Jewels: Verses Said Before Meals

“Great compassionate Protector, All-knowing Teacher, Field of merit and good qualities vast as an ocean — To the Tathagata, I bow.” This verse pays homage to the Buddha, who out of compassion taught us how to protect our minds from the afflictions that result in karma, suffering, and rebirth. Because of his vast spiritual attainments, any actions we do in relation to the Buddha become extremely potent. Contemplating verses extolling the Buddha’s good qualities can immensely expand our self-image and life purpose when we consider our potential to develop these qualities.

The next verse pays homage to the Dharma Jewel — the true paths and true cessations that actually liberate our mind: *“Through purity, freeing from attachment; Through virtue, freeing from the lower realms; Unique, supreme ultimate reality — To the Dharma that is peace, I bow.”* Purity refers to the true path of wisdom realising emptiness, which stops rebirth altogether by uprooting ignorance while creating virtue preventing lower rebirths. *“Unique, supreme ultimate reality”* refers to the true cessation, or nirvana, which is the emptiness of the mind that has eliminated all afflictions and cognitive obscurations.

The Sangha Jewel refers to Aryas who have realised emptiness directly and non-conceptually at the Path of Seeing: *“Having freed themselves showing the path to freedom, too, well established in the trainings. The holy field endowed with good qualities, to the Sangha I bow.”* Aryas can be either lay or ordained persons following any of the three vehicles: hearer, solitary realiser, or Bodhisattva. Aryas have freed themselves from uncontrolled rebirth in samsara and can lead others to freedom. The Sangha embodies the three higher trainings of ethics, concentration and wisdom, having integrated them into their mind streams.

Like the Buddha, the Sangha is a field of merit. The real holy field is the Arya Sangha who are completely reliable because of their realisations, but they are represented by a community of four or more fully ordained people. Making

offerings to the Sangha creates a lot of merits because the monastic community has the very special role of inspiring people, protecting and preserving the teachings, and trying to embody them. The Sangha is essential to helping the Dharma become rooted, grow, and spread in any given country. 🙏



November 29

Offering Our Food

We pay homage to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha by saying the offering verse:

*To the supreme teacher, the precious Buddha,
To the supreme refuge, the holy precious Dharma,
To the supreme guides, the precious Sangha,
To all the objects of refuge, we make this offering.*

Everything, the whole lineage, comes from the Buddha, our supreme teacher. All the teachers we have had, starting with our parents, have contributed immensely to our well-being, but none have the ability to lead us out of the unsatisfactory state of samsara to full awakening. The Dharma refuge of true cessations and true paths is what liberates our mind and turns it into our real refuge. Unlike other religions where refuge objects are always outside and you can only approach them, in Buddhism we become the actual refuge objects, starting with actualising the Dharma on the Path of Seeing. We become part of the Sangha refuge and become the Buddha refuge when our mind is fully purified. The Sangha guides, encourages and inspires us. We can learn a lot from texts, but we can also learn a lot by observing the Sangha to see how the Dharma is lived and practiced on a daily basis.

When we are doing the homage to the Three Jewels, we imagine in the space before us the Buddha surrounded by all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and Dharma scriptures on little tables. With the offering, we imagine offering goddesses coming to scoop up the blissful wisdom nectar and taking it to the merit field in the space in front of us. I like to imagine offering the blissful wisdom nectar to all sentient beings in addition to the Three Jewels. When we do our chanting at the Abbey, we have our palms together because we serve ourselves in a food line. But in a regular meal situation, you put your hands on the plate when you do the offering and imagine that you are lifting it up and offering blissful wisdom nectar to the Buddha. 🙏

November 30

Dedication Verses

After offering our food to the Three Jewels, we dedicate the merit with this verse: *“May we and all those around us never be separated from the Triple Gem in any of our lives. May we always have the opportunity to make offerings to them. And may we continuously receive their blessings and inspiration to progress along the path.”*

It is difficult to have any kind of guiding light about how to live a good and meaningful life if we are born in a place where we would not meet the Dharma. Our minds are always running after the ten non-virtues and ignorance, anger, and attachment, and we probably would not have any awareness of them without the Dharma to point them out to us.

We can appreciate our families and teachers who taught us certain ethical standards, but most people are not taught to see the afflictions as something to be totally abandoned, or how to create virtue and avoid non-virtue through our motivations. Before I met the Dharma, there was something wrong with other people’s greed and anger, but in general, my anger was necessary and important so people would not walk all over me. As far as attachment, that is what I was raised to do — I was supposed to consume, fall in love, have a good reputation, and show off to my friends. You are actually abnormal in our society if you do not do these things, and selfishness is only bad if you have so much of it that other people notice. Ignorance was just voting for the wrong political party.

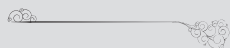
The second thing we dedicate to is to have future opportunities to make offerings to the Three Jewels, which are an incredible field of merit because of their spiritual attainments. This includes having a mind that likes to give because the most important thing when we are giving is our motivation. Blessings and inspiration are translations of the Tibetan word “jin lab” which means to “transform into magnificence”. Two conditions must come together for our mind to be blessed — our receptivity and the awakening influence of the Buddhas.

Blessing is not like being hit on the head with a lightning bolt, nor is it a free ticket that erases whatever harm we have done. We are blessed if we are receptive to the awakening energy of the holy beings while doing our practice.

“By seeing this food as medicine, I will consume it without attachment or complaint, not to increase my arrogance, strength, or good looks, but solely to sustain my life.” As with the five contemplations, we remember that food is like medicine nourishing our body so that we are able to practise the Dharma. We are not eating to maximise our happiness, or build our muscles or flaunt how privileged we are that we can afford to eat organic food. We eat without attachment or complaint so we can become fully awakened buddhas and help others attain buddhahood as well. It is easy to tune out these prayers because we say them every day, so it is good to lock our attention onto each word and think of its meaning. 🍃



December



*The Middle Way is
the great “Pearl of Wisdom”*



December 1

How and What to Eat

We should always eat with presence and be aware of our food. The key is to feel satisfaction and contentment while eating instead of craving, restlessness, or dissatisfaction. We are vegetarian at the Abbey, and more people in the United States, Europe and Australia are also becoming vegetarian. A Buddhist reason for being vegetarian is to avoid killing animals, but others do it for health reasons, out of compassion for farm animals which are raised and slaughtered in inhumane conditions or to be kinder to the environment since cattle manure produces a lot of methane and a lot of lands are taken up to raise livestock. His Holiness recommends that people who do eat meat to eat larger animals because many meals can be served for one life lost. His Holiness is a part-time vegetarian for health reasons, but when he eats meat, he says a mantra to bless the animal for giving up its life and makes dedication prayers for the animal to have a good rebirth and to be able to practise the Dharma well and lead that particular being to awakening.

Sometimes people think being a vegetarian is not healthy, but it is quite possible to learn to eat wisely and be healthy on a vegetarian diet. You take vitamins and learn how to get your protein. One person who came to the Abbey was quite upset that we are not vegan and do not eat only organic produce. I explained that we eat eggs that are not fertilised because eating fertilised eggs involves killing. But organic food is more expensive, as are eggs from free-range chickens and milk from naturally grazing cows. If you are a private party and can afford these foods, it is better. But renunciants only eat the food that is offered to us and we do not like telling people we want all this expensive food that they would even not buy for themselves.

If we are eating to practise the Dharma, we should take care of our health by eating a balanced diet with not too much sugar, salt, oil, or carbs and keeping a healthy weight as best as we can. Being healthy and energetic brings a much greater sense of contentment than stuffing yourself full of cookies. 🍪

December 2

After Meal Dedications

After lunch, at the Abbey, we make an offering to the hungry ghosts. We do this because the Buddha promised one mother hungry ghost that his disciples would feed her and her children every day if she would stop stealing human babies to feed to her children. We snap our fingers to call the pretas, throw the food onto the table or floor, and imagine all the pretas coming and being completely satisfied (we put the offerings outside after the meal). To purify any mistakes we have made in our precepts, we chant some verses in Tibetan.

Then we dedicate for the well-being and spiritual progress of the people who donated the food, and to the rest of the humans in the world, including those who may have harmed us. *“May all those who scold me, make me unhappy, hit me, attack me with weapons, or do things up to the point of killing me attain the happiness of awakening. May they attain full awakening to the unsurpassed, perfectly accomplished state of Buddhahood.”*

This is difficult, but as Dharma practitioners on the receiving end of offerings, we must change our resentful attitude that views some people as enemies. We wish those who harm us the happiness of awakening because they are the unhappiest, and in the process, we also give up our victim mentality. The worst people can do is to kill us, but our real enemies are our negative actions because only they can make us take a lower rebirth. 🙏

December 3

The Merit of Offering Food and Drink

“By the merit of offering food, may they have a good complexion, magnificence, and strength. May they find foods having hundreds of tastes and live with the food of samadhi.”

Here we wish that our benefactors be physically attractive, perhaps by practicing fortitude, have magnificent qualities that allow them to succeed in virtuous projects, and have physical and mental strength.

A strong mind is one that does not crumble and remains composed in the face of adversity, criticism, or stress. We often stress ourselves out unnecessarily over our to-do list because it gives us a big sense of self-importance. When I notice myself doing this, I reflect on the kind of decisions the President has to make, like declaring war, and the karmic weight they carry. Then my piddly-dunk stuff seems rather manageable.

“Food with hundreds of tastes” was the optimum you could have in classical Indian texts in regard to food, and I assume it means a hundred good tastes. Samadhi is also food because concentration nourishes not only the mind but also the body. In deep concentration, your mind is so focused that your body needs very little food. The Tibetans make pills out of flowers and herbs called “culen” (meaning “taking the essence”) which really advanced meditators can subsist on when they do not want to be disturbed.

The next dedication verse is, *“By the merit of offering drink, may their afflictions, hunger, and thirst be pacified. May they possess good qualities such as generosity and take a rebirth without any sickness or thirst.”* Often in the scriptures, “hunger” and “thirst” stand for craving all kinds of external things, like sensory stimulation and ego-pleasing words. This kind of thirst drives most of our actions during the day and a lot of our choices. In this country, we think that going online and ordering whatever we want in five seconds is freedom, but we are actually being controlled by the power of our cravings. Imagine what our lives would be like without craving if whatever we had was “good enough, dear” as Lama Yeshe used to say. We are wishing

that our benefactors have the confidence that they are a valuable person simply because of their Buddha potential and that their life is meaningful no matter the state of their body. They still should practise for their craving to be subdued, but prayers can really help them if they create the fundamental cause.

We end the verse by wishing that our benefactors continue to have generosity and other far-reaching qualities, as well as qualities like love, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness. Taking a rebirth without sickness or thirst applies to both the body and mind since the mind can be sick with anger, greed, and other afflictions and constantly thirsting for fulfillment and satisfaction. 🙏



December 4

The Emptiness of Giving

The next dedication verse is: *“The one who gives, the one who receives, and the generous action are not to be observed as truly existent. By giving with impartiality, may the benefactors attain perfection.”* When we dedicate merit, we seal it with emptiness, which means that we see the whole thing as empty of inherent existence. The whole process of giving is a dependent arising because the giver, the receiver, and the act of giving are mutually dependent on each other for their (conventional) existence. They do not exist as independent things that happen to collide in space. It is very nice to seal the generosity, whether you are on the giving or receiving side.

“Giving with impartiality” could also be translated as giving with equanimity, recognising that everything is equal in terms of being empty of inherent existence. Impartiality is also a reference to a custom at the time of the Buddha whereby people would invite the monastics to their homes for a meal. Sometimes they could not feed the whole sangha, so they would invite only a certain number of members to come. They could not choose which members, however, since it was a practice of seeing all the monastics impartially instead of playing favourites. All monastics are equal in trying to keep their precepts and trying to practise. The sangha would decide who to send according to the ordination order, and the next in line would go to the next invitation. *“Perfection”* refers to full awakening through a realisation of emptiness, which we can develop by applying it to everything we do since there is always an agent, object, and action.

The next verse is: *“By the power of being generous, may they become Buddhas for the benefit of sentient beings, and through generosity, may all the beings who have not been liberated by previous conquerors be liberated.”* We are coming back to our bodhicitta motivation, where we are not just dedicating the merit for our own awakening, but also the awakening of others and the development of their good qualities through the power of their generosity. There have been countless beings who have attained liberation and full awakening before us, but we are still here because we like

going to the beach and going mountain climbing, being workaholics, drinking and drugging, and exalting in all our other distractions since beginningless time. We pray for the liberation and full awakening of all other beings like us, as well as the more unfortunate ones who do not even have a precious human life.

Sharing food is a great example of how we can use a simple action that we do many times a day to create incredible amounts of merit, generate the wisdom to understanding dependent arising and emptiness, cultivate an awareness of the kindness of other living beings, and make prayers and aspirations for their well-being in this life and beyond. 🙏



December 5

Dedicating for the Benefit of All Sentient Beings

The next verse of the dedication prayer is: *“By the merit of this generosity, may the Naga kings, gods having faith in the Dharma, leaders who support religious freedom, benefactors, and others living in the area live long, enjoy good health and prosperity, and attain lasting happiness.”* Nagas are a type of sentient being with a snake-like body. They tend to live in water or places near water like swamps. They are very intelligent and very clean and tidy. Not everyone can see them, but you want to have a good relationship with them. Nagarjuna is so-called because he went to the land of the Nagas to redeem the perfection of wisdom sutras, as the story goes.

“Gods having faith in the Dharma” refers to gods of the desire realm and form realm, who often like to listen to the teachings of the Buddha. There is a prayer you can do before teachings where you invite all the gods to come and listen. My Theravada friends say the little white dots that show up in photographs we take at the Abbey are gods. I am not always a big believer in these kinds of things, but anyone who has ever spent some time in our forest will agree there is some very special energy there. I think it is because of the gods and other spirits who share the space with us. We told them what we were doing when we moved there and made offerings to them before we broke ground for Chenrezig Hall. Regardless of whether we can see them or not, it is good to take care of other living beings rather than think, we, the human beings, are the rulers and everyone else just has to go along.

We dedicate to the welfare of all leaders and officials who believe in religious freedom and diversity since it is incredibly important in a multi-cultural society for people to be able to practise their religion without persecution. *“Benefactors”* refers to all the people who help the Abbey in many ways — monetarily, by volunteering, or through prayer and moral support. *“Others living in the area”* refers to our neighbours — those with whom we share the town, the air, and other natural resources. We have been able to establish wonderful relationships

with people in our community even though we may have very different political ideas. Freedom from illness and injuries, long lives, and material prosperity are some of the things that everyone wants, and we also wish them the mental satisfaction of feeling content with their lives. “*Lasting happiness*” refers to full awakening, and creating a karmic connection with our benefactors so we can continue leading them on the path in future lives.

The final verse is a very famous one from Nagarjuna’s “Precious Garland”: “*Due to this virtue, may all beings complete the collections of merit and wisdom. May they attain the two Buddha bodies resulting from merit and wisdom.*” Here we wish that the virtue that our benefactors helped us to create, will help all beings attain the form and truth bodies of a Buddha by practising the method aspect of the path (renunciation and bodhicitta) and the wisdom aspect (realising emptiness). 🙏



December 6

Working with Attachment to Food

There are a few ways to work with attachment to eating. One very effective way is thinking about what the food looks like after we have chewed it, as it goes through our digestive system, and out the other end. We can also think about its causes, like dirt and fertiliser, which we certainly do not consider appetising. This helps us see how food is not inherently existent food, nor is it inherently delicious. Offering our food to the Three Jewels also reduces attachment because we give it away and certainly would not want to be attached to what belongs to the Buddha.

Sometimes when people are new to the Dharma, it seems like food is their worst attachment. But they say that attachment to food is nothing compared to attachment to sex, reputation, love, praise, or approval. At one of the Western Buddhist Monastic gatherings, we were talking about the difficulties of training our minds. One Theravada monk talked about his attachment to mangoes while he was living in Thailand. I spoke next and said, “If working on my attachment to a mango was the biggest thing I had to do in my early years of training, that would have been a breeze. Instead, my teacher sent me to be the disciplinarian of macho Italian monks.” And then I talked about my desire for praise and approval while working with them, and not being blamed for things I did not do or having people write to my teacher to tell him that I was the worst thing that ever happened to the Dharma centre, simply because I wanted people to go to puja instead of work.

Focus on the kinds of attachment and anger that cause the most difficulties in your life, and gently work on your attachment to food. I have seen many people go to the extreme of not eating at all, which obviously is not healthy. Eating mindfully is very important, and there are many different ways to accomplish this. My friends at Cloud Mountain Retreat Center once told me that they could tell which Buddhist tradition was hosting a retreat there by the way people ate. The Zen people would walk in, sit down, chant, eat everything within five

minutes, chant, and leave. The Vipassana people would walk very slowly, being mindful of all their steps, and chew very slowly, being mindful of every bite, so their meal lasted about forty-five minutes to an hour. The Tibetans would walk in, pray, eat, finish, and leave, all at a normal pace.

We can see that different traditions have different practices for dealing with attachment. The Zen people eat very quickly because there is no time to be attached to the food, and everybody must finish at the same time, so you do not want to be the last one. The Vipassana people lose their attachment by chewing the food so long they get bored with the sensation and the taste. But since our motivation for eating is really the key thing, we can eat at a normal speed if we visualise that we are offering the food to the Buddha, who is sending light throughout our body. In the Chinese tradition, you are supposed to keep the five contemplations in mind throughout the meal, so they could also be called the five mindfulnesses. 🍵



December 7

Buddhist Precepts Regarding Food

The Buddha was completely against harsh ascetic practices like fasting. He had tried them himself during the six years before his awakening and had seen that an emaciated and starving body affected the clarity of the mind.

One kind of asceticism the Buddha did support was the monastic precept of not eating after midday and before the dawn of the next day. There are several reasons behind this precept, although not all Buddhist traditions follow it literally. The first reason is to minimise time spent walking back and forth to the village to gather alms. The second reason is out of consideration for the lay people who had to cook the food for the sangha. The third reason is to keep the mind alert for meditation, since eating heavy meals in the evening can make your mind dull and groggy. Lastly, the Buddha proscribed going on alms rounds at night because some monastics had fallen into cesspools or stepped in faeces in the dark, and they sometimes scared people who thought they were ghosts. This practice worked well in ancient India, where the food had a lot of substance and the Buddha did not prohibit eating meat. Also, the time between noon and the following dawn was not that long since India is near the equator.

Some things had to be modified when Buddhism moved to different cultures, climates and living situations. As vegetarians, Chinese Mahayana Buddhists felt that it was healthier to have three meals a day and called their evening meal “medicine meal”, though we should actually see all our food as medicine. A lot of the Chinese monastics also established monasteries in the mountains to avoid the politics of the cities, so they had to grow their own food. There are not a lot of fruits and vegetables in Tibet, so monastics there had the habit of eating lots of meat and dairy. His Holiness and some others have been working very hard to diminish the amount of meat eaten in the monasteries in India, though eating habits die hard. The Tibetan version of the Vinaya has some exceptions about eating after midday for those who are ill, under-nourished, those who have been traveling, and those who were caught in inclement weather.

Nowadays in America, most of us do not go on alms rounds, though some monasteries have organised alms rounds where they notified their supporters in advance (one even had to get a parade permit from the city council). It is ultimately up to each individual to decide how they keep the precepts about eating. I think it is good to be strict when you first take them, but if you run into health difficulties you can request the Buddha's permission to eat after noon and see the food as medicine. ☁



December 8

The Heart Connection Between Monastics and Laypeople

The practice of doing alms rounds set up a relationship of dependency between the sangha and the lay community in which the lay community provided food and the sangha gave Dharma teachings. We try to duplicate this economy of generosity in a more modern context at the Abbey. People bring food when they come for retreats, but the rest of the time our food is provided by a group of dedicated volunteers in Spokane and Coeur d'Alene who call us once a week and ask us what we need. We tell them what we need and they do the shopping, though we never call them to make requests. Supporters who live far away can also send money for food to our local supporters.

We have made a Dharma practice out of the food offering to remind ourselves of our interdependence and help donors create great merit. Our donors asked us to write a verse they could recite before shopping, which reads: *"Offering food sustains the lives of others. I delight in providing physical nourishment to the sangha knowing that their practice and the teachings they give as a result of it will nourish my heart and the hearts of many others. I will have a calm heart and mind while mindfully selecting appropriate items to offer and will have a deep sense of satisfaction knowing that the sangha appreciates this offering. We have a heart connection, and together we will create peace in a chaotic world."*

When the donors arrive, we put a portion of the food in a big alms bowl from Thailand and they recite, sometimes holding back tears: *"With a mind that takes delight in giving, I offer these requisites to the sangha and the community. Through my offering may they have the food they need to sustain their Dharma practice. They are genuine Dharma friends who encourage, support, and inspire me along the path. May they become realised practitioners and skilled teachers who will guide us on the path. I rejoice at creating great positive potential by offering to those intent on virtue, and dedicate this for the awakening of all sentient beings. Through my generosity, may we all have conducive circumstances to develop heartfelt love, compassion, and altruism for each other, and to realise the ultimate nature of reality."*

Then the sangha community recites in return: *“Your generosity is inspiring and we are humbled by your faith in the Three Jewels. We will endeavour to keep our precepts as best as we can, to live simply, to cultivate equanimity, love, compassion, and joy, and to realise the ultimate nature so that we can repay your kindness in sustaining our lives. Although we are not perfect, we will do our best to be worthy of your offering. Together we will create peace in a chaotic world.”* The Abbey has never had to buy any food since it opened in 2003 and we are very grateful to all our donors for their amazing generosity. 🍃



December 9

Healing the Body, Mind, and World with Bob Wilson

We are all interconnected and interdependent. Many of the beings that I have incarnated with in this life have struggled with achieving and maintaining healthy choices, which has caused immense suffering for them personally and their families. I weighed 400 pounds in the 8th grade. Finally, at 21, I said, “Holy petunias, I’ve got to do something.” That is when I lost all of my extra weight and I have maintained it ever since — I am now 65 and weigh 157. But that was the easy part.

To heal my mind, I cried out to life to help me and that is when Venerable Chodron came into my life. After teaching health education for 26 years, seeing 20 to 60 people every week, I can tell you that you literally become what you think, what you eat, and what you do. Your moment-by-moment choices shape your entire life, and it is all based on karma.

Venerable Chodron has mentioned that we are not really showing our family or friends that we love them if we do not take care of ourselves since they are directly affected by our disease and illness. My first relationship was not very healthy and after extensive spiritual practice and emotional healing, I found the companion I have been with for almost 20 years. We finally got married last year in Oregon. Though we do not always agree with one another, we have never had a fight because we use non-violent communication. We have lots of fresh food in our house and do not bring in any junk food. I left where I was working for 26 years with 750 hours of sick leave. We do strength training at the gym three days a week, which I have turned into a spiritual practice because doing those exercises is as exciting as watching paint dry. I say the mantra, do practices, and send healing energy to all the sick people in our sangha.

The principles Venerable Chodron has been teaching have totally changed my life and I have never missed a day of prayer and meditation in 43 years. My urge to compulsively overeat has not come back in 43 years and my urge to drink alcohol and take drugs has not come back in 28 years. I appreciate Venerable’s

hard work for the world and all the teachers who helped me heal the wounds my dear family was never able to heal. As we choose to eat healthy and pray for those struggling with emotional and physical distress, we are planting seeds for healing in the world. As I walk around the grocery store, I like to offer up the food to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, asking that they send out healing energies around the world. 🍃



December 10

Recognising Our Inner Beauty with Heather Duchscher

I was a pretty normal kid growing up in the 1970s. I was never overweight but still feared gaining weight. I was heavily into dieting by age 12, and I was anorexic by age 15, followed by bulimia in my later teens. I spent about two decades toddling back and forth between starving myself, binging, panicking and throwing out all the food in my house. I think ultimately what I was trying to do was be loved and to control what other people thought about me so that I felt good about myself.

By the time I was in my early 30s, I was physically very sick, very depressed, had pushed away my family, and was on my second marriage, which was heading for a divorce. Everything was crumbling, and I had a lot of despair and hopelessness. I hated myself for my eating disorder, but it was the way I had always coped with stress, and I did not know how else to be.

When I met the Dharma at 33, I connected immediately. Soon I was gobbling up all the Dharma books I could find at the library and listening to podcasts online. My relationships were still messy, and I was still struggling with my eating disorder, but I could tell something was changing. There was a little less attachment, a little less aversion, and a little less jealousy. I was finding more of my self-esteem, not tethered to food, what I looked like and whether people liked me. I realised the potential of what the Buddha said — for change, for eliminating all our suffering, for developing all our good qualities. I went on reading books and watching podcasts for about three or four years. I did not know a single Dharma practitioner and had not gone to any Dharma centres. Then in very rapid succession, five of my loved ones died. One of those deaths was particularly devastating, and all I could think about was how much time I had wasted counting calories and worrying about what I looked like instead of loving and caring for them.

It would have been easy to fall back into my old bad habits, but I had learnt enough of the Dharma at that point to know that there was a way out of suffering

and that I just had to practise to achieve it. I knew then that I had to get more serious about spiritual practice, which meant finding a teacher. Eventually, I connected with the Bodhisattva's Breakfast Corner, started taking the online SAFE course, and started going to the Abbey. Things really took off from there, particularly when I learnt in the SAFE course how to identify the afflictions in my mind, apply the antidotes, and create space between what I was experiencing and my response. I have spent years practising this and it has made an incredible difference. My identity is no longer wrapped up in food and what I look like, but in the beautiful potential that we have to transform our minds and create an environment for other people to do the same. I hope my experience is helpful to people who are struggling with similar problems or know somebody who is. 🍵



December 11

Starting Our Day

How do we cultivate a kind heart? It is not enough to tell ourselves that we should be nice, because telling ourselves what we should or should not be, feel or do does not make us become that way. Filling ourselves with “shoulds” often just makes us feel guilty because we are never what we think we should be. We need to know how to transform our minds. In other words, we must realise the disadvantages of being self-centred. We must truly want to develop a kind heart, not just keep thinking that we should develop a kind heart.

In the morning, when we first wake up, before getting out of bed, before thinking about what we will eat for breakfast or which unpleasant person we will see at the office, we can start the day by thinking, “Today, as much as possible I will not harm anybody. Today, as much as possible I will be of service and benefit to others. Today, I will do all actions so that I will become a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

Setting a positive motivation first thing in the morning is extremely beneficial. When we wake up, our mind is subtle and delicate. If we set a strong positive motivation at this time, there is a greater chance of it influencing us throughout the day. After generating our positive motivation, we get out of bed, wash, have a cup of tea, and then meditate, recite prayers, or read a Dharma book. By starting the day in this way, we will get in touch with ourselves and become our own friend by treasuring and reinforcing our good qualities. 🙏

December 12

Bowing

Bowing is an ancient Buddhist custom and a custom of all religions. It is done to show respect and to humble our ego. In many of the Buddhist monasteries I have visited, and in monastic conferences I have attended, you really see the effect of bowing on the minds of the people who are trained in this way. We bow to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha because they are our refuge and they are the ones we want to emulate on the path to awakening. But we also bow to other practitioners that we respect. In a monastery, there is a lot of bowing, particularly juniors bowing to seniors, but also in some monasteries, everybody bows to each other. It sets a very nice atmosphere for people.

Especially in the Mahayana tradition, it is a way of acknowledging the potential in each individual we encounter, a way of showing respect to their Buddha nature. In our Western culture, bowing, especially for people who are brought up Protestant or Jewish, can seem quite odd and uncomfortable. But it is really a way to train the mind. Similarly, in Tibetan circles, people seem quite happy to bow to monks and to Tibetans.

It is a way of learning to show respect to everybody for their Buddha potential and for the way they are practising the path. It is a nice way to train our minds in seeing the goodness of others. If our mind in any way feels uncomfortable with it, a good place to start is to ask ourselves, “What is it in my mind that feels uncomfortable with this showing of respect, this humbling of my ego? Who am I comfortable bowing to and who am I not comfortable bowing to? What is going on in me, what stories is my mind making about this?”

In each environment that we find ourselves in, we need to know what is suitable. According to certain conventions, we have to follow those customs depending upon what group we are with and who we are with. There are a lot of things to check up on in terms of our actions and responses, ensuring that when we do bow, our heart is in it. It is not just something perfunctory that we do because it is a habit or because we are supposed to, but because it is something that we really see the benefit in. 🙏

December 13

Let's Throw a Pity Party

Think about hating ourselves, and how we blame ourselves because a lot of people do this. If somebody criticised me, “Ugh, I really am hopeless. Of course, nobody loves me. Everything went wrong because of me. Nobody likes me. Nobody respects me.” What is that thing we said in grammar school? “Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, think I will go eat some worms.”

We go into our room and have what I call a pity party. A party for how nobody understands me, how terrible I am, how hopeless the situation is, how everything is going down the drain. I put out my lead balloons and I sit there and suck my thumb and go, “Poor me! Poor me! Poor me!” That is instead of “Happy Birthday” it is “Poor me!” I just go into full-blown, “I am all alone. I am lonely. I do not fit in. The world is an awful place, and I am going to sit here and feel sorry for myself.” Does anybody here do that? I have a PhD in that. I can throw a really good pity party. I just sit there so miserable.

After I encountered the Dharma, I began to ask myself when I am having a pity party, “Who’s the star of the show? Me. Who is the pity party all about? Me. If I cannot be the best one, I am going to be the worst one. But somehow, I am special. I am so powerful that I can make everything go wrong. Nothing is dependent on causes and conditions anymore. I am the powerful one and because I am so stupid and such a jerk, I can make everything go wrong.”

Is that a little inflated? Can you really make everything go wrong? Am I really that awful that I can make everything go wrong? No. Even if I tried to make everything go wrong, I could not do it. It is not my fault. I am not a bad person. This is just my self-centred attitude going around and around in circles about me. Let us get rid of the self-centred attitude because it makes us miserable. 🐛

December 14

We Are All Michael Brown and Darren Wilson

Think in our lives, how often have we been involved in conflicts with people over something small, when our minds got in there and amplified everything, and suddenly we are holding on, we are not going to give up, “I am going to be victorious.” What was the outcome of that?

There have been people around the country who write on their shirts, “I am Michael Brown” and other people who write, “I am Darren Wilson”. I think we are both. Look at what happened. Michael Brown and Darren Wilson were total strangers that morning. It was a morning like any other morning. When we wake up in the morning, it is also a day like any other day. Sometimes we do big things in our lives that do not change very much. But sometimes we do small things that change everything.

From a Dharma viewpoint, both were acting out of very similar mental states. That same mental state exists in us. The lesson is that we have got to get ourselves straightened out about that. We can think, “I am only one person, getting myself straightened out is not such a big deal.” Darren Wilson was one person. Michael Brown was one person. You can see how one person can make a big deal. It can really influence a lot.

If you look at Michael dying that day, there was what we call untimely karma from action created in the past that was strong enough that the causes and conditions came together for it to ripen in his being killed. The same thing can be said of Darren Wilson because he will, maybe not at this moment, but during his life, experience a lot of negative results because of this. Maybe he would not be killed or imprisoned, but who knows what is going to happen as past karma comes and ripens. It is not just past karma. We cannot say it is fated. It also had to do with the mental states that people were in at that time. In our lives sometimes conflicts with people start over something small and then soon it becomes huge. 🌩

December 15

Rejoicing in Taking Precepts

It is good to rejoice in taking precepts. There are many benefits from taking them and living in the precepts. What we often do not realise is that just having the opportunity to take precepts requires a great deal of merit. Just to have that opportunity to take them means that in the past we created some merit that is ripening in that opportunity. We see how rare it is just to have that chance to take precepts, even for one day. How many people spent yesterday eating all day, exaggerating or lying at family dinners to make themselves look good, speaking harsh words, getting irritated, and coveting each other's stuff? We can see that just having the chance to spend a day at the Abbey and take precepts and live in pure ethical discipline means that we did something quite extraordinary in a previous life.

Rejoice at the opportunity that we have and then rejoice that we have made use of the opportunity, lived within the precepts, used the precepts to purify our bad habits of body and speech and thus of mind, and that we used the precepts to create a great deal of merit as well. It is quite important to be able to rejoice at our own and others' virtue, not just looking at our mistakes, but rejoicing at our opportunities and rejoicing at how we make use of the opportunities to create the causes for happiness in the future. As we dedicate the benefit of taking and keeping the precepts, we can rejoice and send the merit out in all directions. We think of it as white light radiating out of our hearts. As we give away the results of our positive actions, we share them by dedicating to the welfare, long-term benefit and awakening of each and every sentient being. 🙏

December 16

Kind Mother Sentient Beings

When my mother passed away, I reflected on how I still had the opportunity to benefit all my mothers from previous lives. The mother of this life has been especially kind by giving us our body, changing our diapers, teaching us to talk and walk, making sure we got an education, and disciplining us so that we can function in society and are not total brats. Likewise, the kindness of all other sentient beings that were our mothers in past lives has also been immense.

Usually, we do not see others in this way because we are too busy dividing them into categories of friend, enemy, stranger, the person I like, the person I do not like, come here, and get away. But if we can stop all that racket in our mind, we can understand that we have had a very deep connection with each sentient being as either parent or child, and they have all been kind to us in the same way as our current life's parents. To repay that kindness, we practise the Dharma and try to share the Dharma with others in a way that is suited to their mind and mentality.

My mother of this life did not have a lot of karma to meet the Dharma, even though she did have some because she had me as her daughter. I prayed to be able to benefit her in a future life because eventually we will meet again. She is not going to go, "Oh, hi, Cherry," and I am not going to respond, "Oh, hi, Mom." It is not going to happen like that when our minds are very obscured by ignorance. But if we can break through a little of our ignorance every day and remember that all beings have been our mothers, a feeling of closeness with every other living being will arise, as well as an appreciation of our having met the Dharma and being able to share it with them in a suitable way. Whenever we see bugs crawling around, the way we help them is by gently scooping them up, saying a few mantras, and taking them outside. The important thing is not to miss the opportunity to benefit. To do this, we must do something about the tyranny of the self-centred mind that prevents us from benefiting others. The more we are able to recognise the kindness of others, the more we can break through the self-centredness that only thinks, "me, me, me; I, I, I; my, my, my; mine, mine, mine." When we can do that, we automatically want to repay their kindness.

For the kind mother sentient being who used to be Adelle Green, I did the King of Prayers and made prayers for her good rebirth and for her to meet the Dharma and be quickly awakened. I also dedicated in a similar way to all sentient beings because they are all equal. There is no inherently existent self in any of them (nor us), so there is no reason to keep some close and some distant. ☸



Damaging Effects of Anger

When we get angry, or when we generate wrong views, we obliterate all the merit and goodness we have worked so hard to put into our consciousness. Even if we have previously dedicated the merit from our good deeds, we get two main results from anger. The first is the negative result of the anger — bad rebirths or hindrances and obstacles in your practice. Also, if you are about to attain a new level or gain insight, anger inhibits the ripening of your good karma. There still might be some residue left if you dedicated it before you got angry, so it is not like your good karmas are completely wiped out. But it is definitely damaged and you have to start all over recreating a lot of the causes for the insight that you might have been just on the verge of getting.

When you think about this, it is kind of scary, at least if you get angry at the rate I do! You may start wondering how you ever have any merit left because anger inhibits here, damages there, blocks there, and destroys here. You think, “All those mornings I got up at four thirty to do prostrations and meditate, I put in so much effort and then I go and get angry at some idiot who might happen to be a Bodhisattva. Since I did not know he is a Bodhisattva, all the effort I put into creating good karma is now damaged.”

Regardless of who the person really is, when we get angry our mind is totally hooked into thinking, “He is an inherently existent idiot from his side, totally independent from me, and this is just who he is.” We need to ask ourselves, “Is getting angry at this person worth destroying all the merit I put so much energy into creating? Am I going to waste my energy and damage myself just by getting mad at somebody I have a bad view of?” We should conclude that that is crazy, totally nutty. I mean, maybe we could waste some energy on someone we respect, but there is absolutely no benefit in getting angry at someone we do not care for. As soon as you set down the anger, you stop seeing him as an idiot and start realising, “Oh this is all coming from me, it has nothing to do with him. This is just my berserk-y, angry mind that is creating the cause for suffering.”

Sometimes we might think, “Well, it is just a little bit of anger,” or, “It is just irritation, not anger, so it is okay because I am not actually destroying any merit.” But it is not like that, and if we look into our minds we can see how much we are damaged by the irritation and how miserable it makes us even if it is not a full-blown rage. I know from a lot of experience that being irritated is not fun. We should remember that these destructive mental states are just not worth it if we are trying to go towards Buddhahood and cultivate compassion and wisdom. This is the time when self-cherishing can be useful. Out of our own sense of integrity and respect for ourselves, let us not be bothered with anger. ☁



December 18

Loosen Your Clinging

Most people do not grasp trying to keep the body until they get old, sick and are moving towards death. When you are young, your body is fun. Until it is not. There are lots of people who get sick when they are young. The pain that the body can cause, and the distress that the body can cause, are no joke. But we usually see the body as something wonderful. “Look, I can go skiing. I can throw a frisbee and a javelin. Look what I can do. This body is fantastic.” or, “Look, I can dance. Look what I can do when I am dancing, this body is great. I can do all these fun things with the body and go white river rafting.” A lot of these fun things last only a short while and you can get killed in the process of doing them. And people do get killed. “Let’s drive a race car...”

We do not really stop and think, “What’s my relationship with this body? How am I going to feel when it is time to give this body up?” When I say to myself, “Who am I going to be without this body?” What answer am I going to give myself in the death process? Is there any kind of experience of selflessness or emptiness to rely on that will help us release the pain of separating from the body and all the identities? Separating from all our possessions, too. No choice. They stay here, we go on. It does not matter how many paper computers, paper refrigerators, and paper speed boats your relatives burn for you. How much money from the bank of hell they send you. None of them come with us.

It is interesting, our friends and relatives burn money from the bank of hell, but they keep the real money for themselves. Which is what happens, doesn’t it? You work very hard for your possessions, and then your descendants fight over them. I used to say this just as a matter of fact. Then it happened in my own family, which I had never expected. With friends and relatives, it is the same thing. There is no choice, when death comes, we must say farewell. Are we prepared for that? Or are we deeply attached to people? It is a question to ask ourselves and to look at. The great masters say, “In preparation for death, learn to give up these attachments.”

It does not mean that you give away your body now, your possessions now, or you do not have any friends or relatives from now on. We still live in a world with these things. It means that we loosen the clinging, the craving, the grasping, and the stickiness regarding those things. If we can do that well, then dying is like going on a picnic. It is a pleasant and wonderful experience. May we create the cause for that to happen! ☁



December 19

Commitment to Kindness

Every morning it is important to reaffirm our commitment to kindness. Our teachers remind us of this again and again, because the afflictions are powerful and our mind is easily swept away by them. It is important on a regular basis to think of the values and principles that we cherish and to come back to that kind heart, and to make a commitment to it again. Even if things are not going the way we want, even if there are problems everywhere, again and again come back to regarding the world and its inhabitants with kindness and treating ourselves and others with kindness. 🌱



Crawling Out of Holes

Sometimes in our practice we dig ourselves into a nice, deep hole. We sit in it and say, “The world is falling apart, something is wrong with it, something is wrong with me, the whole thing is just useless.” We can stay in that hole for quite a while even though it is very uncomfortable, with rocks and shards jabbing us here and there. We keep curling up and trying to get comfortable instead of planning how to get out. We can spend a lot of time doing interior design on our holes when all we need to do is stop and say, “There is a remedy to this situation. There are lots of people up there who can throw me a rope if I bother to ask them.” If we can muster the strength to ask, they might throw us a ladder that is even easier to climb than a rope. Likewise, if we see people in a hole asking for a rope, we can give them a ladder, or even a whole staircase if their hole is big enough.

We all have our variety of holes that we dig ourselves into. As we grow in the Dharma, it is interesting to see how the holes we dig are very similar each time with only slight differences. We may put the really sharp rocks in different places at different times, but the hole is very often the same shape. Some of our holes have small openings at the top but are very large at the bottom. We just lie there and think, “I could never fit through that teeny hole,” even though we are the ones who built it and jumped in! For others, the bottom of the holes are very cramped and narrow while the top are very big and wide. Then when they look up, they say, “Oh that’s too scary — it’s so big.” Others have specially designed their holes so that when they stand up to try to get out, they hit a lever that makes another pile of dirt fall on them. Some of us sit on one side of our hole and say, “Maybe I should sit on that side of the hole.” Then we go over to the other side of the hole and say, “No, maybe I need to be on that side,” and never find a completely comfortable place. It may seem silly to think like this but it is good to know how we build our own holes, and maybe even draw them out to see if they are hard or mushy. As time goes on, we will find it easier to detect when we are digging the hole and when we are sitting in it, and then we can get out much more easily. 🐛

December 21

In, But Not of, the World

Spiritual practice should be something that we can relate to our daily life and the world around us. I was reminded of this after watching videos of a group of people from various religions who went to the 2009 Copenhagen climate change conference to speak out for the protection of the environment and the climate. Our spiritual practice aims to transcend the world by eliminating the ignorance, anger, and attachment that bind us with the craving for it. But this transcendental state has to be fully applicable to what is happening with sentient beings now, not disengaged from the world around us. The samsara we renounce is the five aggregates under the influence of ignorance and afflictions; it does not mean renouncing sentient beings under the influence of afflictions and karma, nor renouncing the environment in which they live.

If we care about sentient beings, we should also care about their environment. It is very important to remember this because sometimes we meet spiritual people whose attitude seems to be, “Forget this world. Everything is totally screwed up, I am going to actualise some kind of trance state that is totally unrelated to what is going on here.” The high attainments we aim to actualise are definitely separate from our ordinary consciousness, which sees external things as truly existent. But the reason we aim for this state of mind and strive to eliminate our afflictions is so that we can be of service and benefit to the world. We must keep our minds in the dharma but our feet on the earth. It is a thin line to walk because we are so used to grasping at inherent existence whenever we are in contact with the external environment or other beings. But we have to eliminate that grasping and yet still be able to relate to the world and the beings in it. ☸

Our Two-Year-Old Mind

Try and have patience for yourself when your mind is behaving like a two-year-old. They call it the “terrible twos” because kids around this age begin to understand the notions of “I” and “mine”. Two-year-olds are always going, “This is mine! Not yours.” And, “I like this, I don’t like that.” “So and so started it, I didn’t!” and, “If you don’t give me what I want, I’m gonna have a temper tantrum and disturb the whole family until you give me what I want!” Our mind is still kind of two-years olds, and it goes through all these dramas. We may get fed up with ourselves, thinking, “Oh, I’m so bossy, I’m so terrible, I upset the whole family. I’m just the most awful child in the world.” Then we go back to yelling and screaming at everybody, beat our breasts in regret, and suck our thumbs. This is why sometimes teachings use the term “childish” sentient beings. Little kids do not realise that their behaviour affects other people; they do not have the capacity to think beyond themselves, and sometimes, as adults, we are similar. Rather than become the child when your mind is acting this way, you have to be the adult and have a good talk with your mind like you are talking to a little kid. You can say, “I know you’re upset about this, and want this and that, but grown-ups have to learn how to bear the frustration of not getting what they want, and this is a good time to practise that.”

Another thing kids do not realise when they are acting out and misbehaving is that they are self-sabotaging. You may love them but do not want to be around them when they are screaming and crying, so their behaviour is sabotaging their yearning for good relationships with other people.

It is the same when our self-centred mind takes over and all we think about is “I” and “mine”, and what the world owes us. What we are doing is pushing other people away when we really want to be connected. As we practise the Bodhisattva path and our childish and self-centred mind comes up, remember we are self-sabotaging our deepest spiritual aspirations to cherish other sentient beings more than ourselves and attain full awakening to work for their benefit. Learn to get in

touch with your love and compassion and your Bodhisattva aspiration and say, “This is the one that is important.” The childish mind may be jumping up and down screaming, “Me, me, me, I, I, I, mine, mine, mine,” but we can choose to pay attention to the adult part because it is more reliable. We have got to nourish the adult part of us that can help the childish part grow up and let go of its extraordinary self-centredness in order to attain our goals. It is a bit like learning how to walk — we must build our mental muscles and learn to help ourselves in this way. 🙏

December 23

Things Exist on the Level of Appearance

Everything seems so solid and real to us most of the time. We feel we are solid and real, as well as all the people we deal with and the situations and environments we find ourselves in. Yesterday probably seemed solid and real when we were living it. But if you try to find where yesterday is today, you will realise that everything that seemed so real and solid then has changed or totally vanished. As we go through the day and interact with people, it is helpful to keep in mind that our feeling that there is a real “me” and a real “other” is false. “You” and “I” exist only on the level of appearance — as all the necessary parts, causes and conditions come together, our conceptual mind groups these things together and gives each a label. It is easy to forget that we are the ones who created the object we think is really “out there” or “in here”. Bearing this fact in mind and contemplating impermanence begins to soften the solid appearance of things, getting us one step closer to realising emptiness. ☁



December 24

Positive and Negative Feedback

How do we reinforce positive behaviour in others? We can either praise the action or the person, or both. I think it is good if we do both, so the other person knows what they did that you are approving of and can internalise the action as part of their identities. For example, it would be very good to say, “When you cleaned up your room, that was a very nice thing to do, and you are a very considerate person because you know that it makes everybody in the house happy.”

Otherwise, especially with little kids, they might not know what they did that you appreciate. On the contrary, when you are trying to discipline kids, you should emphasise the action and not the character. We should say, “That action was harmful, that action hurt somebody’s feelings.” But parents often say, “You’re a bad boy/girl,” which makes the kid feel very bad about themselves and defective when all you are trying to do is discourage a particular behaviour. If we must give negative feedback, talking about the action will be much easier for the other person to understand than something that brands their character. When you say something to somebody and they say, “I don’t think that’s true,” that sounds very different than saying, “You’re a liar.” It is something to look out for in ourselves when we get upset with someone. We usually get upset with the person when it is the behaviour we should be upset with. When people are very angry at someone, they usually talk about their character and call them nouns like “jerk, idiot, liar” and so on, or adjectives like “ridiculous, untrustworthy” and the like, instead of saying, “You did this, and that action is disturbing to me.” Focusing on behaviours can help us too, since thinking “that person did this behaviour” lessens the intensity of our anger. Telling somebody they are a bad person or a good person is inaccurate because we believe everybody has Buddha nature.

In another situation, the person can act differently and they are our friend, so it is always the behaviour that is objectionable. This mind that creates friend and enemy, which are nouns and categories, really hinders us from forgiving people and accepting apologies. Labelling people impede us from connecting with that person and having an attitude of loving-kindness. 🙏

December 25

Karmic Bubbles

Generally, we feel like solid people. There is a real me here. But if you look at it from the viewpoint of multiple lives and the mind and body having a different continuum, then we begin to see that what we are is just kind of a karmic bubble, not something real and solid. By saying that we are a karmic bubble, karma means that we are conditioned, that we are the result of causes that were created in the past. That does not mean predetermination, but it is referring to this incredible complexity of various causes that conditioned who we are right now and what our situation is. When we think about that, we realise that we are not concrete personalities or concrete people but we are conditioned phenomena. By understanding that we are conditioned, it means that there is a possibility to change because things that are conditioned are dependent, they do not exist under their power. As our conditioning changes, who we are changes as well. This means that we have the possibility to progress along the path and become fully awakened Buddhas. We do this by just changing our conditioning.

When we were young, we did not have much control over our conditioning. Not much control over outside influences, but even from the inside we did not know how to evaluate the conditioning we received. Now that we are older, we are able to think more logically and more reasonably so it is possible to begin to deliberately and conscientiously transform the way we condition our lives and therefore create the causes to become much more joyful and enriched people who can really make lives meaningful for the world and ourselves. Having that kind of view of ourselves — just a karmic bubble, nothing permanent or concrete — reminds us of the possibility of change and transformation and gives us a vision of hope and optimism for the future. It gives us some belief, confidence and faith in our potential. 🌸

December 26

Think for Yourself

You need to learn to think for yourself, which is quite important when you are in the Dharma. You learn from and listen to your teachers, but you think for yourself. Especially if it is a Dharma point, you should think, “Is this true or is this not true?” If I am talking about emptiness, do not just think, “Well, somebody said everything is empty of inherent existence so it must be.” Think about it and understand it. In that way, it becomes your own and you get it on a deep internal level.

There are other things we need to look at also, not only specific Dharma points we learn from others, but thinking for yourself in regard to the way the community does things, or the way social issues are regarded. Learn and listen, from your teachers and others, but think for yourself. Do not just listen and think, “My teacher said so, so I believe.” We go to our teachers to learn the Dharma, not to learn politics, not to learn social economics, or any of these kinds of topics.

We need to take Dharma principles and apply them to things but do it in our own creative way. Becoming a monastic does not mean that we are all coming out of the same cookie cutter. That does not work because we all come into this world with different talents, different dispositions, and different interests. I think we should recognise that and work with what we have and use what we have for the benefit of all beings. Instead of trying to make all beings fit into the same square hole, especially if you are round or star-shaped or triangular-shaped, use the beauty of your shape to benefit sentient beings instead of squeezing yourself and trying to be something you are not. I learnt that lesson trying to be a Tibetan nun; there was no way I could fit into how they were supposed to act.

It is a balancing act between learning from others and thinking for ourselves. Especially at the beginning, you really want to learn and listen. But again, even as you are learning and listening, you must think about the teachings yourself.

If somebody says you have a precious human life, do you go, “Yeah, I do, because you said so.” That is not going to bring stability to your practice. If you really think for yourself about what the qualities of a precious human life are, then it comes home in your heart what you have.

In saying this, I am not saying do not accept any guidance. Accept guidance but try to understand the reason for the guidance. See if the guidance is in the Dharma or if the guidance is in cultural differences or politics or something like that. We and our teachers can have different political views, we can have different views on social issues. You have to work it out with your mind so that you understand any actual guidance that you have received and then can apply it to your mind in the future. ☸



December 27

Reflection

Reflect for a minute about the kindness of others, the kindness not only of friends and family but also of strangers who work in society and whose work helps us. Reflect on the benefit of people who challenge us because they make us discover resources within ourselves that we did not know we had. Reflect for a minute on the kindness of others. See how dependent we are on others' kindness, and how much benefit we have received. Respond from your heart with a wish to repay that kindness; wish to make a positive contribution to the welfare of all those other living beings. See your spiritual practice as one way that you can make a positive impact because by progressing along the path yourself, you develop more capability to be of direct benefit and to work for the welfare of others. 🍃



December 28

Pleasing People vs. Having Compassion

There is a big difference between pleasing people and having compassion for them. We often get these things very confused and think that if we have compassion for somebody, then our job is to make them happy. When we are trying to please people because we want their approval, there is no space in our mind for compassion for them at that moment because our attention is on ourselves, anxiously worrying about whether we can do what we think they think we should do. That is a completely dead-end road in terms of Dharma and practising in our lives.

If we are always trying to second-guess people, to figure out what they want and what they need, we are not really being genuine with them. What they want or what they need sometimes is not actually what they want and need if we are going to have compassion for them. It is totally impossible to please other people in whatever we do; they are never going to be completely happy with it. The whole thing of trying to please people, win their approval, and get them to like us, is basically focused on ourselves.

When we have this kind of mind, then there is very little space for compassion. With compassion, you see the situation of somebody else, their being in samsara, their being under the control of their afflictions and karma. We have compassion for them, and what we bring to them is not our song and dance, the show of or trying to please them, but just who we are, a compassionate presence. When we have genuine compassion, our actions become a bit more spontaneous. Somehow, people seem to benefit from them more than when we are trying so hard. It is something to think about, this difference between pleasing and winning people's approval, having concern for them, and the kind of compassion that the Buddha talked about. 🙏

December 29

Whatever Unites, Separates

The Buddha said that whatever comes together must also separate; there is no way around it. What is important is that we have virtuous mental states and kindness when we are together, and that we use the time to learn and practise. When we leave, whatever goodness we have developed can influence whomever we encounter, whether they be friends, enemies or strangers. We do not see the wisdom, kindness, and compassion we have cultivated as a fixed pie of limited quantity or limited quality, but as something to be shared and continuously increased. 🍵



December 30

Habits

We are basically creatures of habit. We have the tendency to keep doing the same thing over and over again. Some of our mental, emotional, verbal, and physical habits are conducive for liberation and some of them are not. Just because we have a habit does not mean the habit is us or that it is permanent. Habits are just conditioned phenomena. A lot of what we are doing in Dharma practice is noticing those mental, physical and verbal habits — particularly the mental ones — and reconditioning ourselves and transforming our energy so it goes in a constructive direction.

Without even trying, we recognise others' habits. If we live with someone or see them regularly, their habitual ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting become evident to us. Our habits are not so obvious to us. Or sometimes they are obvious, but we are very entrenched in them. We defend them. We do not want to change them. That can cause a great deal of suffering.

It is good to be on the lookout, not so much for others' habits, but to do some research and come to know our habits. What are the habitual motions and actions that we do? What are the habitual thought patterns that we follow? How do we habitually speak?

The Buddha said, “Look not so much at what other people do and leave undone, but at our actions, what we do and leave undone.” That is the primary thing in our practice — looking at our habits and then evaluating which ones lead to long-term happiness and which ones lead to misery. Then we learn the techniques the Buddha taught to subdue the ones that are not beneficial and to enhance and maintain the ones that are. 🍃

December 31

Clear Mind

As we go through our lives and as we go through our daily practice, we should remember that sometimes our mind is like in a cloud, but the sky still exists — the sky does not disappear just because there is a cloud. We should remember that at some point the clouds clear, and you can see the open, clear sky.

Similarly, the basic nature of our mind is something clear, something untainted. It is not inherently defiled, so we are not inherently evil, defective or shameful in any way. That clear nature of the mind is still there, but it is covered by ignorance, anger, and attachment like the clouds that surround the Abbey sometimes. The clouds are not the nature of the sky, and the afflictions are not the nature of the mind.

Sometimes a lot of afflictions might come up and it is like we are in the clouds for a while, but it is important to remember that that is not who we are, that is not the nature of the mind. So, do not get tense and wrapped up about that when it happens. Do not take it so seriously and start judging yourself. We can say, “Okay, the mind is like the clouds today, but the pure nature is still there,” and then we can really have some faith and confidence in that. ☁

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