

OUR DAILY PRACTICE:

Living Kinder, Happier Lives One Day at a Time

VENERABLE WULING

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- How Will I Behave Today and the Rest of My Life?
- Everything We Do Matters
- In One Lifetime: Pure Land Buddhism
- Awaken to the Buddha Within
- path to peace
- Heart of a Buddha (editor and contributor)

In Appreciation

Venerable Master Chin Kung,
a truly compassionate and wise teacher
who I have had the supreme good fortune
to learn from.

January 1

*Cultivation is like rowing a boat upriver:
unless we keep rowing steadily,
we'll end up adrift.*

Sporadic cultivation does not provide as much benefit as cultivating daily. Few of us would disagree with that. But trying to squeeze one more task into our already hectic week is, at the very least, daunting. Plus, the time we make for chanting would be so brief. How will it benefit us?

And so, we decide to set aside time to chant and study on weekends. But even if we manage to follow our week-end-only schedule, the benefits will not prove as significant as those from daily learning and practice.

First, we will not have the calming affects that chanting regularly brings, or the empowerment to gradually master our thoughts, rather than be enslaved by them.

Second, cultivation includes applying the teachings in everything we do, not just while sitting in meditation or reading. Regular teachings—even brief ones—help us

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remain focused. Thus, by cultivating daily, we will steadily progress.

January 2

Ordinary beings view things dualistically:

as two, not one.

Awakened beings understand

all phenomena are one, not two.

Viewing circumstances and objects dualistically is seeing them from opposing perspectives. As either one thing or another. We thus categorize everything in contrasting terms like pleasing or annoying, superior or inferior. Caught up in such discriminatory thoughts, we go to great lengths to acquire more of what we desire while vigorously avoiding everything we dislike.

Viewing things dualistically causes us endless problems and agitation. For example, upon viewing a spoon from different angles, two people can argue over whether the spoon is convex or concave. (That's viewing things dualistically.)

Awakened beings, on the other hand, understand that all phenomena are one. They observe the spoon as one

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object with two aspects. In such a manner, they view all situations and objects non-dualistically, and can act judiciously without any trace of rancor.

January 3

*Instead of automatically reacting with sarcasm
or trying to be clever, think again.
Will our wit ridicule another?
Will our sarcasm harm the listener?*

For varied reasons, ranging from wanting to make others laugh to being considered witty, or because of being simply frustrated with a situation, we can find ourselves using sarcasm. But what is sarcasm? It is yet another manifestation of anger. We may view ourselves as amusing, but we're heedlessly belittling another person or some situation. There's a valid reason why the Greeks defined sarcasm as "tearing flesh."

Before glibly tossing out another sarcastic quip, we need to figure out why we feel inclined to do so.

So that others will laugh?

So that they think us sophisticated with our rapier wit?

Surely, we can manage to make others laugh without resorting to disrespect and ridicule. We also need to remind

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ourselves that our sharp remarks nurture tension in others on a subtle level as well as plant seeds for our own future belittlement.

January 4

*When weeding, we need to pull out the roots
or the weeds will grow back.
Eradicating bad habits is the same;
remove the root or the habit will reappear.*

A person unskilled at weeding will often begin by removing the stems and the leaves, that which lies above the soil. But seemingly overnight, the weeds start growing back. And so the novice gardener learns a valuable lesson: removing just the visible parts of the plant won't eliminate the roots. They need to be located, uncovered, and dug out.

In a similar manner, we often try to shed bad habits just by curtailing visible behaviors. But this fails to remove underlying causes. Not surprisingly, as soon as we relax our guard, the bad habits return, as rampant as those weeds. To permanently eradicate bad habits, we need to destroy their roots. How?

First, we need to determine the habits' underlying causes. Maybe selfishness? Maybe apathy or a lack of

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integrity? By figuring out the causes of our bad habits, we can eliminate them.

Forever.

January 5

*Bodhisattvas fear causes;
unawakened beings fear results.*

Understanding that every cause will have a consequence, bodhisattvas strive to avoid creating evil causes while generating those that are good. This two-pronged approach allows these awakened beings to have the right conditions to continue along the path to enlightenment.

Unawakened beings, on the other hand, are like children who commit a misdeed but hope not to get caught. When their bad conduct is discovered, they may blame others. Or they may become defensive. They do not realize that such reactions are yet more causes, causes that will incur yet more painful results and more suffering.

To stop fearing results, we need to live wisely in the present instead of figuring out ways to escape the past. How? By being continuously alert to what we do—to the causes we are creating. Without an adverse cause, adverse consequences will not occur, and we will have saved ourselves from any associated suffering.

January 6

*We should mind our own business
and not the business of others.*

This advice from Great Master Yinguang speaks to us of gossiping, a habit we all indulge in far too often. Consider what you talk about. The book you just read, or what you heard someone did at the party last night? A project you're working on, or your co-workers?

When we gossip, we indulge in speculation and we spread rumors. But even if what we say is true, is it our business to talk about it? Would we be uncomfortable if the person overheard what we said? We can tell ourselves that that person will never know. But the one we told knows. Perhaps this person will think less of us for gossiping. Most likely, we will have planted negative thoughts in the mind of our listener. How? Rarely is gossip about wonderful things. Ultimately, gossip spreads perceived wrongdoings.

Instead of talking about what others have done, we need to focus on our own behavior and correct our faults before we become an item of gossip.

January 7

*Before teaching others,
we should first cultivate ourselves.
Having some success with cultivation,
our behavior will precede our words.*

Having discovered something new and intriguing, we usually can't wait to tell others about it. Take for example, newly hearing about Buddhism. Wanting to share what we just learned is understandable. But if we cannot yet do something, how can we explain it?

Take anger. If we do not yet find a lessening of our anger and a sense of calmness through our practice, how can we teach an irritated person to be more patient?

Or take worries. If we speak of letting go of worry and fear but are often anxious ourselves, how can we convince others that Buddhist practice will help them? When we try to teach something before we can do it, others will resist us. Understandably so.

When we progress in our cultivation, our behavior will

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reflect our growth. When others view us as experienced and trustworthy, we will then be qualified to teach.

January 8

*Whatever the situation,
adverse or favorable,
remain balanced and determined
in your buddha-name chanting.*

Lurching first in one direction and then another, our mind, jolted from its clear and natural state, becomes distracted and troubled. This lamentable state is where we spend much, if not all, of our time.

Rather, the mental state we should seek is for us to remain steadfast and undisturbed. When praised, we do not become proud of ourselves or disdainful of others. Hearing that others are criticizing us, we do not feel offended or defensive. Finding things working out as hoped for, we do not attach or feel arrogant. Encountering situations not planned for, we do not worry or doubt the teachings.

How can we attain such balance? Every time we notice a distraction—good or bad—we return to the buddha-

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name. This returning is our practice. As in sports or music, in fact all things, practice makes perfect. Including chanting the Buddha's name.

January 9

*Not having wandering thoughts
does not mean not thinking.
Having focused on our task,
we do not dwell on it,
lingering over failures or successes.*

Hearing that we should desist from wandering thoughts might sound like we should avoid all thinking. Not so. Wandering thoughts refers to incorrect thoughts, not all thoughts. Having a task, we need to consider how best to accomplish it. And so we have correct thoughts. If others criticize how we do the task, we need to weigh the criticism. Is it valid? Or irrelevant? These are more correct thoughts.

But what if we keep replaying the criticism as if it were a favorite movie? We're right back at trivial, wandering thoughts. Why? Reminiscing about successes depletes our good fortune. Recalling failures plants the wrong kind of seeds. Embarrassment, guilt, anger. Either way, we end up not paying attention to our current tasks.

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So, do not linger on the past. Learn from it. Then move on so that you can focus increasingly on correct thoughts.

January 10

*Strive to detect thoughts
the instant they arise,
before speaking or acting.*

Our thoughts occur with incredible speed and utmost subtlety, not to mention in staggering numbers. As we first notice them, it seems they amble through one after another. Peering more closely, we notice that they're not merely scooting through in single file. No! They're more like thousands of first-graders in an auditorium jostling and shouting "Me! Me!"

Just like their dazed teacher turning to the loudest student, we also go with the most noticeable thought. Without thinking, we act on it and sow a karmic seed. At the same time, our other thoughts are also planting future seeds. Incredibly slight, but seeds nonetheless. Our thoughts, undetectable by us, are vibrations. As such, they will have consequences.

Just as that teacher might calm her students by having

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them focus, momentarily at least, on their favorite ice cream, we too can gain control over our actions and results by focusing on “Amitufo.”

Hopefully, all the time.

January 11

*Buddhism is like an immense mountain
with 84,000 paths leading to the peak.
Choose—and remain on—one path.*

To attain the summit of a mountain in the most effective and enjoyable manner, climbers choose one route. Depending on their abilities, some will prefer a more cautious approach, others a more challenging one. Having chosen their route, they do not deviate from it. The climbers do not keep trying different ones for they know they'll end up wandering around the mountain instead of climbing it, their time and energy wasted.

Our practice is the same. With the summit of enlightenment as our goal, we choose the path that best suits our conditions and abilities. Like the climbers, we also want to stick to our chosen route. Should we take our eyes off our goal, we can become enthralled by other paths.

This one looks easier! That one looks more challenging! I'll try it!
Enamored with exploring myriad options, we will end

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up circling the mountain. And our goal to climb it and reach enlightenment? Forgotten.

January 12

*To no longer be attached
is to be free of
self-centered thoughts and expectations.*

Non-attachment falls between two extremes. At one end lies detachment, the state of being emotionally uninvolved. A detached person, therefore, is often perceived as aloof, as uncaring. Clearly, this state is not our goal. At the other end lies attachment, being emotionally entangled as we focus on a person, object, or idea. Not our goal either!

Our objective is non-attachment, which lies purposefully and unselfishly in the middle. There is no emotional entanglement, but we still care. Very much so. And therefore we do our best in everything we undertake. But we do not get caught up in egoistic thoughts. Facing a task, we can ask “What is the best way to do this” rather than insist “I want to do it this way.”

Having thus reined in our ego, we stop expecting a desired outcome. Then when things do not go our way, as

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it invariably happens, we will not fall prey to obstinacy and regrets.

Finally, no longer attached or entangled, we will be free.

January 13

*Just as time is needed
for a perfume bottle's fragrance to fade away,
time is also needed
for the scent of our habits to wane.*

An empty bottle of perfume, even after washing, will still exude its original fragrance. Although the perfume is long since gone, its scent or “habit energy” remains and will need considerable time to dissipate.

In a similar manner, our bad habits also need time to be eliminated. Even after we curtail an action its habit energy remains, like that scent of the perfume. Lured by the habit energy’s lingering presence, we find it difficult to break the energy’s hold. And so, we are unable to cease the action.

Consider the countless lifetimes we have spent perpetuating and reinforcing our habits, committing misdeed after misdeed. The time the perfume stays in its bottle is minuscule compared to our time committing misdeeds in

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samsara. And so, our habit energy will take a long time of diligent hard work to dispel, to finally be extinguished.

January 14

*Upon seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting,
and touching, discriminatory thoughts arise.
Habits solidify. Control lessens.
Suffering increases.*

Through our senses, we perceive our world. Feelings arise, ideas form. Opinions become set. Liking this, we want more; disliking that, we want it to go away. Such impressions accumulate in our store consciousness. And from these we form our habits. Habits like acting from assumptions rather than from facts, and acting emotionally rather than with understanding.

Reacting from habits, we do not stop to formulate the wisest course of action. We respond automatically, unaware that any control we have over our thoughts and behavior is waning. The more we fail to exercise control and the more careless we become, the more mistakes we make. Since we act negligently and harm others, our resultant sufferings will multiply.

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What can we do? Observe clearly, but do not attach, do not discriminate. Act from understanding, not from emotions.

January 15

*View hatred
as an unwanted caller.*

Most of us are painfully familiar with the emotional upheavals of a once warm relationship that stalled and mutated into an acrimonious one.

Initially, in the downward spiral, we excuse the other's behavior. Then we begin to justify our feelings. One day, we suddenly realize our emotions are starting to feel like a ricocheting ball in a pinball machine. Ping! It's their stubbornness. Ping! But our reasonableness. Their wrongdoing. Our innocence. Suddenly, our smoldering emotions erupt, and we fly into a rage.

And as surely as the pinball will end up in the drain, our hatred will also be for naught. Nothing positive will come of it. Hatred will overcome us and harden in our heart, an uninvited guest who intends to stay a while. We were wrong to succumb to it. Instead of ending our suffering, we have increased it. Rather than helping all beings, we have injured them.

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Before this happens, we need to recognize hatred for what it is and gently, but firmly, send it on its way.

January 16

*Forgiveness does not mean we do not care
or that the other person is pardoned.*

Our forgiving others does not mean they will escape their karmic consequences. We forgive because we understand and care about what happened. But we cannot pardon, for it is not up to us. Understand that all actions will unfailingly have consequences. Understand the potency of karmic forces amassed over uncountable lifetimes.

And so, a wrongdoer's just retribution will occur naturally. Do not waste energy on vengeful thoughts—let them go. Do not be judge, jury, and executioner. By forgiving, we also ease our pain. We understand the gravity of embracing a desire for retaliation. And also its futility. We also understand that to hold the grudge will pull us down into a spiral of anger, reprisal, and more suffering.

As the Buddha cautioned, being angry is like holding onto a piece of hot fiery coal. Before our wrongful intention to throw it at another is carried out, we ourselves get burned.

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Now, and for lifetimes to come.

January 17

*Do not spend time wondering about
another's karmic consequences.*

Musing over others' intentions and resultant karmic results may seem intriguing, and perhaps even worthwhile. But what do we know about this person? And do we really need to find out more? About their comings and goings? About their intentions? We have difficulty in figuring out our own intentions, so why try to unearth those of others.

Besides, and more importantly—it is none of our business. A much wiser use of time would be to look within: examine our own actions. We investigate, then reflect, again and again. It is much like peeling an onion, layer by layer. *Do I detect some resentment, which obstructed my helpfulness? Were my actions half-hearted because I was indifferent? Were they selfish? Did I mean to help but negligently made mistakes?*

Since we will have to live with our karmic results, learning why we act the way we do—and how to change for the better—is what matters to an awakening person.

January 18

*The sincere mind
has no wandering thoughts.*

For us Pure Land practitioners, sincerity means having no doubts, no intermingling, and no interruptions. With doubt eliminated, we are confident that Amitabha Buddha created the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss for the benefit of all beings and that Sakyamuni Buddha taught about that land despite encountering significant obstacles.

We remain confident that our true nature is the same as a Buddha's, and by practicing the teachings we too will become a Buddha. When we eliminate intermingling and know that our sincere chanting is the cause that will result in our birth in the Pure Land, we resist any temptation to chant the buddha-name today and something else tomorrow.

We practice one method, study one sutra, and learn from one teacher. With interruptions eliminated, we restrain our wandering thoughts, even the thought "I am

sincerely chanting,” and strive to constantly dwell on the single pure thought of “Amitufo.”

January 19

*When chanting “Amitufo”
and a wandering thought arises,
which remains in the front of your mind
and which recedes to the back?*

Initially, wandering thoughts will continually derail our chanting. As our chanting becomes established, wandering thoughts will arise less often and retreat more quickly. As we chant with patience and diligence, wandering thoughts will cease, slowly.

Since few of us have reached this last level, it will be helpful to determine if we’re at least progressing. As a wandering thought arises, observe which recedes. “Amitufo”? Or the wandering thought?

Next, determine how soon we notice what just happened. A few seconds? A minute? Longer? Thoughts, good ones or bad ones, seem to arise from nowhere. One moment “Amitufo” is at the front of our mind, and the next, wandering thoughts can take over and “Amitufo” is gone.

Identify what just happened, then quickly return to the safety—and joy—of “Amitufo.”

January 20

*Letting go is more than
giving away possessions.
It is also relinquishing
opinions and preferences.*

For the best example of letting go, we need only reflect on Prince Siddhartha's renuncements. Leaving behind his pleasure-filled life, his attachments to personal views, and eventually even his concept of self, he lived as a penniless, wandering seeker—a seeker who later attained ultimate liberation.

We need to, like the Buddha, stop clinging to personal desires and egoistic opinions. Our attachments constrain us and trap us in the cycle of rebirth. And they have done so since time without beginning. Accept that it is just a matter of time when once again we leave all that we have behind. And so, the wisdom in choosing to let go now rather than having everything torn from us later is blindingly apparent.

No longer a trapped sentient being, we will be content

with, and appreciative of, all that we encounter. And we will do so as a liberated being.

January 21

*Based on previous experiences,
expectations prevent us from opening up
to what may be truly wonderful.*

Expectations, by their very nature, bind us to the familiar and to the past. Expectations prevent us from imagining something new and, quite possibly, more rewarding. They color everything we set out to achieve.

Upon hearing of the lotuses and ponds in the Western Pure Land, we diminish these by likening them to what we have seen here in samsara.

Being told of the learning environment, we remember what school was like and conclude learning in the Pure Land will be more of the same.

Reading that we can visit other Buddhas without leaving the Pure Land, we envisage it to holding a meeting via the Internet.

All these ideas and expectations hold us back!

Letting go of expectations, we free ourselves of remem-

bered images. We begin feeling—begin sensing—the wonder of things beyond our imagination. And we throw open the door to the new and truly wondrous.

January 22

*Do not seek the measure of your actions' worth
in the eyes of others.
Seek it within yourself.*

Long ago, when the Buddha was in our world, an old woman wished to make an offering to the perfectly enlightened being. She had the two coins from her day's begging, and she used them to buy some oil for a lamp. Setting out her offering of a lamp, she vowed to help all beings end their suffering. After leaving the lamp, exhausted and hungry, she died.

The same night, the king also offered lamps, rows upon rows of them. The next day, one of the lamps was still burning, the only one. And amazingly, its flame was even brighter than the night before. When asked how this could be, the Buddha said the lamp was the old woman's. It continued to burn due to her compassionate vow.

The woman did not have to wonder if her meager offering was enough; she did what she knew to be right.

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Her gratitude was immeasurable, her own needs inconsequential, her vow unwavering.

January 23

*When others cause us pain,
we can control our suffering
by how we react to the pain.*

The Buddha explained pain and suffering as two darts.

Pain, the first dart, can be either physical or emotional.

Suffering, the second dart, is what we inflict on ourselves. It is an unthinking reaction to the pain, a hasty reaction due to our ignorance.

Let's say you rush into a room and, in your haste, walk into a chair. A painful first dart. The second dart ensues as you scold yourself for being clumsy and careless, that you have not learned!

At other times, we inflict the second dart when there is no first. For instance, we take a coworker's remark the wrong way and feel a sudden sting of pain. We subsequently stab ourselves with a second dart of anger or distress. The solution? We can't always avoid first darts. But we can control the second ones. We create the suffering, so we can stop it.

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As soon as you sense you are raising a second dart,
recognize it. And drop it for the worthless thing it is.

January 24

*When disagreeable thoughts of others arise,
convert them to amiable ones.*

For our own sake, as well as that of others, we need to replace our belligerent mental chatter with “Amitufo.” Returning to the buddha-name is also an opportunity to quickly transform our offensive thoughts into caring ones. The last impression of the person thus embedded in our store consciousness will then be favorable ones.

Accomplishing this, when we next see the individual, the first feelings to bubble up to the surface of our consciousness will hopefully come from those congenial impressions rather than the earlier derogatory ones.

Failing to accomplish this, it is our indignation that we will feel, surging upward, the next time we meet. We will resume thinking—and acting on—those harsh untransformed thoughts, regardless of how the other person acts towards us. The person may well smile at or say something polite to us, but we will bristle at them.

And we will have spawned yet another enmity.

January 25

*Before attempting to fix the issues around us,
we need to fix those inside us.*

Our underlying aspiration is to help all beings end their suffering. A noble goal. But before we can even attempt to fix small problems in the world, we need to fix the problems within ourselves.

How can we tell others to resolve their conflicts when anger still smolders within us?

How can we end discrimination when we view everything in terms of like and dislike, smiling at some while ignoring others?

How can we resolve ecological issues when we squander natural resources and treat Earth like a garbage dump?

How can we correct government corruption and deceit when we are not truthful with our family and those we work with.

Until we clean our own house, people will not listen to

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us when we tell them how to clean theirs. And why should they? We influence others through our behavior. Yes, words are important, but they need to be supported by action. And if our actions are benevolent and pervasive, words can become unnecessary.

January 26

*As a fissure can split a stone,
doubt cripples one's confidence.*

Fissures in a rock can stress it to a point where it cracks. Over time the rock will crumble away. Even with the hardest of rocks. Similarly, and with equally disastrous results, doubt can eat into and eventually decimate our fragile confidence. This is why our belief needs to be as imperishable as a diamond.

We need to believe in ourselves, secure in the knowledge that we have the same nature as all Buddhas. Having this same buddha-nature, we too can awaken and become a Buddha. We also need to believe in the Buddhas and their teachings. We must guard against doubting what the Buddhas and accomplished masters have taught, guard against questioning our ability to awaken.

Failing to do so, our skepticism will, like a fissure, split and shatter our resolve. With unwavering belief in ourselves and in the Buddhas, we will eliminate doubt and

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burnish our confidence until it shines as brilliantly as a diamond.

January 27

*It is not the amount of teachings that matters,
but how we practice those that we know.*

Our goal is not to become a “night-table Buddhist,” but a focused practitioner. The former consumes teachings—reading one book, moving it to the read pile, and picking up a new one. This is in contrast to the practitioner who reads one book, gets to the last page, turns the book over, and begins reading the book again. And again. And yet again.

A book reviewer once complained that a master’s books kept repeating the same things. Someone replied that it was because we still weren’t doing what the master had instructed in the earlier books.

In other words, until we internalize and practice a book’s teachings, we’re not ready for more. There is no need for a bookshelf of books. We need to just practice what we have.

In Pure Land Buddhism, we do not have dozens of

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books to pile onto our nightstand. And that's okay because the ones we have provide abundant teachings. We just need to clear away the clutter on our night table for our one book.

January 28

*When inclined to take the easy way out,
determine whether you can
live with the consequences.*

When confronted with an unappealing job, we often resist. Not because we question whether it is appropriate to do, whether we lack the necessary skills, or other reasons, all valid. We deem it a chore and shy away from it.

But day after day a discomfort stirs inside us. It reminds us of the task, looming large, still uncompleted. And, once again, our response is delay. Aversion. Resistance. Procrastination. Laziness.

Call it what you will, we're like little children stamping our feet and yelling "I don't want to!" Sounds silly, when we think about it. But our resisting could prove grave. What might happen if we don't finish our task? A relationship turns sour? An even more dreaded task looms? Good fortune wanes?

We need to consider the logical outcomes and ask

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ourselves, “Will the consequence of an unaccomplished task be more painful than the job itself?”

January 29

*Those who do not understand
ask “Why?”
Those who do, struggle,
but move on.*

When faced suddenly with a tragic loss of life, an initial response is often the grief-stricken moan, “Why?” But as heartrending as the loss is, even more terrible is remaining stuck, stuck in forever searching for an answer. Never understanding how such a tragedy could happen. Never moving forward.

Such loss still leaves us with a wrenching sorrow, but as Buddhist practitioners we have thankfully learned the answer to “Why?” Everyone, including the young and innocent, has planted the seeds for what happens to them in this lifetime. Our minds are not yet clear enough for us to know the karmic cause of an unexpected death. But we can at least grasp that a cause existed for such a result. Yes, the loss is tragic, but it is not unfair.

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Such understanding does not magically erase our pain. It does, however, enable us to move on and figure out how to exist with our grim new reality.

January 30

*Not only should we do what is right,
we need to do so correctly.*

What are some incorrect ways? One is to envisage a desirable outcome. Of course, this invariably sets us up for disappointment since things rarely turn out as we anticipate. Another is to act egoistically. Perhaps we dream of succeeding where others have failed. Or envisage being surrounded by our friends and coworkers with everyone proclaiming our name and congratulating us.

So how can we avoid such pitfalls? Just like a horse with blinders on his bridle focuses only on what lies ahead, we too need to put on blinders. Thus focused, our aspiration to do what is right becomes free of expectations, free of ego. We seek to do something for one reason: it's the right thing to do. Personal views, fame, success, etc., do not matter.

We do our best in the hope that conditions will provide fertile ground in which the seeds of our aspirations can take root. And maybe, just maybe, even grow a little.

January 31

*Not liking what we see,
we can always stop looking.*

The distractions we encounter daily seem endless. Waiting-room magazines discussing everything from gossip to sports to politics scattered on tables and stacked in wall displays. Short-lived products crammed floor to ceiling on superstore shelves. Ceiling-hung news-harping TVs everywhere we turn in airports and restaurants. A proliferation of painfully audible mobile devices. All are shouting “Look at me!” All are seeking to stimulate us and grab our attention. All seeking to get us to spend more.

What’s a person to do!

Instead of stewing over poorly made junk, the latest political squabbles, the news headlines that we cannot do anything about, just look away. Averting our attention, we block the visual and audio noise while protecting our pure mind. How?

We change our focus by replacing all the raucous

external stimuli demanding our attention to something calming and familiar. To the soothing, inspiring sound of “Amitufo.”

February 1

*Nurture the heart of respect for all beings,
regardless of their form or nature.*

The first of Samantabhadra's ten great vows is "Respect all Buddhas." That sounds easy. How could we not respect a Buddha! We need to better understand the word "all." "All Buddhas" are not just current Buddhas, but those of the future as well. Who are these future Buddhas? All sentient beings. Since *all sentient beings have buddha-nature*, all will become Buddhas.

Now let's go one step further: *all insentient beings have dharma-nature*. Remember, dharma-nature is the same as buddha-nature. So all beings, sentient and insentient, have the same nature.

How do we show our respect to such diverse beings? To sentient beings—human and animal—we offer fearlessness and friendship.

What of non-sentient beings, those objects that we come into contact with? We need to care for them in a fitting manner, keeping them clean and in order.

We thus appropriately respect all beings: sentient and insentient, regardless of form or nature.

February 2

*Words have the power to destroy.
Words can be the knife that slices,
the club that smashes,
the gun that shatters.*

With alarming ease, hurtful words can stream out of our mouths as unrestricted as a flood-swollen river bursting through a dam. And just as everything in the way of a raging river is laid to waste, those stricken by our verbal onslaught can end up dazed, wondering what just happened.

After we speak harsh words, we may find the courage to apologize. If we are fortunate, the other person forgives us. While forgiveness may ease the animosity, we will still have to endure future karmic consequences for our past karmic actions that we already committed.

By saying harsh words, we break the fundamental precept of “Do no harm.” Instead of giving fearlessness, we give fear. All because we give in to impatience and

intolerance, yet again. This cannot continue. We need to slow down, realize the harm we are doing, and develop patience.

We need “Amitufo.”

February 3

Forgiveness is not just for major wrongs.

We often think of forgiveness in terms of major misdeeds. After all, forgiving others is hard to carry out. Surely, it requires a serious reason. But if we save forgiveness just for major wrongs, we lose a vital cultivation tool. We need to forgive on a regular basis and not just occasionally because it is the niggling everyday slights that we keep running into, not the major misdeeds.

When others impugn or mistreat us, we need to forgive them. When they inconvenience, irritate, or just plain bother us, we need to forgive them. Then, stop thinking of the person and get on with our life.

How do you forgive and forget, and why do it?

Understanding causality, we realize that what was just done to us was the natural result of a karmic deed. And we remember that just as we want to alleviate our suffering we should also wish to alleviate the suffering of the other person. Together, we have been continuously fueling the

flames of our shared anger. When we forgive another person, the fire is doused.

February 4

*“Sentient beings are innumerable;
I vow to help them all.”*

Having embraced this vow, how much of our day is spent fulfilling it? And how much is spent working, studying, eating, sleeping, socializing and relaxing, or frittering time away in front of a TV and on the Internet? Little wonder that while we remain in samsara, all we can manage, at the most, is to help a few individuals ease their current suffering.

Despite good intentions, our help turns out to be as useful as sticking a bandage on a hemorrhaging wound. Plus, in their next lifetime, we won't be around to apply another bandage as karmic wounds reopen and the suffering resumes. But as soon as we get to the Pure Land, we'll begin helping beings—energetically, skillfully, unceasingly.

How?

By teaching the way to heal—to permanently suture—

the wound as we show all beings how to end their endless rebirths. They will then be able to liberate themselves from the cycle of rebirth. Forever.

This is how we can help all beings.

February 5

*We do the right thing
not because we expect to change the world,
but because it's the right thing to do.*

Let's face it, few of us have the position or power to sway others. But that's just fine because being devoid of any sort of influence over others frees us from egoistic expectations. It can also save us from karmic retributions incurred from our improperly wielding power. We'll do something just because it's the right thing to do.

It makes everything so much easier. There's no karmic mess to worry about. No one to ask what they think. We can focus on implementing our plans without wasting energy worrying about others' reactions. Our happiness, our feeling of accomplishment, will come entirely from doing the right thing.

If others notice what we are doing and change for the better, excellent. If no one notices, that's fine. We will have successfully reinforced our natural desire to do what is proper. And not because we harbor unrealistic hopes.

VENERABLE WULING

We do it for the pure joy of doing the right thing.

February 6

Sincerity
is a mind without wandering thoughts.

Dictionaries define sincerity with words like *genuine* and *honest*. Let's apply these to a teacher with a disinterested student. She genuinely wants to help him appreciate the day's lesson. Now let's add a Buddhist aspect, where sincerity is defined as a sharply focused mind, a mind free of wandering thoughts.

The teacher increases her efforts—she focuses single-mindedly on helping him. Her mind does not wander off to her weekly yoga class or tomorrow's exam. With concentration, she brings together her energy, experience, and mental acuity. Her mind doesn't leap from one unformed idea to another, from almost devising a way to help only to be distracted by another thought. She is better able to recall his earlier problems, their past conversations, and the methods she had used. Such conscientious efforts will inspire him to try harder.

VENERABLE WULING

Such is the power of a sincere mind without wandering thoughts.

February 7

*Do not compare one person to another.
Everyone is different—a combination
of karmic causes and consequences.*

Throughout our past lives, we planted incalculable seeds, some of which have matured in this lifetime. Far more have not. For example, when you gave fearlessness, you planted the seeds for a healthy, long life. But what if those seeds have not yet matured? Very likely you will be undergoing health problems, maybe even severe enough to affect your lifespan. And so, you suffer.

Now, imagine I come along and, observing your problems, compare you to a healthy person we both know. In an instant, I mind another's business by not minding my speech. With no right for me to do either, your suffering ratchets up. Fearlessness is needed but I do not give it! Thus, I also increase my suffering, my future good health.

So instead of comparing one person to another, celebrate the past deeds of the fortunate one and encourage the other to plant more such seeds for a better future.

February 8

*Come away from your mistakes,
neither uncaring nor overwhelmed by guilt,
but determined to do better in the future.*

How often have you sighed *Why did I say that? How could I have acted so callously? If only I hadn't!* Guilty thoughts can haunt us for the rest of our life, sneaking up on us, unwanted and unexpectedly. We just don't seem able to let go of painful memories of the harm we inflicted. But we need to. If not for our own sake, then for the well-being of others.

Being guilt-stricken over personal idiocies doesn't make us better people. Think you're repaying a karmic debt? Who are you repaying it to? Who is benefitting from your guilt? Somehow, someday, we need to release our guilty feelings. It's not that we no longer care about what we did. We do. But of greater concern is what we do from now on.

The best thing we can do is get to the Pure Land because from there, finally, we will be able to find and help

Our Daily Practice:

all those we harmed. So much better than drowning in
guilt, unable to move.

February 9

*Remaining silent
works so much better
than trying to watch our every word.*

Of the three karmas—thought, speech, and action—speech is the one that gets us into the most trouble. It's so easy! (1) Open mouth. (2) Blurt out whatever comes to mind. And herein lies the problem. Oblivious of the countless infinitesimal thoughts streaming through our mind, we're so caught up in events and our feelings that we're not even aware of what we're about to blurt out. But out the words come. And it's too late.

Instantly regretting them, we wonder what on earth possessed us. Once again, we resolve to monitor our thoughts before we embarrass ourselves further. And once again, the energy that it takes to do this stuns us. It's exhausting. Plus, by the time we decide how best to say something, the conversation is on something else.

How much easier it would be to not offer our every

Our Daily Practice:

rising opinion, to speak only when necessary, and to keep our mouth in what is often the safest position—shut.

February 10

*Hold phenomena in your hand,
not in your heart.*

Attachments—those myriad things we cling to that bind us to endless rebirths and suffering. The awakened ones advise that for us to end our suffering we have to let go of our attachments. But such advice sounds like existing in a monochrome world while those around us are enjoying a world ablaze with color. If we think this way, we have misunderstood.

When we relinquish attachments, we still hold the person, the object, the experience, the idea in our hands. Just not in our heart. We marvel at being able to hold them thus, awed by how something so precious has come to us. This is not the same as wanting to keep them always with us, never letting them go.

When we try to hold on to phenomena permanently, we are holding on very tightly. If we clasp, say, a rare songbird in our hands, it will be crushed by our clinging. It will

Our Daily Practice:

die. Allowing it to rest lightly on our hand, it will thrust out its chest to joyously sing, as we are filled with delight, not attachments.

February 11

*Do your best,
and remember that
being able to accomplish something
depends on conditions.*

Life would be much easier if we just knew in advance the outcome of our efforts. If positive, we would proceed. If negative, we would cease our labors, knowing that our endeavors are destined to fail. A very simple formula.

Alas, most of us do not have the calm, clear mind to know whether conditions will prove favorable. And so, we proceed as best we can, always trying to work on problems as they arise. We just plod on, bit by bit, in hopes that our good intentions will join with skillful means to find fertile conditions. Will it happen? Maybe not. But maybe it will, for our good-intentioned plodding may just be what is needed.

Whatever the outcome, we will have planted positive seeds for our future. Then, after knowing in our heart that

Our Daily Practice:

we sincerely did our best, we can finally let go of regret and disappointment.

February 12

*Don't get lost in regrets
for not having done something.
Start doing it now.*

The past is just that: the past. It's our reality fixed in time. Bemoaning what we did, or failed to do, achieves little. If we were supposed to have done something, we would have. Since we didn't, we clearly hadn't planted enough seeds and nurtured enough conditions to accomplish it. Very possibly, we hadn't managed to overcome our selfish, lazy habits. Possibly hadn't wanted to be bothered to do more.

Now, disappointed by our inertia, we can sink further into dismay, or we can rouse ourselves and make changes. Or, painfully no longer having such an option, we can find ways to be kinder to those still in our life. We cannot alter our past mistakes because they are fixed in time. But we can remedy our selfishness, bad habits, and inclination to make poor choices, for these are not yet set.

To accomplish this, we need to leave the past, pay attention to the present, and keep an eye on the future.

February 13

*Before correcting someone,
determine why
they behave the way they do.*

Most of us would probably agree that when people act differently from the way we do, they're not necessarily wrong. We know it intellectually. But, from the judgmental mumbling going on in our head, we still feel that those people are wrong.

Just recall something that happened recently. How did we view it? What was our perspective? Many of our thoughts were still critical, were they not? We were shocked, exasperated, disappointed, bewildered. We blamed others for not having acted correctly; "correctly" being defined as how we would have acted.

By learning why people conduct themselves as they do, we will better understand their actions. Maybe we will realize that what they did wasn't wrong after all. Just different.

So in those situations when we do need to correct someone—an employee, a child, someone who requests our guidance—we first need to learn what prompted their behavior.

February 14

*When about to complain,
remember “That’s my karma.”*

Unappealing and unwanted events assail us all the time. When they do, it can be very tempting to grumble, *Why me?* To which we might raise an eyebrow and query, *Well, who else?*

Everything that happens to us is a consequence of the causes we have created, the seeds we have planted. Having planted onion seeds last year in our flower beds, it would be silly to wander out the back door of our house this year and demand, “What are all those onions doing in my flower beds!”

No one snuck in under cover of darkness and sowed those seeds in our impregnable back yard. We planted them. We’re the only person in the universe who can plant seeds in our private garden. No one else did. Similarly, no one else can tend our garden. Choosing the seeds, planting, watering, fertilizing, and weeding them—it’s all up to us, no one else.

So the next time something pops up in the garden of our life, we can wisely nod and acknowledge, “Yup. That’s my karma.”

February 15

*Too often,
we not only repeat our mistakes,
but we seem to be trying to
perfect them as well.*

Anything worthwhile takes time, patience, and attention; call it stick-to-itiveness. The same holds true for correcting our mistakes. We need to keep chipping away at them like a sculptor steadily working on a block of marble, looking for and then carefully eliminating superfluous bits to reveal perfection.

Like the sculptor, we too need to keep chipping away at our faults every day, even when inertia strikes. It won't be easy. Those who know us might well declare that not only are we not cutting down our mistakes, we seem to be perfecting them. But we need to emulate the sculptor's steady progress, reflecting daily then finding and eliminating faults.

Initially, we will not even notice that we are making

progress. But as we improve, we will flake off more and more faults until, finally, we reveal the perfection within ourselves.

February 16

*When goaded,
not fighting back takes courage.*

He was surrounded by people with nothing to lose, their barely suppressed anger radiating off them in waves. As they loomed over him, goading him into a fight, it took courage to remain composed and not retaliate.

Courage.

This is not a word we usually associate with the Buddha's teachings. Perhaps we should. It takes courage—steadfastness in the face of fear—to forgive when wronged, to respect when derided, to persist when overwhelmed, and, especially, to stand peacefully when goaded. We need courage to overcome our niggling fear of trusting the Buddhas and our teachers. Courage, too, to overcome our fear of being unworthy of the trust the Buddhas and our teachers have placed in us. Our fear is yet one more obstacle to overcome.

If the man in the above account could face up to and

overcome his fear, then how can we, experiencing far more favorable conditions, do less?

February 17

Correcting faults is cultivation.

To correct our faults we need to change. How? There are three possible ways available to us. We can catch the faults before we commit them. We can understand why they are so harmful. Or we can change from our heart, thus ensuring that everything we think and do is correct.

The first method, to catch faults one by one, demands vigilance—we have to weigh every thought before we speak or act. It's a struggle.

The second method necessitates an in-depth understanding of cause and consequence.

The third method, the most powerful, does not require us to weigh every thought. Additionally, our understanding need not be so thorough. Our thoughts will already be properly focused, either on selflessly completing tasks and interacting with others or, ideally, on chanting the buddha-name.

With our focus on correct thoughts, our erroneous,

wandering thoughts will gradually fade. With “Amitufo,” our heart will become serene and pure, empty of faults, naturally wise.

February 18

*When praised for an accomplishment,
remember to feel grateful to all those
who helped you succeed.*

One of our fundamental afflictions is thinking that we have an independent self and that what we achieve is due to our own efforts. Such thinking leads to other afflictions, including arrogance and pride. While we may have put forth much effort, we shouldn't claim all the credit. Or even most of it.

Our parents gave us life. Our teachers guide us, friends encourage us, fellow practitioners reassure us, coworkers challenge us, exemplars inspire us, family members nudge us, enemies drive us. People built the schools and buildings we study, work, and live in. Others provide the food that sustains us. In no way are we independent.

We are joined body, spirit, and mind with all those who formed us. And to everything and everyone we have been and are a part of and interact with, we are linked inseparably.

VENERABLE WULING

Any accomplishment we might have belongs to all of them as well. Be grateful for their presence.

February 19

*Cultivation
entails giving up whatever has little value
to attain what is invaluable.*

Let's be honest, letting go of sensory indulgence can sound so, well, spartan. Having spent years bettering our lives only to abandon the things that we now take for granted and enjoy feels so, well, illogical.

Don't worry. Our goal is a level of joy we have yet to realize. It is not about being deprived.

What we discard are attachments to the phenomena cluttering our lives in samsara. We shed our attachments because they bring us, at most, mere fleeting pleasure. In effect, our happiness caused by something yesterday will turn to sorrow tomorrow when the conditions are no longer present. Compared to endless joy, momentary pleasure does not hold much value.

Admittedly, it takes a lot of letting go to attain infinite joy. But we don't want to wait to start benefitting from our

efforts. Bit by bit, as we progress in letting go, we will realize a hitherto unknown sense of ease and fulfillment.

February 20

*Minding one's own business
may not be a lack of caring
but of acting prudently.*

Before voicing our views or interceding in something we witness or hear about, we should first determine whether to even involve ourselves. Sound callous? It's really not, because much of what has transpired isn't our personal concern, isn't actually our business. Regardless, we invariably have opinions regarding the mistakes people make and in what manner they should rectify them.

But instead of declaring our views to all and sundry, we should ask ourselves some questions. Am I responsible in some way for the welfare of those involved? Do I share any accountability for what is now happening? Have I done or failed to do something that brought those involved to this point?²

In other words, we need to determine whether it is our place to intercede? If we lack the wisdom to know the

answers to these questions, might we not also lack the wisdom to intervene wisely?

February 21

*We do not require
diverse chants and mantras.
We only need one.*

With an abundance of Buddhist chants and mantras, it becomes tempting to learn several. We think we can select a correct one for a particular situation. But such an approach poses a dilemma of what to choose and of effectiveness.

It's the same dilemma we encounter while trying to simultaneously practice diverse schools: unfocused familiarity instead of focused proficiency. And to further complicate things, when under pressure we might not be sure which mantra or chant to use. Wouldn't it be much easier if there was one that was ideal for all situations? Fortunately for us, there is.

When sick, chant "Amitufo."

When concerned about others, chant "Amitufo."

When unsure what to do, feeling irritated, worried or scared, when dying—"Amitufo."

By chanting “Amitufo” for all our needs, we will strengthen our surest method for ending all afflictions and suffering.

February 22

*It's time to clean out the attic.
No, not that one,
the other one.*

“What other one?” you ask. The one stuffed with the accumulated dust-gathering detritus from uncountable lifetimes—your mind. Yes, that one.

To appreciate the true situation, imagine you've lived in the same house since birth. Let's look at your attic. You have been stuffing things into it on a daily basis. No, make that minute-by-minute. Your home's top-most floor has thus expanded to unimaginable proportions. But that volume is nothing compared to our mental top-most floor. We've been stuffing things into it willy-nilly—since time immemorial. “Oh dear!” Indeed.

Now let's say we want to move. Where to? The Western Pure Land. But in order to move, we need to clean out our attic. There's no time to hold up each item, reliving fond or bitter memories. If it's not a good seed, a virtue, an Amitufofo, out it goes.

When our attic is rid of the detritus, of attachments,
we get to move. Finally.

February 23

*No one leaves
a confrontation unscathed.*

Whether a participant, an observer, or someone further removed, everyone involved in or touched by a dispute is harmed. Those who exchanged harsh words or even actual blows will have planted the seeds for painful future karmic retributions. Those who witnessed what happened will find themselves impacted in varying ways and degrees. The affected ones will continue to influence others they come into contact with.

The rancor engendered by the conflict injures everyone all around it. Like embers falling away from a smoldering fire, they scorch and sear all they touch. Thus, the number of beings impacted negatively continues to grow in ways the combatants never imagined.

As untold beings get affected one by one, the adverse karmic retributions will continue to mount for the original participants, especially for the one who started it all. Yet just one more reason we should think before we act.

February 24

*“Why should I re-read a Buddhist book
when I know what happens?”*

So many books today seem best suited to a mere single reading. This could well be due to our having learned all there is in the book. Fortunately, there are books that we can return to and benefit from the rest of our lives. For example, Buddhist books, sutras, and commentaries. In fact, the more we read these, the more we benefit from them.

We need not hurriedly turn the page to find out what happens next. We already know. Knowing what lies ahead, our mind can be at ease. As the very familiarity of the words calms us, our increasingly peaceful mind can more deeply absorb the embedded wisdom in what we are reading. At a particularly moving passage, we linger contemplatively. At another, we see something we did not see before.

Reading the Buddhist book repeatedly, the words become progressively more sublime, subtle, and meaning-

Our Daily Practice:

ful. It transforms what was once a leisure activity into a meditative practice.

February 25

*When thrown by a horse, get back on.
Our path in life is the same.
When thrown by doubt and difficulties,
get right back on the path.*

We will always encounter obstacles. That's reality in samsara. The obstacles may be external: no place to practice, no teacher, unsupportive family and friends. Or internal: procrastination, apathy, doubt. If we linger over such difficulties, these obstacles will eventually become impassable. We may then be tempted to give up entirely.

Think of this in terms of riding a horse to a distant destination. If the horse throws us, the thought of remounting can be daunting. *Do I really want to climb back on a creature who seems so resolutely opposed to the idea? What if he throws me again? I think I'll walk.*

Anyone who has ridden horses knows the necessity of remounting right after a fall. Failing to do so, the rider runs the very real risk of never riding again. Likewise, failing to

Our Daily Practice:

get back on our path when thrown by obstacles, we run the risk of abandoning our practice in this lifetime.

February 26

Circumstances

*—favorable and unfavorable—
provide practice opportunities.*

When our life is going well, complacency often emerges. We're too busy enjoying our good fortune to think of all the things we need to do to increase it. And too happy to think of ending others' suffering. When things are not going well, we can feel so overwhelmed by events that cultivating to attain a future goal seems irrelevant compared to surviving the day unscathed.

But all circumstances are suitable for practice. For example, when in danger, we can cultivate a calm mind. In fearful times, we can practice giving others courage as well as letting go of our attachment to ego.

When others are enraged, we can strive to engender patience to help diffuse the anger.

When everything is going well, we can exercise humility and gratitude. While enjoying happy occasions,

Our Daily Practice:

we can compassionately strive to help others find joy as well. And always, whether times are good or bad, we chant “Amitufo.”

February 27

*Notice from the Good Fortune Bank:
Statements will no longer be issued.*

How much good fortune do we have? What about accumulations? Or how much of our ‘reserves’ have we depleted. Financial institutions update us monthly. Many now provide phone apps that allow us to check on our balances round the clock. We can even request to be notified the instant anything changes.

Wouldn’t it be convenient if the Good Fortune Bank could also notify us?

Alert: you just helped someone; you now have X.

Or, *Alert: You obtained something you don’t need; your balance has decreased to Y.*

Without such updates, we have no idea how much good fortune we have spent or given up, how much we have added on. And so, we can’t know our balance in our account at the Good Fortune Bank. But we don’t need to. We can keep a mental tally, a daily score. As long as we

achieve more selfless acts than selfish ones at the end of the day, we can be secure in the knowledge that our balance has increased.

February 28

*If others ask for your opinion,
respectfully give it.
If they do not ask,
respectfully keep it to yourself.*

Voicing our opinions isn't difficult. Doing it all the time, we've mastered that skill. Voicing them at the right time is what we have pretty much failed to get a handle on. The right time occurs when others either ask us to do so or indicate in some way that our views will be welcomed. But if we voice our thoughts in a disrespectful, overwhelming manner, our invitation to speak freely may be quickly rescinded. Offering a viewpoint should be just that—an offering.

We should extend our idea as respectfully as we proffer water and flowers to a Buddha. We don't thrust flowers at a Buddha image or plunk them down and leave. We offer flowers in appreciation, grateful for the opportunity to be able to do so.

We should offer our viewpoints in the same way for the times that someone will want our opinion is rare.

February 29

*Learn from guilt
and do not become immersed in it.*

Our difficulty in forgiving ourselves and others is worsened by our thoughts returning to what happened, over and over. First, when we have an argument or fight with someone, we consider how bad it made both of us feel. Then we resolve to try harder next time to not give in to the anger. We don't want to feel terrible again!

For the other person, we forgive them by reminding ourselves that we have no idea what happened in that person's life to result in their acting with such hostility. And we tell ourselves that we got to walk away from a person who was verbally abusive toward us. They couldn't! What suffering.

Finally, each time our thoughts return to what happened, we drag them away and firmly plant them on "Amitufo."

We do this every time our thoughts return to the inci-

dent and our guilt. And we remind ourselves that our guilt is a waste of time and energy. It will be much better chant “Amitufo” and dedicate the merits to all beings in suffering.

March 1

*Letting go doesn't mean that we don't care
but that we're at ease with our life.*

Imagine you're ambling through a quiet meadow on a lazy summer day with sunlight filtering through the trees. The birds are singing, and a breeze gently rustles the leaves overhead. Worries are forgotten, fears discarded. Nothing to do, save be at peace, at ease.

To be at ease is to attain freedom from mental constraints. It is to be composed yet flexible, content yet happy, still yet aware, relaxed yet secure. We achieve ease when we stop avoiding everything that we deem unpleasant and when we stop grasping at everything that we believe will make us happy.

It is the state we attain when we let go of wanting the world and everything in it to conform to our preferences and expectations. No longer struggling, moaning, railing, and whinging, we settle into quiet, contented happiness.

This is just a taste of what we will experience perma-

nently when we attain the supreme and perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood. This is just a taste of “Great Ease.”

March 2

*Seek wisdom,
not knowledge.*

Knowledge comprises the facts and ideas acquired from external sources through experience, observation, and learning. Then there is that which already lies within, deep within our true nature. This is wisdom, our innate *prajna*. With *prajna*, we simply know.

Imagine getting caught in a sudden downpour. We'd dash for cover—not stand in the pouring rain analyzing our various options. *Prajna* wisdom is this natural. Only much more serene. While knowledge comes to us from external sources, *prajna* arises from the tranquil mind. How?

As our mind calms down, *prajna* bubbles up to the surface of our mind and begins to function. Initially, almost as soon as our bubble of wisdom arises, it bursts. But with continued meditation—for us, chanting the buddha-name—wisdom will arise more often and function longer. Eventually, wisdom will no longer recede.

When we function continuously from our innate prajna, we will be awakened.

March 3

*When you have no say or influence
and cannot bring about any change,
accept the reality of what is.*

Just as everything that happens to us is a consequence of what we have thought, said, and done, so too what happens to others are the consequences of their respective karmas. And yet, knowing that cause and effect is a natural law unrestricted by time, we still long to ease others' suffering. Not knowing whether we can, we try anyway.

Our wish to assist is the embryonic stirring of our compassionate bodhi mind. But we need to bear in mind that we may well lack the necessary abilities and conditions to do so. Just as those we seek to help might well lack the conditions for us to ease their suffering. This likelihood of not being able to effect any change does not mean we do not try.

We should.

But upon failing to improve a situation, we need to let

go of any disappointment. We need to readily accept whatever ensues and realize that we did try our best to help ease another's suffering.

March 4

*If you wouldn't want others
to hear what you're saying about them,
most likely it shouldn't be said.*

Don't gossip. Okay, that's simple. Or is it? Is saying something nice about someone gossiping? Some people might say yes, others no. So how do we realize that what we are going to say isn't gossip? One litmus test is to ask ourselves if we would say it in front of the person. Aside from exceptions like not discussing what we'll be giving a child for his birthday in front of him, this guideline works well.

If we are going to get upset or feel regret for speaking out, then we shouldn't.

If the other person might feel hurt or defensive or angry at what we say, then we shouldn't.

If there is even a remote chance of upsetting the other person in any way, then we shouldn't say it.

Notice a pattern? It's "we shouldn't." Unless the person

is going to thank us for what we are going to say, or smile happily with eyes twinkling, or feel the need to demur humbly, then we shouldn't say it at all.

So yes, it is simple after all.

March 5

*Bad habits, like weeds,
should be pulled out when detected.
Left alone, they will rapidly grow out of control.*

Any gardener with bad habits will most likely find himself hard pressed to say which grows out of control faster: the weeds or his habits. Both are looming threats whose seeds were sown without us noticing anything. As they first appear, both weeds and habits seem so trifling, just pesky little annoyances, and hardly worth bothering about. No big deal, we tell ourselves. We can eliminate them another day.

But as they develop, we realize that we need to do something before they multiply. We must not wait any longer! And yet, we still do nothing. Until one day, faster than we thought possible, those minor irritations have grown monstrously and taken over. And worse, like Medusa's snakes, they intertwine every which way, making things complicated. And menacing. Which end is which? Where to begin?

VENERABLE WULING

Note to self: When such pests are spotted, pluck them out! Quickly!

March 6

*When about to tell others
that your Dharma door is better than theirs,
remember, "That's their choice."*

We all have a unique combination of roots, habits, causes, and conditions. Knowing this, the Buddha compassionately taught 84,000 Dharma doors. If a person has good fortune, she will intuitively find the most suitable method for herself. Just as, hopefully, others too will be fortunate enough to be drawn to the method best suited to them, based on their previously developed roots and current abilities.

Having made our choice, we need to respect those of others. If one method was perfect for everyone, the Buddha would have taught just that one. He didn't. Until we uncover a lot more of our wisdom and eliminate a lot more of our ignorance, we won't know which method is most suitable for another.

Attempting to convince someone to abandon his or her

practice for ours runs the risk of leaving that person confused and frustrated. Perhaps, even enough to abandon Buddhism. Rather than provoke these, we need to accept—and respect—that person's choice.

March 7

*Why seek transitory happiness in phenomena,
when joy without end is within our reach?*

Myriad pleasurable things available to people with a bit of good fortune—people like us—are sought for the enjoyment that they can bring. Seeking such happiness seems so much more reasonable than trying to attain something referred to as “ultimate joy” or “ultimate bliss.” After all, we have experienced happiness to various degrees, so we think we know what it’s like. But we really don’t know what ultimate joy, much less ultimate bliss, feels like.

To give up the known to seek the unknown—this seems risky. And yet, this exchange is precisely what the Buddha encouraged us to do. He knew that if we persevere, we will realize that everyday happiness cannot compare to the joy to be found in buddha-name chanting, when, for a moment, we are suddenly transported to a state of joy. This moment—incredibly serene while at the same time gloriously joyful—is all too brief. But it holds the promise of unending joy to come.

March 8

*When taken advantage of,
we can view it as a karmic repayment
or as something put away for the future.
Or as an opportunity to forgive a debt.*

Someone taking advantage of us happens in one of two scenarios.

In the first scenario, we owe the person. So being taken advantage of means a karmic debt is reduced, perhaps even canceled. With lifetimes of creating debts, having one eliminated is just a drop in the bucket. But if we can gladly repay it, we'll do more than just settle a karmic score. This deeper understanding of karma is a sign of progress in our cultivation. And so, we know that repayment is a good thing.

In the second scenario, we do not owe the person. In this instance, being taken advantage of means that the person now owes us. We now have a karmic credit. But someone owing us is possibly yet another enmity waiting to

Our Daily Practice:

happen. In addition, the other person will now have yet another debt to repay. For both our sakes let's forgive this person's debt.

March 9

*“Please don’t give me frustration.
I have enough already, thank you.”*

When you suggest something to a person, pay heed to her response. Is she accepting it happily? Or grimacing? Perhaps she is offering an alternative or declining with an explanation. If you perceive a less than enthusiastic response, discuss other options with the person. This can prevent any potential frustration.

But what if you aren’t listening earnestly? What if you’re still enamored with your proposed plan or idea. Hearing a reasoned “No thank you,” you still forge ahead, adjusting your original suggestion slightly. The person again demurs, further clarifying why she cannot accept. But yet again, in your obstinacy to obtain acceptance, you tweak the plan once more. The person, recognizing the railroad car of destiny barreling down the track towards her, decides to accord with conditions and accepts. Gracefully, I might add.

Our Daily Practice:

Maxim: Just as there is merit in offering, there is wisdom in accepting a “No thank you.”

March 10

*Three lifetimes:
striving, indulging, paying the price.*

Buddhism teaches us about three lifetimes.

In the first, a person strives to be good. Having little, he still gives whatever he can. He soothes others' fears and worries, and remains ever vigilant for ways to help. He thus accumulate good fortune.

In a second lifetime, due to all this good fortune, maybe he becomes arrogant. After all, he now has status, wealth, power. There's much to be proud of. Caught up in personal indulgence, he ignores others' suffering. Now, instead of watching for opportunities to help, he pursues opportunities to wield his power, to awe others, to control, and to create fear. To dominate. The more power he has, the more lives are affected. And destroyed. One with great power, for example a political leader, can affect the lives of millions of beings, even billions.

In a third lifetime, having squandered his good fortune

Our Daily Practice:

and created untold suffering, he plummets into the hells. Such is the terrible fate of misusing that “second” lifetime.

March 11

*Don't agitate the water.
Or your mind.*

Think of the mind as a pool of water. When the water is calm, we can see all the way to the bottom. With nothing to obstruct us, we can view everything clearly in their sparkling perfection. But when the water is disturbed, it stirs up the bottom mud. With so many particles swirling around, the water becomes cloudy, contaminated.

When we need to decide how to respond to or resolve a situation, we need a clear mind. Chanting “Amitufo” allows us to calm our agitated mind. This is akin to the water clearing up. Without further agitation, the particles will settle back to the bottom. When we get aggravated and highly agitated, perhaps in trying to figure out what to do, it is like plunging our hand into the water. When we frenziedly try one idea then another, it is like frantically poking here, blindly grasping there, wildly roiling calm waters.

Don't.

Our Daily Practice:

Instead, sit quietly and allow the water—your thoughts—to settle. Doing so, your solution will shine forth.

March 12

*Do not envy others for what they have.
Get busy planting your own good seeds.*

When looking at those who have much good fortune, it is very easy to be envious. Or to deem it unfair when so many others have so little. It doesn't help when the fortunate ones are obnoxious and egotistical. You wonder, why are they enjoying such wealth? Because they have planted the relevant seeds! In other words, they have earned their good fortune.

In previous lifetimes, they were generous and thoughtful, not puffed up and pompous. Whether they had much or little, they gave their resources, time, and energy. Maybe they gave publicly, thinking it might inspire others to give. Maybe they gave anonymously, perhaps to avoid embarrassing the recipient. When giving, they did so with sincerity and respect.

But look at some of them in this lifetime. Selfish and arrogant, they are currently planting seeds for a harrowing

Our Daily Practice:

future downfall. Learn from their example: humbly open your heart and your hands to help others. And don't ever close them.

March 13

Don't judge others.

First, we don't understand enough to fairly judge someone. To establish why she is acting as she does, we need to know her karmic trail, one that covers countless lifetimes. But that's not all. Because everyone is connected, we also need to know the intertwining relationships of all those involved to piece together this massive karmic jigsaw puzzle.

But, all these are beyond our current abilities! Which is okay actually because, second, it's rarely our place, or responsibility, to judge others. A fact we tend to overlook most of the time.

Our actions are the only things we should judge. Here too we won't know how our past karmas will dictate a situation, but there are still things that we can discern. Our intentions. Our mindset. Our manner. We use the principles we learn in our Buddhist study as benchmarks against which we judge our own actions. Doing so should keep us quite busy. So much so that we no longer feel inclined to judge others' actions.

March 14

*Why bad things
happen to good people.*

Upon seeing an unscrupulous person experience misfortune, most of us would probably not consider it unfair. But it does seem unfair when someone who does everything we know to be right undergoes one misfortune after another. What happened to cause and effect?

Well, nothing.

We've just seen a sliver of the person's actions in one lifetime; we have no idea how he behaved in others. All of us undergo the just consequences incurred through past misdeeds. So his current misfortune is fair.

But wait.

What we also do not know is what his life would be like if he hadn't been so good in his present lifetime. Very possibly his difficulties could be far more severe: perhaps death or impoverishment instead of a broken leg or financial setback. So a person's severity of destined hardships will lessen due to current selfless and ethical behavior.

Adverse karmic retributions ease in the face of good karmic actions.

March 15

*When pursuing something enjoyable,
remember*

“All phenomena are illusory.”

*When avoiding something unpleasant,
remember*

“All phenomena are illusory.”

Most of us spend a great deal of time and energy chasing what we believe will make us happy and evading what we fear will cause us suffering. But in fact, both chasing and evading cause suffering. In Buddhism, we learn that all phenomena—all things, events, and matters—are unreal, impermanent, and destined to end. Good times and favorable conditions are not real because they don't last.

Thankfully, the same applies to bad times and unfavorable conditions. We may understand the principle. But until we embrace the reality that nothing here in samsara continues forever, we will continue to suffer. If we stop trying to force everything to conform to our wishes—

accepting that phenomena are always in flux—we will stop struggling.

Struggling causes the suffering.

Acceptance eases the suffering.

Patience ends it.

March 16

*Do not judge others for their choices.
They may be doing better with their options
than we are with ours.*

Visualize a man and a woman standing in a supermarket checkout line on a snowy winter day. The man, drinking coffee from his thermos, is buying frozen conventionally grown corn, frozen raspberries, dry beans, and day-old bread. The woman has organic corn-on-the-cob, mangoes, wild-caught salmon, still warm Ciabatta bread, and sips a latte from the coffee shop. Looking at the man's shopping basket, she congratulates herself on her superior choices.

But the man selected non-organic produce listed safe by the EWG, US-grown fruit frozen when fresh, inexpensive high protein food, and whole wheat bread baked one day ago. Plus his thermos held the fair-trade coffee that he brewed at home. The woman chose an out-of-season vegetable, imported fruit, expensive protein, white bread, and non-fair-trade coffee in a single-use cup.

We need to pay attention to our own choices, not those of others.

March 17

*Adorn yourself not with the gems of this world
but with those of the Western Pure Land.*

In samsara, wealthy people have long adorned themselves with precious metals and gems. The more good fortune they have, the more wealth they acquire. More gold, silver, precious stones.

Gems, like lapis lazuli, and precious metals, including gold and silver, also exist in the Western Pure Land. But in that land, they are enjoyed by all beings, not by just a few. More importantly, in that land, the gems represent virtues. Arising from Amitabha Buddha's mind and the minds of all the beings there, the virtues are so prolific that they manifest everywhere.

What are some of these virtues?

Permanence, which occurs when beings use their pure mind.

Joy, which arises from practicing and learning daily.

True self, which is to control one's thoughts, allowing the attainment of great freedom.

And purity, the mind free of attachments.

Why seek to possess physical gems for a few brief years,
when in the Pure Land, we will permanently attain all that
the gems represent.

March 18

*Every moment in time is unique,
and unrepeatable.*

When we, unawakened beings, recall an enjoyable experience, we often find ourselves musing about that moment of delight. And so we try to recapture that feeling by duplicating what happened. But we can't.

The conditions that caused it—people, places, objects, times, our thoughts—all came together for a brief instant. And in a flash, all those conditions changed because everything in samsara is in a state of constant flux. A new set of conditions may be similar, but never identical. Besides, even if they were, our expectations would add a new variable to that old equation. A moment of serendipity, because of what it is, can never be recreated. It's just impossible.

So rather than try to recreate the magical thermos of hot chocolate sipped delightfully on that long drive home, be grateful for the beverage you're now savoring. If the old

memory arises, observe it but don't crave to repeat it. You can't, and that's fine.

March 19

*With expectations,
the most beautiful rose will prove disappointing.
Without them,
a simple violet is perfection.*

When we have preconceived ideas, we set ourselves up for disappointment. The real world around us will never match our imaginary one, born of our remembrances and desires, that we carry within us. The most beautiful rose in the world will dishearten anyone who carries a preconceived image of it.

On the other hand, sans anticipation, a simple violet is appreciated as an object of incredible beauty, our wonder and delight enhanced by our suddenly coming upon it. Not having to meet a preconceived standard, it achieves perfection simply by existing.

If, somehow, we can let go of anticipation, we will be able to explore the world like young children investigating everything in their small worlds. Too young for precon-

ceived ideas, for them everything is an eye-opener. And their delight is obvious.

Without expectations, we too will be like that.

March 20

*All too easily,
harmless indulgences can become addictions.*

That cup of coffee in the morning to get us going, dinner at our favorite restaurant to celebrate good news, the weekend getaway to mark a difficult job we've just completed. Innocuous indulgences? Or something else?

The coffee, special dinner, and getaway seem so harmless. And they can be if we do not become dependent on them. But if we feel we can't function without the coffee, can't relax after finishing a job without the usual dinner or weekend getaway, then we're in trouble. We are addicted without knowing it.

When a little indulgence morphs into something we can't function without, and when we feel incomplete because there is no reward for good news or a finished job well done, then we remain wanting. And we have officially slipped over the line.

We've gone from enjoying something to feeling unable

to function without it. We've upped the level of the reward to where, very soon, we'll need more. We've entered our own little world of addiction.

March 21

*To learn from our teachers,
we need to be near them
every day.*

We might well wonder how on earth we're supposed to be near our teachers daily. Sure, up to the last century or so in the East, people could have done this simply by spending all their lives in the same place. Many temples and monasteries were within reach of the locals. But in the West today, Buddhist centers and monastics are still limited in number. And so, being near our teachers daily can be very difficult.

Let's key in on "near them." Not surprisingly, we assume that it means physical proximity—living in the same place as our teacher. But "near them" refers to a teacher's teachings, not their physical presence. It's the teachings we need to be near. And being near the teachings is to learn and live them daily.

We could stand right next to a teacher all day long, but

VENERABLE WULING

if we're not learning from him, not following what he says,
we're not "near" him. We're just taking up valuable space.

March 22

*Be careful with words.
What we say heedlessly
may haunt others the rest of their lives.*

We all know the feeling. Someone we admire or trust says something, and it feels like she just slapped us. Caught completely off guard, we may utter something, but more likely we'll be too dazed to talk. The moment passes, and the person moves on to another topic. Slowly we recover, but the pain remains. Years pass with no thoughts on it until something triggers the memory, and those words rise anew. And with them, searing pain.

So what was said very long ago has the power to haunt us the rest of our life and even our lives yet to come. Distressing words etched in our memory can arise at the strangest, most seemingly unrelated situation.

Had the person realized that her words, casually spoken, could cause us such pain and hound us endlessly, she wouldn't have said them. She just wasn't thinking. But we need to. And we can. We must.

March 23

*When entering a Buddhist center,
we need to leave more than our shoes at the door.*

Upon entering the cultivation hall of a Buddhist center for the first time, most of us naturally look around with a mixture of curiosity and respect. We try to follow what everyone else is doing. Hopefully, after attending for some time, we settle in and contentedly follow the established rules and procedures. Our focus is now on our practice, not on the protocol.

But other people may, instead of according with the proceedings, begin wondering why things are done in a certain way. *Another center does things differently. Why can't things here be done like that? Why can't I do what I want?* With such thinking, we will be entering the hall with excess baggage—our attachments.

A vital part of self-cultivation is letting go of personal preferences. One of them: when things work, but not in the way you'd like them to, it's fine.

Our Daily Practice:

So, when you leave your shoes at the door, remember to also leave your attachments.

March 24

*When realizing that we failed
to react compassionately,
imagining how a role model would have reacted
can help us improve.*

After we have been cultivating for a while, we would expect to react better than previously in various situations. But what of the times when it feels like we don't remember our manners? When we don't do what we learned in Buddhism?

For example, shocked upon seeing a person's unexpected decline in health, we fail to adapt to his new condition quickly enough to bring him a chair. Or a worrisome visit actually goes well. Relief gushes over us, but we fail to offer to help the person get to her next destination.

One option is to imagine how a bodhisattva would react in the circumstance. Trying to emulate an awakened being, however, is daunting. Much less intimidating is to envision how someone we know and admire would act.

Our Daily Practice:

Repeatedly doing this should prepare us to react more thoughtfully in the future regardless of the circumstances.

March 25

*Others choose how they act towards me.
I, in turn, also have a choice
in how to act towards them.*

How others act towards us is their choice, a decision that entails karmic results. We too have a choice. We could react automatically without considering the consequences. Initially, this may not seem like a choice, but it is—we are reacting from habit. Habits are formed by opting to do something and then doing it repeatedly.

At any point, we can choose to change our behavior. For the most part we don't. And so we end up defaulting to our usual action or response—one that's been programmed over lifetimes.

Instead of choosing to act from habits, a saner choice would be to first consider likely future consequences of an action. Sounds too complicated to do? Takes too much time when the action needs to be immediate? Consider this: the time we take to carefully consider how to react is

Our Daily Practice:

infinitesimal compared to the time we will spend suffering the results of acting rashly.

March 26

*Problems arise due to
our misunderstanding cause and effect.*

Although we may think that we understand cause and effect, we really don't. Or at least not fully.

Karmas, or causes, are good, bad, or neutral actions. Neutral means the activity is neither good nor bad morally. These karmas don't pose any problems because they don't carry painful retributions. Good karmas have consequences, but they're good ones. No problem here, other than the fact that we don't create enough of them. Clearly, our problem is bad karmas. Then why do we keep committing them when we know they result in suffering?

One reason might be that we don't grasp the inclusiveness of karma. Karma concerns everything, not only major actions. It concerns things done everywhere, all the time. It does not switch on and off. Yes, we need to pay attention to major karmas, but our minor daily actions have consequences too. And unfortunately, if bad, or fortunately, if good, they all add up.

Our Daily Practice:

All the time. Every time.

March 27

*If something is going to happen,
worry will not stop it.
If something is not going to happen,
worry wastes time and energy.*

Worries arise from fear—fear that things will remain the same and fear that they will change. For some of us worry becomes a habit, for others a learned behavior. And there are those for whom it seems almost physical—a mutation in their DNA that results in them being hardwired for worry.

Whatever the underlying reason, worrying is pointless, a waste of time and energy. If through individual or shared karma, we have set events into motion, worrying won't prevent them from occurring. And if we haven't set things into motion, nothing is going to happen. So there's no need to worry.

Worries are wandering thoughts. We stop worrying by eliminating fear. Fear arises because we stubbornly attach

Our Daily Practice:

to our existence. Daily learning and practice will help us let go of attachments and contentedly accept what is and will be.

March 28

*Critiques
whether unjustified
or embarrassingly accurate,
are opportunities to practice patience.*

Criticism can hurt. Unless offered helpfully, either in delivery or by the right person, it's very easy for us to feel offended or even under attack. Perhaps it's a case of being sharply censured in front of others, a distressing face-losing moment. Or perhaps the critique is unfair, in which case it's not surprising to cry foul. After having taken the time to put forth the effort to complete a task correctly, here is someone claiming we did it incorrectly.

But what if the criticism is valid. If so, we will feel embarrassed, red-faced over having done something badly and not knowing it. Or, aware that we did it poorly, we didn't know how to fix the mistakes and didn't ask for help. Or even worse, knowing that there were mistakes, we didn't bother to correct them.

Our Daily Practice:

Next time, instead of feeling hurt from criticisms, view them as opportunities to cultivate patience and diligence.

March 29

*Offering criticism
in a timely, respectful manner.
(Part One)*

Discerning when and how to criticize someone remains a skill few of us have managed to master. Let's face it, we haven't even grasped the more basic issue of who we should—and can—criticize. We seem to think it's wide open.

Anyone who stumbles into our crosshairs—acting in a manner we wouldn't—is subject to the critical remarks bubbling up within us. Unless we can catch ourselves, our words will spew forth. Voila. As if we need another karmic enmity. So whom do we criticize? Those we are responsible for, like our children or subordinates at work.

Those we have a good affinity with and who are open to our suggestions, like some family members, friends, and close coworkers. Those we love and respect, who love and respect us. If there is a good affinity and we feel someone

Our Daily Practice:

will welcome our opinions, we offer them. For those who have a lesser or no affinity with us, we guide by setting examples. And keep our opinions to ourselves.

March 30

*Offering criticism
in a timely, respectful manner.
(Part Two)*

Yesterday we learned about the people who we could rightly offer critical remarks to—those we have a good affinity with. Next, how do we critique them? In the way that we would want them to critique us. One consideration is a matter of when and where: try hard not to correct someone in front of others or when you're upset.

Another factor is one of approach. Instead of bluntly criticizing them, phrase the comments in terms that the person is more likely to accept. Don't say the person is wrong, just that you believe what he did was. Then explain why and what might have been done instead. Have a respectful conversation, don't give a lecture.

As we have been advised:

“If you know anything that is *hurtful and untrue*,
don't say it.

Our Daily Practice:

If you know anything that is *helpful but untrue*,
don't say it.

If you know anything that is *hurtful but true*,
don't say it.

If you know anything that is *helpful and true*,
find the right time.”

March 31

*If you can't understand, fix, or accept it
—let it go.*

*I don't see how the project will work. I don't get why they're doing it.
I just don't understand.*

We've all been there. We hear about what others are doing and just can't see how the proposed project will work, or why it's even needed. Suddenly they invite us to participate, and so we look into the proposal. Upon checking things out, we ponder this bewildering project and shake our head.

At this point, we have some options. To ease our gnawing doubts we ask more questions. Or we can politely decline the invitation to participate and get back to meeting our responsibilities—things and projects we understand and are happy to have taken on.

The first option will result in further frustration and wasted energy.

The second option—opting out—enables us to reduce

Our Daily Practice:

our frustrated thoughts. We wish success to those undertaking the new project. At the same time, we rededicate ourselves to the work we are qualified for and committed to doing.

April 1

*Reduce sensory craving
by realizing “less is more.”*

A dozen or so years ago, I happened to glance at a TV when program credits were scrolling down the screen. Working online with a coworker, I commented to him that the image on the screen moved. He hesitated, then cautiously reminded me, “It’s TV. Things move.” I assured him that his salient bit of information was welcomed, but, not to worry, I was talking about the swirling background behind the credits.

Apparently, mere words are no longer enough to hold our attention. We now require sensory stimulation every moment of our lives. And not just from television but from everywhere. And not just visually but for all our senses. Worse, unable to calm our mind, we agitate it even more with increased amounts of stimuli. What can we do?

Stop devouring phenomena and, instead, view them with equanimity. Allow your mind to settle, and find joy in

Our Daily Practice:

simplicity. And begin to let go of attachments by realizing that, in many ways, less truly is more.

April 2

*Complete work on time, and, ideally,
before it's due.*

It's happened to all of us. Someone at work or in an organization we belong to fails to complete their assigned part of a project on time. When it comes to us, it comes with a message that it's up to us to get things back on schedule for the next deadline. Which is in six days. Including the weekend.

And so we work all day and into the night for the next several days, neglecting our other jobs, frantically re-scheduling prior commitments, and becoming frazzled. And extremely testy. Coworkers avoid us, and family members silently place our dinner on our desk before tiptoeing out of the room.

Having gone through this ourselves, let's not inflict it on others. This isn't about managing time better or about procrastination, although they're important.

It's about respect—respect for those whose work

Our Daily Practice:

follows ours. Respect for their time, respect for their family, and respect for all those we will inconvenience should we fail to meet our responsibilities in a timely manner.

April 3

Helping naturally and appropriately.

Seeing a young girl struggle to extract a paper towel from its dispenser, I reached over to turn the awkwardly-placed dispenser knob. With that, the paper towel magically rolled out. Eagerly tearing off the towel, the girl turned and looked up at me. Her smile was radiant. I also had a happy smile as we shared our moment of hard-won success.

Helping her had been so natural. There had been no need to judge whether she was worthy of help. She was a little girl! No need to decide if I should be the one to help. No one else noticed her predicament.

And deciding how to help wasn't an issue because, thanks to personal experience, I knew how to extract the towel!

And so, I offered my help unconditionally and spontaneously. By experiencing a rare flash of clarity, I had gone straight from perception to action. Looking back over what had just happened, I mused that perhaps this could be

Our Daily Practice:

considered a rare taste of how awakened beings help.
Naturally and appropriately.

April 4

*After asking a question and receiving the reply,
remember to say “thank you.”*

If our parents were able to look over our shoulder while we’re emailing, they would likely be appalled. *You forgot to say “Thank you.”* In an age of instantaneous communication, courtesy is too often a thing forgotten.

For example, a person emails another, perhaps asking how to do something. Perhaps asking a favor. The recipient graciously stops what she’s doing to carefully compose a reply. It may be what the person needs to know or an apology for not being able to help. She hits send. And unbeknownst to her, it’s also the end of the conversation. It’s the end because the person who emailed for help didn’t respond with a “Thank you.” Or anything else.

It’s akin to someone asking for something, getting it, and then walking away without any acknowledgement, the item firmly in his grasp. Most of us wouldn’t do this. And yet many don’t send emails with “Thank you.” We need to.

Our Daily Practice:

Why? It's polite. Not a good enough reason? You may want another favor.

April 5

*When we speak of how people have upset us,
we are not ridding ourselves of our frustration.
We are dumping it on others.*

“Phew, now I feel better.” But what about the other person? What if he is no better than we are at letting frustration roll off our backs, like water off a duck’s back? Even though he didn’t experience what we did, he picks up on our pain. He feels that pain more and more. For we have shoveled all the rubbish in our backyard over to his. The pain compounds when mixed with his affection for us.

Even though those who care about us listen willingly to our ranting and whinging, is it fair to ask them to? We’re not showing that we care about them when we offload our garbage of negative emotions onto them. So let’s stop our rubbish from leaving our backyard, stop heaping it onto another.

Instead, let’s turn that mental rubbish into compost! Mix it with patience and aerate it with forgiveness. Replace

Our Daily Practice:

the bad with the good, and transform that garbage into something useful.

April 6

*Whether learning or teaching,
we need Dharma affinities.*

Before teaching others, a Buddhist teacher needs to successfully practice the principles learned from the sutras and accomplished masters. For a Buddhist student, he or she needs to willingly set aside other teachings to focus on only one. Lacking this focus would be like pouring tea into a cup already filled with hot chocolate.

You'd get a cup overflowing with an unpalatable liquid.

In similar fashion, mixing teachings muddles all these teachings. Additionally, a Dharma affinity needs to exist between teacher and student—a willing teacher, happy to teach the student, and a willing student, all too happy to learn from the teacher. Such a relationship is essential. Without one, try as we might to learn from an accomplished master, our learning will be limited. Our inspiration to practice will waver.

Better to learn from another master, perhaps even a

Our Daily Practice:

less-accomplished one. A strong affinity will make us more diligent in learning. And in practice, too.

April 7

*It can be a fine line between
appreciation and attachment.*

And as with all lines in the sand, it's easy to slip past the line, into the side we hope to avoid. The deciding factor? Craving. Desire. Like missing something when it's absent. Say, the morning triple-shot latte we had during that rush project. Or like wanting something not to end. Say, an evening spent listening to our favorite music at a concert.

Think of attachments as failures to accord with the current situation. They become unfulfilled wishes, which is one of the eight sufferings. And they are very difficult to detect because it's such a fine line between them and sincere appreciation. But since attachments lead to suffering, we have to detect them. And so we need to observe our thoughts.

When we fix our morning coffee, do thoughts of delicately foamed lattes arise?

Does our usual simple cup now seem less satisfactory?

Our Daily Practice:

Do we start checking prices online for that espresso machine everyone's talking about?

If so, we've slipped over that line.

April 8

*Chanting with a focused mind and with sincerity,
the vitality of a planted seed will be strong.
Chanting with a wandering mind and with
reluctance, the vitality of the seed will be weak.*

Planting Amitufo seeds in our store consciousness is akin to planting seeds in a garden, say bean seeds. If we view gardening as a burden, we'll end up inattentive and careless. Very likely, the bean plants will not thrive. But if we carefully nurture those seeds, we can have healthy plants. Planting Amitufo seeds—chanting the buddha- name—works the same way.

With dedicated and focused chanting, our properly planted Amitufo seeds will grow strong. As we plant more seeds, they'll begin to overwhelm our selfish ones. These bad karma seeds are those that we have planted, not just in this lifetime but in our lifetimes since time immemorial. Birth as a human is incredibly rare. The chance of being born as a human who can chant "Amitufo" is beyond imagining.

Our Daily Practice:

We need to get busy.

We need to focus and chant sincerely, planting seed after seed after seed.

April 9

Do not steal.

This, the second of the five precepts and also the ten virtuous karmas, is often explained as not taking another's property without his or her agreement. We might well wonder at the prominent placement of this precept. How many of us would steal others' possessions? But we're not just talking about things here.

Stealing is taking anything without first asking permission. What is taken can include someone's time, their peace of mind, their feeling of security, happiness.

Stealing is taking advantage of another person, taking things from work, shouting at a child, avoiding paying taxes, bringing home a shell from a public beach, not readily letting someone into your lane while driving, making others work harder to meet a deadline because we missed ours.

The list is endless.

The solution simple. Not easy! Simple. Humbly

Our Daily Practice:

approach all actions with respect for the rights and property of others. In keeping this precept, we are also giving fearlessness.

April 10

*Instead of being frustrated
when things fail to go according to plan,
appreciate those rare times when they do.*

One would think that having reached “the age of majority” (i.e., being a grown-up), we’d have gotten used to the reality that very few things work out as we hope or expect. Perhaps conditions shifted. Perhaps others had their plans changed, which affected ours. Perhaps our expectations were a tad too optimistic.

Whatever the reason, most days unfold as a series of unplanned happenings, which requires us to adjust what we are doing or plan to do. As the day wears on and our energy wanes, we tend to recall and relive our frustrations. And so, too much of our day is wasted on unhappy thoughts.

Rather, appreciate the times when things work out, even if it’s for a little while. Then we’ll be in a much better frame of mind, able to handle what comes at us. Able to

Our Daily Practice:

improve in our practice of not being a slave to our mind,
but its master.

April 11

*Caught up in judging what seems to be,
we miss what really is.*

Remember the tale of the blind men, with each one taken to a different part of an elephant? To its head, an ear, a tusk, its trunk, its underbelly, a foot, its tail, and also the tuft of its tail. Asked to describe the elephant, each man announced what they felt: a pot, a basket, a plowshare, a plow, a storehouse, a pillar, a pestle, and a brush.

We can only imagine that as each man proclaimed what an elephant was, he must have wondered what on earth the others were talking about. But every one of them, sure of what they felt, became more insistent of being right. And yes, the others had to be wrong. The result: they began fighting each other. Instead of sharing what they each had learned. Instead of discussing among themselves why they had reached such different opinions.

When we, like those men, become adamant that we know all that needs to be known and close our minds to

Our Daily Practice:

other things, we too run the serious risk of missing what really is.

April 12

*In all endeavors, seek to avoid mistakes,
not win praise.*

It's probably no exaggeration to say that the vast majority of us like to be praised. This is not necessarily all bad. Praise, especially from those entrusted with the responsibility to raise us, can reinforce our good behavior. Thus, praise can help us learn how to behave respectfully and ethically by encouraging us to act in ways that enhance our lives and not detract from them.

Clearly good.

But praise should not drive our behavior because that would make praise our goal.

Rather, our goal should be to avoid making mistakes—either technically or ethically. But there are always others who crave praise and chase it. At any cost. So, from influential people on Twitter to the neighborhood teenager who uses Snapchat, we have people who will do anything for attention, for praise. A terribly risky, and sad, way to live.

Our Daily Practice:

We don't want to join them! We want to behave in a way that will result in our making fewer mistakes. And improve our futures.

April 13

*Nurture good seeds
to overwhelm the bad.*

The honeysuckle shrub can grow so tightly compacted that even the most persistent weeds cannot penetrate it. The plant stands untouchable—any attempted incursion would be forestalled. We can only imagine the stamina of the seeds and the tenacity of the roots that enable the plant to remain impregnable.

Imagine planting in our minds Amitufo seeds that have similar stamina and tenacity. We reinforce these super seeds by planting more and more of them. In time, these seeds will grow, their once shallow roots getting stronger. Provide our Amitufo seeds with the right conditions—our earnest cultivation and the mental weeding of bad habits—and they will thrive.

In time, like those dense, impregnable roots of the honeysuckle plant, our good roots would forestall any incursion. With this accomplished, our garden will bloom, our fruit of birth in the Pure Land will mature.

Our Daily Practice:

Finally, we will go home.

April 14

*Being kind is not necessarily being gentle.
Sometimes, true kindness is being stern.*

One of Buddhism's four all-embracing methods is kind words.

Picturing an example for this, we might come up with a doting grandmother whose grandson puts Play-Doh into her cup of tea causing it to overflow. Smiling, she tskts "Alan" to him. He, in turn, just laughs at her.

Ah, her words are so kind. But perhaps harsher words may be kinder.

Like those from the shocked mother who turns to her son and firmly says, "Alan! That's not the right way to treat your grandmother."

The mother then goes on to explain why it is wrong. She spells out the right behavior for the circumstance and tells her son why he should apologize to his grandmother.

The grandmother says what we imagine a grandmother might say. But the mother's words are the truly

Our Daily Practice:

kind ones because they teach the type of behavior that her son will need to get along well with people and other beings

Kind words aren't soft words, but rather those that help us become better people.

April 15

*Wanting something is not enough for it to happen.
We need the right conditions.*

As much as we wish for something to happen, without the right circumstances, it cannot. What we now have or lack, what we now enjoy or suffer, have all come about due to our past thoughts and actions. The same principle will hold for tomorrow. There's no magic wand to wave; it's all up to us. Now we need to purposefully apply this principle to our life

For example, wishing to find a Buddhist master to learn from is not enough unless we are very fortunate and our newly arisen wish coincides with the necessary conditions. In such a case, finding our master occurs naturally, like dominoes toppling over one by one, all because of the first one.

Lacking such incredibly good timing, such good fortune, we need to create the necessary conditions by learning and practicing where we are. When possible, we

Our Daily Practice:

can also attend retreats. Having patiently and diligently created our conditions, in time, we will meet the master.

And intuitively know—yes, this is the one.

April 16

Different doesn't mean wrong.

Thousands of years ago, very likely trusting only those who looked like you could have saved your life. Strangers, people who looked different, might well kill you. Reasonable, in light of how they too were taught not to trust anyone looking different. So, with survival the foremost concern, humans had good reason to distrust outsiders—those outside their family, their clan, and over time, outside their village.

Gradually, distrust embedded itself in our DNA. And in our store consciousness. In dangerous circumstances and times, such distrust is understandable. But too often foolish. Distrusting others because they appear different doesn't save us; it eviscerates us and crushes others.

Why?

Differentiation arises from dualism. It's me versus you, us versus them. It personifies ego attachment: I'm right, so whatever others think and do is wrong. They lose, so I

Our Daily Practice:

gain. This shows ignorance of cause and effect. It also robs others of happiness. It gives fear, not fearlessness. It kills hope.

It holds the power to destroy.

April 17

*With every breath we take,
we are one breath
closer to the Pure Land.*

Incredible! Our being born in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss is not a matter of *if*. It's a question of *when*. We have stepped onto the Pure Land path, but we tend to dawdle, distracted by all the phenomena we encounter. And truly, since we're still here in samsara, this is clearly what we've been doing and for far too long now.

Or, we can leap ahead.

Since our goal has been determined—and our belief, vow, and practice assure us of reaching it—the only unknown is how long we will take to get there. It involves choosing. We make the wrong choice every time we become distracted by daily events, every time we opt for short-lived enjoyment, every time we fall prey to old habits. Distracted time and again on where we've been and where we are instead of what lies ahead. Of making that leap forward.

Our Daily Practice:

When in despair of reaching that goal, remember: with every breath, we're closer to the Pure Land.

April 18

*Don't allow a negative thought
to become your new mantra.*

Something is seen or heard and it bothers us, a lot. *It's not fair. It's not thoughtful. It's not supposed to be that way.* Whatever the reason, we are incapable of just brushing the thought aside and getting on with our life. It's pretty ironic when you think of it.

What we want to do is focus on the thought of Amittufo, but our mind keeps slipping away from him. What we don't want to do is keep thinking negative thoughts. But our mind keeps returning to them as surely as chicks scurry back to the mother hen.

We end up turning those irritating thoughts into our latest mantra—reviewing them like a favorite movie, refining them as if editing the next bestseller.

Maybe returning to our thoughts is understandable—after all, the irritation is just outside our window. Or perhaps we just can't, actually won't, forgive and forget.

Our Daily Practice:

Well, we need to. If you were to die right now, what would you want to be thinking of—Amitufofo or that bothersome thought?

April 19

Graciousness: a timeless virtue.

Graciousness. What a lovely, old-fashioned word.

It brings to mind ladies in hooped skirts and men in top hats out for a morning stroll through the park. Yes, well, that's an unfortunate image. Why? Because graciousness is the unselfish offering of courtesy, being accommodating and kind, and respecting others and being at ease with oneself. It's not a virtue of a past age. We need it today if there is to be a tomorrow.

Let's fast-forward one of those couples to today. Fully kitted out for their morning jog, smartphones on and earbuds in, our couple are now in a world of their own. Everything else is a bother. In their world, and woefully in ours too, graciousness is not on the agenda.

Really?

Is there no time to let someone give his opinion before offering yours? No time to let someone move into the queue, ahead of you? Is there no time to return a wayward

Our Daily Practice:

ball? To let someone overtake you? To compliment someone on a job well done? To play with your child?

No time?

There's always time.

Always.

April 20

*Instead of trying to surpass others,
help them to succeed.*

We seem to have reached a point where everything we do entails competition. For me to gain, someone else has to lose. People crave my product, not yours. Like me more on Facebook than you. Agree with me, not you.

Clearly, people don't grasp the ubiquity of reaping what they sow. The problem is compounded by most people in believing that they have only one lifetime, their current one. And so they try to make theories from what they can remember.

Tragically, this is like looking at their actions of the past ten seconds and basing their decisions on those brief moments. Shortsighted, to say the least. Having learned about rebirth and causality, we know that causes need to have been planted previously to have certain things happen—like selling a product or being liked by others.

So we can relax. What a relief to stop trying to outdo

Our Daily Practice:

everyone. Instead, we can now help others accomplish what they hope for by teaching them how to plant the right seeds

April 21

*Others being wasteful
is no excuse for us to be as well.*

Welcome to the Age of Plenty. Odds are, if you're reading this, you have the good fortune to participate in our current consumer age. Offering a proliferation of products and hitherto unknown convenience, this age offers cheap throw-away goods paired with ease of disposal.

A winning combination!

Use a plastic disposable razor a few times, toss it. Get a cup of coffee on the way to work, drink the brew, toss the cup. Subscribe to a service that expresses over a one-meal box, ingredients included. Fix dinner, then toss the box, ingredient packaging, cold keepers, unused ingredients (now or later). Give a child a toy, watch the toy break, toss it, buy another.

Modern conveniences. Easy to get. (Think Amazon).

Easy to toss. (Think curbside trash pickup.)

What else is disposed of? Money. Good fortune. Finite

Our Daily Practice:

resources. Any real sense of appreciation. Gone too is the happiness of those who are doomed to come after us.

April 22

*Sharing something disturbing with others
makes us feel better,
but what about them?*

If we're fortunate, we will have someone in our life who cares enough to listen to our recount of a displeasing event.

But what about her?

As she listens, she is sharing our frustration. So, unless she's better than we are at sloughing off painful experiences, we will adversely affect her with our grievances.

When speaking with those who care enough to listen to us, we need to consider what we are about to say. But we don't have to be paranoid about this. We just need to be considerate. Why don't we just shed the memory of painful events before they upset anyone else? Do we need to recount every little event in our lives? Really need to talk so much? Text so much? Share every detail of our lives on social media?

Our Daily Practice:

On the flip side, it's also not necessary to become a recluse. We do, however, need to value all those we are fortunate enough to have in our life. And respect them, and their peace of mind.

April 23

*Taking care of objects is a sign of respect
for those objects
and our environment.*

We know we should observe the first of the ten great vows, which is to respect all Buddhas.

But how do we treat the things that we have? We should respect them as well. Do so as a meditation. Chant “Amitufo” while organizing, cleaning, and putting the objects back in their proper places. These are just a few of the ways to correctly care for individual objects and our immediate environment

This respect shows our appreciation for we understand that it’s due to our good fortune that we have all that we do. Viewing objects in this way entails considering each item’s intended use.

Properly using objects and caring for them shows our appreciation for all the resources and time expended in creating and getting them to us. If we no longer have a use

Our Daily Practice:

for something, we can pass it on to someone who can use it. Don't let it be one more forgotten, unwanted object collecting dust at the back of our closet.

April 24

*Recognizing enmities is the first step.
Transforming them, the second.*

It happens in an instant.

We meet someone, and seemingly unfounded feelings overwhelm us. We don't like him. We don't trust him. He didn't do anything, yet we pull back. Actually, such feelings are not unfounded. They're triggered by causes that have been planted in the store consciousness. Though we're in a different lifetime, we intuit it's an old enmity. And we take up where we left off —distrusting, disliking, even hating.

Having recognized an enmity, we need to transform our feelings of aversion because the last thing we want is to have bitter feelings intensify.

How do we transform our feelings? By reminding ourselves that we're living different lives now. Perhaps our enmity arose from a misunderstanding. What if it was all a mistake? We were both ignorant then. The other person may still be, but we know better now. We realize what can happen when an enmity worsens.

Our Daily Practice:

For both our sakes, we need to let go of the past and find a way back to normalcy.

April 25

*People with great authority
need great wisdom.*

Those of us who do not wield much influence over others should be grateful. And immensely relieved. Any harm we do in saying or doing something inept will be limited in scope. Therefore, any damage we do will be minimized.

But consider those, due to position and wealth, who do affect the lives of untold numbers of people. Terrifying!

Unless they act from empathy and wisdom, from the heart of selflessness, their actions will be tainted with arrogance. And intolerance. And fear. These are not the qualities of greatness; they are the instruments of discord. The higher the authority, the more pervasive the harm, the more intense the pain.

Wherever we are in the ranking of such things, we need to blink, step back, and then examine what lies at the heart of our own actions. Discerning the possibilities that lie within our own small sphere of influence, we can then join the ranks of those who alleviate, not inflict, pain.

April 26

*“I am very grateful for your help.
Regardless of the outcome,
thank you very much.”*

When someone asks for our help on a project, do we ponder these: *What if something goes wrong? What if the outcome is not what she is hoping for? Will I somehow get blamed?*

With a multitude of such concerns, we'll have less time and energy for the project. And so we don't ponder the what-ifs; we just start to help.

If the seeker of help deeply understands karma, understands that the project's outcome depends on her conditions, then what a relief it is for us! Knowing that she too understands causality, we can focus on the task and not be plagued with worry over failures. If the outcome is not as hoped, it's not our fault. If it does work out, it's not to our credit.

With such thinking, we eliminate our ego and self-centeredness from the equation.

Who wouldn't want to help someone so at ease with conditions?

Who wouldn't want to help us if we were too?

April 27

*To drift or to steer—
which will we choose?*

Due to our karmas in past lifetimes, we have set the course for lifetimes to come. But our course is not fixed. We have the ability to change it through the many choices we make every day.

It's like adjusting the flow of a river.

By placing enough stones strategically, we can alter what seems inevitable. Besides placement, we also need to decide the number of stones and their sizes. But do not drop them haphazardly—the river might be diverted toward nearby houses. Position them wisely to guide the water, perhaps toward an unusually parched field.

So let's decide not to drift, like a wild untamed river. Let's avoid the obvious setbacks. Better to orchestrate the flow, no matter how few opportunities we get, to try to consciously make things better.

Don't get crushed by the rapids of suffering. Don't

drown in enjoyment. Slow things down to understand what is happening. Redirect ourselves so that we can redirect others. Help ourselves so that we can help others.

April 28

*Good friends are hard to find.
Treasure them with correct speech and actions.*

Thanks to our parents, who likely learned good manners from their own parents, most of us were taught how to behave in public. So, as adults, we are especially civil when interacting with strangers and acquaintances. It seems, however, that we find a high level of civility difficult to maintain. And so at times we simply forget to be civil at all.

Ironically, we feel so relaxed with those whom we spend the most time with that we allow courtesy to fly out the proverbial window. We end up treating strangers more respectfully—and more considerately—than we do family members and friends. While relatives will find it difficult to leave us, friends have fewer such restraints. Although it will cause them distress, they can simply walk out of our life.

All because we forget to treat them with respect and consideration.

We should remember close friendships are rare and

need tending. Having few good friends, we can't afford carelessness, can't afford to lose a good friend.

April 29

*Pleasure from indulging ourselves is momentary.
Guilt from having done so lasts much longer.*

Eating an entire bag of chips. Browsing online and impulsively buying a new gadget. Hitting snooze on the alarm clock while we burrow back into our fluffy duvet.

We do them, and more, because we feel entitled to them.

Perhaps we work hard and feel a reward is deserved. Perhaps we do not work hard at all and seek to distract ourselves from self-reproach. Perhaps we are unhappy. Or just bored. And so we indulge ourselves and feel a surge of enjoyment.

But all too soon that momentary pleasure passes and only the memory remains. And with it, guilt. We know the futility of such indulgences, and we tell ourselves not to repeat them. And yet, we do. Feelings of frustration, remorse, embarrassment fester within us. They linger, enduring far longer than any fleeting satisfaction from our latest bout of indulgence. What can we do?

VENERABLE WULING

Understand that we have more to do.

Commit ourselves to doing it.

And get to work.

April 30

*Peace doesn't begin with another person.
It begins with me.*

Peace. When we hear this word, our thoughts often zoom in to a world very different from ours today. We smile. Then sigh. World peace is a lovely ideal, but one which feels utterly beyond us. So how about something smaller, something doable. How about peace in our little corner of the world. Granted, on many days even this seems beyond us, but at least we now have a goal. Indeed, fostering harmony is why we learn Buddhism and cultivate ourselves.

What do we cultivate?

We cultivate self-discipline to refrain from speech that would disturb others.

We cultivate broad-mindedness to better appreciate and respect others' views.

Cultivate compassion to see a stranger's suffering as clearly as our own and to seek a way to alleviate it.

Cultivate humility to realize we acted improperly and need to apologize.

And we cultivate generosity to share our good fortune with those who have less than we do.

Succeeding in these, we will help bring peace to those around us.

May 1

*In the daily rush to arrive,
are you sure you're going
in the right direction?*

Work. Family. Community. We scramble to accomplish our goals, to meet our duties. From places to be at to plans to be made, we're so often in a hurry. Although we hear that multi-tasking is counter-productive, we continue writing that text on our smartphones while mentally noting what we need from the grocery store on the way home.

Much of the time, most of us are so busy doing and going in hopes of arriving, that we don't stop to consider the direction we're heading.

Maybe we chose it due to others' expectations. Maybe we're just following the crowd. Whatever the reason, we're on the move. But take a minute to reflect. Where are we going? And when we finally arrive, will we look back with bewilderment? Regret? Or a sense of a life well-lived? A life where we didn't aimlessly rush off, following the crowd.

Rather, a life where we made sure we were headed in the right direction.

May 2

When listening to the Dharma, simply absorb it.

Looking back fondly, starting the new school year meant getting new supplies. A big decision was— the notebook. What size? Color? Two-hole? Three? How many dividers? Such decisions were crucial because some serious note-taking was about to be undertaken. Older now, notes are possibly even more important. Increasingly, what we want to learn or to remember needs to be written down.

And so, at a Dharma lecture, we whip out pen and paper, determined to take copious notes. But the first thing we hear is, “Don’t take notes.” No notes? Seriously? How will I remember what the lecturer is going to say? Realize this: when we’re writing, we’re not listening. But when we concentrate on what is being said, we will hear what we need to hear. For we’ll be ready to hear it. Keep attending the talks or listening to the recordings. But leave the notebooks at home.

Each time, our understanding will deepen and solidify.
And each time we listen, we will absorb what we need.

May 3

*If you have to ask if it's wrong,
it very likely is.*

Asking our teacher for help in trying to figure out what we should do will often solicit advice to chant the buddha-name. The reason is that the chanting will help our mind become tranquil. This will allow the answer to be perceived, just as a calm pool of water, no longer agitated, will reveal the sand at the pool's bottom. Why doesn't the teacher just tell us what to do?

First, her role is to teach principles, not to decide for others how to live their lives.

Second, she doesn't need to tell us. We already know what to do, we just haven't realized it. At least not clearly. An inkling is there. The right action becomes more obvious when our appeal for help begins with "Is it wrong to . . .?"

If we're wondering whether something could be wrong, it's because we're uneasy. Something about this action doesn't feel right. We feel it in our gut. At this point,

Our Daily Practice:

we could ask ourselves: could we live with, be at ease with, the thing we are going to do. With buddha-name chanting, a calm mind will bring out the answer.

May 4

*Often a gift for us
can bring us more joy
when we give it to someone else to use.*

Usually, when someone who knows us selects something we enjoy, we happily use it. It's only good manners! The fact that we like the high mountain tea or those luscious dark chocolates has nothing to do with it. We're just being polite. Honestly!

But what if we don't consume our gifts. What if, in turn, we give the tea to a tea lover. This rare blend would have him gleeful for quite a while. Or give the chocolates to someone who wouldn't think of splurging on herself. If we drink the tea and eat the chocolates, they'll soon be gone. Especially those chocolates. At times, we might recall the wonderful aromas and tastes. This could smack of attachments.

But imagine our joy when years later the aroma from a cup of tea handed to us triggers the memory of how much

Our Daily Practice:

our good friend enjoyed his tea. Our own personal pleasure is immaterial.

The happiness of others is what truly matters.

May 5

*Humility isn't a shortcoming;
it's strength.
Remaining quiet isn't avoidance;
it's self-control.*

Self-cultivation is about the quiet things, the inner work we undertake. It's being humble, not only when we fail but also when we finally accomplish a difficult task and accolades come in. It's remaining quiet when we're tempted to babble, knowing that our speaking would disturb others. And very honestly, it isn't really necessary.

Like the other qualities we cultivate, humility and quietude could appear as weaknesses, especially by those who are less aware. They are more used to seeing strength exhibited by a show of power and self-control displayed in sheer physical strength. To those who master the quiet qualities, they are anything but. Our ability to remain free from arrogance or pride and our realization that the wisest action may well be to remain silent can bring incredible peace of mind.

Our Daily Practice:

A source of stability and contentment, humility and quietude are therefore strengths.

May 6

*Every minute listening to the Dharma
is one less minute
of harmful thoughts.*

Those of us who have tried to calm our mind with chanting have very likely experienced a barrage of thoughts streaming through. To make matters worse, most of those thoughts were neither loving nor compassionate. They did not arise from gratitude or contentment. Rather, they were triggered by destructive habits like worry, anger, jealousy, fear, frustration. At times in our chanting, we become aware of such harmful thoughts. But what about when we're doing everyday tasks?

In our daily, harried state of mental overload and physical activity, we fail to detect what's happening. Fail to notice all the damaging seeds we keep planting in our store consciousness. What's a person to do?

Listen to the Dharma!

Every single second that our mind is engrossed in the

Our Daily Practice:

Dharma, untold numbers of detrimental thoughts are averted. What about their bad seeds? Never sown.

May 7

*When hearing of someone's ill health,
we need to be wary of self-pride
in our good health.*

We've just heard that someone we know is ill. An old superstition tells us to “knock on wood”—to avoid tempting fate and finding ourselves in like circumstances. We don't really believe the superstition; it's just a saying we grew up with. As the saying whips through our mind, what comes next is important.

Do we feel gratitude for our good fortune?

Are we recognizing that our mental and physical well-being have resulted from our having given fearlessness?

Realizing the wisdom in giving, are we inculcating it in our practice?

Or are we, instead, patting ourselves on the back, attributing our good health to our nutritious diet, regular exercise, and healthy lifestyle.

The moment we slip into congratulating ourselves, we

Our Daily Practice:

walk away heedlessly from safely dwelling in gratitude and
end up in the enemy camp of arrogance.

Not where we want to be.

May 8

Repairing the harm we have done.
(Part One)

Having lived countless lifetimes since time without beginning, we have committed an untold number of harmful actions. Fortunately, we have also performed many that were honorable. Which of our karmic seeds will mature depends on our conditions. In some lifetimes, luck seems to find us; in others, we seem to encounter one misfortune after another.

Feeling pain due to physical disorders or mental distress are our karmic consequences. We have caused others pain, and so now we face pain ourselves. That explains how we got to this point. What do we do now? If today, we say or do something that hurts another, we can realize what we just did and apologize. We can say we're sorry right away.

But how do we apologize to those we harmed in past lifetimes?

We don't know who they are or what we did. And how

Our Daily Practice:

do we even find them? Very simply, we cannot. But that does not mean we cannot apologize. We can. And we do so through the moving offering of repentance.

May 9

*Repairing the harm we have done.
(Part Two)*

To express our heartfelt regret at having caused others pain, we intone aloud or silently:

*All evil actions committed by me since time immemorial,
stemming from greed, anger, and ignorance,
arising from body, speech, and mind,
I deeply repent having committed.*

To deepen our regret for all the harm we have done, we can also do prostrations. If we are sincere enough, we will touch those we have harmed—wherever they now are. And begin to apologize for our past selfish and, too often, cruel actions toward them. By sincerely repenting the harm we have done and the pain we have caused, we are also committing ourselves to doing better from now on.

Repenting has the power to liberate.

Our Daily Practice:

It is the “I’m so very sorry” that we want to say to the one we hurt or disappointed, but can no longer. It is an offering of healing. For ourselves, yes, but ultimately, and more importantly, for others.

May 10

*What we can control, we need to.
What we cannot, we need to let go.*

Many things fall within our control, like our thoughts, feelings, and actions. That is, things that we can control arise from our mind. What can't we control? Situations and conditions that arise due to and are set into motion by our already committed karmas from long ago. What else? The current thoughts and actions of other people. This delineation should make life very straightforward. Why put time and energy into trying to control what we cannot?

But although we cannot control others, we can influence them. How? By being a good example, by working on what we can control—our thoughts. Our thoughts, imperceptible, give rise to our actions, easily perceived by others. So, by controlling that which arises from within us, we can better ourselves. And by setting a good example, we can possibly help others.

But it all begins with controlling what we can and letting go trying to control what we cannot.

May 11

*Learning to practice
as awakened beings do.*

At some point in our practice of Buddhism, we will want to work on developing our bodhi mind, the mind of understanding and compassion. How? We can practice the bodhisattvas' six paramitas of giving, morality, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and prajna wisdom.

Wow! Where do we even begin?

An excellent place is the sutras and their commentaries. Or we can study the more recent, and often easier to understand, works of Buddhist masters and teachers. Prefer even more modest sources? We can observe and then emulate those who already practice the paramitas.

Alternatively, we can come at this from the opposite direction and observe those who are behaving contrary to the paramitas. While these bad examples won't show us what to do, they can teach us what not to do.

And they can inspire us to work much harder because

they show us the kind of person we can become when we fail to practice.

May 12

*Learn to be generous
by observing those who are selfish.*

A selfish person puts his own desires and his own interests before those of others. This includes his own suffering. Self-absorbed, he often doesn't notice the situation of others. Or even if he notices, concerns of others just fly by him. Perhaps he's too busy with personal matters to help someone else. Too frustrated with an issue unfolding at work that it doesn't occur to him to smile at the waitperson who looks in need of a little kindness. So engrossed in increasing his net worth that he can't bear to give any of it away.

So arrogant too. He thinks that others are just plain lazy, unlike him, who worked so darn hard to get to where he is.

Whatever the reason, the door to his heart is firmly closed. What a sad way to live—suspicious, grasping, fearful. Observing this person, we can throw open the door to

our heart and be the very opposite. Be trusting, be generous, be courageous.

We can be more like a bodhisattva.

May 13

*Learn to be moral
by observing those who are unrestrained.*

An unrestrained person pursues her own preferences and attachments. If these coincide with the established guidelines and rules for good behavior, it's good news. Or she can go her own way, believing that it's no big deal. She justifies her behavior with all sorts of reasons and always placing her happiness before that of others.

Wrapped up in her own world, she doesn't notice the discomfort she's causing others. If criticized for her behavior, she might lash out in embarrassment or frustration. She might even get into difficulties legally. For all the suffering that she leaves in her karmic trail, she will undoubtedly be in trouble in the future.

This is not someone we want to emulate, to mirror.

We want to live a principled life and not have any worries about our behavior. We don't want to distress others with our conduct. We want to plant seeds for happiness, not suffering.

May 14

*Learn to be patient
by observing those who are demanding.*

Demanding people are rarely satisfied.

Situations seldom meet their expectations, relationships are often unfulfilling, completed projects fail to meet their standards, everything takes too long. Demanding perfection of themselves and everything around them, they often find they're too hot, too cold, too hungry, too full, too early, too late. Basically, little meets their exacting standards. Even the things they have control over often end in frustration. So they're usually disappointed, distressed, or disgruntled.

Not a mindset we want to adopt!

By practicing the paramita of patience, we'll stop struggling with our conditions. Instead, we accept that life doesn't often go as we wish. And that's alright.

So if we're too warm, that's okay. A little hungry? Stuck in a slow line? Working with those with a different work ethic? That's life!

Our Daily Practice:

When we are patient, everything will be much more pleasant.

May 15

*Learn to be diligent
by observing those who procrastinate.*

Working in fits and starts, enthusiasm waxing and waning like the moon on steroids, unpredictable in the best of circumstances and undependable in the worst. Those who procrastinate just don't seem to follow anything through to completion. They may have the best intentions or good ideas, but they don't accomplish much. Their motto: there's always tomorrow.

Overwhelmed by a looming task, their modus operandi seems to be escaping to a mind-numbing activity like watching TV or surfing the Internet. They may be the sweetest people we know, but they're not dependable. And, sadly, we can't rely on them when tasks await.

Our lesson from them?

We need to focus on the task at hand and stick with it. We don't want to get overworked or, on the flip side, lose interest. So wisely, we pace ourselves. This way, we'll get

Our Daily Practice:

daily satisfaction from having set a goal and then progressing toward it.

May 16

*Learn to have meditative concentration
by observing those who are heedless.*

Unmindful of what they are doing, oblivious to the looming consequences, heedless people drift through life unable to focus on tasks, whether assigned or chosen.

This aimless meandering also threatens a person's spiritual quest. People know it's beneficial, but they don't start. When they do, they still dillydally. They set a goal and know to reach it, but they lack the will to do the necessary work. And so, they pretty much continue drifting from task to task, half-hearted and unfocused.

Now consider a person who keeps the focus.

We want to be this person, if not already. Endeavoring to complete things the best we can and believing in the importance of our spiritual practice, we now determine how best to accomplish the practice. Equipped with a generous heart, a principled approach to life, patience, and diligence, we can settle down to our true work—attaining meditative concentration.

May 17

*Learn to have wisdom
by observing those who are fearful.*

Unawakened beings perceive themselves as the center of their universe. Viewing their thoughts as real and their body as who they are, they further assume that objects can be possessed and that relationships will last forever.

But, inevitably, fear creeps in. Might a close relationship turn sour? What if a prized object is lost? Or stolen? What if their body—who they are—gets sickened with disease? Or incapacitated? Fear is everywhere, attaching itself to everything these people know and have, to all their experiences.

Learn from these people.

And leave fear and worries behind. We can do it by calming our mind. With a calm mind, wisdom will arise. With wisdom, we will know our body is only a vehicle used for a lifetime. This body isn't "I." Nothing can be kept or possessed, and so, there is really nothing to lose.

When we practice to awaken, we will know there is nothing to fear.

May 18

*Do what I say.
But not what I do.*

I think it would be safe to say that parents have been saying “do what I say” to their children for millennia, or even longer.

But what if the parents’ behavior does not match the stern words for their children. “Turn off your TV!” while they themselves return to the soccer finals. “Don’t waste time playing on your phone!” But they then text a friend about the latest kerfuffle at work. “You’re spending too much time on the Internet!” even as they continue gaming online. “Talk nicely to your brother!” But the heated discussion with their neighbor carries on

Children learn by observing. They will discern the disparity when parents issue an edict but don’t do it themselves. They want to know why their parents are not following the rules that they have laid out.

It’s pretty tough to come up with a good answer to such

logic. “Be- cause I’m your mother/father” won’t cut it. Unless parents want a mini-rebellion on their hands, they’d be better off doing what they’re telling their children to do.

May 19

*In your excitement to get something,
make sure it's what you want.*

Just like little children who thrust out their hands to grasp a new enticing sweet they see, we too set our mind on obtaining that something we just saw or heard about.

For the fleetest moment we may hesitate, but the initial momentum to pursue the prize and the visions of euphoria and satisfaction in eventually bagging a new possession is just too much to overcome. We make excuses. We may lie to ourselves. We even tell ourselves that it is not in our DNA to put on the brakes. This tug-of-war goes on. Craving and visions of the prize versus abandoning these habits.

Thankfully, as we practice, we will find the pool of stuff and experiences we crave ever shrinking. Which is good. Even better, the next time a new piece of “candy” catches our attention—and we’re tempted to shout “Mine!”—remember how we’re now contentedly simplifying our life.

May 20

I didn't want . . .

I could have . . .

If only . . .

Regrets, self-reproach, guilt. We can learn from these and become better people. Or, we can be overwhelmed by these feelings, forever reliving past mistakes. Events unfolding in our present lifetime were set into motion by our thoughts and actions from countless lifetimes ago. In other words, whatever is happening is supposed to happen.

Yes, we'd have better health if we had spent more time easing others' worries instead of being absorbed in our own.

Yes, we'd be happier if we had the courage to do the right thing in the face of opposition.

Yes, we'd be enjoying more good fortune if we had put others ahead of us.

But we didn't do enough the above.

So now we suffer. Suffering, however, need not become

Our Daily Practice:

a permanent fixture in our lives. Learning cause and effect allows us to understand why we are in our current situation. But don't stop here. Put this newfound understanding into action. Now! And we will reap the benefits of a better situation in the future.

May 21

*Bodhisattva come here to teach us?
Or just an incredibly annoying person?*

We all know her. She's the one who happily informs us that we're doing something incorrectly. In front of others.

The one who commends our good work to others. Then humbly adds that she was the one who talked us into doing it.

The one who describes her memory as faultless, but who gets the facts wrong.

It sure feels like an incredibly annoying person, right? Maybe not. Granted, the odds of meeting a bodhisattva are pretty slim. But the reality is that we can't be sure.

Bodhisattvas know what we need to learn. And they teach us. Things like patience in the face of frustrating circumstances. Or knowing what is truly important as opposed to what soothes our ego. Or the benefits of remaining quiet because defending ourselves would result in animosity, not the truth revealed.

Our Daily Practice:

With wisdom, even that annoying person can serve as our personal bodhisattva. It all depends on what we tell ourselves.

Which could be the best teaching of all.

May 22

*Affinities from past lives
are not bound by form or appearance.*

How many times have you met someone and instantly liked him? Or someone else you immediately disliked? Both people had smiled at you, but your response to each was very different.

What's going on here?

In the first instance, you ran into an old karmic affinity, and an enmity in the second. Your store consciousness recognized theirs and, in a flash, old feelings about them arose within you. But this does not apply only to humans.

Consider the cat who always seeks our company and whom we feel a deep affection for, the dog that growls only at us, the squirrel who eats contentedly from our hand. Consider also two distinct animals, normally hunter and prey, romping together like best friends.

We are reacting from karmic relationships, good and bad ones, just as the animals are. Developed over past life-

Our Daily Practice:

times, these relationships are not bound by form or even the current path of existence.

Yet another reason to respect all beings.

May 23

*You cannot do everything,
so do what you can.*

Food security, animal agriculture, gender equality, climate change, single-use plastics, chemical pollution, resource depletion.

There's so much to be concerned about if we want to be a responsible member of society! And the list keeps growing in our over-populated, consumer-oriented, technology-driven world. Because everyone apparently wants more, especially those who have the most. It's overwhelming.

"How much can I do?" we ask ourselves. We want to throw up our hands and give up even trying.

Resist that urge.

It would be great to do everything. But we can't. Instead, we could choose one social concern. Focus on it, study it, and get to work. Let others choose and work on their own concerns. If we're not bouncing erratically from

Our Daily Practice:

one issue to another, we can all focus all our energy on our own choice and end up accomplishing a lot more.

And then be able to take on the next one.

May 24

“Don’t shoot the messenger!”

In this case, the messenger is the one bringing about our karmic consequences.

A coworker laughs openly at our mistakes made in the annual report. A loved one criticizes us embarrassingly in front of others. Our laptop is stolen, a neighbor plays his TV loudly while we’re trying to sleep, a visiting child breaks our heirloom teapot. Getting upset with the coworker, loved one, thief, neighbor, or child are misdirected actions—born from not understanding or remembering the pervasiveness of causality.

If we hadn’t laughed at another, criticized unskillfully, stolen or broken someone’s property, made a lot of noise that bothered others in this or past lifetimes, we wouldn’t be experiencing these incidents. All the above people are just the messengers delivering our karmic retributions. Our getting upset or angry or sad just plants more seeds for the same, and even worse.

Our Daily Practice:

We need to work with ourselves on learning to accept
our karmic consequences.

And not shoot the messenger.

May 25

*Without focus,
we will lose our balance and lurch off the path.*

Imagine you are going to step onto a balance board for the first time. It looks friendly enough—a piece of wood placed over the barrel of a cylinder. And it looks easy: step on the board, legs apart, keep your balance. You figure if you remain centered and upright, you won't fall. So they say. And so on you go. Oops, down you go!

Telling yourself that mastery will take some practice, you try again. And this time you concentrate.

But the next second, you think of something else. Losing your focus, down you go again.

Telling yourself that you just have to focus harder, you step back on. Now you really concentrate. Over time, as you practice over and over, and over, you realize that you cannot have a single wandering thought, or you will lose your balance.

Our Buddhist practice is the same. As we focus on

Our Daily Practice:

“Amitufo,” wandering thoughts will arise, jeopardizing our focus. Just like on the balance board, when we lose our concentration, we fall off.

Time to get back on.

May 26

*When annoyed by others' bad habits,
is it because we have the same ones?*

The sad reality is that we often notice annoying habits in others because we have the same ones. We just don't notice them when we're the perpetrator. It's so much easier to see them in others! Perhaps the person is offering his thoughts. On everything.

Okay, let's stop right here. This may be a habit indulged in by a fair number of people, including us.

Voicing an opinion may stem from the person's (our) sincere wish to be helpful. Or from an honest belief that they (we) know the answer to a question someone asked at dinner. Whatever the reason, the person's seemingly endless stream of replies bothers us.

And then one day, we overhear someone mutter to themselves "the world according to..." And they then say our name, with frustration in every syllable.

Wow! Speak of the proverbial bucket of cold water—

Our Daily Practice:

we too have fallen into the habit of trying to be helpful, informative, etcetera. And apparently failing.

So we, also, are annoying others.

May 27

*It's time for our
"Not-Now" brush.*

Preparing to meditate, we turn down the lights, perhaps light a candle or some incense, assume our preferred sitting posture, and close our eyes. As we take a relaxing deep breath, our mind begins to settle.

Then, in an instant, our mind is distracted, yet again. An idea for something we're writing, a meeting to schedule, our overdue library books—these are all important, just not more than our meditation. If we're really concerned that we cannot remember the thought again, we can jot it down and return to our meditation.

What if it is yet another wandering thought?

For these thoughts and others that pop up, we get our "Not-Now" brush. Mine is like the dustpan brush we had when I was young: sturdy wooden handle, soft black bristles. With our virtual brush in hand, we gently, but firmly, silently murmur "not-now" and brush the thought away.

Our Daily Practice:

Now we can return to our meditation, our “Not- Now”
brush ever ready.

May 28

*What if we like the practice,
but feel that we're not making progress?*

The teachings make sense, we respect our teacher, we like the chanting. We might even enjoy visiting a center where the ceremonies are in another language! And yet, despite all this, we don't feel like we're making any real progress.

We hear accounts of people who are doing well in their practice, but we feel stuck in ours. And so we wonder "What am I doing wrong?" Very likely we're still clinging to our attachments. Attachment to what is familiar, to judging those around us, to meeting other's expectations of us. Attachment to those we love, to all that we deem life-enhancing.

It's like holding a cup brimming with Enjoyment tea and wondering why we can't pour in any more. Might the problem be our ego? Our wanting to control, to please others, to reject that which we dislike, to hold on to what we enjoy while avoiding everything else.

Our Daily Practice:

Are these what we really want?

Or can we begin to see how they're keeping us stuck
when we yearn to move on?

May 29

*We see others' happiness on the surface.
See through to the suffering and unhappiness
that lie beneath.*

Looking through a friend's photos from a recent family gathering, we see image after image of happy people. A father dancing with his young daughter, spouses opening a present together, nieces and nephews clowning around. Everyone is laughing and relaxed and comfortable with one another.

Then we think of our own life. Dull, by comparison.

Okay, we need to stop here. And reconsider. The photos are merely snapshots of moments in time. The lens does not delve into the frame-by-frame reality of someone's life. We're looking at the public face, the one people instinctively put on when they step out their front door. If we could see them at home, just going about their business, we'd see that they too experience unhappiness and disappointment.

Our Daily Practice:

We'd see they're very much like us. And we'd realize that we're not the only ones who are living imperfect lives.

We all are.

May 30

Do we really need all this baggage?

“Goodness, these bags are heavy! And there’s so many of them, how will I ever keep track of them all? Plus, just look at them, they’re all mismatched. Some look ancient and tattered, really old and dusty.

Looking inside one, we see old images of unknown people, faded documents with unpronounceable names, strange-looking clothes, books in languages we can’t read, and more. Then we look in another. Then another. What a jumble of stuff.

After a few more bags, we realize that the contents are totally unimportant things. We don’t need them. They are useless and can be discarded.

And with that, we close our bags and walk away, leaving them behind to vanish.

Unencumbered, we feel lighter than we can ever recall. As we were told, when our mind opens up, we will realize there is no longer a need for all the baggage we have accumulated over uncountable lifetimes. We can discard it all.

Our Daily Practice:

Letting go, we will feel joy naturally, both physical and mental.

May 31

I am.

I am, now, no longer.

Both are fine.

Perhaps we identify ourselves as “artist” or “surgeon.” Then one day dawns this realization—the skills that provide our identity have slipped beyond our ability to perform them. We are unable to paint what we see so clearly in our mind, unable to perform the operation to save a child’s life. No longer artist or surgeon, we feel bereft. When clinging to “I am ...,” we set ourselves up for suffering.

But if we understand that everything is impermanent, that we are more than what we now are, our suffering will abate.

Life is a series of *I am*’s. Perhaps we were once a strong nimble child, or a student who could stay awake all night studying. Perhaps, later, that artist or surgeon. These are identities at some point in time—and all are impermanent.

Our Daily Practice:

I am's are not fixed. They are stops along our way in this lifetime.

Let us appreciate them when we are there. When their time is past, smile and let go. “I am no longer” is alright too.

June 1

Habits are like familiar paths.

Having a habit, to me, is like striding along a familiar path, perhaps on the way to the market or in the park. Having taken this path many times, we feel confident whenever on it. Paying no heed to what's happening, we just keep moving, our mind on other things

Acting from habit is very similar. We proceed without thinking. Having done something repeatedly, we're convinced that what we're doing is just fine.

In reality, this approach hasn't really worked all that well for us. Hopefully, the day will come when we look around and realize that we have been making mistakes. And so we attempt to make corrections. But doing things differently is not easy.

We flounder, blundering first in one direction and then in another, in our attempts to act more mindfully. As long as we remain patient with the process and we persevere, we will form new—and better—habits. Confidence with better and correct habits will soon develop.

Our Daily Practice:

This is the familiar path we want to be on.

June 2

*No one is too important to say
“I’m sorry.”*

We’re in the grocery store, pushing our shopping cart around the end of the aisle when we suddenly come face to face with another person doing the same thing. Narrowly avoiding a collision, we both smile, murmur “Sorry” and good-naturedly negotiate around each other.

See how easy it is? When we’re not captivated by thoughts of self-importance, we can freely act like civil human beings.

Why can’t this happen all the time? Is it because apologizing to someone who is less influential or wealthy would be demeaning? And so Mr. All-important doesn’t consider it necessary to apologize, for anything. How sad.

Too often, people strut around with inflated egos due to their current good fortune, which they incorrectly credit to being more clever than others. No one is so important that he doesn’t need to apologize for uncivil behavior.

Our Daily Practice:

Better to say “I’m sorry” now than be sorry in the future when our past arrogance and misdeeds catch up with us.

June 3

*Have greed?
Have anger?
You're ignorant!*

A while back, I filmed a lecture on the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. After the writing and editing, I faced a crucial part of producing a Dharma talk: coming up with the title. While I was struggling with this challenge, mulling over possible options, another nun looked over and asked me what the talk was about.

“The three poisons,” I replied.

She whipped back, “Have greed and anger? You’re ignorant!”

Wow. I wished I had come up with that. Regrettably, I couldn’t use her idea. (It was a tad too forthright.) But she was so right. If we indulge in greed and succumb to anger, it’s due to our ignorance, like our failure to realize the existence of cause and effect. All that we’ll end up with from giving in to the three poisons will be disappointment and regret.

Our Daily Practice:

The three are a package deal—due to ignorance, we crave. When our cravings are unfulfilled, we get angry.

This is one deal we can live without.

June 4

*We practice to accord with the world,
not to have it conform to our wishes.*

Much of our energy seems directed at trying to get others to comply with our wishes. We plan and rehearse what we'll say. Frustrated with the initial response, we just blurt out what we want. More negative responses end up with our frantically devising Plan B. Or C, D. Whatever it is, the goal is to get someone to stop doing something their way and start doing it ours.

Not surprisingly, our desired effect invariably remains just that—a desire. Whatever our strategy. What we're trying to do is change our situation, but it's not amenable to a quick fix.

To correctly change it, we need a good understanding of causality. For now, we need to stop fussing over the barking dog, our midnight music-blaring neighbor, the world's laziest coworker and stop allowing them to irritate us. Yes, they are annoying. No, they are not life-threatening.

Our Daily Practice:

So let's view them as tools for our practice of patience rather than living instruments of torture.

June 5

*View this world as a hotel
where we are temporary guests.*

We've been advised to view the world as a hotel that we are visiting for a mere few days. Since our time here is so brief, there's no point in getting attached to the place. It's not our home; it doesn't belong to us.

During our visit, we treat the facilities with respect—we keep our space clean, use only what we need, don't bother the other guests, and make sure we leave everything in as good a condition as when we got here, or even better. Since we're just visiting, we won't be taking anything with us because whatever we encounter will remain behind when we leave.

If one of the other visitors needs help, we do whatever we can. But we don't get attached. And we don't have expectations for the lives of those we help because, being such short-term visitors, we have little time to make much of an impact.

Our Daily Practice:

Our plan is that in the future, once we get to our real home, we'll come back often to truly help all those who are still staying at this hotel.

June 6

*Difficult to teach,
we are like children ignoring a parent's advice.*

With infinite patience and compassion, and in fulfillment of their vows to help all beings, Buddhas and bodhisattvas await the opportunity to help us. So we wonder, why don't they just come?

Okay, let's say they do. If they come to us looking like a Buddha, we'd be too in awe to listen to them. After we finally stop gaping and actually pay attention to what they teach about suffering and its end, what then?

Very likely, we'd still be too attached to our current existence to let it all go. We'll make excuses. To practice the teachings to end our suffering—that's a big leap! We're just ordinary people.

And what if they come in the guise of an ordinary person?

We'd just waive off their advice—hey, they don't look like Buddhas. Like children, we'll be too self-absorbed to

Our Daily Practice:

listen to advice, too stubborn to ask for help, too self-indulgent to want to change.

Little wonder that it's so difficult for awakened beings to come to help us.

June 7

*Is our chanting session
a superhighway or a country lane?*

Remember the time you were so absorbed in what you were doing that you forgot the time?

Now think of your last chanting session. Did time pass as quickly? In the first example, you were doing something you really enjoyed. In the chanting example, it was something you knew you should do, and even wanted to, but focus was simply elusive. All those wandering thoughts!

Goodness, what to do?

Chanting can either be like driving on a country road or on a superhighway.

If it's a country road, we drive along enjoying the scenery, stop to visit the town that we're passing through, get a bite to eat, check out the park, and amble back to our car. Enjoyable, but it's going to take a long time to reach our destination.

Taking the superhighway, we don't stop to see all the

Our Daily Practice:

various sights because that would require us to get off the highway. There's no time for that.

We need to focus on our driving, on "Amitufofo," because we want to get to our destination ASAP.

June 8

*We must be willing to give up what we are
to become what we aspire to be.*

To learn how to ride a bike, we had to lift our feet off the ground, place them on the pedals, and then frantically steer the handlebars once our parent let go of the bike. We also had to let go—of our fear of crashing. Learning to swim, we had to let go of the side of the pool. Going to college, we had to leave home and go live with a bunch of strangers.

Becoming a bike rider, a swimmer, a student—all required us to leave what we knew and who we were, and sally forth into the unknown. Essentially, to arrive at a new place we had to leave a familiar one. Our venturing forth wasn't easy. But venture forth we did.

Why?

We were enthralled by the possibility of what we could become. Working to achieve our dreams took courage and imagination. And determination. We deemed the freedom to be gained every time we succeed to be worth the effort.

Our Daily Practice:

But some day, we'll realize that they were nothing compared to the freedom we will gain venturing forth to awakening.

June 9

*Care about the person
by letting go their heedless comment.*

As beings trying to awaken, we strive to be patient, accepting, and caring. There are many other qualities, all of which are equally invaluable. And equally difficult to do.

If we are fortunate, we will know others who, like us, are working to improve themselves. Like us, they often encounter roadblocks. Like us, they speak without thinking. And just like ours, their careless words hurt.

But don't let them.

Let go the heedless words. Instead, love and care about others. Odds are they've spoken hurtful words many times. The sad reality here in samsara is that, caught up in an emotional moment, we too respond with harsh words. Chaotic thoughts careen through our minds, and we cannot catch our words fast enough before they are uttered. Others may do the same thing.

Our Daily Practice:

So why should we get upset over what they heedlessly said? They probably didn't think about what they were saying.

And would be very grateful if we didn't think of them either.

June 10

Practice letting go now without hesitation.

*When it becomes a habit, a positive one,
we will find letting go at the end of our life easier.*

We hear it often: “Let go.” Of what?

Everything. Our personal views. Our likes and aversions. Our greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. And in time, our body.

Maybe, having relinquished a few attachments, we realize that we do indeed feel less burdened. But letting go is proving to be a real struggle. Not yet a habit, it is neither natural nor easy. But with practice, it can be. This is vital because if we have trouble letting go now, imagine what we’ll be going through at the end of our life.

The more we practice something, the more proficient we become. We need to keep reminding ourselves that letting go is not depriving ourselves. It’s knowing what’s really important. Would they be attachments and fleeting pleasures? Or the attainment of infinite wondrous benefits?

Our Daily Practice:

Practice letting go now. So when Amitabha Buddha comes to guide us to the Pure Land we do not hesitate, for we will already know how to let go.

June 11

*Forget about jealousy.
Instead, rejoice at other's meritorious deeds.*

One of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's ten great vows is to rejoice at others' meritorious deeds. Although this vow is a high-level practice undertaken by bodhisattvas, we can still begin to incorporate it into our practice. This vow of being happy at others' good actions helps us counter jealousy. Upon seeing others accomplishing something we dream about, we often succumb to jealousy.

We mutter to ourselves "Why them?" Because they have planted the right seeds and the right conditions have matured.

"Why not me?" Because either we didn't plant the seeds, or our conditions haven't matured yet.

"Okay. But do I have to feel happy for them?" Yes, because they did something good. (That's the "meritorious" bit.)

Accomplishing something good is not always easy. The

Our Daily Practice:

right seeds and conditions need to mature—at the same time. So let's get over our lethargy and our pouting. Celebrate those who manage to shine for they deserve our heartfelt delight and applause

June 12

*Studying Buddhism without practicing
is like studying how to play the piano
and never touching the keyboard.*

Theory is one thing, application another. Application invariably benefits significantly from study. Alternatively, study devoid of application usually results in merely obtaining technical knowledge. There is no real accomplishment. A student who fails to apply what she learns is merely repeating the words of others. Without putting words into action, there is simply no “music.”

Even worse, without practice, we will miss the whole point of the learning—to master the skill, or at least attain some degree of proficiency in it.

Studying Buddhism works the same way.

By failing to apply the teachings on meditation, we remain distracted and unfocused. Failing to apply the principles behind cultivation, we remain stuck in our bad habits and self-absorption. Like the person who never

Our Daily Practice:

touches the keyboard, we too will miss any wonderful outcome.

In our case, the unsurpassed joy of awakening.

June 13

Regrets

*—afflictions that cause grief and distress—
disturb both body and mind.*

A crucial objective in cultivation is to discover our faults, feel remorse, correct them, and then continue practicing. One risk in this process is to go through it quickly and without much thought. Call it a cursory correction. At the other end, a risk we run is getting mired in the process and being overwhelmed by feelings of guilt. We need to move mindfully through each step, neither progressing so quickly that we don't really learn from our mistakes nor so slowly that we find ourselves trapped in guilt, unable to practice. Repeatedly replaying what we did saps us of our energy, leaving little for our desired improvement. Acknowledging that so much of what we do is a continuation of karmic threads can help here. And also to realize that we need to stop adding to the karmic chain. How? By chanting "Amitufo" and dedicating the merits

Our Daily Practice:

to all those we hurt. And ex- pending our energy thus
saved on self-cultivation

June 14

*A time to test and
a time to trust.*

After being warned by their parents not to touch a hot stove, some children may ignore the advice. But when the hand gets closer to a burner, the child will know that the parent is wise. Hopefully, this will be enough for a doubting child to heed future parental warnings. Other children may just trust the parent and do not need to test their advice.

Now grown up, we face advice from diverse sources. But the issue of trustworthiness still remains. Even in regards to the Buddha. Many of his teachings we can test. Having learned that our karmas have results, we act mindfully and find that we face fewer problems. Letting go of expectations, we have fewer disappointments. Not giving in to anger, we are less disturbed.

Overall, we're happier.

What about the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss? There's no hot-stove test for doubters of this place. At

Our Daily Practice:

some point, one just trusts a good teacher, someone who has diagnosed myriad problems and prescribed all the right treatments.

June 15

Do you have time to chant?

Sorry, not now.

Then do you have time to watch a movie?

Sure!

In the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment, diligence appears four times. Why so often?

Because diligence is crucial to our accomplishing pretty much everything worthwhile. Unless we have already planted abundant seeds to attain something, we need to get busy. But getting busy is difficult. We find it much easier to do something enjoyable than to do something we regard as work.

An example?

Observing the efforts of others rather than doing something ourselves. Most of us make excuses to just coast. Inertia is king. Except when we get energized with things that matter to us: our loved ones, an avocation, our principles.

Our Daily Practice:

We need to move our Buddhist practice to this exception list. And then move it to the top of the list! Because in samsara, freeing ourselves from momentary indulgence and inertia will lead to the ultimate enjoyment.

June 16

*In the eyes of an awakened being,
we are all seen as lamentable,
considered unfortunate.*

Nothing makes a dung beetle's day like a lump of feces.

Whether they roll it into a ball, bury it, or inhabit it, the dung beetle lives and breathes dung. It's their nursery, their source of food and water, their home. They might even attach themselves to the animal source and wait for the inevitable. Without dung, they are lost. And so they might even steal a dung ball under the guise of helping another beetle. From birth to death, their existence centers on dung, on something we deem repulsive.

What a miserable way to live we tell ourselves, as we shudder.

And with that, we return to our own existence and the things that make our day. We eat and drink. We raise our children and tend our home. We interact with others to attain more of what we want, perhaps even through dishonorable means.

Our Daily Practice:

In their own ways, humans and beetles consider themselves fortunate. But both are inordinately mistaken.

June 17

*First comes patience.
Ultimately, there is just happiness.*

When others strongly want something, we can practice patience. How? By deferring to them. If it's not an issue of, say, principles or safety, why not?

Will it really make a difference to us to let the aggressive driver into our lane? Yes, he's annoying. But no, it shouldn't make a difference. Who is to say whose journey is more important. Or urgent. And what will we win? With anger frothing within us, can we really win anything? When we exit the road first, we embarrassingly pump our fist into the air. We tell ourselves that we won!

But as our blood pressure normalizes, a realization befalls us: we just created another enmity. As if we don't already have enough.

The next time your wishes do not concur with someone else's, remember that we are not more important than others. Any tug-of-war on this issue is not important. Only

Our Daily Practice:

patience is. Very likely, you will see how patiently accommodating the other person will make everyone a winner.

June 18

*Are we asking “Can I?”
Or “Should I?”?*

Being able to do something does not necessarily mean we should.

Walking down the street, do I heedlessly drop a piece of paper on the ground? Carry it to the nearest trash bin? Take it home to add to the recycling bag?

Dining with friends, do I order the meat like everyone else? Do I order a vegetarian option? A vegan one? Do I say I just feel like tofu tonight? Say it's for health reasons? Do I explain that I don't need, or want, to take another's life to support my own?

Sure, I can toss the paper aside. Yes, I can order whatever I want on the menu. But does being able to do something mean that I should? That I don't need to care about small things like a piece of paper or one serving of meat? Or do I have a responsibility to those my decisions impact? And also, not coincidentally, my own future karma?

Our Daily Practice:

When with others, do I act the same way they do?

Or do I decide to take the more arduous path of making conscious decisions on increasing subtle levels?

June 19

*Forming Dharma affinities
one smile at a time.*

Unless we're absorbed in our thoughts, we tend to mirror others' reactions. Say someone looks at us and smiles. Normally, we would return the smile. Normally.

Recently in a restaurant, a person in my line of sight looked at me. No smiles. Glared is a harsh word, so let's just say he looked at me fixedly. While I usually would have smiled, it had been a tiring morning, and my energy was running low. So I just looked back. No smile from me either. We both resumed eating our own lunches, and I thought "Well darn. I just blew my chance to form a Dharma affinity."

Fortunately, on the way out, his companion stopped by my table and asked what I was having. Upon learning it was a vegan burger, she replied she was newly vegan. We ended up talking, and even her friend became friendly. So the opportunity wasn't lost after all.

Our Daily Practice:

But because I had allowed myself to be affected by another person, I came perilously close to losing the opportunity to form a Dharma affinity.

June 20

*Behaving morally,
we'll be more free from the restrictions
due to our bad karmas.*

We're all prisoners, all confined to life in a cell. Some cells feel spacious and luxurious with walls of sparkling glass so clear we're not even aware of their presence. Others are cramped and barren with rusting, impregnable bars cold to the touch. Despite their decrepitude, they powerfully encircle us.

Our guards and fellow inmates may be attentive and understanding, eager to lessen our suffering. Or they may be mean-spirited and vengeful, intent on making us pay for our offenses, real or perceived. But whatever our current cell's conditions, once we leave our cell, it will only be to enter another one.

The way to escape?

Look around our cell and the surrounding ones. Cognizant of the stifling environment, we figure out all the

Our Daily Practice:

ways we can think, speak, and behave honorably and selflessly. When we do so, we will be more at ease in our current cell.

In the future, we will leave all the cells behind, even the one called samsara.

June 21

*Giving a possession can be easy.
Giving of oneself takes true generosity.*

Dropping a box of clothes off at Goodwill or St. Vincent's, buying some cans and packages of food to put into the food bank bin at the grocery store, writing a check to our town's animal shelter, donating online after a disaster—all are quick and relatively easy. Taking the time to help someone is an entirely different matter.

Most of us don't have an endless supply of time and energy. (At least not yet. We will when we become Buddhas.) So committing to help—and then actually doing so—can feel daunting. Easy or otherwise, the wise person gives to others, even when it's daunting. An object or some money is one thing. Giving one's time and energy is another. It's personal!

And that's what makes it so special. Giving of ourselves flings open the doors of our heart and enables us to step outside of ourselves. Where fresh air and freedom await.

June 22

*Are we learning Buddhism to benefit ourselves?
Or others?*

The response depends on how far along we are on the path. Let's say it's early days. We're just getting a handle on rebirth and all the different paths including the hells and hungry ghosts. Then there's causality, pervasive and timeless. What karmas have we sown, we wonder. We also realize that suffering could be just one step away, lurking behind current happiness.

It should come then as no surprise that, at first, we learn Buddhism to benefit ourselves. Who wouldn't want to end their suffering and improve their future lifetimes! As time passes, and with further cultivation and learning, we begin to look anew at those vows of helping others that we read of. Yes, it's not only about helping ourselves! We help ourselves so that we can help others. That's our ultimate goal. And if we don't know how to help ourselves we certainly won't be able to help others.

So, don't worry.

Yes, we start with "ourselves." In time, we graduate to "others."

June 23

*When we stop fussing about things,
they go much more smoothly!*

It's exhausting! All that time and energy we expend on fussing about the daily annoyances we encounter. It's just too much and all a big waste. We know this. And yet here we are, still grumbling. *Why do I keep having to fix his mistakes? Won't she ever learn? Do they think their time is more valuable than mine?* It becomes a contest between which is more tiring. Fixing the mess? Or fussing about it?

Upon consideration, it's really not much of a contest. Fussing wins, hands down. But it doesn't accomplish anything.

Point 1: We can whinge all we want, but we still have to fix what the other person messed up. Not good! Let's make that "We still need to fix what the person needs help with."

Point 2: That correcting will take longer because when we're fussing, we're not doing the task. Just wasting time and energy. We should just tell ourselves that in the past we

must have driven a coworker crazy. If we see it as fair retribution, our now focused mind can calmly complete the work.

June 24

We need to be trustworthy.

Not be a wolf's dinner.

If we keep giving a shaded view of something that happened, people will learn to discount, and eventually ignore, what we say. Especially if we cast ourselves in the starring role.

Remember the hapless boy who cried wolf when there wasn't one in sight? In time, the villagers learned not to believe him. He was left to fend for himself (and we know how well that turned out) when a wolf actually turned up. The villagers came to ignore his cries of "WOLF!" because experience told them that to the boy telling the truth was unimportant.

He wasn't trustworthy. He wasn't believable.

In the same way, if we keep skewing our reporting while others know the reality, it's only a matter of time until people listen to us with a healthy dose of skepticism. How can they depend on us when we seem incapable of reporting an event honestly and relating it properly?

Undependable and untrustworthy.
Is this how we want others to perceive us?

June 25

*The situation isn't bad or good;
it all depends on what we tell ourselves.*

In Buddhism, we hear about turning afflictions into bodhi. In effect, it is transforming negative thoughts into awakened ones. How? We stop viewing a situation as trying and see it in a favorable light.

For example, we change “that barking dog is driving me crazy!” to “that dog is helping me develop patience.”

Now I can assure you from personal experience that it's much easier to type the previous sentence than do it. The dog really is annoying, and I'm trying to write. So, how can I transform here? Well, for one thing, my patience can always stand some work. And since it is best practiced in adverse conditions, a barking dog is a winner.

So, thank you, dog! Noisy as you are, you are helping me out.

Turning such an annoyance into a tool for teaching patience that will help me focus on writing is akin to

turning afflictions into bodhi, of changing a negative thought into one that benefits others.

June 26

*Self-discipline gets us
from where we are
to where we want to be.*

Let's consider self-discipline from two aspects.

First, everyday self-discipline will help us accomplish what we want to with less frustration and disappointment. It's a tool we can use when we don't feel like doing something and want to put it off. Again. With self-discipline, we take ourselves by the proverbial lapels, look ourselves in the eye, and say "Nope. You'll do it now." Once we accomplish what we have to do, we will feel good.

Second, moral self-discipline will help us navigate through the mire of situations and relationships we encounter on a daily basis. By having a moral compass—for example, the precepts of no killing, no stealing, and no false speech—we will have the means to check our bearings to make sure we're headed in the right direction. That we're not getting lead astray again by our bad habits.

Getting quickly back on track will mean we'll arrive at our destination sooner. And with less pain.

June 27

*Don't focus on what you have done
but on what you can do.*

Maybe it's *Gee, I was clever to do that!* Or perhaps, *Oh no, what was I thinking?* We swing from congratulating ourselves one day to being overwhelmed with regret the next. Life spent on an emotional seesaw from recalling what we did can feel exhilarating. Or depressing. Either way, it's exhausting. And fruitless. Thoughts of things we accomplished can lead to arrogance. Thoughts of what we failed at can lead to feelings of inadequacy.

Both, and pretty much everything in between, are not helpful because what we did is in the past, and we can't change what's in the past. All we can do is learn from it and then learn how to live with it.

Ultimately, when we focus on what we did in the past, we're looking in the wrong direction. We need to consider our options and focus on what we can do now because now is all we have. And because now is where we still have

choices, still have the potential to decide on those actions and thoughts that are truly wise and wondrous.

June 28

Praise.

Do not be concerned that you don't get any.

*But be concerned that you are not acting
in a praiseworthy way.*

It feels good to be praised. Humble people may feel grateful that they didn't mess up again. Arrogant people may think how perceptive others are to recognize quality when they see it. Wise people may politely murmur "Ami-tuofo" and carry on with what they were doing.

Hopefully, we're like those wise people because they understand the pitfalls of praise.

Compliments are a karmic result for good actions done. But they are actually poor returns because wise people aspire to accrue merits, which are beneficial, not something self-satisfying like compliments. Understanding this, our question regarding praise becomes not how we can receive it but, rather, how we can act in a manner that would be worthy of praise. And not just from anybody, but from those we respect. Not so they will praise us.

But because their high standards are the benchmarks we use to judge ourselves.

June 29

Be grateful.

*The pain of having our faults pointed out to us
is invariably less than the suffering
as a consequence of committing faults over and over.*

Since our cultivation relies on us correcting our faults, anyone would think we'd be happy, delighted even, to have our faults pointed out by others. After all, they're helping us progress in our practice. In reality, few of us like being corrected. Criticism will elicit a range of reactions. Embarrassment. Guilt. Defensiveness.

But rarely gratitude.

Which is a shame really. Most of us have a stockpile of faults and noticing them isn't something we readily do. But we need to stop committing faults. It's the only way we can quit suffering from the negative consequences of our actions, thoughts, and speech. To progress.

So brush aside that moment of chagrin or umbrage. The more we do this, the easier it will get. And let's face it,

sometimes a verbal slap in the face can be extraordinarily effective.

Enough so that we know we'll never do THAT again.

June 30

*Always bear in mind
that even our smallest deed can impact others.*

Most of us would like to help others, to do something to improve people's lives. Some may choose careers of service. Committed to a cause, others may support it financially. Or dedicate their free time to volunteer work. The more we care, the more we want to do. Seeking to make a difference in the world, we consider the big picture. But not everyone has the conditions to act at this level.

And even those who can would do well to also look at the "small" picture because even the most minor action can impact others.

Indeed, the degree of the impact is often relative to the sincerity accompanying the action.

A polite "thank you" is always appreciated. But when that "thank you" is accompanied by a smile that carries up to the person's eyes, and you feel the smiling person is genuinely thinking of you at that moment, it can carry us

for quite some time. So it's not just the magnitude of the action that makes a difference—it's the sincerity.

July 1

*Do not wonder if others are doing their best.
Just make sure that you are.*

One of the first things we do in the morning is to look in a mirror. Even if we don't leave our home, we tend to tidy ourselves up. During the day, chancing upon a mirror, we run a quick check of our appearance. Before retiring, we look in the mirror to wash our face, brush our teeth, etc.

So we look in the mirror every day. But what do we see? Another wrinkle, a nice smile, our mother's eyes. We see what's on the outside. But when we look at others during the day, it's a different matter altogether.

After noting their physical appearances, we tend to zero in on their mistakes. Like an eagle zeroing in on its hapless prey. That eagle needs to eat. But do we really need to critique others?

Let's imagine another kind of mirror, a cultivation mirror. By holding it up to look directly into it, we block our view of what others are doing. And with that crystal-

like clarity, we now see what we are doing. Are we happy with what we see? Or grimacing at our irresponsible ways.

July 2

I alone am responsible for my life.

There's no one to blame.

The good news? I have the power to change it.

Untold imprints from our karmas—thoughts, words, and actions—over countless lifetimes have gone into the mix of impressions in our store consciousness. Defined by our karmas, our current life is therefore solely our creation. When certain people impact our life, it is because we planted the cause for them to do so. And this time, will we create good or bad karma? This makes us solely responsible for our life.

So, sorry, there's no one else to blame.

What we are experiencing is because of what we had done in this life. And what we did in all our lives before. The future holds the potential to be much better. Incredibly better. Since we alone are responsible for our lives, it's entirely up to us what our future will hold.

If we decide that we want to be born in the Western

Pure Land then we need to make it happen—with belief, vow, and practice. So, fully confident we will attain what we aspire to, let's get to work.

July 3

Karma has no expiration date.

In our ignorance and delusion, we do not truly understand karma. What we think, say, and do will assuredly come back to us—just as surely as our ball thrown against a wall will ricochet back to us. Our karmic ricochet may take a million lifetimes, but regardless of the time span a cause will give rise to a result.

Many of us will say that we believe in karma. Yet we behave like we do not.

Consider this. Have we become even a little irritated with someone or something today? That was anger, and we have not understood karma. Have we ever declared “I want pizza tonight!” (and nothing else). Have we ever thought, *Yes! That gap is enough for me to get into the other lane.*

Those were greed—for taste, for self-interest. If we still have ignorance and delusion, still feel anger and craving, then we have not really understood causality. And instead of planting seeds to be born in the Pure Land, we are

continuing to plant the wrong seeds, those that would see us suffering in samsara, over and over.

July 4

If it's so easy, why am I still here?
(Part One)

Of all the methods the Buddha taught, Pure Land Buddhism is said to be the “easiest to practice.” Those unfamiliar with the practice may get excited on hearing this. *At last! An easy method!* Not so fast there. Yes, compared to other Dharma doors, Pure Land is indeed the simplest and easiest.

But not easy!

“Easiest” refers to buddha-name chanting. From the moment we begin our practice to the moment Amitabha Buddha comes to escort us to the Western Pure Land, we chant his name. There is no need for a teacher to monitor our progress step by step, assessing us to guide us to the next level. We just chant Amitabha Buddha’s name. So the practice is truly the easiest.

But! We need to chant single-mindedly, with no other thoughts arising. This is the “not easy” part. Anyone who

has tried to hold just one thought in their mind knows how slippery thoughts are. So, while the method is the easiest, the practice takes dedication.

July 5

If it's so easy, why am I still here?
(Part Two)

While buddha-name chanting is indeed straightforward and the easiest of all the methods the Buddha taught, it's not all that we do. Chanting needs to go hand in hand with cultivation. Why? To attain birth in the Pure Land, we need an absolutely focused mind in our last moments. For this, we need the right conditions. What conditions? We need to be awake and coherent. If not chanting peacefully on our own, we need companions who chant to remind us that we have to chant.

How do we ensure we'll have such rare conditions? We cultivate ourselves through moral, compassionate living. We live simply, using just what we need. We give our energy, time, and resources to those who have less good fortune than we. We strive to alleviate the fears and worries of others. We view the needs and concerns of others as seriously as we view our own.

Doing these, we will create the necessary good fortune to be able to chant “Amitufo” in those crucial last moments.

July 6

Live every day as if it is your last.

Most of us have a good idea of what we want, and need, to get done today. For many, tasks at work loom. For others, family responsibilities. Or perhaps running errands, watching TV, checking the news, lunch with a coworker or friend, servicing the car, apologizing to our partner for last night's argument. There's so much we need to do to meet commitments, so much we want to do for personal enjoyment, so much we hope to accomplish. A lifetime of daily to-dos.

But what if we found out that we don't have a lifetime of endless tomorrows?

What if we learned that all we have is today? Just 24 hours. Suddenly, things like TV, the latest gossip, etc., seem irrelevant. And things like family and friends, and maybe even work, more so.

But it is our yearning to be born in the Pure Land in this lifetime that surges to the top of our last To-Do list.

And stays there. Now, always aware of this, we need to remain focused on what truly matters.

We need to live every day as if it's our last.

July 7

Give fearlessness.

Not fear.

At some point in our daily routine, we encounter an “it.” “It” isn’t dangerous. Nor newsworthy or life-changing. Just annoying! An inconsiderate behavior that has been going on for a long time, affecting not only us but others as well.

So, once again, we rehearse how we will lodge a complaint with the appropriate person, confident that she’ll correct the “annoying” person. Perhaps by pointing out how his actions go against the rules. Perhaps with a mild reminder of the need for considerate behavior.

We could complain, but must we? Should we? We know that we’re supposed to give fearlessness. Not fear.

What if, instead of helping the person conform to the rules, we cause him a serious problem? What if his conditions are so constricting that he has no option but to break that rule knowing he’s not hurting anyone? What if our complaint triggers a life-changing event for him?

We need to ease others suffering, not cause it. We need to relax. And just let go.

July 8

*How to know
if your practice is bearing results?*

Here's an example. While writing an email, I noticed that my email address was wrong. It had changed and I didn't want that. So I located a place to re-enter it. After a glance at the message that read something like "Seriously?" I blithely clicked "Yes."

A few seconds later, something told me to hit "Cancel!" After I did that, I decided to work on a file stored on my desktop.

But it was gone. What happened? Then reality dawned. I quickly checked my other files.

Gone! I looked in Finder. Here too, everything was gone.

Here too, everything was gone.

Okay, this is when you determine whether your practice is bearing fruit. I didn't panic. I was, however, extraordinarily focused. I wondered what on earth I had been thinking when I clicked "Yes." Then I examined my

options in order not to similarly zap another computer, chose one, murmured “Amitufo,” and hit “Okay.” Slowly my folders repopulated my laptop. Thank goodness for the “cloud.”

And “Amitufo.”

July 9

*Transform
admonitions into aspirations.*

Fully aware of our weaknesses, bad habits, and unfavorable conditions, the Buddha enumerated many sets of teaching guidelines. The most fundamental is do nothing evil, do good, and purify the mind. The Buddha elaborated on these three principles in the ten virtuous karmas of no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, enticing speech, greed, anger, or ignorance.

We want to cease committing harmful actions. With greater understanding and appreciation of the guidelines, we will be able to apply them more comprehensively, and, thus, more effectively. But we can do even more.

How?

By viewing admonitions on what we do and say not as cautions but as aspirations—as personal resolutions—to refrain from unvirtuous thoughts and behavior. This is to

benefit all involved. By beginning each of the ten virtuous karmas with “I resolve not to,” we will gradually reach the level at which we benefit all beings.

July 10

*I resolve not to kill.
Instead, I will respect and
have compassion for all beings.*

The first vow of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is to respect all Buddhas. Understanding that all beings have buddha-nature and are future Buddhas, we also strive to respect all beings. Bodhisattvas vow to help all sentient beings. We also should strive to have compassion for others, for we know too well that all beings suffer. That they fear violence and death.

As our understanding and our respect and compassion for beings grow, we resolve not to take the life of any living being. And yet, almost immediately, we fail. How can we not take the life of other beings when so much of what we do entails killing? Breathing, eating, walking—our very existence—involves killing.

Even so, we do have choices.

Consume meat and dairy, or eat a plant-based diet?

VENERABLE WULING

Walk on grass and step on an unseen ant, or use a walkway?

Whack that spider, or catch and release?

We really do have choices. We just need to make the right ones.

July 11

*I resolve not to steal.
Instead, I will only take something
when I have permission from the owner.*

Envision forgetting your book in a busy restaurant and returning an hour later to find your book right where you left it. Imagine working for a company knowing you're paid a fair wage. Or living with someone who doesn't verbally abuse you. Or visiting a national park untouched by vandalism. Stealing is taking something without the owner's permission. So we wouldn't assume that an abandoned book is for the taking.

But stealing is not only about taking physical objects.

We wouldn't take advantage of others or disregard their right to feel safe. We wouldn't orchestrate a YouTube minute of fame by taking videos of ourselves destroying public property, or worse.

When we resolve not to steal, we respect an individual's property. That includes their time, feelings, and peace of

mind. Very importantly, we must also not take these away from them.

July 12

*I resolve not to engage in sexual misconduct
or in any sensory indulgence.
Instead, I will develop
the mind of self-restraint and purity.*

Sensory indulgence underlies the warning against sexual misconduct. In our practice, we seek a pure mind—the state of a controlled mind, undisturbed by what it encounters.

And yet too often, we veer toward a different mental state.

Day in and day out we seek excitement. While such stimulation feels enjoyable at the time, it wreaks havoc on our practice. Plus, sensory indulgence—be it visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, or mental—always ends in suffering.

How so?

When the activity stops, we will miss it. Or we become disappointed by our failed attempts to repeat the experi-

ence, feelings included. Or, maybe we just lose interest. We need to realize that by indulging ourselves in the momentary satisfaction of our senses, we repeatedly distract ourselves from what truly matters—a serene, clear mind untroubled by momentary sensory distractions.

July 13

*I resolve not to use false speech.
Instead, I will speak the truth
in a wise way and at the right time.*

False speech is more than outright lying, more than voicing a wrong statement. For instance, denying taking something when we did. False speech can be exaggerating the retelling of what happened. Maybe in the hope of making a funny event more entertaining. Or making a trivial incident more noteworthy.

False speech can be presenting information in a biased, distorted way to mislead the listener. It can be deliberately deceitful. Or made to appear harmless. Perhaps with a wish to not hurt others' feelings or to save them from embarrassment.

Know this: false speech is just that, for it lumbers the listener with misinformation.

We need instead to speak in a way that others find trustworthy, acceptable, and safe to act on. Truthful speech

requires a calm mind. It entails respect for those who hear what we say. It stems from sensitivity.

And sometimes even courage.

July 14

*I resolve not to use divisive speech.
Instead, I will speak words that
foster harmony and understanding.*

Divisive speech is that which causes discord among people. Whether we do so intentionally or unintentionally, whether we are telling the truth or not, we're sowing the seeds for friction between people. Why would we do this?

Perhaps we're in a bad mood.

Perhaps we're feeling disheartened and are thus careless of who we strike out at.

Perhaps we're jealous of a relationship, even to the point of wanting to destroy it.

Perhaps we heard some gossip about an acquaintance and just can't resist the urge to pass it on to others in our circle.

Perhaps we feel that belittling our competition to our boss will better our chances of getting a promotion.

We have plenty of reasons. But divisive words are

cruel, careless, and destructive. They are not the words of a caring, purposeful person. Instead, we need to speak truthfully and prudently in a way that nurtures accord and fosters understanding between people.

July 15

*I resolve not to use harsh speech.
Instead, I will speak words that
benefit others and foster peace.*

The paramita of giving involves three categories: wealth, teachings, and fearlessness. When we give fearlessness, we ease others' distress and nurture their feelings of safety. If, however, we're using bad language, belittling others, raising our voice, offending or hurting others with our abrasive speech or tone of voice—we are using harsh speech. And we're giving fear. Not fearlessness.

Our speech can have lasting effects. The harsh words we blurt out will be stored in our consciousness. We also run the genuine risk of having them firmly embedded in the other person's consciousness as well. In the heat of the moment, when we're too wrapped up in our feelings to allow our mindfulness to weigh in on what we're about to say, we create great harm. What to do?

Remain calm. Remain silent. Listen to the other person.

VENERABLE WULING

Think before opening our mouth.

July 16

*I resolve not to use enticing speech.
Instead, I will speak
sincerely and truthfully.*

Enticing speech is all around us—on the Internet, TV, movies, music, billboards.

It's at lunch with coworkers and around us in the check-out lane.

It's used by companies wanting to increase their bottom line regardless of the cost to society or the environment. Desperate to remain in power, politicians may sow falsehoods to perpetuate fear and greed.

It's resorted to by individuals placing their own desires before everyone else.

Enticing speech is all the speech that lures us to do lesser things. Not vigilant enough, we succumb. Subtle or obvious, polished or crude, enticing speech misleads us. It distracts us from what is truly important: living an honorable life, helping others, and attaining a good rebirth.

Often finding ourselves at the receiving end of enticing speech, we know how it feels. We need to guard against using it on others.

Enticing speech is a weapon.

One we should disdain, and never reach for.

July 17

*I resolve to refrain from greed.
Instead, I will open my heart
and practice giving.*

It's easy to give in to greed when we feel we're the center of the universe. It's this skewed perspective that is contributing to our problems today. Problems faced by far too many people. Unawakened, we picture everything from the viewpoint of "I." This will only end up in us expecting the world to conform to "my" wishes.

But what if we all wished for the hopes of others to be met before our own?

For instance, let's imagine there are one hundred people in a room with several tubs of ice cream on a hot summer day. When everyone scrambles to dig in, there will be chaos. Some people will pack their bowls with ice cream. Others will end up with nothing in theirs.

But if everyone in the room puts the wishes of others before their own, everyone will get a fair share. There will

be one hundred happy ice cream eaters. Why? Because all hopes are met.

Opening the door to their hearts is making everyone truly happy.

July 18

*I resolve to refrain from anger.
Instead, I will develop patience and
the compassion to see the suffering of others.*

“Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble.”

The three witches in Macbeth were mixing a brew of terrible trouble by casting in poisoned entrails, eye of newt, toe of frog, and more.

We have our own messy hex of misery and strife, a recipe that includes annoyance, bitterness, outrage. Our life is not progressing well. Either we don't get what we want, or we get what we don't want. Nothing is complying with our wishes. And so we add wood to the fire and stir our cauldron of negative feelings, tossing in a dash of belligerence, a handful of aggression.

So engrossed are we in our emotional brew that we fail to realize that we're choking on it and driving others away.

The solution?

Recognize others' suffering as acutely as you discern your own. Be compassionate. And in the face of trying circumstances, patiently devote your energy to alleviating, not worsening, the suffering of others.

July 19

*I resolve to refrain from ignorance.
Instead, I will disciple myself and
calm my mind so that I can act from wisdom.*

Why? It's a common enough question, one we've asked ourselves numerous times. Examples: *Why did I say what I did? Why did I do that? Why did I even have the thought to do so in the first place?*

Because of our ignorance—our lack of knowing and understanding. Either we didn't know better. (But we often do.) Or we haven't yet grasped the harm we can inflict on others and ourselves when our careless behavior arises from what we're feeling.

Sometimes emotions are helpful. For instance, when in danger, we experience fear and frantically cast about for a way to escape.

But much of the time, our emotions just get us into trouble. We cultivate to discipline ourselves. Doing so successfully, we no longer need to worry about or be

embarrassed by our actions. Our mind will begin to calm down. When it is tranquil, like still water, our wisdom will bubble up, and we will naturally do what is right.

July 20

*What we take for someone's unwillingness to help
may just be their wish not to intrude.
Or perhaps they are uncertain how best to help.*

Reticence to pitch in and help arises from a wide range of reasons. Perhaps the one who needs help has a temper or an unyielding I-know-it-all air that discourages others from offering to help. And so, people would like to help but hesitate over just how to do so.

Or possibly they've tried to in the past and were brushed off. Perhaps some people doubted that they could and when they did help, their efforts were scoffed at and errors highlighted.

Clearly, there are numerous reasons why people do not help. Therefore, jumping to the conclusion that people don't want to help is just too simplistic. It will only land us in the wrong place. As we can see, it is very easy to mistake humble reluctance for obstinate disinclination. But we can change all that.

A welcoming smile or a casual “Can you help me out here?” will get us the help we really do need and allow the other person to practice giving.

A win for all involved.

July 21

*Not being able to do something
one hundred percent
doesn't mean that we shouldn't try at all.*

Imagine a casual discussion on food between two people. When asked what she eats, the vegetarian replies that she eats a plant-based diet and so she doesn't eat meat. Asked why, she explains how animal agriculture causes suffering and killing.

The other person, a meat-eater, retorts that plants are living beings, so vegetarians still cause killing.

Sadly, this is correct. We live in samsara, in the land the Buddha said is called "Endurance." To acquire food, shelter, and other living necessities, we all are responsible for the death of others, be they animal or plant. In the face of this realization, it would be easy to throw up one's hands in frustration. But just because we can't do something perfectly doesn't mean we should give up trying.

Yes, for us to live, others must die. We cannot change

this reality. But what we can change is how many beings we harm.

And how many we save.

July 22

*Replace not just painful thoughts
but also enjoyable thoughts with “Amitufo.”*

Most of us are aware of the dangers of negative thoughts like those arising from anger, fear, sadness. Negative thoughts are unsettling and if left unchecked can become debilitating. So it's easy to see why we need to replace them with “Amitufo.”

But why replace our amused laughter at something a coworker said or replace pleasure when listening to a favorite piece of music? Why replace thoughts of satisfaction, say after accomplishing a difficult task?

The risk of experiencing such seemingly harmless emotions is that innocent thoughts of appreciation can all too easily morph into attachments. Our satisfaction grows into pride as we now make it a quest to garner praise instead of simply doing a task well. Pleasure from a well-played piece of music could become an attachment, and when we desire more we could forget our cultivation.

VENERABLE WULING

So we need to remember that while we appreciate the good things that come to us, we then return to “Amitufo.”

July 23

*Seeds of kindness, seeds of unkindness.
Which ones will I nurture today?*

Deep within our store consciousness lie all the seeds of all our thoughts, speech, and actions incurred since time without beginning. That's a lot of seeds! There are seeds of kindness, and seeds of treachery. Seeds of suffering, and seeds of happiness. Some have grown large and strong, while others remain small and weak.

While we cannot alter the fact that we have planted these seeds and carried them with us through innumerable lifetimes, we can choose which seeds to nurture and which to leave untouched. If we choose to water the seeds of delusion and ignorance, our suffering will increase. We've done and experienced this in too many lifetimes. Still being here in samsara is testimony to that.

Every moment gives us a chance to make conscious, purposeful choices. So be done with the seeds of callousness and disloyalty. Instead, tend and care for those

wonderful seeds of awakening and wisdom, and thus be closer to happiness and liberation.

July 24

*All that we experience today
is the result of our past karmas.*

We often enjoy good results because we feel that we have earned them. But what of our suffering, especially when it threatens to overwhelm us? It's also due to our past karmas. Thoughts of angrily blaming ourselves, of terrible sadness over another insensitive act, of self-loathing. All are suffering. All are painful.

The pain we bear is the maturing—the fruition—of past karmas. We can allow pain to consume us as we lash out in confusion and anger. But it just creates more causes that will lead to further painful results. More importantly, debilitating emotions will derail us from the path.

But pain need not cause more pain.

Instead of feeling overwhelmed we can try to understand that this is an opportunity for us to sweep away some of our negative karma. Everything arises from the mind. So use misfortune to serve us, instead of restricting us.

Viewed this way, adversity can provide us with the opportunity to grow. And progress.

July 25

*He who receives kindness should never forget it,
but one who performs kindness
would be wise to forget it.*

We should always be grateful for the kindness that others have shown to us. Kindness can relieve our fears and worries, and lessen our suffering. Remembering the kindness of others and how much it meant to us, we will be more inclined to pass it on.

But when kind to others, we shouldn't dwell on it. Replaying in our minds our kindness to others could allow pride to creep in. We might look down on the person who needed our help—mentally patting that person on her head like we would a child. While we, dwelling on our good actions, mentally pat ourselves on the shoulder. Unaware of the tiny changes within us, we have given pride a home. And there goes our humility.

The Buddha warned us of the poisons of greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. Pride is a slippery slope with the

bottom being arrogance. So just as we need to guard against anger arising, we need to also guard against pride.

July 26

*“There is nothing
either good or bad,
but thinking makes it so.”*

Shakespeare famously wrote these words in Hamlet. And how true these words are. Unequivocally, it is our thinking that makes us happy and at ease. Or otherwise. As we go through life trying to prevail in a constantly happy state, we stubbornly blot out experiences that tell us otherwise. We do this as we incessantly pursue the posit that only pleasant phenomena will make us happy.

But happiness is a mental state, not a quality inherent in material possessions or new experiences.

So rightly, whether or not something puts a smile on our face depends on what we tell ourselves. We can firmly—and wrongly—assert that to be happy we just need more pleasing objects, relationships, and experiences.

Or, we can accept that wanting more inevitably leads to more wanting. And more disappointment, and frustra-

tion and, thus, more suffering. Causes with downward spiraling effects.

It's our choice.

July 27

*Pain will always be with us.
When there is pain, suffering follows.
(Part 1)*

Some years ago, when walking blithely (but alas, not mindfully) out the front door, I didn't notice the ice. In two seconds I was airborne. Right away gravity took over.

One moment I had two feet on the porch, and a few seconds later I was sitting on the ground several yards away looking back at the porch. Apparently, there was a middle part in my acrobatics because my knee really, really hurt. It caused pain for days, but by using various cultivation methods, my suffering eased some.

I chanted, which made me happy. It also helped me to relax, which in turn lessened the physiological reaction to pain.

Another method was getting involved in my work, which distracted me from thinking of the pain.

Then there was understanding as I smiled and thought,

I'm repaying some of my past karmas! In that instance, I managed to actualize the reality that even though we undergo pain, we can choose not to continue suffering.

July 28

*Pain will always be with us.
When there is pain, suffering follows.
(Part 2)*

Pain is not just physical. Because we have hearts and minds, we develop “emotional” pain. The pain from a banged-up knee is very different from the deep pain of losing someone we love. This pain is deeper and lasts much longer. We know we will no longer see the one we miss and sometimes this just washes over us, and at the most unexpected moments.

The loss hurts all the more because one moment we are happily doing something and then, in an instant, we remember.

And once again, we feel like we are drowning in a never-ending whirlpool of sadness, one that never stops torturing us. The ground suddenly feels like it’s falling away from under us, and we find ourselves flailing away in space, insecure and alone.

Our pain of having lost someone we loved and still

miss very much is made worse by our continued suffering. Pain is the loss, suffering is our grief. Will this torture ever end?

We cannot stop the loss. The reality is that in samsara, we will lose all those we love. Perhaps to death. Perhaps to separation. Pain is inevitable, but suffering is not. At some point in our mourning, we will begin to realize that we can ease our suffering.

This realization may come after we find ourselves walking around apologizing mentally for past wrongs to the one we have lost. Thinking of them is just too painful. Surely, our loved one would not want us in such a state.

And so, we gently close the door to suffering. And gradually, just as our loved one would want us to do, we open another door instead—the one that shows us happy memories. And even more gradually, when reminded of the one we lost, it is not grief that arises, but appreciation and gratitude that we were able to have the person in our lives as long as we did.

July 29

*“But how can I use Buddhism
in everyday life?”*

The woman who asked me this added that she wasn't a monastic—she lived in the “real world,” a world filled with deadlines, competition, and scrappy people.

Once I quit laughing, I explained that my life has many deadlines, human nature is rife with competition, and monastics also have people who don't agree with them. And having worked all day, even eating my meals at the computer, I really did have a good idea of her world.

I then gave her an example of Buddhism applied in real life.

A student told me of the time where she realized a supplier had misquoted a product's price. Rather than take advantage of his error, this student questioned the pricing, which the grateful supplier quickly corrected. The student could have saved a lot of money but knew it was not “right.” It would not have followed the Buddha's teachings.

She is now trusted by the supplier and respected by his company. Why? She's ethical.

This is Buddhism working in the "real world."

July 30

Transformation takes time.

Changing our habitual ways of doing things takes time. But a snail-paced mission in a society craving instant gratification is a tough thing. We don't like waiting. We don't have time to be patient. We have a lot to do, and people expect things to be done—all are expecting quick results. But effecting lasting change takes time.

So in your practice, do not have expectations of fast achievements.

In fact, don't have any expectations at all.

Start from where you are, and gradually learn how to put the teachings into practice by starting with things that are easier to change. As you begin to improve in little ways, you will gain the confidence and experience to know how to change in more meaningful ways. Such change and any self-improvement will take time. Understanding this, patiently give yourself the time you need.

Gradually, as you become more adept at changing, you

will even begin to transform negative thoughts and bad habits into those that brighten your world and all who enter it.

July 31

*Progress
in our cultivation
comes from small everyday improvements.*

Improvement in anything requires the taking of small steps. So too the work on our cultivation: small steps every day.

How?

We can cultivate fearlessness by supporting a harried coworker worried about an impending deadline. Or helping an animal trapped in a roadside drain. We can work on equanimity while waiting in line to reschedule our canceled flight. Or on patience when our children are each telling us their version of how our favorite lamp was broken.

Gradually, we will become more adept at our cultivation. Then, thankfully, when we run up against life's more trying challenges, we will be better skilled at reacting prudently and calmly. To those who haven't attempted this cultivation, it may seem easy.

But the reality is that even minor acts in our cultivation require much persistence to accomplish them well. To see how we're progressing, we can keep asking ourselves, "Am I doing this the best I can?"

August 1

I got it!
I lost it . . .

A momentary flash of achievement. Perhaps it will come when we open our eyes during a group chanting session. For a moment, we clearly—and calmly—see the candles, incense holder, and flowers in front of the statue of Amitabha Buddha. In that briefest of moments, there is no stirring of thoughts—no thoughts of labeling, discriminating or attaching.

Instead, perceiving everything correctly, our mind remains still—this is the “I got it” moment.

We recognize what just happened but in the next nanosecond, a tsunami of our usual thoughts overwhelms us. Yet again, we start to label what we see. Thoughts of good or bad, thoughts of like or dislike, thoughts of clinging or aversion—all arise from within us.

And with all these thoughts, the realization of “I lost it!”

VENERABLE WULING

Lost that amazing flash of pure seeing. And how uncluttered, how clear and quiet it felt. Know that we just had a hint of what awakened beings experience.

August 2

The more desires we have, the more we will suffer.

*The more wishes we have,
the more disappointed we will be.*

In our continuous attempts to try to make the world conform to our wishes, we're just setting ourselves up for unending suffering and disappointment. We know this first hand, and yet we keep doing it. It's foolhardy. We already know that our wanting things to be a certain way doesn't make them happen. Every time we get tripped up by our habits of desiring and wishing, we get reminded of such futility.

Why do we have such problems?

There are many reasons.

We may acknowledge the pointlessness in our heads, but we are not strong enough to move beyond doing the same old thing. Our habits are cons-old.

Or maybe we are brave enough to start demanding less of the world but aren't diligent enough to follow through.

VENERABLE WULING

Going with the flow is so much easier than paddling in
another direction. It just takes too much energy and care

But when has easy ever achieved anything worthwhile?

August 3

*“We are to endure what others cannot
and practice what others cannot achieve.”*

These words from Great Master Yinguang were spoken to guide and encourage us. While others engage in perceived pleasures, and are so often enthralled by them, we are to challenge ourselves to seek other rewards.

Like meeting basic needs instead of indulging ourselves.

Or knowing that being uncomfortable is OK, with no need to remedy it.

Like living simply so that others will have a better chance at survival, now and in the future.

Or seeking true joy rather than fleeting, often hedonistic, worldly happiness.

In lives uncountable, we existed in ignorance because good teachers were absent. And so we squandered our good fortune and burned our merits with our anger.

But in some other lives, we practiced. Having done so,

we set the stage for this lifetime, this rarest of opportunities to practice what so many others do not have the conditions or inclination to do.

And so as the Master wisely advised, we are to practice. Do not follow the others who do not.

August 4

*How do I choose a school in Buddhism?
What criteria should I use?*

The Buddha taught 84,000 methods. This number symbolizes something uncountable. Additionally, all methods are equally good—none is superior or inferior to another. Each person just needs to find the most suitable one, the one that will accord with their abilities and the way they live.

In your search, you might listen to different teachers, read various books, and check out Buddhist websites. If you live where there is a Buddhist center, you could visit it to get a better feeling for the practice and teachings. If there isn't a center close by, you might attend a day-long or weekend retreat to see if the practice and teachings feel appropriate for you.

Finding the right method depends on your conditions. Recognizing the method is mainly intuitive. When you are fortunate enough to find the correct method for yourself,

everything will just feel right—the practice, the teachings, the people—everything.

This rightness has been likened to a feeling of “coming home.”

Finally.

August 5

*With grasping, we lose.
Without grasping, we gain.*

Let's try an experiment.

Close your eyes and imagine reaching out your hand to pick up a small stone. With your palm facing downwards, use your fingers and thumb to pick up the stone carefully. Holding the stone tightly lest it drops, your fingers will begin to ache and cramp up after a while. You can grasp the stone for a few minutes, a few hours, or maybe longer. But the longer you do so, the more painful the holding becomes until at some point the inevitable happens.

You release your grip. Despite all your grasping, you cannot hold on to the stone forever. It will fall and be lost.

Now, once again imagine reaching out your hand to pick up that same stone. But this time, after you pick it up, turn your hand over with your palm facing up. Open your hand and let the stone sit quietly on your palm. Your fingers are now relaxed.

VENERABLE WULING

With grasping, we lose.
Without grasping, we gain.

August 6

*Patience fosters humility,
impatience arouses arrogance.*

Patience is the ability to accept discomfort, to remain unperturbed in the face of obstacles, and to be steadfast in the pursuit of a goal. There's no complaint or irritation. No gritting of our teeth.

Humility is being honest with ourselves and recognizing that we have faults and make mistakes. And that, no, we are not the most important person in the room.

Patience fosters humility by enabling us to calmly view ourselves in relation to what we are undergoing. Doing so, we will be better able to respect the views of others and appreciate that their wishes matter just as much as ours.

Impatience is all the things that patience is not.

It is being restless and desirous, and getting irritated when things don't go our way. When impatient, we focus on what we feel and want. We then become disdainful of others and dismissive of their views and feelings. And with

all that, we fall into the snare of pride and arrogance. And wonder why those we like and care about avoid us.

August 7

*“We should see only others’ good points,
not their shortcomings.”*

Some things bear repeating. Often. The above advice from Great Master Yinguang falls into that category. Why? It’s just so very easy to find fault with another person! With just a thought of this person, all his bad traits and faults come to the fore.

The irritation mounts, and we reach a point where we become oblivious to how we are reacting. Before we know it, we’ve become so irked by his shortcomings that we destroy any hope we have of our own possible contentment or of controlling our thoughts and feelings.

Our derisive behavior is a sad state of affairs. We’re only hurting ourselves because in focusing on another’s shortcomings, we fail to notice his good points or maybe just gloss over them. We thus condemn ourselves to being cranky and cynical. And miss out on his good points. Surely he has some! Possibly they’re just hard to see.

Don't be so blinded by the bad that we miss the good.
Let go your pickiness, and get to see the goodness
around you.

August 8

*Be skeptical when appropriate,
have faith when doubt can be eliminated.*

When the Buddha warned us about doubt (one of the five poisons, the others being greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance), he was not talking about reasonable skepticism in daily matters. Like rebuilding a washed-out bridge in a week. The Buddha was speaking of people's doubt in the sages' teachings.

Based on our roots from previous lifetimes, we come to the teachings with varying degrees of doubt. But we whittle away doubts when we experience firsthand the truth of what awakened beings have taught us.

For instance, we experience that, yes, when we live a moral life we worry less. Thus, we verify the teachings for ourselves. Chiseling away at our doubt, we will reach the point where we accept certain teachings on faith. An example?

Once born in the Pure Land, we will attain enlighten-

ment far more quickly than with other methods. When the teachings and our experience mesh, we will let go of our hesitation.

And our doubt.

August 9

*At the heart of
prejudice, condescension, and rage
lies fear.*

And mind-numbing ignorance. The strutting bully, the bigot, and the snob may all appear to be confident and strong, but the reality is very different.

Under their blustering and seeming conviction lies fear. For some, it is the fear that they will lose their tentative hold on a situation. For others, fear of the moment of absolute loss for what already seems to be slipping away.

Under their aggressive demeanor and self-righteous attitude lies ignorance. Ignorance of how his perks and profits came about. Of how people end up with just a little bit more than those they look down upon, those they feel threatened by.

Those whose hearts are strangled by such fear do not realize that the good things in their lives come from helping others in past lifetimes, not by being cleverer in the

current one. Allowing their fears to dictate their lives, they are only laying the groundwork for future deprivation and anguish.

August 10

“Character is destiny.”

While the above quote feels like something the Buddha might have said, it was actually articulated by the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus.

What is character? Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines character as “a composite of good moral qualities typically of moral excellence and firmness blended with resolution, self-discipline, high ethics, force, and judgment.” If that’s character, then that’s what we need to develop!

Character clearly rises above belief systems. The “good men and good women” we read of in the *Amitabha Sutra* is a reference to character. With character, we will be honorable, disciplined, diligent. And wise. We will firmly set ourselves on a path that far surpasses the ones where we all too often meander habitually along—the path of self-centeredness and personal convenience. With character, we will determine our destiny, a better future.

VENERABLE WULING

Not just for us, but for all those we care about, have cared about, and will care about in the future as well.

August 11

*When trying to avoid our own inconvenience,
we need to be sure that we're not inadvertently
inconveniencing others.*

Preparing to drive a few hours to a monthly class I teach at a correctional center, I decided to get a coffee from our town's very own, newly opened (Yes!) Starbucks store. Knowing two routes, I chose the faster and more convenient one for me.

Things went well until I hit the last red light. I was in the single lane for cars going straight as well as for those turning right. Needing to go straight, I waited for a green light. As I drove through, I glanced in my rear-view mirror to see how many cars were turning right.

They all were!

I was in the correct lane and following the traffic rules. At that intersection, even with a red light, drivers can turn right if there are no on-coming cars. I realized then that my stopping at the red light had prevented them from

doing so. I had held other people up, even if allowed by the traffic rules.

In focusing on my own needs, I had inadvertently inconvenienced several people.

August 12

*Singing birds help you learn in the Pure Land.
Why not create that relaxed environment here?*

Ideally, when we listen to talks on the Dharma, we set all tasks and distractions aside, sit down, and focus on the talks. But life is rarely ideal. If ever. With much to do at work and at home, and with distractions everywhere we turn, we rarely have optimal conditions to practice and learn. How do we find and dedicate the time we want—and need—to do both?

We know that buddha-name chanting requires dedicated focused time. Our learning, however, can be more flexible. We can take a hint from those who listen to Dharma talks in the Pure Land.

In that land, Amitabha Buddha has birds singing the Dharma because he understands that even beings who manage to attain birth there will find it easier to periodically take a more relaxed approach to learning.

We can do the same.

Integrate some of our learning into our daily tasks. Perhaps during our daily commute or when doing routine tasks. Wherever we find ourselves.

August 13

*“If anything I have said or done
has offended you,
please forgive me.”*

Wow! How many of us have the strength of character—not to mention the courage—to look another person in the eye and say the above?

The simplicity of the words notwithstanding, it is incredibly personal. A person sincere in what they say, including an apology, will do so while unguardedly looking the other person in the eye.

Sounds daunting?

Okay, perhaps before you try to figure out whether this is something worth working on, picture being on the receiving side of this apology. “If anything . . . offended you . . . forgive me.” Imagine how blown away you’d be! Your petty resentments just dissolve into nothingness. Your pent-up irritation. Poof! Your anger? Gone.

Who can stay angry at someone who so honestly—and humbly—wants to apologize? Impossible!

This is the power of an apology sincerely meant and humbly given.

August 14

*When encountering an onerous situation,
what matters is what we choose to think and do.*

For all those who know this and have no trouble ignoring situations that distract or frustrate you, I have good news. You get to skip today's lesson! For the rest of us, let's proceed with our blatantly obvious—but really difficult to pull-off—piece of advice.

So, the past is over. *Okay.*

We can't fix it. *Understood.*

All we can do is learn and move on. *Got this one, too.*

Then what's our problem? *We can't let go!*

We can't dismiss the grievances, guilt, embarrassment, all the painful memories that seemingly arise from out of nowhere. Just when things are going well and we feel happy, they resurface. And once again, we get carried away, unable to stop an all-too-familiar runaway train of thoughts that appears more regularly than the bullet trains of Japan.

But let go we must. Every single moment, at every turn. Whether the memory is an upsetting one or a good one. Just keep letting go, gently, but firmly. And with persistence! Things will get better.

August 15

*Our lives will never be perfect
here in samsara.*

Striving to become a better person, trying to follow the guidance we receive, we can become frustrated when running into obstacles and seeming contradictions. At such a point, we can become discouraged. *Why are our good actions failing to produce good results? And why haven't we progressed further?*

Because change takes time. It takes patience and hard work to remain focused on our vow to end suffering and attain lasting happiness. There will always be obstacles in samsara. As the warning goes, "Good work, more trouble."

Our sincerely trying to improve does not automatically eliminate our karmic consequences. Nor will obstacles just go away, allowing us to progress smoothly in our practice. Nothing is easy here in samsara. Neither is there perfection. Accepting this will help us to be resilient, to keep plugging away, when we encounter seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

The obstacles are temporary, and as long as we do not give up, they will be overcome.

August 16

“What do you Buddhists believe?”

When we get asked this, we often mention rebirth and karma. Rebirth can be a stretch for many people, so for them we may not want to linger too long on it. Cause and effect usually proves easier to discuss.

But wait, if the person isn't comfortable with the concept of rebirth, how do we explain causality?

We could ask some questions, like what happens if she misses a deadline at work? What happens after she goes out of her way to help another? As she ponders the questions, tell her that our action will set into motion a karmic train. She nods and tells you that she has gotten sullen looks from coworkers before. But also a grateful hug from someone she had helped.

Explain how, with awareness, patterns can be discerned. Acting in certain ways, certain things happen: adverse actions often result in distress while those that are positive most often lead to feelings of well-being. Then,

with enough time and effort, we do more than just accept this truth. We look for opportunities to do what we know is right.

August 17

“Why is that Buddha statue fat?”

This familiar statue, with a big happy smile and an even bigger tummy, seen in Chinese Buddhist centers (and restaurants!) represents Maitreya Bodhisattva and is modeled after a monk called “Budai.” When offered alms, the venerable would put them in his cloth bag, or *budai*. With his bag always with him, he became known as Budai.

When someone asked him what Buddhism was, he would smile and put the bag down, indicating that Buddhism teaches letting go.

When asked what one should do next, he lifted the bag to his shoulder and walked away. A sign of taking up the helping of others. So Buddhism teaches one to let go of everything and to help others.

Just before he passed from this world, Venerable Budai revealed that he was a manifestation of Maitreya Bodhisattva. Since then, in China, his image has been modeled on Venerable Budai. His broad smile reminds us,

“Want to learn Buddhism? Be happy and greet all with a smile!” His big stomach symbolizes great tolerance and equality.

August 18

*Sentient beings are innumerable;
I vow to help them all.*

This aspiration to help all beings is the first of the four great vows of Buddhas. With much enthusiasm to learn and practice the teachings, many people become enthralled with the abundance of Buddhist teachings. But in the vows, we see that mastering boundless Dharma doors, the methods of learning and practice, is the third vow. The first is to give rise to the vow to help all beings.

All beings? Can't I just help myself?

If we practice to solely help ourselves, our mind will remain narrow and biased. A broad and impartial mind, like that of an awakened being, is what we strive for. With our firm holding of the first great vow—the aspiration to help all sentient beings—our great compassion will be generated and compel us to be diligent on the path. Without compassion and diligence, we will give up in the face of obstacles.

So the first vow inspires and encourages us, and serves as our fundamental vow.

The other three vows serve to help us fulfill this first vow.

August 19

*Afflictions are inexhaustible;
I vow to end them all.*

After we make the fundamental vow to universally help all beings, we vow to eliminate our afflictions, the second of the four great vows.

While there are innumerable afflictions, the major ones are greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt about the sage's teachings. Falling prey to these afflictions, and many others, our minds and bodies are in a continuous state of agitation and self-absorption. Suffering from physical pain and mental distress, we are hardly in a state to help anyone.

So how do we change this? How do we end our afflictions?

We can begin by observing the precepts, foremost of which are no killing, stealing, and false speech. Our abiding by the precepts will lead to our attaining meditative concentration. In this calm, clear state, we will see things as they really are.

We can see how our energy-draining, time-consuming afflictions are holding us back from helping ourselves, but much more importantly, from helping others.

August 20

*Dharma doors are boundless;
I vow to master them all.*

The third of the great vows of Buddhas—mastering all the Dharma doors—is where most people want to start. This is understandable because, with so many wonderful teachings from the Buddha, it's understandable that people want to learn all they can.

But until we eliminate our afflictions, trying to absorb the various methods can become yet one more affliction.

Plus, we don't have time! Our goal here in samsara is to get to the Pure Land. ASAP. Once there, we'll have an infinite lifetime in which to learn all Dharma doors. With our remaining afflictions kept in check, we will, with our clear mind, be set to learn different methods without becoming confused or attached.

Different beings have diverse needs and capabilities. Mastering all Dharma doors will allow us to know and use the method best suited to every individual's level and inclination. And thus help fulfill the first vow.

August 21

*Buddhahood is unsurpassable;
I vow to attain it.*

The fourth vow of attaining the unsurpassable state of buddhahood is our ultimate goal. Only as a Buddha can we fulfill our first vow to help all sentient beings, regardless of their form, path, or state of mind. Only as a Buddha will our generosity, morality, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom finally be complete. Only as a Buddha will our compassion and wisdom be perfectly realized.

But to accomplish all these, it is crucial we follow the vows in the order given to us.

The first vow provides us with our motivation—we make the vow that we will help all beings end suffering and attain lasting happiness.

The second, third, and fourth vows provide our roadmap for ending afflictions, learning Dharma doors, and attaining buddhahood.

Our Daily Practice:

Without this roadmap, we will not know the necessary steps in which to progress, or even what direction we should head in.

With this roadmap to guide us, we will achieve all that we vow to do.

August 22

Chant the buddha-name.

No problem if you are not a Buddhist.

Chanting “Amitufo” is a form of meditation. It’s a way of calming our mind and controlling where it goes by focusing on a chosen object or idea. The primary aim of this form of meditation is to achieve the mental state of one-mind undisturbed, a state in which the mind concentrates solely on its meditative subject.

We chant “Amitufo” to focus our thoughts on an awakened being, a being who used to be like we unawakened beings but who has now achieved perfect wisdom and compassion.

We are not worshipping him. Just like when we meditate by concentrating on our in- and out-breaths, we aren’t worshipping our breaths. Or when listening intently to the sound of ocean waves, we aren’t worshipping the ocean.

In our chanting, we are focusing our thoughts on a being who possesses the virtues we wish to develop. So,

Our Daily Practice:

Buddhist or not, chant the buddha- name to develop these same virtues.

August 23

View obstacles as opportunities.

Imagine yourself writing on a computer when the electricity suddenly goes off and, too late, you realize you forgot to save the file. Or imagine answering the phone to find yourself on the line with a person who doesn't seem to need to stop for breath and whose non-stop conversation is amazingly absent of punctuation.

Do we groan in exasperation? Give in to anger? Wallow in self-pity?

How about declaring these two incidents as opportunities for practice! We may have lost our first draft, but start writing again, taking it as a refinement of what we had written. Listening calmly to our non-stop talker, we can let go of feelings of frustration and plant seeds of affability, not bitterness.

Viewing all our obstacles as opportunities comes from how we choose to react to life when things fail to go as we had hoped. A file is lost. Or our already busy day is interrupted. By responding calmly, we avoid old habits.

Our Daily Practice:

We then seize opportunities to form newer, more positive habits.

August 24

*When you see someone having a tough time,
do what you can to ease their suffering.*

Giving, one of the paramitas, comprises three basic categories. The third category—fearlessness—is relieving others' fearful feelings, which can range from a vague sense of unease to outright terror. Rarely will we find ourselves in a position to alleviate terror, but all around us anxieties abound.

From the overweight mailman who struggles to deliver a package to an upstairs flat to the mother trying to calm her crying child in a clinic's packed waiting room to the struggling freshman who just failed her exam. No, we can't change their situations. It's their karmic consequence. But rarely are they expecting us to.

What we can do is raise our heads out of our own tiring, frustrating, heart-wrenching traumas and see that we've got a lot of company. Having lugged heavy boxes up the stairs and failed our share of exams, we can sincerely appreciate what they're going through.

Our Daily Practice:

And we can forget our own concerns and spend a few minutes letting them know that we care about theirs.

August 25

*Procrastination is stagnation.
It's also a choice.*

We know a task awaits. We know because it's right in front of us, just lying there with no inclination to wander off in search of someone more responsive. There's no desire whatsoever to let us off the hook.

We all have reasons for putting things off. Basically, we don't want to do any of it. It wasn't our idea. We're busy with other things. We're tired. But we better find the energy or we're going to be lugging it around like Marley's ghost dragging his chains.

We need two things. (1) Inspiration. (2) Technique.

Technique is whatever works. For some, To-Do lists transform dreaded tasks into little bundles of joy. Ahh, the triumph of ticking off one more item! Some people have even been known to complete a task then add it to the list just to be able to check it off.

And the inspiration to get it all done? It comes from

Our Daily Practice:

experience: *The task is not leaving I'm tired of looking at it. And, gosh, what a wonderful relief when I finally get stuff done!*

August 26

*Constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha
is like always thinking of the person
we have fallen in love with.*

Remember the first time you fell in love?

You couldn't stop thinking about the person. You kept recalling past conversations. Imagining future ones. Wondering when you would see him next. Wanting so much to spend all your time with her. Essentially, thoughts of your loved one were ever present.

While you didn't go around murmuring your loved one's name all the time, that very existence touched every aspect of your life. One way or another, your thoughts kept magnetizing happily to that most important person. Nothing else seemed as important. You did your daily stuff but never lost that awareness of your loved one.

Well, this is what constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha is like. Yes, we regularly chant his name. But even when not chanting, he is always on our mind. Not because it's something we have to do.

Our Daily Practice:

But for the sheer happiness of always having him
with us.

August 27

*You know your cultivation is working when . . .
you laugh!*

Laughter! Surely, before Buddhism that would not have been your answer. Imagine the following in your kitchen.

Wanting to add another smidgen of almond milk to a dish, you vigorously shake the carton. And with that, the lid flies off. You immediately remember that after the last pour you did not cap it properly. The loosely placed cap cannot hold back the excited milk.

Liberated at last from its prison, the milk jubilantly makes a run for it! And in the briefest instant of time imaginable, you have almond milk on you, your clothes, the counter, and both upper and lower cabinets. Also, the milk's mad dash for freedom has landed it on an impressively extensive area of the kitchen floor (washed the day before) and, finally, down the front of the stove across the floor.

Surveying the scene, you do the only logical thing—you laugh.

Our Daily Practice:

It's heartening that test moments like these assure us that—yes—those years of cultivation are indeed paying off.

August 28

*The clarity we need to resolve a problem
is never found in anger.*

“Wait a minute. Won’t righteous outrage strengthen my resolve and provide the energy I need to remedy a bad situation?”

Sounds reasonable, but no. In our cultivation, we’re supposed to manage negative feelings by detecting when they arise and eliminating them.

“Okay then, what am I supposed to do when I’m tempted, and encouraged, to act on my righteous indignation?”

Recognize that under that need to act is seething and, at times, uncontrollable anger. The energy that comes from anger is blind—not insightful. It burns through good intentions and leaves us exhausted. Not the “something” we are looking for.

With insight, we will be able to better understand the karmic causality unfolding before us. And remind ourselves

Our Daily Practice:

that there's already too much anger in the world. Our adding more fuel to the fire won't fix anything. Only with a clear, rational mind will we discern the wisest way to react. And have the confidence to do what we know to be right.

August 29

*Everything in samsara
exists in a constant state of flux,
ever-changing, continuously moving.*

In our comfort with the known and our worries over the unknown, we often wish things, even though far from ideal, would just stay the way they are. But life has no pause button. We cannot stop things from changing.

For example, take in a deep breath and hold it. Do not let it out, do not exhale. How do you feel? In a matter of seconds, holding our breath becomes increasingly uncomfortable and then almost alarmingly so. At some point, we can't help but exhale and take our next breath.

Just as we cannot reasonably stop our breathing, there is no stopping change. Change is as natural as our inhaling and exhaling.

It might be helpful here to remind ourselves that change can be—and often is—for the better. An example? We can stop our habitual, harmful reactions to what we experience and replace those reactions with good ones.

Our Daily Practice:

Thus, change can indeed be positive.

August 30

Getting directions to Carnegie Hall.

Have you heard the one about a visitor to New York City who stopped a passerby and asked how to get to Carnegie Hall? The cheeky reply was “practice, practice, practice.” No one gets to any level of proficiency without practice, focused practice.

Consider mental afflictions and bad habits.

Doing away with them is never an easy thing. We can all testify to that. It takes hard work and sustained effort to lessen and eventually eliminate them. To accomplish this, we need daily teachings to remind us of the importance of our work, and to encourage us.

We also need reminders to not be enticed by situations and people who consistently elicit our repetitive, harmful reactions. Suitably equipped, we need to put everything into practice. The more we do something, the better we get at it.

And gradually, with “practice, practice, practice,” we

Our Daily Practice:

will remain calm in the face of situations that would have unsettled and waylaid us in the past.

August 31

*Nonviolence does not mean we do not react.
It means we do not react with more violence.*

In being nonviolent, we are not indifferent. We proactively engage in finding solutions to underlying problems. And most of the time, we're talking about everyday situations.

If a flicker of displeasure stirs within us when the phone rings or when someone interrupts us, that flicker is an ember for violence. It is a seed for future conflict, and we just planted it deep within us. It will combine with other such seeds and thanks to our nurturing them, they will grow stronger.

If we can manage to reduce this preoccupation with ourselves and what we are doing, this self-absorption, the barriers we erect between self and others will come down. We will realize that the underlying problem, which caused our ire to rise, was our viewing what we were doing as more important than the other person's activity.

Having found our underlying problem—self-absorp-

Our Daily Practice:

tion—we will be in a much better frame of mind to not have that flicker of displeasure the next time we are interrupted.

September 1

*Don't fret.
Just continue with your task at hand.*

One snowy winter day, while running water into a pitcher at the kitchen sink, I glanced out the living room patio door.

A car in the visitor's parking area across the road had its lights on. But the car itself did not appear to be running, and I couldn't see anyone inside. It was cold, about minus 20 degrees. It would only be a matter of time before the battery would go dead.

I also didn't recognize the car. And with three buildings surrounding the area, there were twelve possible apartments the driver might be visiting. Pondering this and realizing that there really wasn't anything I could do, I returned my attention to the pitcher. Which was overflowing!

Hastily turning off the water, I, yet again, reminded myself "Compassion, but no wisdom." It would have been

Our Daily Practice:

far better if I had realized more quickly that I couldn't do anything about the car and returned to my task at hand.

September 2

Do something for that person you're upset with.

In our cultivation, we need myriad tools to help us overcome obstacles. I used one on a recent visit with someone who, like me, forthrightly expresses her opinions.

On this occasion, she said something that was no longer true. Her comment was confusing because she was contradicting some facts I had just mentioned. She completely forgot what I had said earlier. Replaying in my mind all the nodding she did earlier, I was befuddled.

And admittedly somewhat miffed.

But then the unfortunate occasions when I was too opinionated flashed across my mind. This time I was determined not to repeat the hurt, not to cause her pain. Not wanting to embarrass or upset her, I remained silent.

And then, thinking of how easily our careless words can upset others, I apologized for the times that I had verbally irritated her. She graciously said she couldn't remember my having done so.

Our Daily Practice:

Wow! Instant pique dissipation.

All from considering the other person's feelings instead of my own. And apologizing.

September 3

*Sometimes,
proving that we're right isn't worth the price.
(Part 1)*

Once upon a time, a young couple was driving to the lakeside cabin where they were planning to spend their honeymoon. Approaching a junction in the road, the wife said, "We should turn left here to get to the other side of the lake."

The husband replied, "We could, but I was told that by turning right, we'd get there quicker."

She responded that surely going left was better.

With a hint of irritation, her husband retorted that no, he had even checked a map before they left. And his route was best.

"I'm sure I heard my sister say to turn left," she said.

"No! We need to turn right!" he retorted heatedly.

His wife was becoming upset. "I'm sure we go left."

Sensing her increasing unhappiness, he realized that

Our Daily Practice:

the direction didn't really matter. What mattered was the wonderful person next to him.

His face softened, and he said gently, "I'm sorry. You're correct. Left it is."

"Thank you," she said as she squeezed his hand.

September 4

*Sometimes,
proving that we're right isn't worth the price.
(Part 2)*

It is so easy to get caught up in daily discussions that we often don't consider their trifling nature. Does it really matter whether we turn right or left in a drive around the lake? And yet, in the midst of a disagreement, we lose sight of this. We feel compelled to set the other person straight. And fail to notice that in our attachment to our viewpoint, we're upsetting the other person.

What's the point of winning an argument at the cost of distressing someone we care about? Or anyone, for that matter.

What comfort will we find in being right when we contribute to another's distress? Or in our insistence, we cause their fears to increase, perhaps in their worry over making yet another mistake.

All this so that we can be right? The unhappiness we

Our Daily Practice:

will cause is pointless. Often, it's best not to tell others that they are wrong. And very often, we really don't need to show the world that we are right.

September 5

*The meditating mind:
like a petal floating downward
and settling gently on the ground.*

Imagine a blossom detaching from its tree to begin a seemingly effortless descent to the ground below. But just as the blossom starts its journey, it finds itself caught in a breeze swirling among the trees.

And so the blossom twirls upwards, dancing with newfound energy. As the breeze dies down, the blossom once again finds itself settling. Then, caught again by yet another breeze, it starts another pirouette. This goes on for a while, but finally it comes to rest on the ground.

This is our mind when we chant the buddha-name.

As we close our eyes and begin to settle our mind on “Amitufo,” wandering thoughts, breeze- or hurricane-like, carry it first one way and then another. As soon as our “Amitufo” again looks ready to settle, our mind is off again, seemingly beyond our control.

Our Daily Practice:

But just as the blossom eventually stills, with enough practice, our mind will likewise eventually become still.

September 6

“I know what you’re thinking.”

Actually, she doesn’t. And her summation of what she believed was in my head confirmed that.

But think about it. How can another person really know our thoughts?

Most of the time, we ourselves remain oblivious to our thoughts. And to further complicate things, our thoughts are so capricious, as are our volatile emotions. Hopefully, with progress in our cultivation we will become less judgmental. Not to mention, thank goodness, our growing realization that we don’t always need to be voicing our opinions.

Thus, while others may have some idea of what we were thinking, we’ve moved on. Our thoughts have moved on.

So when we converse with others, we too should give them the benefit of doubt—do not try to read things into their words and behavior. Voicing opinions is risky! We

Our Daily Practice:

could end up misleading those listening to us. And disquiet the one we're speaking on behalf of. Besides, it's really not our place—we're not their Communication Representative.

September 7

*“Since Amitabha is so compassionate,
why doesn’t he come
and take us to the Pure Land right now?”*

Just as Sakyamuni Buddha cannot enlighten us, Amitabha Buddha cannot whisk us away to the Pure Land just because we wish to go there.

Not even a Buddha can go against the natural law of cause and effect. We need to plant the seeds for something to happen, whether it’s getting a raise at work or being born in the Western Pure Land.

We create the cause for the latter by attaining, at a minimum, Constant Mindfulness of Amitabha through our buddha-name chanting. We also need to let go of our attachments. Wishing to be born in the Pure Land on its own is not enough, especially when we equally wish for a good job, a loving family, tasty food, etc. Our only attachment should be to “Amitufo”.

Until we let go of all worldly attachments and have an

Our Daily Practice:

attachment to only one thing—to “Amitufo”—we’re not ready to go to the Pure Land. And he cannot come to guide us there.

September 8

*Discriminatory seeds and habits
have been planted within each of us.
We need to remind ourselves of this before acting.*

We discriminate all the time.

Hearing or seeing something or someone, we instantly identify what we perceive with its accepted name or term. If we see a person, the familiar vocabulary imbedded in our store consciousness springs forward: male, female, tall, short.

In a flash, we move from recognition to assessing: attractive, talks too much, etc. Pigeonholing by skin color (followed by the identifier of “like me” or “not like me”), religion (followed by “same as mine” or “not mine”), education level, sexual orientation, nationality.

If, in our cultivation, we haven’t found much success in stopping our biased discriminating, we need to at least catch such thoughts before they lead to regrettable action.

Discriminating thoughts can be dangerous. Both to

Our Daily Practice:

others and ourselves. So as soon as we detect them, we need to halt. While still at the perception stage, we need to act appropriately, without discrimination.

September 9

*We need to stop overthinking life
and just do our tasks.*

What's happening in the news? Should I buy that work- related book my coworkers are talking about or borrow it from the library? Wait a minute, who left that pink flamingo float in the pond?

Enough! We're making our lives far too complicated.

Instead of focusing on what we need to, we allow an endless train of random, wandering thoughts to distract us. Like that silly pink float. Instead of being lured by, engrossed in, and held captive to endless distractions, we need to hold firm. And focus.

We need to stop and ask ourselves, *What is the best use of my time? What is my task, right now? Not my task next week, not my task tomorrow. Not even later today. What am I supposed to be doing here and now?*

It's not that things like what's happening in the world and at work don't matter. It's about when we focus on our tasks at the appropriate time, we'll handle them more efficiently.

Our Daily Practice:

And maybe even forget the pink flamingo float and end up with some time to read that important book.

September 10

*We don't have to know everything.
So relax.*

Being well informed—others seem to expect it of us, and we expect it of ourselves. News of the latest political crisis delivered to our smartphone, the final episode of a popular TV series, editorial opinions in the newspaper, local news on the radio. How did we get to this point? Who decided it was so crucial for us to know about, well, everything. And why do we buy into such thinking?

Yes, we need to know enough about our world to remain aware of the things directly affecting us and those we're responsible for.

But why spend valuable time and energy on the things that don't affect us or that we have no influence over? Why do we feel we need to offer an opinion on whatever people are talking about? Is it due to not wanting to appear ignorant? Or are we trying to fit in? Or trying to be helpful?

Whatever the reason, being smitten by (perhaps

Our Daily Practice:

addicted to) constant updates steals our time and wastes our energy.

As Nancy Reagan advised: “Just say no.”

September 11

*Strength is not controlling others,
but controlling oneself.*

It's not hard to be a bully. You just tell yourself that you're smarter, bigger, more capable than others. So cloaked, you now lord it over everyone. You stride to the front of the line, pushing aside those in your way. Dismissive of other's views, you demean their ideas while your minions praise yours.

Bullies think that they're strong and powerful, towering over their targets who cringe in fear of the next tirade, or worse. But bullies are so wrong. Strength isn't the ability to make others cower in fear and submission. It isn't about creating havoc by turning moral standards upside down.

Strength is holding steadfast to moral codes when others are dismissing them. It's standing firm in the face of temptations and using our influence to do good, not harm. It's admitting we need help one moment and, in the next, seamlessly offering a helping hand to those in need.

Our Daily Practice:

True strength is an inner virtue, not an external spectacle.

September 12

*View inner impulses with the same apprehension
that you do with a bossy person.*

When someone tries to boss us around we invariably resist. *Who does she think she is? He's got a nerve telling me what I should do.* And so we dig in our heels and refuse to listen to their bossy advice. We can make our own decisions, thank you very much.

But what about our own whims? Any advice needed with them?

For example: past conversations. What is it that compels us to replay them in our minds? Verbal disagreements: what compels us to argue with someone in the first place? More-than-one syndrome: the imported chocolates, courtesy of a friend, beckoning to us. A good reason to enjoy one. Delicious! Then we feel compelled to eat another. After the third one, guilty thoughts arise and our delight turns into embarrassment. We blame our lack of willpower.

Our Daily Practice:

Just as we now resist being dictated by the apparent whims of others, we need to develop the control to not be dictated by our own whims and impulses.

September 13

*“Don’t be too quick.
You never know
what the next one will be like.”*

Years ago, a wise woman told me about a time in her life when she was much younger. As with many married couples, she and her husband found themselves going through a difficult time. They were increasingly at odds with one another. Unsure of what to do, the woman went to her mother and admitted her growing unhappiness. She was even considering divorce.

Her mother replied, “Think—don’t rush. You have no idea what the next one will be like.”

With her mother’s sobering advice in her mind, the young wife went home to her husband. They remained married—happily, as it turned out—for over fifty years until his passing. She missed him every day until she too passed away.

Like that bride, we also run into situations where we

Our Daily Practice:

might just find it easier to throw up our hands and quit. When deciding what to do, it can be helpful to remember this: “You have no idea what the next one will be like.”

September 14

*Even in the face of accidents,
there is choice.*

Once, after I had spoken about choices, a man asked about his friend who survived a horrific accident. To save the friend's life, the doctors had to amputate her legs. He asked, where was her choice? The accident was just that, an accident.

It was followed by more suffering—the myriad emotions and thoughts that had to be assailing her every moment. Perhaps anger at the driver of the other car. Perhaps anger at herself for not having done something differently. Perhaps an anguished *Why me?* or *If only!*

I told him that at some point, when her shock and initial reactions ease, when she gradually stops reacting angrily or numbly to her loss, this friend will, hopefully, come to realize that she has choices. One choice involves holding on to the suffering, which could go on for years. The other involves a realization of what is at stake here. And asking “What fresh path to move on to?”

Our Daily Practice:

Pain is an integral part of life here in samsara; suffering our reaction to it.

Choice determines how long and deeply we will suffer from our pain.

September 15

Compassion is aspiring to help all beings.

Wisdom is knowing how to help.

If, when empathizing with other's suffering, we feel overwhelmed, we may reassure ourselves that at least we're being compassionate. But even with good intentions, when we fail to employ wisdom, our efforts to help will likely prove ineffective and lead to our feeling disappointed and frustrated.

What we ordinary beings have yet to realize and thus so far failed to remedy, is that we invariably act from emotions. Rather than from wisdom. Oh, what tangled webs of emotion we weave. They overwhelm us to the point that not only are we unable to help others, we make things worse.

We may have empathy, but can we help others in a substantial way?

Will they be any closer to ending their suffering?

In our practice, instead of reacting blindly from

Our Daily Practice:

emotions, we need to temper our compassion with wisdom. When we do this, we can begin to truly ease not just our own suffering but that of others as well.

September 16

*Reasons we are reborn as a family:
kindness, revenge, and debts.*

The causes of affinity are manifold. The Buddha grouped them into four categories: to repay kindness, to exact revenge, to collect a debt, and to repay a debt. If a particular affinity is powerful, we'll be reborn in the same family. If lighter, as friends. Lighter still? Then we'll interact to some degree.

Say we had been kind to someone in past lifetimes, this person could now be in our family to repay that kindness. When we encounter trouble, she is the one helping us wholeheartedly.

What if we had been unkind? We will have a person who dislikes us, so often insulting and even slandering us. He has come for revenge.

If the person defrauds or robs us of our money or belongings, she is collecting a debt.

If someone helps us make money so that we become well off financially, he is repaying a debt.

Our Daily Practice:

Examples of cause and effect for the four basic kinds of affinities are numerous, but we can appreciate the general idea—we need to nurture good relationships and resolve enmities.

September 17

*Often, others often see
the benefits of our practicing Buddhism
before we do.*

Before becoming a nun, I would take my mother and her friend Ruth to run errands. When Ruth asked if I had changed since becoming a Buddhist, my mother told her how I seemed much happier. And more patient. She continued at some length, talking about how much calmer I was, how much easier I was to get along with. Much more patient.

Finally, I interjected, “I couldn’t have been that bad before!” (But apparently, I was.) We laughed, and they moved on to another subject.

I have come to realize that we may well not be the best judge of whether we are making progress. Maybe we’re expecting, or hoping for, a dramatic change. Maybe we’re being too hard on ourselves to be able to judge impartially. Those who know us well will happily notice that we’re more at ease with others and more enjoyable to be with.

Our Daily Practice:

So if we want to know if we are making any progress, it might be better to ask those who know us well. Just be prepared for the answer!

September 18

*“If many beings have been born in the Pure Land
and they have vowed to help us,
where are they?”*

They could be here already! They just don't walk up and say “Hi, I'm from the Pure Land, and I'm here to help you.” We wouldn't believe them! Remember the story of a man who drowned and went to heaven?

This man asked God why God hadn't saved him from drowning. God asked if he remembered the farmer who came by in a boat. The farmer offered to rescue him but he declined, saying he was waiting for God. “That was me,” God said. “But you refused my help because you were waiting for God.”

Like that man, we have preconceived ideas of how awakened beings will help us. So we're not aware of true help when we see it. It comes from those who humbly work to build a center. From the cooks who prepare the meals at a retreat so we can chant in the cultivation hall. From the

Our Daily Practice:

master who spends hours trying to find the right words to help his students understand the teachings.

Our help is here already. We just need to open our hearts and minds to see it.

September 19

“Too old to learn; just be good.”

One day at a Buddhist center, while helping a monk carry some supplies to another building, he asked my age. Such a question in Chinese culture is not at all rude, even if we had just met. Knowing another person's age helps determine how to treat the person. Those who are younger treat those who are older with the proper respect.

In response to his query, I replied, “Forty-eight.”

He considered my answer for a moment, and responded earnestly, “Too old to learn. Just be good.”

Over the years, people have reacted differently to this “too old to learn” comment. I didn't question or get upset over the first part. Perhaps it was the way he said it. Perhaps it was my growing familiarity with this question. Somehow, I just zoomed in on that last bit. Such a simple instruction: Just be good. That's all we have to do.

We don't need to complicate our practice.

Don't need to study a vast array of sutras and commentaries.

Our Daily Practice:

Just learn one sutra.

Just chant one Buddha's name.

Just be good.

September 20

Change.
Impermanence.
Nothing lasts forever.

Life is a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, a flash of lightning, a drop of dew.” We know this, and so when the time comes, we try to push out of our minds the thought that a loved one is dying. Except that it doesn’t work. We’re attached and we cannot let go. We cannot bear the thought that one day soon we will lose her.

But it happens, and on that most terrible day our world drops away from below us. Totally in shock and numbed, we are adrift. No longer with an option to push reality away, we come face-to-face with impermanence. We are alone. We are in pain. We suffer.

Lifetime after lifetime, we have clung very tightly to our attachments. We know the reality, yet refuse to accept it. We prefer to live in ignorance, ensnared by our emotions and mired in our habits.

Our Daily Practice:

This will continue into an endless future unless we change. We need to awaken.

Now.

September 21

*Thoughts can transform in an instant.
Hopefully in the right direction.*

Imagine rushing to the library with an armful of books, coffee in one hand, purse slung over your shoulder. Suddenly, somebody bumps into you from behind. Arms flailing, you manage to retain your balance, but your books go flying, your coffee cup ends up on the ground, next to your gaping purse, its contents all over the sidewalk. Whirling around to yell at the person who caused this disaster, you manage to catch yourself before you blurt out a scolding.

In front of you, an elderly woman lies sprawled on the ground. She's murmuring to herself, "I'm so clumsy!"

In an instant, you're at her side, "Are you alright? Did you hurt yourself? Can I help you up?"

If we could see the pain and suffering of others, and their self-recrimination and embarrassment this clearly, we would be much less inclined to allow our irritation and

Our Daily Practice:

anger to arise. We would try to find out if others are hurt.
If they need help.

And if we can provide that help.

September 22

*The peaceful environment we seek
can be found wherever we are,
even in a busy city.*

How? By replacing all those pesky bad habits that we tend to indulge in! Like being easily distracted and desirous of new experiences. Being gregarious and seeking others' company. Or being lazy and following wherever our wandering thoughts happen to lead us.

By changing these, we can reduce our mental clutter. When in a car or on a train, don't look at billboards. They're designed to elicit our cravings and emotions.

At work, spend less time chatting and gossiping.

At home, turn the TV off. Programs and movies are made to keep our adrenaline pumping and are interspersed with frequent commercials to have us discover something we can't live without.

On the Internet, check what is needed but don't get carried away, aimlessly clicking the headlines or surfing.

Our Daily Practice:

So many of the distractions in our lives are what we invite in. Instead, we can quiet the mental clutter and begin to create that calm, peaceful world right where we are—even in a city.

September 23

Every thought is important.

What a delightfully quiet day! There's lots of work for me to do, but no emergencies popping up in my inbox. An occasional car passes by, but mainly I hear various birds chirping and the seasonal flocks of Canada geese discussing flight plans while flying overhead. No noise to distract me. So, it's a good day to work.

But with all the quiet (there's always a but), I've been noticing my thoughts. And they haven't been as admirable as I'd prefer them to be. Nothing too serious. A touch of sarcasm here (when I was trying for wit). A sprinkling of fleeting thoughts there. Of self-satisfaction. Others of frustration. Like I said —nothing overly serious.

But if such thoughts arise on a good day, little wonder we think the things we do on bad days! The problem on those days is that we fail to notice what we're thinking until it's too late.

So now is an excellent time to practice—when life is

Our Daily Practice:

peaceful and I can catch and correct myself. Hopefully, I'll prove better at it on more challenging days.

September 24

Good luck? Maybe.

Bad luck? Maybe.

Once upon a time, a peasant had a horse. When the horse ran away, the peasant's neighbors came to console him for his bad luck. He answered, "Maybe."

The next day, the horse came back and with it, six wild horses. The neighbors came to congratulate him on such good luck. The peasant said, "Maybe."

The day after, his son tried to ride one of the wild horses. But he was thrown off and broke his leg. Once again, the neighbors shared his misfortune. The peasant said, "Maybe."

The day after, soldiers came to conscript the youth of the village. Because of his son's broken leg the soldiers passed him over. When the neighbors came to congratulate him on his good fortune, the peasant said again, "Maybe."

As we see in this story, good luck and bad luck are ever changing, like two sides of a coin flipping back and forth.

Our Daily Practice:

Whatever we encounter, we need to view it with equanimity, not judge it, and accept it with flexibility.

September 25

*To savor something new,
we need to let go of the old.*

Picture in your mind a cup filled with tea. It's your favorite Earl Grey. But today, you feel like trying another tea, one that a friend is raving over, the Dragon Pearl Jasmine. Both teas are really good, but you experiment. You mix them together. The result? A very strange tasting brew.

Learning Buddhism is like this.

If we try to take in new teachings when our "cup" already holds another, the diverse teachings will become muddled. We'll end up trying to combine different forms of meditation and find that we cannot master any of them. Study different teachings and we'll find that while both have the same goal, we need to take different paths to reach it. Listen to different teachers and we'll get confused with teachings explained in different ways. Even when equally good, the practice and the teachings lose their potency when combined.

Our Daily Practice:

Sometimes, we need to clean the cup—let go of former ideas and notions—to purely appreciate that which is new.

September 26

We don't wake up in the morning thinking that we're going to be selfish and inconsiderate today.

And yet throughout the day, we act selfishly in so many ways. We don't answer a coworker's email, although we know he's waiting for our response. We postpone a trip to the library to return a best seller, a popular book with readers. We go shopping with one friend forgetting that we had told another we'd go with her.

Here's another thought we don't wake up with: *I'm going to make someone suffer today.*

And yet, that's what we often do. We turn up the air conditioning to stay comfortable. But cooling ourselves this way contributes to global warming. This causes soil erosion on the other side of the world. Worried farmers are told that global warming is the culprit, but they have no means to stop it.

We tend busily to our affairs and forget our friend in the nursing home who enjoys such visits.

Our Daily Practice:

We get trapped by our habits, our personal inertia, our wish for personal comfort. We don't mean to be selfish or unkind. But too often, we end up being so.

September 27

*Lacking understanding in our practice,
we're just going through the motions.*

One evening, a man was watching his wife prepare an eggplant for their dinner. Watching her cut off the end of the eggplant and then throwing it away, he asked her why she did so. She replied it was the way her mother had always fixed egg-plant.

His curiosity growing, he suggested that they call her mother to find out the reason. When they called her mother, she replied that it was the way her mother had always fixed eggplant.

Growing increasingly perplexed, the husband suggested that they call Grandma in an attempt to figure out the reason behind what has apparently become a family tradition. When they asked, Grandma replied that the reason was simple—not having a large enough pan, she cut off the end of the egg-plant to make it fit.

If we want to truly benefit from our practice, we need

Our Daily Practice:

to understand the principles—and reasons—behind what we do. Otherwise, we might just be going through the motions.

September 28

*“Not be attached?
But I’d feel detached!”*

Buddhism teaches non-attachment, not detachment. Detachment is unresponsive and devoid of emotions. Non-attachment, however, allows us to experience emotions while not becoming trapped by them. While non-attached, we still care. But in caring, we don’t discriminate—feeling love for one person and antipathy for another. While non-attached, we also let go of worries and expectations. Fully engaged in what we do, we realize our actions are all we control.

As Master Kuang-ch’in said, “Non-attachment does not mean indifference or carelessness, but rather you should do your best and not worry about the results.”

Neither do we detach from our body. We wisely realize that it’s not permanent, not our true self. It’s a temporary dwelling for this lifetime. In taking care of it, we seek a balance between asceticism and hedonism.

Our Daily Practice:

Those I know who are non-attached are some of the most engaged, hard-working, and cheerful people I know. They're a joy to be around. Just thinking of them makes me smile.

September 29

*“In the face of war, social injustice,
religious conflict, what difference can I make?
Can I even make an impact?
The odds are overwhelming. It's pointless.”*

Frankly, what matters is that we do what is right, simply because that's what it is—right. We refrain from striking another person not because we expect that action will lead to the end of violence, but because not hitting another person is the right thing to do.

We refrain from lying to our spouse or partner not because we think our actions will convince others to be honest, but because being truthful in any relationship is the right way to behave.

We do not ignore a customer because of the color of his skin or the way he speaks. Treating all people equally and with respect is the right way to interact with others.

We refrain from wrongdoing because even if no one will know of the wrong we do—and even if our right

Our Daily Practice:

actions have absolutely no effect on others—doing something wrong is just plain wrong.

And so, we do what is right.

September 30

*There's no need to fuss.
Everything is "perfect."*

This phrase doesn't mean our day is wonderful and requires scant improvement. (Nor does it mean the speaker lives in an alternate universe.) The phrase means that everything has transpired precisely the way it was supposed to.

Three unexpected projects dumped on your desk by a vacation-bound supervisor? Perfect!

Your name added to the updated volunteer list after you had notified the group of your future unavailability? Perfect as well.

The perfect outcome isn't the fantastic one we imagined, but the one that was supposed to happen. There's no point fussing over how things can be different. If they are to be different, they will be. But none of that is happening. Let's accept reality and quit wasting time and energy on our disappointment.

Our Daily Practice:

Instead, tell yourself “It’s perfect!”

Thankfully, most things happening in our lives can indeed become more bearable, and sometimes even humorous, when we summon forth our newfound motto.

October 1

“Take the elevator, it’s much quicker.”

Imagine you’ve left your small village to learn how to help others. Exhausted after days of walking, you see an incredibly high building on the horizon. In awe, you finally reach it and are greeted by a kind gentleman who offers you much needed food and water.

“What’s at the top of the building?”

He replies that it is a glorious place, for it has none of the sufferings your land does. He invites you to move in.

“How?” you ask.

He explains there are stairs, but they take a very long time. Pointing to a door, he says that the elevator will instead whisk you to the top. The stairs look safe to you, but what about his magical-sounding “elevator?” You wonder, *What if it doesn’t work as promised? Wouldn’t the stairs be safer?*

Some Pure Land newcomers face this predicament because they doubt quick fixes. But sometimes, we need to

Our Daily Practice:

trust those who have already helped us greatly. Questioning the efficacy of the Pure Land method will result in not only our continued suffering but also the suffering of those back home whom we vowed to help.

October 2

Fill the silence—with silence.

Many years ago, I avidly devoured Tony Hillerman's Jim Chee mysteries.

I remember a story about an experienced policeman saying that when he questions suspects, he will just remain quiet. Unable to take the silence, most would start talking. And what the police needed to learn would soon be divulged.

How embarrassingly true!

What is it about silence that so many people find so uncomfortable? It's as bad as putting a compulsively neat person in a messy room with "Don't Touch Anything" signs. The room will surely be organized in record-time. Likewise, a compulsive talker just needs to do his thing: fill the room with audio clutter.

Just because someone else isn't talking is not an invitation for us to fill the airwaves with whatever comes to mind. Does the other person really want to hear about our

Our Daily Practice:

childhood, past relationships, health status? We may deem them important or interesting. But most likely, they're not really worth sharing with one and all.

October 3

*Affinities, and love,
can span many lifetimes.*

One morning, on a spring day in 2004, I opened my window blinds, sat down at my desk, and glanced out at the lawn and beyond. I saw a tiny bunny, several yards away, hovering over the body of a larger rabbit. Apparently, this rabbit had died in a slight indentation in the lawn.

Throughout the day, I saw the young bunny race back and forth across the grass, chasing away a large bird that was trying to get at the dead rabbit. When not chasing the bird, the bunny bit off mouthfuls of the tall grass, returned to the rabbit, and placed the grass over the body. The process took considerable time, for the bunny also had to keep chasing off the bird. It was still trying to fend off the bird when I shut my window blinds that evening.

On another morning, this one in the spring of 2005, I saw a grown rabbit hop straight to where the other rabbit had been buried. The rabbit rearranged what remained of

the still discernible mound of grass and then hopped back the way it had come from around the side of the building. I did not see the rabbit in 2006 or 2007 as I was working elsewhere.

Then in 2008, late one Monday night, I returned to the US after two months in Australia. The next day was my first morning in about eighteen months to work at my old spot in front of the window. The thick grass outside the window was due for the weekly cutting. But I could see the spot where the rabbit had died for the “burial mound” was still discernible.

As I watched, I saw a rabbit come around from the side of the building and go straight to the spot. It remained there for a few seconds and hopped a few feet away. Then it went straight back to the spot, rearranged some of the dead grass, paused a few seconds, and returned the way it had come from around the side of the building.

Affinities span many lifetimes. They do not involve just human beings. And just as humans can be filial children and seek to repay kindness and love, other creatures can as well.

October 4

Transform enemies into friends.

It starts with what we tell ourselves. Out with negative chatter, in with positive self-talk. When next with the person who irritates us, look for something he does that's kind. Ignore how you feel about him. Just focus on that kind behavior.

That's your first "turn."

It enables you to react positively to him, which will be imprinted in his store consciousness. If there's no change in him, try again. Don't just throw up your hands and quit. Focus on that kindness. At some point, those Kind-reaction Seeds in his consciousness will mature. By planting dozens of seeds instead of only one, your odds for growing flowers improve.

As you're casting seeds in his consciousness and planting them in your own, remember, all you can control is your own thoughts and emotions.

Just as you toss in a few flower seeds into his sadly

Our Daily Practice:

barren yard when you walk by, in hopes that they will bring him happiness, you should also nurture your own. You'll grow a beautiful garden.

After seeing it, he may just want one too.

October 5

*Lost opportunities
have the power to haunt.*

Some years ago, a woman related something that happened when her daughter was young.

While checking out in a grocery store, she heard the woman at the next register saying she did not have enough money to pay for all her groceries. Planning how she was going to get her daughter and her own groceries to her car, the young mother realized—too late—that if she had not been so self-absorbed, she could have offered to help pay for the other woman's groceries.

Years later, her oversight still haunts her. That young mother is now a loving grandmother, thoughtful of everyone she encounters. Like all of us, she has regrets. One of them is how years before, failing to notice what was happening in someone else's life, she missed the opportunity to provide assistance.

How easy it is for each of us to become so preoccupied

Our Daily Practice:

with our own lives that we fail to notice situations in the lives of others.

And so, not paying attention, we miss an opportunity to do good.

October 6

A Caregiver's Good Fortune

Being a caregiver can be exhausting and frustrating. The hours are long and the work often lonely. With their freedom diminished, caregivers can feel trapped by circumstances that they cannot control. The person they care for may well have a condition from which he or she will not recover.

So the caregiver has to often handle growing feelings of impending loss and the resultant grief. Uncertainty and fear are given constants. A caregiver—even one who starts out with love and enthusiasm—can begin to feel overwhelmed, saddened, and powerless.

But even in this most challenging situation, there can be joy and gratitude.

How often have we heard someone say, after the death of a loved one, “I thought I had more time.” Thinking that, the person didn’t get around to visiting or even to calling very often. There were other things to do. An

urgent project at work, a weekend away with friends, daily tasks to be done. And, after all, there was enough time.

But then suddenly one day, it was too late. There was no more time.

No more time to go over photos together and hear the family stories again. No more time for visits on a cold winter night with a cup of tea and “Remember when . . .?” moments. No chance to look into the loved one’s eyes and to thank them, and for them to smile and say “Thank you” back. No more time for joy and gratitude. But much time for regret.

And the caregiver?

The caregiver had time aplenty! So many ways to say “Thank you.” So much time to share that cup of tea. So many opportunities to hug a parent or a spouse and say “I want to do this” and “I’m not going to leave you.”

So many ways to wordlessly say “Don’t be afraid. I’m here.” So much time for the unexpected silliness and the shared laughter. So many wonderful memories.

And much less need for regret.

October 7

*“But I want to help people now,
not sometime in the future.”*

Upon learning that our primary goal is to seek birth in the Pure Land in this lifetime and come back to help people afterward, we might protest “I want to help now!” While our wish is admirable, our abilities are limited. And so in trying to help, our efforts can prove mistake ridden and clumsy. We realize there isn’t much we can do to help others. A further complication is that our life can end at any moment.

As someone recently said, “If we don’t attain birth in our current lifetime—what a waste.”

To not waste this life, we need to focus. How?

We can ask ourselves: *What is my ultimate goal? How much time will I devote to my practice and learning? Will this be enough to accomplish my goal? Am I honestly doing everything I can to progress? What inspires me to practice or study when I’d rather do something else? What is the one book or recorded talk that I can really get into by listening to or reading regularly?*

Our Daily Practice:

And perhaps the ultimate question: *How much time do I have left in this lifetime?*

October 8

Recognize wandering thoughts for what they are—distractions.

We are working on an overdue project, one that requires concentration. But it's also close to lunchtime.

Up pops an image of a veggie burger and salad. We may well smile and congratulate ourselves on having decided what to eat, but those thoughts are distractions that break our concentration.

Or maybe we're chanting "Amitufo" at a Pure Land center and remember that we need to stop by a store on the way home and get a birthday present for a friend. Maybe that book she wants? Yes, this too is a distraction—thinking about where to get that present as opposed to chanting.

If we're busy with one task and our thoughts stray elsewhere, then our original train of thought is broken. These wandering thoughts distract us. It will take time to get back into what we were previously doing. That's time wasted. No matter how brilliant a distracting idea, that's what it is—a distraction.

Our Daily Practice:

So think this way: wandering thoughts equals distractions.

October 9

*I know what I'm doing.
It's the other person who doesn't.*

I had been staying at one of our centers when the day turned rainy. Close to lunchtime, people began arriving via the long walkway.

I noticed a young woman who was holding an umbrella and wearing flip-flops. *She'll get her feet wet. And maybe catch a cold with this chilly wind!*

I was thinking this when I remembered that I too had worn sandals to lunch. But I had good reason! *I just need to go a few paces until I'm under the awning. Just a few feet.* So I was entirely justified. She's not.

Thank goodness, all this silliness only lasted a few seconds before I caught myself. Regrettably, we perform such fault-finding comparisons all the time. We act in a similar manner, but our own behavior is justified. *I have a good reason, he doesn't. I know what I'm doing, she does not.*

And so we observe, differentiate, critique, and judge.

Our Daily Practice:

Imagine how much more pleasant it would be just to observe and stop there. Or at least observe and conclude something pleasant.

As in, *great hot pink flip-flops!*

October 10

Another chance.

Think of a person, now deceased, whom you had loved more than anyone else in your life.

Think of all the things you wish you could have done for her or said to him. All the times you could have been more patient. Been more attuned to that special person's unspoken needs and wishes. More concerned with their happiness and how to bring it about. More aware of their sadness and how to ease it.

Now think of all the things you did right, but just not often enough. Immersed in this back-and-forth roller-coaster of love and regret, look around you.

In our uncountable lifetimes, we have loved innumerable beings just as much. Missed them just as intensely. So many who we wished with our all heart we had done more for.

Our current loved one is no longer with us but others are still here. The next time you have negative thoughts of

Our Daily Practice:

the person you are with, remember your special one. What emerges is the pain of regret, of words and deeds unfinished. You wish you had done more.

With the one in front of you, you still can.

October 11

*Upon realizing
we have done something wrong.*

First, we don't want to get mired in remorse over what we did. Doing so, we won't move on. We'll stay stuck, brooding over what we did. We want to regret our actions and look at regret in a positive way, recognizing that our actions were civilly, morally, or even legally wrong.

We can remind ourselves that not feeling regret would be a problem because we wouldn't have the motivation to reform. This will help us view our regret as a helpful warning of what we need to change in order to avoid doing something worse in the future.

With this mindset, we can begin to move on by considering the underlying reason we acted as we did and then determine how we can better respond in the future. Instead of letting regret weigh us down, it can help us be the person we want to be.

Calm—not worried about having acted wrongly.

Our Daily Practice:

Relaxed—not filled with anger at perceived injustices.

Empathetic—understanding that just as we do things we regret, so do others.

Optimistic—knowing that the past is just that and how our focus now is on creating a better future.

October 12

Aspirations?
Or expectations?

Aspirations are our wish to achieve things. Expectations are the belief that something will happen.

Aspirations involve what happens inside us. Arising from within, they require action on our part. *I aspire to help others. I aspire to be a more understanding person. I aspire to enjoy the day whether the sun shines or the rain pours down.*

Expectations often involve what happens outside us. *I expect others to appreciate my help, my partner to agree with my dinner plans, the sun to shine while the rain holds off.*

Aspirations show our higher goals. *I aspire to be more patient, to spend more time with my children, to be a model of goodness, to meet my parent's ideals for me.*

Expectations are more ordinary. Because expectations often involve others, outcomes are unpredictable, which invariably translates to unhappiness.

An aspiration is a wish that I act on, but an expectation

Our Daily Practice:

can depend on others to perform or a situation to unfold as I want. Expectations often bind us to disappointment.

Aspirations enable us to soar.

October 13

*Contentment is born of the ability
to laugh at oneself unaffectedly.*

If we laugh at ourselves first, then others won't. Instead, they'll be laughing with us. This way we will be eliminating duality—no *me* and no *other*.

We'll be eliminating egoism—*I am an important person who does not make mistakes. And even if I did, no one would dare laugh at me!*

We'll be giving fearlessness—giving another person the okay to smile without the fear of hurting our feelings or embarrassing us. And we'll be giving ourselves fearlessness too, by realizing that many things we deem meaningful really aren't. Like pride. Expectations of not making mistakes. Exaggeration of status. These are false measures of a person's worth.

What matters is that we try to do something as best we can and then see what happens. Made a mistake? Rarely is it life-threatening. If we can forgo self-recrimination—and

Our Daily Practice:

maybe even find some humor in what happened—we'll be in a better frame of mind to figure out how to not repeat the mistake.

October 14

*Reminder to self:
Laziness leads us to places
we don't want to go.*

Thanks to our laziness in everyday situations, and to our resultant failure to do what we are supposed to, we frustrate others. In our practice, laziness ends up with us feeling guilty or maybe even defeated. Instead of doing what we should do to transcend samsara, we're wasting time in wandering thoughts and pointless activities.

Here we are, in one of those unbelievably rare lifetimes where we encounter the Dharma and all the right conditions to be able to practice, and what do we do? We binge-watch a TV series. We text. Incessantly. We tell ourselves we have plenty of time. We'll chant tonight. Listen to that Dharma talk tomorrow. We do what is easy or pleasurable, not what is wise. We give ourselves excuses. We're lazy.

And we do ourselves an incredible disservice by failing to take advantage of this rarest of opportunities. Thus,

Our Daily Practice:

with others and ourselves, in matters small and large, laziness gets us into unimaginable trouble and does us great harm.

October 15

*When we jump to conclusions,
we invariably land in the wrong place.*

Having taken my seat on the airplane, I noticed the interaction between the two people seated in front of me. Something they said made me smile. A smile that, unbeknownst to me, was noticed by the woman coming down the aisle.

“That’s right, laugh at me!”

The voice was plainly upset. *Whoa*, I said to myself. Turning immediately to the direction of the outburst, I saw a woman struggling with her carry-on bag and a seriously cumbersome personal item. I can only imagine that she was frustrated with—and embarrassed by—having to wrestle with her belongings in full view of those already seated.

My thoughts had been on the couple in front of me, but my smile was perceived as happening in regards to something very different. And so, a coincidental smile had

Our Daily Practice:

left a harried fellow passenger steaming. In her awkward position along the narrow aisle, she quickly concluded that I was laughing at her. Which, sadly, only increased her misery.

October 16

*How can anger be real when in an instant
— “Poof”—
it’s gone.*

Living in a residential area, I found the oversized truck parked periodically in the guest parking area to be seriously annoying. *That’s against the rules! Not a business area! Plus, it sticks out into the driveway!*

Then one day, walking to my building, I heard a “Hello there!” It came from the smiling man approaching me from the next building.

“Can I help you with that box?” I declined his thoughtful offer, but we got to talking. A friendly conversation on a pleasant sunny day.

Then he said it: “That’s my truck.”

My expression must have reflected my feelings for the looming vehicle, because he quickly added, “I don’t know where else to park it when I visit!”

He was sincerely distressed. And poof, my anger was

Our Daily Practice:

gone. That quickly! That's how insubstantial it had been. And how quickly we can change our thoughts when we understand a situation and quit spinning silly tales based on preconceived, erroneous opinions.

Now . . . what else can I poof into oblivion?

October 17

*Self-sacrifice and selfless behavior
aren't just for the big things in life.*

Years ago, a friend shared with me a special moment that happened at his church. With a minister who was appreciated for his inspiring and passionate sermons, the popular church had grown to become one of the largest in the area.

One spring day, when the church was filled with several hundred people, the minister completed his closing words and looked out over the congregation. He paused to gather his thoughts and then began to speak.

“I have been talking to you today about compassion. About putting the needs of others before our own. Of even sacrificing our personal happiness for that of others. Over the years, as I watch you all get into your cars and depart, I realize my pleas for humility and self-sacrifice may not be the first things on the minds of busy people. But today, could you please—just as far as the parking lot—do not determine to be among the first to leave!”

Our Daily Practice:

Sometimes it's the little things that provide the most memorable lessons.

October 18

*We have a responsibility to act on our own
and not wait for instructions on what to do.*

While it can be tempting to leave everything up to someone else, especially someone who is knowledgeable and whom we respect, we still remain responsible for our own behavior. And it is our responsibility to do what is right even when initially we feel unsure just what right is.

As long as we remain part of this world, it is our responsibility to be informed. To understand the phenomena that we interact with. And then apply the ethical principles that we have learned to decide whether or not to do something. And, if yes, then how best to proceed.

This is why we study and examine those principles—to be able to use fundamental truths (for example, do no harm) in new situations. But if we remain uninformed, we will remain oblivious to the harm we perpetrate. So we cannot wait for someone to hand us instructions for every

Our Daily Practice:

situation we encounter. We need to educate ourselves and determine how best to act.

October 19

*What to do
when everything we say is irritating.*

You and another person have been friends for years. Many times laughing about silly things, at times pensive over others. But things have changed. The easy banter has morphed into occasions where you irritate the other person. You've tried being careful with every word. But it's exhausting.

And so you begin to avoid the person. Many of us have been there. And we begin to wonder why. We ask ourselves, have we been the irritant? The culprit? Hopefully not. Then, is the other person irritating us, slowly enough not to be so noticeable? Yes? Then we need to get to the root of it and figure out what to do.

Was it over a minor incident? Hardly seems worth ruining a friendship over. A major incident? It sounds like a discussion is needed for both our sakes. Or perhaps the person is going through a difficult time, and it's nothing to do with the friendship.

Our Daily Practice:

So instead of conjuring up all sorts of personal wrongdoing, why not just ask the other person if everything is alright.

October 20

*Even advice from those who irritate us
can be valid.*

Hopefully, we have someone whom we have an unusually good affinity with. We respect and trust this person so much that when she corrects us, we just say “Oh, okay.” And then we calmly do as she recommends. No fuss. No arguing.

We simply accept the advice and act on it because she knows us and cares about us, and offers her words in a non-emotional, non-confrontational way. And if it comes with critique, it is easy to accept.

Unfortunately, there are those we share a weak affinity with and whom we trust only minimally. So when he criticizes us, we bristle with irritation. We may not even utter a reply.

Such defensive stances are typical for us still stuck here in samsara. But maybe, just maybe, he has valid points, helpful ones. While he may not have our best interests at

Our Daily Practice:

heart, he may nonetheless be observing the situation clearly.

We need to consider that his advice, even if given unskillfully and without affection, might be accurate.

October 21

*Seeing people in trouble, we should not ignore them,
thinking it's their karma,
their own doing.*

Throughout our innumerable lifetimes, not knowing about or not truly understanding cause and effect, we have thought and acted without considering what could happen afterwards. We were ignorant then. And we still are.

We were, and remain, like children, acting impulsively without any thought of consequences. Just as we empathize with the child who hurts herself falling out of a tree, we feel compassion for people who bring suffering upon themselves through their own actions. They are ignorant. Just like us.

To understand that suffering is brought about by one's actions allows us to improve our behavior. It also helps us to deepen our compassion through the giving of fearlessness and of what we have. To dismiss suffering as the person's own fault is to be judgmental, not compassionate.

Our Daily Practice:

No matter how powerful or old the other person is,
they are actually children when it comes to realizing the
pervasiveness of causality

Just like us.

October 22

*If Amitabha Buddha were to appear before you
and say he is here
to escort you to the Pure Land right now,
what would your very first thought be?*

When I first started practicing Pure Land Buddhism in Dallas, Texas, I was sitting in the dining hall one Sunday afternoon with several other people. A long-time practitioner looked at us and asked the above question. We all started to think.

And therein lay the problem.

By thinking, we were plainly hesitant. Clearly, and sadly, we weren't ready. If we were, our first reaction would have been an instantaneous "Yes!" No other thought should have arisen other than the thought to go immediately. What if it isn't the right time? But it is. Knowing that the time is right, Amitabha Buddha will come for us.

So I ask Pure Land practitioners reading this, "If Amitabha Buddha were to appear before you and say he

Our Daily Practice:

was here to escort you to the Pure Land right now, what would your very first thought be?"

October 23

*Instead of feeling guilty for past wrongdoings,
we need to let go of the guilt
and chant “Amitufo.”*

We’re supposed to understand causality—to know why bad things happen—and also not to blame others for our problems. With this understanding, we will be better able to create favorable conditions for our future.

And so, in our practice, we don’t just forgive others, we also need to forgive ourselves. We were just as ignorant as others then. And still are. So we need to recognize that we have done bad things and that we don’t want to repeat them.

There is also no need to beat ourselves up over having done them. Each of us needs to let go. Not just of the things we like, not just the good stuff. We also need to let go of our guilt and self-anger for what we did in the past. The past is done and over with while the future is yet to be created. The present is where we do the creating, where we focus our energy. Be firm with yourself, not angry.

Our Daily Practice:

And firmly—and mindfully— replace each negative thought with “Amitufo,” not just for ourselves, but for all beings.

October 24

*“Try doing something for someone.
You can’t have two opposing sets of thoughts
in your mind at one and the same time.”*

This was a noted British anatomist’s response to a student who asked what the best cure for fear was. He then said that one set of thoughts will always drive the other out. Something we need to do. Trying to break negative thought patterns is very difficult, but this is what our practice seeks to do: replace what is wrong with what is right.

Our feelings, the way we feel, arise from what we tell ourselves. So we need to switch away from the bad—what is obstructing us—to the good. This good is also something that can pull our mind away from the negative. If we can replace a negative thought with a caring thought, we will have begun to turn our mind away from suffering toward happiness.

And with more of our thoughts arising from our caring for others, our mind will be more firmly rooted in happiness.

Our Daily Practice:

Is this easy?

Of course not.

But it is possible and worthwhile?

Definitely!

October 25

*You don't surrender
control of your body to others.
More importantly, don't surrender
control of your mind to others.*

We strongly adhere to the former, so why do we so often allow the latter?

When driving and someone cuts in front of us, we blurt out an emphatic “Idiot!” Reading comments on social media that we disagree with, we write our own insensitive reply. Upon seeing an ad for the latest smartphone, our longing arises and the phone in our hand suddenly seems in urgent need of replacement.

Why do we so readily give in to all the people and situations around us that dictate how we think and feel?

Blindly following what others tell us to do is a big danger point. It could lead us to disaster. But we seem to ignore this, the potential harm that can come from others dictating our thoughts and feelings.

Our Daily Practice:

Just as we would guard against those who wish us physical harm, we need to guard against things and messages and people who seek to control our thoughts.

October 26

*In the face of unfolding destiny,
we hold the future in our hands.*

It can be very difficult to decide what to do when so much of what we encounter in life is grey and so little is black and white.

When faced with myriad choices, and none seem to clearly be the right one, we need to remind ourselves that we will end up doing what is destined to happen. And because of this, we may think that we do not have an active choice in the outcome. Unpleasantness? Merriment? *It was destined to happen!*

We are wrong. The part we play in the current unfolding destiny will go towards creating our own future destiny and is thus vitally important.

For instance, (1) *did I hurt the person because I gave in to my anger and didn't care what I said, and so the event unfolded as destined?*

Or, (2) *no matter how much I cared and tried to act wisely, my efforts failed. The event unfolded as destined: I hurt the person.*

Our Daily Practice:

If I do the first, I'm walking the path of more suffering.
If I do the second, I am on the path of reducing my future suffering.

October 27

Hatred is indeed a slippery slope.

Consider how often friendship and love, or even a mere acquaintance, can devolve into dislike. Or even hatred. And how rare it is for us to stop our dislike—and hatred—once we have begun.

Hatred is like the proverbial slippery slope: easy to slide down but incredibly difficult to climb back up.

As we begin to hate, we justify our feelings and become convinced we are right to feel as we do. The other person has done something terrible—they have wronged us. I have done nothing—just an innocent party. The hatred swells and over time we become attached to it. To stop this hating, we will need to let go of our attachment to it.

How?

Admit that our hate is unwarranted. Period! And even if in most people's eyes it is warranted, we would be wrong to give in to hate. As ordinary beings, we neither like giving up attachments nor admitting we are wrong. Isn't it just

Our Daily Practice:

more practical not to reinforce such self- destructive habits
in the first place?

October 28

*Chaos is prison.
A calm mind,
one that is developed from meditative concentration,
is freedom.*

Just as an organizational system brings order to a situation in disarray, meditative concentration brings order to a mind that is chaotic. While we may assure ourselves that a constantly moving mind is a sign of freedom, it is not. Such a mind is in prison.

Prisoners are under the control of others. Told to leave their cells, they leave. Told to stay in their cells, they stay. A chaotic mind is another form of prison. Just more subtle. More debilitating.

The chaotic mind also cannot go where it chooses. As soon as it tries it is prevented from doing so, swept away by different thoughts, including regrets and fears. Even when happiness is found, it ends all too soon. This unfocused mind has no control, no freedom.

Our Daily Practice:

With meditative concentration and the mental order that arises from it, the mind can soar wherever it wishes. Even away from regret and fear.

This truly is freedom.

October 29

*Mindfulness,
concentration,
or meditative concentration?*

Mindfulness is being aware of what we are doing and of what is happening around us. When planting seeds in the garden, I am aware of the feel of the dirt, the seed's firmness, the hose at my feet. I am mindful of the laughter of children nearby, the songs of birds in the trees, the warmth of the sun on my back, and the changing light pattern caused by the clouds.

Concentration is choosing what I will focus on and remaining focused on that. Holding the seedling, I look for a good spot. Digging a hole, I concentrate on my spade. Watering the seed, I make sure the amount is just right. And the children, the birds, the sun, the moving shadows? I appreciate all of them but I do not become distracted by them.

Meditative concentration, which requires even more

Our Daily Practice:

effort, takes concentration to a higher level. It enables us to focus solely on the object or sound that will enable us to fulfill our spiritual aspiration.

October 30

*Although it may seem
there is nothing we can do,
we can be kind.*

Equanimity. Altruism. Compassion. Courage. It is admirable to strive for these virtues and others. These qualities are not easy to achieve. They're overwhelming, surely for the starting practitioner, and even for those who are not. Fortunately, there's a more basic virtue we can achieve—kindness.

“Is there anything I can help with?” upon seeing our elderly neighbor.

“Why don't you go first” to the person who approached the check-out line the same moment we did. The wave to the driver who is trying to edge out into traffic to pull ahead of you. The smile to the child who looks up at you apprehensively.

For virtues with a capital “V,” we need wisdom. For kindness, while wisdom surely helps, we just need to be

Our Daily Practice:

aware of what is taking place around us. And to realize that putting someone else's anxieties, fears, or needs before our own is not a sacrifice. It's an opportunity.

A chance to make not just one, but two people happier.

October 31

*We don't know what others are thinking,
so rather than assume something negative,
let's imagine something good.*

When observing others' behavior, it can be tempting to assign various motives to them. Especially when we find their behavior questionable, or even objectionable. But we shouldn't be judging others. Period.

And why are we even trying to figure out other peoples' wandering thoughts? Isn't this just indulging in our own wandering thoughts?

And why, when we're imagining other's thoughts, do we so often paint those thoughts as negative? Might it be that those negative thoughts are more a reflection of what's in our own mind, rather than someone else's? After all, we're the ones who imagined the thoughts.

The next time we're tempted to write the script for what another person is thinking, how about giving the person the benefit of the doubt. Let's imagine something

Our Daily Practice:

good! We'll be happier, and so will others when we act toward them from our good thoughts.

November 1

*When learning of another's pain,
remember this is about them.*

When someone summons the courage to tell us of something terrible that happened to them, we may fall speechless. Not knowing what best to say, we may mumble how sorry we are and can't imagine what he is going through.

Alternatively, we may relate how we understand because something disturbing also happened to us. And then detail what happened. The first response is at least indicative of how we sincerely care. The second response focuses on the wrong person—on us. So what might we say instead?

“Thank you. Thank you for trusting that I will support you.”

With that the person knows we will not diminish their hurt. Yes, this opening is from our perspective but the point of focus is on the other person, on their suffering. After

Our Daily Practice:

this, we listen attentively, trying to understand what they are thinking and feeling, which may be somewhat overwhelming. But it will help us figure how best to help them alleviate their suffering.

November 2

*A rollercoaster can be fun
as long as it's not an emotional one.*

It happens all the time. We're in the midst of one thought, when a very different one pops in. As it elbows its way to center stage, feelings absent mere seconds ago cascade in as well. In a flash, the new feelings—perhaps happiness, perhaps anxiety or sadness—expand and drive earlier feelings aside.

Riding this emotional rollercoaster, we finally remember that our feelings are transient. And, despite their insistence otherwise, they are actually not real. After all, the feelings weren't even here a minute ago! Now we're deliriously happy, or ridden with anxiety, or overwhelmed by sadness.

We need to summon up better thoughts—those of awareness, understanding, and control—and unplug the rollercoaster. What will we discover? A sense of peace and confidence, knowing that while we can take part in and

Our Daily Practice:

appreciate life, we need not be overwhelmed by uncontrollable feelings.

We thus avoid that exhausting rollercoaster and, instead, glide contentedly through life.

November 3

*When setting a new routine,
begin modestly.*

Let's say we're new to meditation. In our newfound enthusiasm, we decide that we're going to meditate thirty minutes every day. Our goal set, life quickly intercedes and excuses proliferate. *I'm too busy. Or Got to clean this mess in the kitchen. Or I'm really tired. I'll chant tomorrow.*

For whatever reason, we don't meet our newly set goal.

But was it reasonable in the first place? Meditating for thirty minutes every day is most admirable. But very often not doable initially. What if, instead of setting that goal for thirty minutes, you set it for three minutes? Still too busy or tired?

"You mean I only have to sit and concentrate for three minutes?" Even a busy or tired person can most likely manage three minutes.

By setting a modest goal, we have a much better chance of meeting it and feeling good. Plus, there's an

Our Daily Practice:

additional benefit. After chanting for three minutes, we may continue for a few more. But even if we don't, we get to feel good at having accomplished our goal.

November 4

*When memories of a loved one arise
and threaten our peace of mind,
avoid the snare of sadness.*

Often, when we least expect it, something will trigger a memory of a loved one who is no longer in our lives.

Instead of being saddened by feelings of loss, we can appreciate and learn from those memories. We don't have to remain caught up in grief, regretting how our time together wasn't longer or how we wasted so much of the time we had.

We can instead choose to feel gratitude, reminding ourselves how fortunate we were to have had the person in our life as long as we did.

Instead of regretting how we have no way of replacing the person, we can realize the wisdom in the teachings—that it was our conditions that helped bring about her presence in our current lifetime. Aware of how conditions are the results of good seeds planted in previous lives, we can be more vigilant of the seeds we plant now.

Our Daily Practice:

So instead of being grieved by our loss, let it inspire us.

November 5

*When others unexpectedly hurt us
with their words,
return kindness not pain.*

Most of us have experienced a trusted friend or a loved one say something so unexpected that we're stung. Caught off guard, we struggled to respond.

Perhaps, in trying to react compassionately, we figured that something must have upset the person for her to have spoken so unkindly. And in doing so, she carelessly planted seeds for her future suffering. Not wanting to make things worse, we might have even tried avoidance!

Instead of dreading another occurrence, we can dedicate merits from our practice to her. Today, after dedicating our merits to adorning the Pure Land, repaying all kindnesses and relieving all suffering, we can add a special dedication to the person causing us distress. Dedicating merits to someone to help them find happiness and live a peaceful life can dramatically change our perspective.

Our Daily Practice:

How so?

It's hard to remain upset with someone when you just wished for her to find peace and happiness.

November 6

*Negative thoughts—
so many opportunities for a Dharma lesson!*

As soon as you notice such a thought, it is an opportunity for a mini Dharma talk. Let's say you're angry.

Lesson: Anger makes me cranky, not happy. It only plants seeds for more anger in my future. Current enmities stem from past enmities. If I add fuel to this fire, they will be even worse in the future.

Ask yourself where it is coming from. Might the anger be stemming from jealousy? If so, that's another Dharma lesson.

Lesson: He has the right conditions for what he did. I don't. So what might his conditions be, and how do I create them?

Or, maybe the negative thought arose from fear. Fear of you or someone you care about losing something. Yet another opportunity!

Lesson: Whatever happens to me and whatever I have are determined by my previous karmas. No one can take from me what I have destined for myself. Both good and bad. As soon as we detect a negative thought, we flush out its source.

Our Daily Practice:

Applying the appropriate Buddhist principle, we give ourselves a Dharma talk. In this way, we replace negative thoughts with positive ones.

November 7

*Our greatest achievements
begin with modest first steps.*

One day, when a group of practitioners was discussing the challenges of practicing every day, one person asked another how long she chants.

“Twenty minutes,” she replied.

“That’s all?” the questioner, a little shocked, blurted out. What he hadn’t thought to follow up with was “How often?”

In hoping to alleviate his dismay, the respondent explained that she chants a few times a day. She revealed that in such a manner, she keeps the buddha-name more firmly in mind. Additionally, if she finds that she has more time, she will chant even longer!

The now intrigued questioner queried, “Why twenty minutes?”

To which, the person explained how she started with chanting five minutes a day. Accomplishing this initial goal,

Our Daily Practice:

she felt confident that she could do more and so gradually increased the length of time, to now twenty minutes. From a modest goal, habits can be established. And then improved upon.

November 8

*When unable to see a person's reaction,
we need to be even more careful with our words.*

When we're talking with another person, we may inadvertently say something that hurts or bothers the person. Since we're looking at him we can see his reaction and, hopefully, address any misunderstanding. This process is the nature of conversation: our speaking and then hearing another's response as we observe his physical reactions. We continue chatting based on these verbal and physical cues.

But when we write—and especially when writing a comment online—we don't have the advantage of seeing how others react. Fixated on driving home our point without being able to see the reader's reaction, we don't see the hurt expression, the flash of anger. Unable to see these reactions, we have no clue as to the damage our words are inflicting. And so we plow ahead like a runaway train.

Rather, we need to take control of the chaotic situa-

Our Daily Practice:

tion, and like a good engineer drive the train responsibly and arrive safely.

And be a polite driver at that.

November 9

*What matters is not who we are
but what we are.*

The comforts we enjoy, where we live, those we love and care about, the position we hold in our work—they all occur mainly due to our karmas from past lifetimes.

Consider the last item, one's job. Those who are outstanding in a prestigious profession and enjoying their fame and rewards can get carried away with themselves. But fame and position are transitory, and dependent on our continued good fortune. We use up our good fortune as we personally enjoy it, but selfish acts will decimate it.

Since nothing is permanent, our status from our work is likewise transitory and thus not what should matter to us.

What should matter?

How we behave. What we are.

Our actions are important because they are not only reflections of past actions but also come about due to our current choices. Choices we are confronted with countless

Our Daily Practice:

times a day. On how to behave or how we choose to think. Which leads to what we are today and will become tomorrow.

November 10

*Others have managed to forgive,
how can we?*

Hearing accounts of others who have forgiven, we may well wonder how they managed it?

Just as we hope for forgiveness, others do as well. Their hope may be buried in the emotions of the moment. Initially, we will find it hard to convince ourselves that a raging, bitter, or screaming individual is seeking forgiveness. It's hardly the way we would act in similar circumstances.

What the person so desperately wants is for their pain and suffering—their experienced humiliation, injury, fear, alienation, whatever—to stop. They don't know that this is what they want, so they don't yet know how to make it happen.

Recognizing what they are going through, we will better understand why they are acting the way they are. And by understanding, we will be much better placed to

Our Daily Practice:

empathize with them. And by empathizing, just maybe we will be able to somehow figure out how to help diffuse the situation.

Or at the very least not make it worse.

November 11

*Before voicing an opinion,
be sure the one you are speaking to
wishes to hear it*

On one occasion, a monk asked the Buddha if he would speak to a certain woman.

Agreeing, the Buddha went to the woman. Seeing him approach, she turned away. The Buddha calmly walked around to again face her. She looked up. The Buddha moved so that he was again within her eyesight, but this time she looked down.

The Buddha then told the monk that the woman did not wish to listen to him. The Buddha wasn't upset. He calmly accepted that conditions weren't right for her to listen to him.

So unlike us—the unawakened and opinionated people of today.

Having neglected to first get a person's okay to offer our opinion, we just plunge into giving it anyhow. The

Our Daily Practice:

person may listen politely but sigh inwardly. She may mentally roll her eyes. Or argue. The chance of her eagerly saying “Wow! Thanks!” have become slim. Instead of helping, we’ll have irritated someone. And possibly, permanently turned the person off.

November 12

*Gossip is harmful,
even if the person never learns of what we said.*

When we gossip about others, we may tell ourselves that we're not doing any real harm. *The person will never hear about it. What are the chances?* We can tell ourselves this. But even if that is so, harm is still done.

When we engage in gossip, we waste our time and energy. Even worse, we waste the time and energy of those who listen to the hearsay we're spreading. If we want to say something about others, we should be speaking positively about them, not passing on gossip.

Gossip usually includes something unfavorable, even malicious. Unkind thoughts are negative and therefore plant negative seeds, thus creating more negative karma. To make things even worse, just as we view those who don't tell the truth as untrustworthy, our gossiping will deem us unreliable in the eyes of those who do value the truth.

Our Daily Practice:

So honest people will avoid us. Eventually, only those who do not value integrity will spend time with us.

November 13

*A foolproof way
to avoid bad speech karma.*

One day, I awoke to discover that I had lost my voice. Panic quickly set in. But I soon realized a benefit to my newfound voiceless state. Since I couldn't speak, I couldn't say anything I would regret.

I couldn't get myself into trouble!

Buoyed by my newfound realization, I grabbed a pen and pad for when I needed to communicate with others. After my first written conversation, I concluded that it would be tough to disagree with someone if you couldn't speak. Talking is quick and easy. Writing takes time! Blurting out a dissenting opinion is instantaneous. Having to write it down, you will soon conclude that an argument is just more trouble than it's worth.

How much easier to smile and get along with the other person.

Now, I admit that losing one's voice is an extreme way

Our Daily Practice:

of avoiding bad verbal karmas. But we don't need to lose our voice to achieve the same result. We can just talk less. A lot less. And honestly, most of the talking we deem necessary is, in reality, pretty much unnecessary.

November 14

*Viewing our loss
as a positive for another.*

When something does not work out as we hope, we can feel a sense of loss. We do not get the promotion that we feel we are entitled to. Our soccer team makes it to the finals only to lose to our longstanding rivals. Again. We finally work up the courage to ask someone out only to be told that he just started seeing someone.

In these and so many other circumstances, as disappointment sets in, we feel that we have lost. That we didn't get what we wanted. And deserved. This initial reaction is understandable. We worked hard for the promotion, practiced all year for the soccer finals, took the time to help that wary person feel safe with us. And what happened? We were rejected. We lost.

But what if we could look at this from a broader perspective? A coworker got a promotion. A team that also practiced hard won the championship. And maybe the special person has at long last found his soulmate.

Our Daily Practice:

Reminding ourselves that our conditions just weren't right, let's try to be happy for those whose conditions were.

November 15

*Our lives today are a rare opportunity,
a precious chance to choose
and progress.*

Very rarely are we reborn as humans. Rarer still are we reborn at a time when we can learn what the Buddha taught. And do what he encouraged us to do: practice and experience his teachings. Even now, with the teachings widely available, few learn and practice them. What seems so clear and obvious to these few remains unacceptable to many others. Or perhaps inaccessible.

Those who have the conditions to learn and practice in order to evolve into more loving, caring people have received a gift. Yes, it's a gift received due largely to their past hard work and sincere efforts. A gift, nonetheless. One from awakened beings!

When presented with a gift, the wise recipient is appreciative. It would be hubris, not to mention bad manners, to murmur "Thanks" and then set the gift aside, undervalued

Our Daily Practice:

and unused. And so, upon receipt, we hold our gift and marvel at it for it shows the way to a bright, loving future.

Do not waste it.

November 16

*Imagine feeling so calm
that others can perceive it.*

One day, I was doing prostrations in my dorm room. I forget how long I prostrated, but I do remember very clearly how happy and calm I felt afterward. It had been an unusually good session. After putting away my mat, I left the dorm to go to another building.

Along the way, a fellow nun was walking toward me. As we got closer, we both smiled and greeted one another. Then, pausing for a second or two, she admitted to having something upsetting to tell me. Not wanting to distress me, she had been putting it off for several days. But seeing my unusually serene demeanor, she decided the time was right to tell me. And she did.

I don't remember what she said. But I do remember my reaction.

“Okay.”

Needless to say, she was much relieved. Laughing, she

Our Daily Practice:

told me that because I looked so calm and relaxed that she easily found the courage to give me the bad news.

Just imagine us looking so calm, thanks to our chanting and practice, that those we encounter can perceive it.

Well, we can.

November 17

*Good seeds or bad seeds.
Which will we nurture?*

Our future depends on the decisions we make today. We've got three basic directions to choose from—the good (smart) one, the bad (unwise) one, and the same one we're now on. This last one is the easiest. This is the path where we go with our old habits. Easy choices here. They may be good habits or not so good ones.

The second direction—the bad or unwise one—also tends to be easy. And often fun. A double cheeseburger with onion rings instead of a grain bowl with beans and veggies. Fun! And the degree of “unwise”? It depends on the frequency of the choice.

The first direction—the good or smart one—is that grain bowl. Perhaps not quite the rush of pleasure like with the cheeseburger, but not the health problems or bad karma either. So, not the guilt. Not the worry. The good, and smart, direction is the hardest because it requires maturity and discipline. And self-respect.

Our Daily Practice:

And although harder in the beginning, it's the real winner in the long run.

November 18

*Learn from guilt
and do not become immersed in it.*

Our difficulty in forgiving ourselves and others is worsened by our thoughts returning to what happened, over and over. First, when we have an argument or fight with someone, we consider how bad it made both of us feel. Then we resolve to try harder next time to not give in to the anger. We don't want to feel terrible again!

For the other person, we forgive them by reminding ourselves that we have no idea what happened in that person's life to result in their acting with such hostility. And we tell ourselves that we got to walk away from a person who was verbally abusive toward us. They couldn't! What suffering.

Finally, each time our thoughts return to what happened, we brush them aside and replace them with "Amitufo."

We do this every time our thoughts return to the inci-

Our Daily Practice:

dent and our guilt. And we remind ourselves that our guilt is a waste of time and energy. It will be much better to chant “Amitufo” and dedicate the merits to all being in suffering.

November 19

*A daily choice:
self-indulgence or simple joys.*

Running an errand at a mall, we were a group of nuns looking after one another and laughing. And observing. I saw a mother hugging her crying child, a young woman laughing along with the blind man who held her arm. But mainly I saw self-engrossed people amidst the upscale shops and numerous eateries.

A woman mindlessly eating her lunch while flipping through a catalog. A well-dressed man striding by while venting angrily into his earbuds. A couple looking at the store displays while ignoring each other. People were spending money, shopping, dining—doing things that were supposed to make them happy. But they weren't. Perhaps they sensed the futility of searching for happiness in possessions and self-indulgence.

No happiness there.

Where was it?

Our Daily Practice:

In the laughter between friends. In the eyes of a mother and her child. On the face of an elderly, blind man laughing with his companion. The observed happiness was not from any self-indulgence. It was from friendship and caring for others.

November 20

*We never know when
a bodhisattva-to-be is coming to help.*

Arriving at our center mid-afternoon and thus having missed lunch, I went to the kitchen in search of something to eat. Perusing the shelves, I selected a package. While gazing intently at it (apparently thinking that concentration and a furrowed brow would enable me to read Chinese), a fellow nun came in.

Seeing the bag, she laughed and said, “No, not that one.”

I understood what she meant—it was something that either I didn’t eat or was unsuitable for what I had in mind. Laughing along with her, I put the bag back, grateful once again that others know what I can, and cannot, eat.

She carefully examined the cabinet and pointed out two bags, one with almond powder and the other with black bean powder. Still chuckling, she said I would enjoy those two together. I mixed them and, of course, she was right. The drink was just what I needed.

Our Daily Practice:

We never know when those around us are bodhisattvas in training.

November 21

*Finding our path can resemble
a piece of a jigsaw puzzle searching for its home.*

A class member told us one evening that although she was raised in a particular religion, she never felt as if it was the one for her. She did not quite fit in. Someone suggested that spiritual traditions are a bit like jigsaw puzzles. Some people gravitate to the closest “puzzle,” the one of their parents. Seeing an empty place, this person approaches it.

A perfect fit!

But others can approach their same puzzle and, for various reasons, they just don't fit. They try to. They just don't. Nothing is wrong with the puzzle. Nothing is wrong with the individual. They just don't go together.

People can spend years trying various puzzles, looking for the one they fit. All the puzzles are beautiful. The fit just isn't there.

Then one day, the person walks up to yet another puzzle. *Here I go again.* But there's no sigh this time. Instead,

Our Daily Practice:

Wow! This is it! In a world of beautiful puzzles, with good fortune and persistence, we too will find the one that feels just right for us.

November 22

*Perceiving is fine;
the issue is what we do next.*

The five senses, or first five consciousnesses, are sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. They enable us to accurately know what is being viewed, heard, smelled, etc. For awakened beings, these five senses coupled with innate wisdom enable them to interact correctly with their environment and everything and everyone in it. Then they stop there.

But we unawakened beings careen blithely into the sixth consciousness. This is the discriminatory mind, let's say, the mind of *black* or *white*, *different* or *like me*.

From here, things get worse as we instantly lurch into the seventh consciousness, which attaches. This is the push-pull mind that attaches to ideas of *I dislike* or *I like*, etc.

Awakened beings stop at the point where they perceive and interact correctly. For them, there is no discriminating or attaching. Sadly, we're not there yet. And so, we discrim-

Our Daily Practice:

inate and attach, and can end up causing terrible suffering. For ourselves in the future. And even worse, for others now.

November 23

*The mountain is high and difficult to climb,
but not impossibly so.*

Attaining buddhahood takes uncountable lifetimes.

Too overwhelming?

Maybe this will help: imagine the perfect enlightenment of buddhahood as the top of a mountain, one so high that it's hidden by the clouds above us. But we have been assured that there is indeed a peak and that we will reach it if we keep climbing. And so we take a few more steps. Suddenly we slip on some loose stones and find ourselves even lower than we were.

Resuming our climb, we come to an outcropping of rock and cannot figure how to get around it. No matter what we try, nothing works. Becoming frustrated and careless, we start slipping back on those darn stones again. *I can give up. This mountain is just too tough. Maybe go back down the mountain. Life was much easier down below. Or perhaps just stay here for a while.*

As we ponder our situation, we glance around and

notice that, actually, we are a bit higher than we were a while ago. We realize that the air is a little less polluted, the sky a little bluer. We can breathe more easily and see farther.

Peering back down the mountain, we see other climbers struggling to reach the point we're at. We call down to them with some encouraging words. And as we do this, we hear those who are above us on the mountain. They're doing the same for us—calling down words of encouragement and helpful hints for how to proceed.

We realize that we're not the only one on the mountain! Helping others, we feel good. Being helped, we feel more confident about what lies ahead.

By looking around, seeing beyond our own struggles and noticing others, we feel better about our progress so far. We still can't see the top and it's clear that we have a long way to go.

But things have gotten better.

We have indeed made some progress. Taking the time to realize this and breathing deeply, we smile. Feeling renewed, we turn back to the mountain and resume our climb, with more energy and confidence than we had before.

November 24

*To help others
we need a calm, clear mind.*

Empathizing with another person, we feel what he feels. And his suffering suddenly becomes ours. One might wonder, *Isn't this a good thing? The way a caring person reacts to another's suffering?* If we don't handle the suffering correctly, no.

When the Buddha encountered those who were suffering, he clearly saw their suffering. But if he had taken it all in—like a sponge absorbing water—it would have tainted his calm, clear mind. Instead, he saw the suffering perfectly and, knowing what conditions the person had or didn't have, intuitively knew how to help, what to say.

But for us, we are a sponge when we encounter others suffering. We're like a person who jumps into a raging river to save a drowning man. Unable to manage the swirling waters, we realize, too late, we're drowning too!

The alternative?

Our Daily Practice:

View others' suffering clearly. Then, react calmly. We have a choice as to how to respond to suffering. We can absorb it and, like a sponge, become more soiled with time. Or we can see it clearly and remain unstained while truly helping others.

November 25

*It's all in how you look at it:
afflictions or appreciation.*

“Have you noticed the water smelling funny?” the concerned visitor asked his host.

Smiling, she explained, “Yes, after we get a good rain, the water always smells funny for a few days. The new water rushing into the rainwater tank stirs up the water already in it. So the bad smell means the tank got a needed restock of water.”

With that new information, what had seemed like something troubling was actually good news.

When we do not have all the information we need to see something clearly, we can quickly leap to a wrong conclusion. And become upset at what we just landed on. In this instance, the water smelled unpleasant, but when the visitor learned what had happened, he was no longer bothered by the strange odor. Knowing the severity of the area’s water shortage, he knew that the refilled water tank was a welcomed relief.

Our Daily Practice:

It's a question of how we view things.

Is it an affliction?

Or actually something to be appreciated.

November 26

*Was that a necessary thought?
Or just another meddling worry?*

Faced with a situation that requires us to respond, we usually do one of two things. We put on our thinking cap, analyze the situation, and figure out a solution.

Or we worry, a negative response. We go over and over things that might happen, which makes us anxious. We find ourselves fixating on the negative what-ifs that keep circling around our heads. Perhaps, we blame ourselves for having made a serious mistake and worry about possible outcomes. Perhaps, we fear what might happen if things go against us in tomorrow's meeting at work. Worrying involves anxiety and unhappiness.

Let's get back to thinking—the more positive, creative process. Thinking can fix problems; worrying increases them. Understanding this, the next time you notice mental agitation or sense a feeling of unease, check to see whether you might have slipped over the thin line between thinking and worrying.

November 27

*Sometimes, not looking too far ahead
will help us reach our goal.*

Everyone was excited to go on the outing that had been described as “a climb up a hill.” To me, it sounded more like a mountain. Hill or mountain, we were supposed to climb it. After years of sitting in front of computers, I was definitely not in shape to undertake such a climb. But there was no way I was going to give up and admit defeat. So to the slope I went.

Rather than looking up and trying to gauge how much further I had to go, I focused on taking the next step. No more than that. Just . . . the . . . next . . . step. And so I pressed on, one step at a time. After what seemed like an eternity, I reached the top. And it reinforced an invaluable lesson about challenges.

Don't be overwhelmed by how long something might take.

Don't look too far ahead and give in to doubt.

Just keep taking the next step. Gradually doubts, fears, and worries will recede as you become absorbed in your task. And, with time, you will reach your goal.

November 28

*View the death of a loved one
like a coin—it has two sides.*

Too often, we get caught up in grief and fail to see the other side—gratitude. Which side we focus on is crucial. Grieving is a process we go through. But it can stop being a process and become a place, a spot we cannot move beyond. Thoughts of the ones we loved but are now lost to us can bring inexpressible suffering.

Why? we cry, silently or aloud.

After the shock, the guilt, the anger, the realization of the magnitude of the loss and our loneliness, we can remain stuck—trapped in this pit of quicksand.

Or we can turn the coin over and gaze at the face of gratitude.

We benefitted from the person's wisdom, and humor. They helped us know when we should be determined and strong, and when we should be gentle. They challenged and encouraged us. Cared about us. Loved us.

VENERABLE WULING

So stop continuing to grieve, for it tarnishes the side called gratitude. Focusing on gratitude will polish this side with our love, until it glows.

November 29

*What we often think:
others do evil, not me.*

As Buddhists, we believe that all beings are by nature good. But, for uncountable reasons, we often don't do what is good. And in not doing good, we all too often stray into doing evil as our thoughts go unnoticed, our speech becomes careless, our actions go unchecked.

Lazy, we fall into bad habits.

Caught off guard, we don't think before we react.

Proud, we can't bring ourselves to apologize.

Frustrated, we don't think, or care, about what we're doing to others.

Selfish, we ignore the needs and wishes of others.

Intolerant, we don't care about those whom we deem inferior.

So anger, unforgiveness, envy, fear, delusion, ignorance—these are all evil. But we ourselves are not evil. Sadly, however, often when we are not mindful, we can do evil

things. So, with an awareness of this, do not focus on what others do. Do not be angry at the actions of others. Focus on what you yourself are thinking . . . saying . . . doing.

This is where it all begins.

Will it be evil or good?

November 30

*The Western Pure Land:
a land not just of beauty
but also of profound symbolism.*

The Buddha spoke of a wondrous Pure Land for the benefit of future beings. But he knew this land would be beyond our ability to grasp.

And so the Buddha used imagery to help us—ground of gold, trees of jewels, birds singing the Dharma. He knew that wise masters would learn and practice the teachings, and over time they would explain the teachings to their students.

The masters would point out how the golden ground symbolizes purity, unlike ours made of dirt. And how the precious jewels aren't like the jewels here that trigger our greed. In that land, they symbolize the four qualities of enlightenment: permanence, joy, true self, and purity.

Also, how the company of compassionate, caring bodhisattvas means that no longer will we be in the company of people who trigger our anger.

So, like those masters, to truly appreciate and deeply believe the teachings, we too need to study and practice them.

December 1

*Whoever is responsible
will reap the fruits.*

One time when the Buddha was in Sravasti, the body of a young woman who had been murdered was found buried on the monastery grounds. As rumors flew, townspeople began to question, even heckle, the monks on their rounds. The monks went to the Buddha for guidance.

He instructed them not to feel ashamed, that false accusations can occur at any time and will gradually fade. If people continued to question the monks, they were to respond that those responsible would reap the fruits.

Several days later, officials caught the murderers. Not only were the monastics exonerated, but the Buddha requested clemency for the guilty men. The Buddha's responses throughout the incident were not to offer defenses but to remain calm and to continue teaching. Not to react in an agitated or vengeful manner but to understand that such fatal actions were due to hatred and jealousy.

We too need to understand the cause. And the results.
And not worsen our own.

December 2

*Go for a retreat.
Not out there, but within.*

Who hasn't looked forward to a vacation? Or perhaps a quiet weekend away from it all? A secluded retreat? Who hasn't daydreamed of an exotic place filled with new sights and excitement? Or longed for peace and quiet.

Then one day, we checked out what was appealing, looked into available options, and made our plans. We made arrangements for home and work, and booked our reservations.

The day finally came, and we were off.

And then—all too soon—it was time's up, time to return home.

Back in our regular routine, we began to fantasize about our next vacation or quiet retreat. But do we really need to go through all the searching and planning to find the sought-after change from our daily routine? Not really.

If we're seeking peace and quiet, we can find a

secluded place at home and settle in. We can power down our smartphones and computers, let go of the daily noise, turn on the chanting music, close our eyes, and tune out the world.

And find real peace—the one already within us.

December 3

*Even when others will not know,
I will.*

The scenario: We use a self-scan lane to check out of the grocery store. Grabbing our bags, we run through the just-starting rain to our car. As we're hurriedly loading the bags into our car, we notice a package of nuts. Not remembering having scanned it, we check the receipt. No nuts! We have two options.

(1) Tell ourself it's no big deal—plus it's raining harder now! And just drive away.

(2) Run back through the rain into the store, apologize, and pay for the nuts.

We can justify our reasons for choosing option one: all that rain, we need to get home, we're a good customer who buys a lot at the store, it's only a few dollars, etc. What if we choose option two? We'll get wet! But we also get to have a clear conscience. When we unload the bags at home, we can look at the nuts and feel good that we did

the right thing. We'll not be bothered by guilt every time we eat a few.

Doing what is right may be inconvenient. Most likely, no one will know about it. But we'll know. And get to feel good about doing the right thing.

December 4

*Guard against the insulation of wealth,
the arrogance of complacency.*

A wealthy person is shielded from many of the worries the less fortunate face. How to find a job when her employer closes in a recession. How to pay mounting medical bills when health insurance isn't available. How to feed his children when food prices keep rising, but hourly pay remains stagnant.

For a wealthy person, it's a matter of choices, not questions of survival. An existence where, yes, there are conflicts and disappointments, ups and downs, but basic survival issues do not take center stage.

Smug and feeling invincible, many who are wealthy and powerful very easily become arrogant. Convinced that their success is due to their hard work and cleverness, they believe that those who have little just haven't worked hard enough. Or that they are just plain lazy. Negating any sense of empathy for people who have little, those who

have much can advance to having outright disdain for others.

A truly selfish—and tragic—waste of good fortune.

December 5

*We need more than just a
To-Do List.*

To-Do lists are so wonderful—think of something to be done, pull up the list app or get that notebook, and enter the new task. Now we won't forget! All we need to do is to complete it. But here's where things get tricky. We're more skilled at adding to our list than checking items off.

A solution?

How about a second list—a Not-To-Do-Yet list.

What would we put on it? All those time wasters we indulge in: binge-watching shows on Netflix; checking social media and email; chatting with coworkers; shopping across town or online. Too easily do these fill up our day, where we squander away precious time needed for the essentials.

But by using the two lists, we'll find the time for things on both. In adding our time-wasters to the Not-To-Do-Yet list, we're not saying we'll never do them again. Just not

right now. First, we'll do some of those To-Do tasks in our newly carved out time.

Then, feeling good about our accomplishments, we can take a short, predetermined break for non-essential things.

December 6

*One moment we're chanting and the next,
we're not.*

It's not surprising. After all, we're used to multitasking. And so, as soon as our mind sets into motion the chant of "Amitufo, Amitufo . . ." it zooms away to plan the next meal or write another FaceBook post. A solution? Count as we chant! We might count once per word. Or on every in-breath and then again on the out-breath. Or once on a combined inhale and exhale.

Just like the speed of our chanting, we can see what method works best for us.

How do we combine counting with chanting? We can try to hold both thoughts in our mind, weaving them together like coiled rope. Or we can chant while visualizing the number, layering it on top of the chant. The objective is to hold both the chant and the number in our mind—without losing awareness of either one—until we reach our pre-determined number. What if we lose track of the number. Start over again at once!

VENERABLE WULING

The thought of which will greatly enhance our focus.

December 7

*With good fortune
comes responsibility.*

Good fortune provides us not only with a rare existence as a human but also includes everything from adequate living necessities to the good things that make our life comfortable and enjoyable. Family members who are loving and supportive. Friends who genuinely have our best interests at heart. Coworkers who we can depend on.

Having attained these, we can find ourselves at a juncture.

Do we personally enjoy all we have and look no further? Or do we begin to look beyond our own existence? Do we recognize that while we are not supposed to attach to the phenomena around us, we should not ignore or dismiss them either? As an integral member of humanity, can we, upon seeing others in need, not want to help? Is it not our responsibility to aspire to leave a place better after we have been there?

Good fortune can be very gratifying. But far more rewarding is good fortune coupled with the willingness to share it.

December 8

*We all discriminate.
What matters is what we do next.*

Until we awaken, we will continue to act from our sixth consciousness, the mental awareness consciousness that labels. In a flash, it puts in its two-cents worth of discriminatory thoughts and judgments.

In order to stop all such nonsense—and finally, awaken—we need to catch the discriminatory thought as soon as possible and discern the label we just applied. We need to confront these labels that elicit specific unfair, unkind reactions from within us and determine where they come from.

From incorrect thinking, like if others achieve then I lose?

From other wrong thinking involving personal preferences, cultural upbringing, social media?

Perhaps from why we fail to think for ourselves?

From our fears?

Whatever the reasons, we need to find the discrimina-

tory root, recognize it, and realize just how destructive it is. And just how ephemeral all our labels are.

If we were to die today and be reborn tomorrow, our frame of reference for all those labels would change.

So, why attach to something arbitrary and fleeting? Why disdain someone or something, when we could be that person or covet that thing tomorrow. Why judge others when we remain so ignorant?

We do not need to judge others. It's not our place. Thank goodness for that! We just need to remember that the person we are about to label and discriminate against is just like us. An ignorant, deluded unawakened person trying to end unhappiness and suffering, working to protect loved ones and friends, and, hopefully, endeavoring to live a better day today than was lived yesterday.

That should be enough to keep us focused on our own thoughts and behavior, know what we should think and do, and find a wiser, kinder, and more beneficial way of living.

December 9

*When faced with a dreaded undertaking,
imagine storming a castle.*

Allow me to begin with a disclaimer—I’ve never stormed a castle. At least not in my current lifetime. And so this truly is a posited metaphor.

I can think of two ways to get into our imaginary castle.

First, a frontal assault. This requires the person-in-charge to draw up the attack plans, procure the needed armaments, and enlist and train the necessary troops. Overwhelming!

How about that second approach? Entering via an easy-entry back- door that leads to accessible, manageable areas.

Now, let’s apply our metaphor to real life. Storming our “castle” is an undertaking we have been putting off because it requires more effort than we can muster. But tackling a small bit? One that wouldn’t require much effort

and would be easier to accomplish? That feels much more doable!

And so, the next time you find yourself procrastinating, break your undertaking down into smaller tasks. Upon completion, you'll be in a strong position to finish off the rest of the "castle."

December 10

*We do not know
what is in the mind of another person.
And we would do well not to guess.*

“Why did he do that?” “What was she thinking?”

Let’s face it, it’s tough enough to know why we act the way we do or say the things we say. So when someone asks us those questions about someone else, we are on the cusp of stepping into a minefield of wrong responses. We may try to participate in the conversation, but any answers are guesses at best. We should not even try.

The best response I have heard to such a query: “I do not know what is in the mind of another person.”

Okay—that’s good for several reasons. 1) It’s the truth. 2) We cut out the gossip. 3) We refrain from planting some more bad karmic seeds. 4) We don’t join in idle speculation that wastes time and can get others, and ourselves, in trouble.

I could go on, but you get the point.

So next time, when asked the above, try replying, “Sorry, but I don’t know what is in the mind of another person.”

December 11

*If you want something done
try asking how the person would accomplish it.*

Having something that needs to be done, we might ask someone for help. Perhaps a subordinate at work or a dependable friend who generously lends a helping hand when needed. Knowing the outcome we seek, we just tell the person what to do, step by step. We may feel this to be the most effective means to obtain the result we seek. But it may merely be one means out of many.

Next time, instead of just telling the person what to do, try this: explain your hoped-for end result and, very importantly, ask them how they would proceed.

This has several advantages. With their skill sets, they may come up with unique solutions, something completely new to you. They may even know others who can help. Their method can end up being faster and more efficient. Asking how they are going to do something can also bring the other person on as a partner, not merely someone given a task.

However we look at it, all those involved can come out ahead.

December 12

*Observing anger,
it is the face of fear we are actually seeing.*

Seeing others act out of anger, we can find it tempting to shake our head and ponder. *How can they be so angry? So ignorant? And even, So violent?*

As our questioning continues, we find that we have gone past personal irritation. We have become angry ourselves. Discerning how we have again fallen into an emotional trap, we need to pause.

We need to realize the true essence of the problem—fear.

The person acting like a bully, shouting at others, and even becoming violent, may look strong. But those seemingly powerful actions are actually the manifestations of fear. Fear of losing what he has. Of never attaining what she has been assured is hers. Of remaining stuck while others are moving on. Of being viewed as no better than others, than those they are berating or acting against.

If we can see the face of fear lurking behind all that anger, we will recognize the true problem. And finally stand a chance of resolving it.

December 13

*What we habitually do,
we become.
What we habitually think,
as well.*

Remember how you were told not to slouch when young? Our parents were helping us form habits for the future. If we failed to listen then, we might well find ourselves hunching over today. For example, when working on our laptop. Or walking with our body ever so slightly curved, head tilted slightly, and eyes downcast. Suitable for not tripping over something, but not helpful when crossing a busy street!

Our mind works the same way.

If we have a habit of turning to negative thoughts, like those of grievance, self-pity, low-esteem, our minds will become increasingly used to such thoughts. And gradually, imperceptibly, become changed by them.

Just as our body can in time become bent over, our

mind can also begin to warp, to view all that it perceives negatively. And, without our even noticing, our mind slowly closes to all that is upright and well thought out.

December 14

*We cannot control what goes on around us,
but we can choose what we invite in.*

Imagine the following scenario. You're getting ready to have dinner with your family or a few friends when the doorbell rings. Not expecting anyone else, you cautiously look through the peephole or check the security camera. You see a stranger. Do you unlock the door, throw it open, and invite him in?

No. You would most likely not choose to let in an unknown person, someone who might be anything from annoying to dangerous.

If we are careful about who we invite into our home, why are we so careless about what we welcome into our mind? Just because something pops up on the television or in social media, or in conversations around us, it doesn't mean we should readily admit such things into our life. Into our minds. It's our decision whether we allow the ill will and daily drama into our minds.

VENERABLE WULING

We can throw open the door to all and sundry.

Or we can choose to only invite in that which we know
is safe and beneficial.

December 15

*“We chose forgiveness and love over hatred . . .
Forgiveness is the greatest gift
you can give yourself and to others.”*

The above was said by the mother of three of the four children who were killed, on their way to buy ice cream, by a drunk driver. Surely if she could forgive someone who committed such a horrendous act, we can forgive those whose actions pale by comparison.

When grievances arise, is the turmoil we feel worth the suffering we cause, both for ourselves and those around us?

Does it make sense to dwell on seeming injustices that only matter because it is our very dwelling on them that grants them power over us!

Instead, we should strive to bring forth forgiveness. The reality is that clinging to a desire for retaliation will doom us to remaining lost in the past, unable to change it. Unable to move past our emotional turmoil. Unable to move on.

Forgiveness truly is a gift because it offers the possibility of happiness.

December 16

*Want to have a good day?
Do good things.*

It's easy to allow what others say or do to determine what kind of day we will have. But allowing others to control whether our day is pleasant or not is, frankly, illogical. If we want to have a good day, we just need to do good things. Yes, it starts with us. That's about as simple as cause and effect can get. It is also powerful.

It's our choice: spend our energy reacting to others' negative actions or act from the goodness already within us. Instead of absorbing and being disturbed by what is disagreeable, do something worthwhile. So take charge. Block the negative energy or stop reflecting it. Emit positive energy—do good things.

Will we immediately change the undesirable day to one filled with good results? Unlikely.

But regardless of the immediate external outcomes, we will know we did what's right. The results can catch up

with us later. Which is fine. Because for now, we're having a good day.

December 17

*The most important person
arrives last.*

I heard this one night on a stationary bus, where the passengers were waiting impatiently for the bus to start off. Suddenly, a man dashed into view, hastening up the bus. This person was apparently familiar to the driver, who shook his head and muttered, “The most important person arrives last.”

This very brief statement, a saying that I had never heard before, has remained with me.

In many formalities, from award shows to government ceremonies, protocol calls for a buildup in status until, at last—the most essential person appears.

Most of us are not this person.

Our real place in the scheme of things acknowledged, we need to ask ourselves whether we habitually run late, like that flustered man. If not, great. But if we do, then we might ask ourselves if we really want to announce to all involved that our time is more valuable than theirs.

VENERABLE WULING

That we are the most important person!

December 18

“Beans . . . beans . . . beans . . .”

We heard our white-haired host repeating the above as he walked out of the kitchen and down the hallway, where he disappeared into a room. When he returned to the kitchen, he was holding a can of beans.

Finding us looking at him, he laughed contagiously and explained that it was his “mind’s way of exercising his body.” As our host opened his coveted can of beans, he explained that he had turned the closet into a backup pantry. And he chuckled again.

Now, he could have felt embarrassed at having launched into his “beans, beans, beans” soliloquy in front of an audience.

He could have been dejected about how his memory wasn’t as sharp as it once was.

He could have gotten angry.

He was none of these. At some point in time, he decided not to give in to anger, sadness, or wistfulness

when faced with declining faculties. He would use humor. What a delightful gift, not only for himself but for all those around him!

December 19

It's never too late to apologize.

We were discussing the importance of apologizing when a practitioner told me of one apology he made many years before.

When he was ten years old, an older relative invited him to see some books. While looking around the shelves, the young boy took a comic. As he grew from a boy to a teenager to a man, he replayed that moment over and over. Ten years ago, he met the daughter of that older relative for the first time in forty years.

And he admitted his theft.

I can only imagine the lifting of the weight of guilt his admission brought about. Apologizing can be breathtaking. Only after we apologize can we appreciate the weight of guilt we had been carrying. Will the intense feeling of relief last forever? No. It will likely only linger a few hours, days if we are lucky.

But the memory of our relief will remain. Maybe we

won't remember exactly what it felt like, but we will not forget how great it was. How relieved, how happy, we had felt. That memory can spur us to apologize again. And again

December 20

*Find contentment
in the action,
not the result.*

Let's face it; there's not a lot in life we have control over. We may do our best to win in a game, but if others play more skillfully, our dream of a win will end up in disappointment. We may propose a solution to a problem at work, but if another one is selected, here too, we'll be disappointed.

By placing our hopes for happiness on attaining our desired result, we're setting ourselves up for a lot of unhappiness. There're too many external variables that will factor into the various outcomes.

Just too many things beyond our control.

But what if, instead, we focus on what we can control?

For example, playing our utmost or being super creative with the solution? Knowing that we did our best, we'll find satisfaction in having done so. We can then view

winning the game or being congratulated on our brilliant solution as icing on the cake.

December 21

*“How we do anything
is how we do everything.”*

Flitting like a hummingbird on a nectar high, our mind alights one second on the news we are hearing on the TV, the next to what we’ll have for dinner tomorrow, then quickly on to what on earth is our neighbor doing to produce such strange noises. All these are going on as our computer beckons—while the work we are supposed to be doing remains untouched. Then our spouse fumes and frets because we are not helping to clean the house.

The saying “How we do anything is how we do everything” cautions us that everything we do does indeed matter. Procrastination and delays will get us nowhere. Literally and metaphorically. The needed action still requires us to do something about it and we need to work on it.

And so we would do well to ask ourselves, *Do I honestly want to stay this way, the way I am? And what about the rest of my*

life? Do I have good habits? Am I a good role model? Or a repeat time-waster? Hopefully, we'll prudently choose the way we want to spend our next few minutes.

And the years to come.

December 22

*If we learn,
but don't practice,
we'll end up forgetting.*

Early early on, we learned an invaluable lesson: if we don't put our keys in a designated place, we're doomed to be perpetually searching for them. This turns frantic when our appointment was five minutes ago.

And so, whether at home, work, or running errands, keys now have their place. On the hook by the door, in our bag, our pocket. Essentially, we have learned that we don't enjoy looking for our keys. To know where on earth (literally) they will be, we found a logical place for them. We then made it a habit to place them in "their" place.

If we had not acted on the fact that we dislike losing our keys—had not put what we learned into practice—those missing keys would still be a problem.

Anything we learn related to good behavior needs to be put into practice and repeated until it becomes a habit.

Whether it be finding our keys, cultivating to be a better person, or chanting the buddha-name.

December 23

*It's easier to dam a stream
than to hold back a river.*

Think of a huge river: say, the Amazon, Yangtze, or Mississippi.

Now, let's say that we are told that, in order to reduce flooding, we have to dam that river. And so, logically, we head upstream, looking for places where the river is narrower and more manageable.

Similarly, if we are to gain some control over our habitual behavior—from that which wastes our time or impacts our health to that which inconveniences others or, even worse, distresses them—we would look for the minor habits that contribute to such overall bad behavior.

The habits that are not yet well-established would be the easiest to control. These would be the easiest to “dam up” before they become unchangeable and firmly anchored.

In time, as we become more skilled at stopping these

fledgling habits, the more equipped we will be to tackle those that are more entrenched.

December 24

*Let's view our Must-Do List
as an Opportunity-List.*

I don't know about you, but my To-Do List seems prone to taking on a parental or boss-like tone. It becomes a long list of must-dos. Little wonder the list manifests an adversarial tone rather than a we're-in-this-together-so-let's-get-going tone.

But what if the next time we look at our list, we view it as an inventory of opportunities waiting eagerly for us to join in?

That task to answer an email can become a chance to strengthen a friendship or help someone check off an item on their own list.

The task to write an article could provide an opportunity to help others learn a new skill or maybe gain a new perspective on a social issue.

The task reminding us to run the protection app on our computer can prevent it from shutting down just when a yearly deadline looms.

If we could view tasks as helpful rather than demanding, they can become positively enjoyable.

December 25

*After doing something good, let go
and await the next opportunity.*

Upon doing something good, some people pause and await the acclaim. If it comes in a sufficient amount, they'll take on another such task. If the praise is insufficient or not forthcoming, they may deem such efforts a waste of energy and cease doing them.

Other people may not expect the acclaim to be immediate but will run a mental tally of the recognition they consider their due. Failing to receive the desired amount in a reasonable time frame, they too may cease such actions or decide to make the bargain terms more clear next time.

Another group comprises those who do something good without any expectation of recognition. If it is forthcoming, they try to remain unaffected as they continue with their good actions.

The fourth group? Not only do they not expect praise for their exemplary acts, they also prefer that others do not

even know the good actions were theirs, so their good karmic retributions will not be enjoyed, and so wasted, in the form of acclaim.

December 26

*“Receive without pride,
let go without attachment.”*

No, this was not said by the Buddha but by Marcus Aurelius. Whether we're lauded for an accomplishment at work or in our community, praised by those we hold important in our lives, or honored by those we don't even know, we need to “receive without pride.”

Remember, we could not have accomplished what we did alone, in a vacuum. Accomplishments are a combination of our actions and those of others. An amalgamation of everyone's conditions correctly aligned, all due to results of past actions. Yes, the conditions were right for us. But there's no reason for us to get carried away.

With our bearings steady, when conditions change, we will not be off-kilter when praise and honors pass on to others. Not being enamored with receiving recognition, we are able to “let go without attachment.”

We are appreciative of what is happening but not

excited by it. And we will remain calm and accepting in the face of what passes from us

December 27

*Patience enables us to achieve
what we once thought
could never be ours.*

Patience enables us to endure what those who are unable to practice it would normally find upsetting. These include physical discomfort, insults, setbacks in one's practice.

Patience enables us to understand that such things are the karmic results of previous thoughts and behavior, which we committed. With insight, we will begin to realize that becoming angry rather than remaining calm and quiet will create enmities. New enmities will further deter the building of Dharma relationships, affinities that will allow us to teach the Dharma to others once we are born in the Pure Land and uncover our innate abilities.

Patience is not just about endurance.

Or about awaiting better conditions. Because irritations and setbacks test our patience, they are opportunities to help us deepen our patience, which will in turn, help us to advance on the path to liberation.

December 28

*Emotional reactions
to suffering are useless.
Alleviate them.*

News is everywhere. On our phones, the Internet. On social media, the TV. The list is long and the onslaught nonstop. Wishing to be informed world citizens, we read, watch, listen. And to the suffering that we see depicted before us, we react with emotions ranging from sadness to anger. These reactions, we believe, are how caring people would react.

But if emotional responses are all we can muster, what will they accomplish? One more person suffering—us! This helps no one, not those caught in the dire situation, nor us.

If we can do something to improve the situation for others, then we try to do so. For if all we can do is to watch helplessly, what will we accomplish? We'll only add to the shared angst in the world.

What should we do instead when there is nothing we can do about what we see?

Our Daily Practice:

We can remain calm.

We chant the buddha-name.

Slowly, over time, we will thus end the counter-productive whirlpool of our own emotions.

December 29

How to be prepared for anything.

What do I do if . . . ?” “But what if . . . ?” “That’s all well and good for you, but what should I do if . . . ?”

The answer to all the highly stressed questions is—calm your mind. Yes, staying calm is a good first step.

Wanting to be prepared and hoping to act prudently, we find ourselves tempted to imagine various scenarios so that we can plan how to react to them. The problem is, life’s preplanned solutions very rarely (if ever!) pan out. While we spent time preparing for one scenario, another occurs that varies just enough that our plan becomes useless.

It would be much better to spend our time calming our mind so that we remain calm and ready regardless of the situation.

When the mind is tranquil, there is no panic.

Not panicking, we are better equipped to consider the situation.

Our Daily Practice:

Considering the situation calmly, we have a better chance of not making mistakes.

Avoiding mistakes, we will spend less time trying to undo any harm we might do.

All this from having a calm mind.

December 30

*“Accept
what fate gives you
outside of your own power of choice.”*

Marcus Aurelius wrote the above. As Buddhists, we also speak of acceptance. There are things we cannot change, like decisions made by others. But there are things we can change—our mindset and habits, for example. By accepting that we cannot control or change what others are doing, we can stop wasting time fussing over them.

Try telling yourself this: *What’s the point! Fussing will change nothing. I am wasted. My energy is drained. And time, so little of it available, is gone. Yes, I will accept. No more fussing, no more wasting of time. Instead, I will use it to work on things I want to work on, things within my power to change. Like all those pesky bad habits! I will no longer be negative. I will exude a positive frame of mind. Yes, the things over which I have the power to change have proven unyielding in the past, but I am not giving up. I am just as determined as they are stubborn.*

Miles ahead of pointless fussing.

December 31

There is no better time than now.

When I have a room dedicated to my practice, I'll start chanting every day. When I have the time, I'll start listening daily to a Dharma talk or reading a book on the teachings.

These are some of the things we tell ourselves. But if we wait for the ideal setting or surroundings before getting truly serious about our practice and learning, we'll be waiting forever. The perfect conditions are not to be found here in our world. Instead of hoping for them, we need to start right now, right here, with whatever we have, wherever we are.

Don't have that dedicated practice room? Well, since most of us chant with our eyes closed, a fully-decorated dedicated space isn't required—just a calm mind.

And while dedicating sizable chunks of time to reading and listening to the Dharma is ideal, shorter sessions are also OK.

We don't start with perfect conditions. We create them.

How? By chanting and learning every day, even if only for a brief time in the plainest space.

When? Right now.

Why? Very truly—there is no better time than now.

Dedication of Merit

May the merits and virtues
accrued from this work
adorn the Buddha's pure land,
repay the four kinds of kindness above,
and relieve the sufferings of those
in the three paths below.

May all those
who see and hear of this
bring forth the bodhi mind
and at the end of this life,
be born together
in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

