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From the Abbot
Every Day Is a Good Day

Master Ummon, founder of one of the five houses of Zen, said to his assembled students, “I don’t ask you about the days before the fifteenth of the month. What about after the fifteenth? Say something about those days.” As he often did, he answered his own question: “Every day is a good day.”

In the lunar calendar, the fifteenth of the month refers to the full moon, which represents awakened mind. Ummon wasn’t asking about the days before realization. His “every day is a good day” was not dependent upon the circumstances and conditions of those days.

When one feels stuck in the days “before the fifteenth,” no matter what the calendar reads, one may experience a high degree of irritability and reactivity. Caught up in fear and loathing, distraction and withdrawal, grief and fixation, it’s hard to feel that every day is a good day, especially when every day brings news of decisions likely to result in further suffering.

We may think that if our practice were correct, we wouldn’t feel those negative emotions. But what is correct practice? Not to avoid, not to run from these feelings, but to be aware of them with compassion: acknowledging, but not being controlled by them. It’s a very different experience. When we’re aware of the irritation that’s lurking just beneath the surface, it’s less likely that it’s going to jump out and bash somebody in the head.

Using what Pema Chodron calls “compassionate inquiry,” we can note when we’ve been hooked, and observe the story lines we’ve created around our circumstances. In her book *Taking the Leap*, she writes that her teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, spoke of practice as just being completely present. “It was not, as he put it, ‘a vacation from irritation.’”

If we are completely present to whatever is arising, we can be willing to stretch beyond our self-imposed limits; to endure what may seem unendurable. This is our vow, after all—to be here for it, as it is now, whether or not we approve or feel it’s the way it should be. Who really follows our dictates, anyway!

Most of us know the expression, “the finger pointing at the moon.” Out of ignorance or laziness, we may take the finger for the moon, conceptualizing about enlightenment, based on reading about someone else’s experience. It is essential to realize full-moon mind for oneself. We have to turn off the computer, muzzle the phone, shut the book, and just sit down, attending to nothing but each exhalation, breath after breath, becoming the moon, not getting lost in the highways and byways of intellectual evaluation and judgment, but just seeing into boundless truth beyond words and phrases.

We have been given this precious human birth so that we can live our bodhisattva vow, relinquishing our preferential mind and self-absorption, and devoting ourselves instead to living by the Six Paramitas: generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, zazen, and wisdom. Or even more simply, to the Three Fundamental Precepts: Do not engage in harmful acts; do engage in beneficial acts; keep your mind pure.

Trungpa Rinpoche said, “Taking the bodhisattva vow implies that instead of holding our own individual territory and defending it tooth and nail, we become open to the world that we are living in. It means we are willing to take on greater responsibility, immense responsibility. In fact, it means taking a big chance. But taking such a chance is not false heroism or personal eccentricity. It is a chance that has been taken in the past by millions of bodhisattvas, enlightened ones, and great teachers. So a tradition of responsibility and openness has been handed down from generation to generation, and now we too are participating in the sanity and dignity of this tradition.”

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“Now we too are participating.” This is what the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. did with his life. He took responsibility, took a big chance. He led the nonviolent struggle to end segregation, and marched for racial and economic justice. He gave his life for that struggle.

“Hate,” MLK said in 1957—six decades ago— “destroys the very structure of the personality of the hater. The way to be integrated with yourself is to be sure that you meet every situation of life with an abounding love...Love has within it a redemptive power.”

Buddha said in the *Dhammapada*, “Hatred can never put an end to hatred; love alone can. This is an unalterable law.”

Feeling as if we’re getting swept away by negativity, we can remind ourselves that hatred breeds more hatred, resulting in unending cycles of misery. Just because there are people who are ignorant of the underlying truth of interdependence does not mean we should contribute to that ignorance. We don’t need to hate the haters. We can STOP! And return to this very breath.

When we return, we’re in time out of time—you know the saying, there’s no time like the present? What Ummon is calling us to experience is, there’s no time *in* the present. The open, attentive mind, the mind of radical acceptance, excludes no one, no situation, no suffering—it’s an embrace that comes from the realization of our utter unity. But this oneness does not mean there’s a blissful realm to which we adhere. There’s no fixed point at which we can say, this is the fifteenth—this is the present. When we try to capture that present mind, where is it? Already gone! As the *Diamond Sutra* reminds us, “Past mind cannot be recalled; present mind cannot be held; future mind cannot be grasped.”

So what about the days after the fifteenth? Experiencing the radical present doesn’t mean detaching from what comes next. It doesn’t confer oblivion. We can’t just say, “All right, let’s just get back to business as usual,” because there is no usual to get back to. The bubble of complacency, of apathy, has been pierced, and it’s up to us to face what had long been conveniently ignored. What had been lurking below the surface has erupted. Now it’s up to us to take responsibility, to take a big chance, to respond with courage and loving discernment.

These days after the fifteenth are a moment-by-moment actualization of our bodhisattva vow. And when we vow to save all beings, we are simultaneously realizing interdependence. There are no “others” to save. The refugee, the immigrant, the addict, the homeless person—they *are* us. So are those whose values and political views differ from ours. Seeing them as separate, undeserving of our care and concern, perpetuates everyone’s suffering.

So we sit, with dedication and consistency, “with faith and understanding,” as the *Diamond Sutra* says, not pondering whether or not we want to do it, or can take the time to do it. We just do it. When we practice sincerely this way, it’s not a matter of successful *zazen* or effective *zazen*; when we drop self-evaluation, each sitting has an unending ripple effect of positive energy. The simple repetition of that which is unrepeatable allows us to respond from the *hara*, from the heart. There’s no formula! Each situation demands complete, one-pointed awareness; then, we can discern right action; when we get there, we’ll know what to do, as Rinzai put it.

When we become intimate with the reality that is not bound by any declaration or national event or international emergency or any phenomenon at all—when we experience just this moment, the full moon of it, as it is—then we naturally feel a motivation and resolve greater than any we’ve ever experienced before.

Coming from this intimacy, we can have the courage to resist oppression and injustice in ways that unite rather than divide us. “May we completely realize and actualize the Tathagata’s teaching,” we recite in “Opening This Dharma.” This is our prayer; this is our vow; this is our pledge: to realize and actualize our full-moon mind, thought by thought, day by day, every day.