

How to Universally Apply Buddhism in Daily Life

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Source text: 《福慧隨身書》 No.005 《道在平常日用中》

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Understanding and Practice: Part of Daily Life

It has been thirty years since the inception of *Bodhedrum* [Buddhist magazine], and this year is the thirtieth anniversary of this magazine. In the circle of Buddhist magazine [publishers], devotee Zhu Fei has tirelessly worked for this magazine as the editor and overall manager all these years, which is truly rare and precious.

To commemorate this thirtieth anniversary, a special edition will be published with the keynote focusing on “how to universally apply Buddhism in daily life.” This topic is not only extremely important in relation to [the comprehension of] Buddhism and [future development of] modern Chinese Buddhism but also very apt and timely, making it worthy of serious consideration by the Buddhist circle.

We all know that the Buddha-dharma taught by the Buddha differs from the dogma that faith-based theistic religions advocate. Buddhism is a religion integrated with rationality, virtuous conduct, and humanity. Therefore, the practice of Buddhism is for no other purpose than to discipline our mental and bodily activities and purify our body and mind so that we can attain mental and bodily freedom. Buddhism is not externally oriented toward seeking material and/or divine powers for assistance and salvation. Rather, Buddhist practice starts from self-training of one's body and mind to realize the ideal of benefiting oneself and others. If one is able to accept, embrace, and follow the Buddha-dharma, then naturally, one will universally apply it to their everyday life.

With faith and practice under the guidance of the Buddha-dharma, one will establish the proper, right views and earnest motives, and one's wisdom and compassion will continuously grow. However, over the years of propagation and due to the transmission of Buddhism from India to China, some teachings have inclined toward superstition, ceremonies, and intellectualism. This may be a result of adapting to worldly situations or due to the use of skillful means to cater to those with low spiritual capacity. Consequently, Buddhists' understanding and practices gradually became disconnected from their daily life. This is a problem that everyone should pay attention to.

Pure and Liberated Body and Mind: Essential in Daily Life

We should know that to universally apply Buddhism in daily life does not mean that we are to occupy ourselves each day with reciting *sūtras*, practicing prostrations and repentance, or undertaking special services for the hungry ghosts. Nor are we to spend our days studying the scriptures, giving lectures on the *sūtras*, writing articles on Buddhism, reciting a buddha's name, chanting mantras, being vegetarian, or saving lives [of animals destined to be killed]. Nor is it that we are to constantly attend service ceremonies, make donations and offerings, repair and build monasteries, establish Buddhist schools, undertake cultural and charity work, or live in a hermitage to practice, and so on. All these activities may align with the Buddha-dharma, but they may also simply be [superficial] appearances. For modern Chinese Buddhism, these practices are not insubstantial, in which the activities of reciting a buddha's name, chanting mantras, building large monasteries and buddha statues have been particularly popular in the last twenty years or so.

A [true] follower and practitioner of Buddhism should aim to discipline and purify their own bodily and mental activities and even progress to attaining the virtuous capacity of liberation and carefreeness of body and mind. If we forget about this essential true meaning [of self-discipline and purification], we cannot be regarded as universally applying Buddhism in daily life even though we may engage in the promotion of the dharma to benefit sentient beings through cultural, charitable, educational, and international Buddhist activities. At this time and place, the question of how to universally apply Buddhism in daily life, I feel, deserves Buddhist practitioners' deliberation.

To universally apply Buddhism in daily life is, essentially, to discipline and purify our own bodily and mental activities and to attain the virtuous capacity for the liberation of body and mind when learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma. The Buddha-dharma is not an abstract and abstruse theory or a mystical and strange practice. What the Buddha taught is understandable and feasible for the ordinary person. The Buddha said, "The amount of dharma I have revealed is like the soil caught in one's fingernails, while the dharma I have not expounded is like the soil covering the earth." This statement means that the Buddha taught only the righteous dharma that centered on wholesome human practices, which lead practitioners to the ultimate [goal].

In this world, there are many worldly philosophies and practices. Even if these were beneficial to this world, the Buddha simply did not discuss them because they have no bearing on the goal of purifying one's own body and mind in order to reach liberation. (This is also because people would naturally promote these worldly philosophies and practices; as the *sūtras* explain, they are worldly wholesome deeds that cater to the needs of the world.) The Buddha pointed out the fact of delusional cyclic existence and the possibility of true liberation directly through the teaching centered on the body and minds of humans (sentient beings). Buddha encouraged, persuaded, and guided people to undertake [proper] practices. When the Buddha taught about all the things connected to the body and mind (which are also related to the external world), such as the five aggregates, six elements, and six sense faculties, he was merely presenting different analyses from diverse perspectives [on the same subject].

Understanding: The Guide for and Result of Practice

The Buddha-dharma can be split into understanding and practice. Understanding is the initial guide for practicing, and it also acts as the end result of practice (understanding and practice cannot be separated).

Attaining Liberation through Right Understanding of Dependent Co-arising, Impermanence, Suffering, and Selflessness

Regarding understanding, it is referred to as right view, right intention, right discernment, knowing things correctly, and so on, in the *sūtras*. Body and mind refer to the activities of the body and mind that are led by the sixth consciousness. No matter whether these activities are connected to oneself or others (humans and other sentient beings) or are in relation to the material world, whether they are carried out in the present, from the past to the present, or from the present to the future, the Buddha said that all arise from [causes and] conditions, and “what I expound is focused on causes [and conditions of all phenomena].” The Buddha understands this world and addresses [the issues of] this world according to the principle that things mutually rely on each other to arise and exist.

According to the teaching of dependent co-arising, it is said, “When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.”¹ Following this, one does not fall into the extremes [of existence or annihilation]. Based on this, the Buddha thus taught the middle path of neither existing nor nonexisting, neither permanent nor impermanent, neither the same nor different, neither coming nor going, and neither arising nor ceasing. Anything that arises from [causes and] conditions will inevitably cease to be; therefore, it is impermanent. That which is impermanent is not ultimately secure; therefore, it is suffering. That which is impermanent and suffering is thus selfless ([true] self must be real, permanent, and [full of] joy).

¹ The translation follows Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Bloomington: Wisdom Publications, 2000), page 596.

Sentient beings are unable to comprehend that [everything in] this world is dependent co-arisen, and so they are unable to correctly understand impermanence, suffering, absence of a real self, and that which belongs to the self. Therefore, they are unable to attain the liberation of nirvana. This is called “ignorance” (which can simply be referred to as not understanding the causes of suffering and the cessation of suffering), and all defilements arise therein. Defilements arise from a self and that which belongs to the self. That is, grasping a self and that which belongs to the self is [an erroneous] view, clinging onto the self and that which belongs to the self is craving, and centering on the self and relying on the self [to dominate others] is arrogance. Moreover, perceptions and behaviors arise from defilements that revolve around the self. If these thoughts and behaviors contradict the mutual reliance of dependent co-arising and cause self-benefit at the harm of others (a person, race, country, and so on), then these are unwholesome behaviors (karma) and belong to unrighteousness. If [our behaviors] accord with dependent co-arising and are mutually beneficial, then they are wholesome behaviors and belong to righteousness. Wholesome and unwholesome behaviors will result in peaceful happiness and suffering, respectively. Nevertheless, [these wholesome and unwholesome behaviors] are not perfect and contain defilements,² which is the [cause of] endless cyclic existence. This occurs when one is unable to correctly know dependent co-arising. If one does correctly know dependent co-arising and behaves according to the dharma/righteousness, then loathing [toward this world] arises as a result of seeing impermanence and suffering, and one will be free from desires (detached from defilements) through insight into the absence of a self and that which belongs to a self. Then one can [finally] attain liberation and realize cessation (the ending of the suffering of both body and mind).

Right Confidence: The Result of Right Understanding and Right Views

The Buddha-dharma is simply a teaching that reveals the cause of suffering and the middle path that ceases suffering, which is expounded on the basis of the dependent co-arising in relation to body and mind, which are led by consciousness. When learning

² Here, defilements refer to the self-centered thoughts that may accompany wholesome deeds. For example, one may give to the poor for the sake of being praised and rather than wanting to help the poor.

the Buddha-dharma, one must possess the essential right view concerning dependent co-arising. Possessing the right view does not simply mean to know; rather, it is a result of transforming this correct knowledge into a personal conviction. With right view, there will be right confidence. [In Buddhism,] confidence is [defined as] the ability to purify, just as a water purification tablet can purify dirty water. When genuine confidence arises in the mind, there will certainly be no defilements and no suffering, and the mind will be filled with purity, peace, and joy. As such, one can then be regarded as a true disciple who has taken refuge in the triple gem.

The [concept of] genuine confidence taught in the Buddha-dharma is completely different from the worldly concept of faith. When someone (or a certain book) says something, and we accept it to be true, this is generally called “belief” and is merely to make sure something is the case, just like believing that one plus one equals two. In addition, [there is the situation where] one concurs, agrees with a person and what they teach, and accepts what they say. Generally, this too is called belief. This [situation] is just like believing in an ism or in a leader, which in reality is just the worldly belief with submission. The worldly characteristics of believing in intuition, fate, feng shui, and so on, all fall within these two types [of worldly beliefs].

Genuine confidence, as taught in the Buddha-dharma, arises from reliance on the triple gem. It is the result of mental activities and brings about qualities of purity, joy, and so on. This genuine confidence is initiated from right understanding and right views, which in turn arises from rationality. Therefore, genuine confidence brings about calmness. Although it [genuine confidence] may be similar to faith in a theistic religion, it will not cause one to fall into fanatical delusion.

Foundations for Learning the Buddha-dharma

When we look at the situation, followers of Chinese Buddhism are large in number. Many have faith in the Buddha and sages—arhats and bodhisattvas—and yet there are few who have faith in the Buddha-dharma. They do not understand the Buddha-dharma and do not believe in the dharma; consequently, they cannot differentiate between gods and buddhas (recently, and surprisingly, some argue that if one believes in the Buddha, one must also believe in gods). Regarding the buddhas, arhats, and bodhisattvas, many

[people] hold a faith that is mystic-based and worship them with the same frame of mind as faith in a god. Therefore, on the one hand, they believe in the great powers of buddhas and (noble) sages and seek their blessings. On the other hand, for the purpose of gaining present-life and future-life benefits—such as good health, longevity, fortune, a good family, a good career, and avoidance of the three lower realms—many followers undertake religious activities to deter calamities, generate merit, and bring about longevity. Even though these can be regarded as skillful ways to cater to certain devotees, genuine confidence will not arise in them if their focus is on seeking external [benefits] rather than on internally investigating their own body and mind. In such a case, how is it possible that Buddhism is universally applied in daily life?

In this era of focusing on material desires and seeking external things, it is not easy for Buddhists to thoroughly awaken to dependent co-arising and loathe [this world], be free from desires, and attain cessation. The confidence that Buddhists should be able to develop is based on understanding the mutual reliance that is referred to as the principle of dependent co-arising and on deeply believing in the inevitable law of cause and effect spanning three periods of time,³ where wholesome deeds result in happiness, and unwholesome deeds result in suffering.

The law of cause and effect, which reveals that wholesome deeds result in happiness and unwholesome deeds result in suffering, has the following key points: (1) it is we who create [our future] and not others, (2) opportunities are equally available and not selective, (3) the future is optimistic and not pessimistic, and (4) wholesome and unwholesome [deeds] have their respective retributions without uncertainty. One who has a firm belief in the law of cause and effect believes that proper behavior founded on right view will be the power to improve their future and change their old [bad] ways for the better. We should no longer blame the heavens [gods] or other people [and instead] should do our best to improve ourselves. We should not let the determination to give up bad ways and undertake wholesome deeds be swayed by any unfortunate circumstances we face in the present. If we have a firm belief in the law of cause and effect and apply it to daily life, we can then manifest the spirit of the Buddha-dharma.

³ “Three periods of time” refers to the past, present, and future.

When the Buddhist teaching on the law of cause and effect spanning three periods of time was introduced to Chinese Buddhists, although they appeared to believe it, they also had their doubts about it and continued to hold the mindset of flaking it or seeking self-benefit by cutting corners. Many refused to behave in accordance with the principle—that is, to undertake the right human practice of giving up unwholesome deeds and undertaking wholesome deeds. On the contrary, the ancient Chinese practices of fortune-telling,⁴ feng shui, and so on, were heavily incorporated into [Chinese] Buddhism and permitted by many senior and highly regarded Buddhists. The [adopted,] debased practices in the Buddhist circle that seek [divine] help and are similar to black magic are delusive and not genuine.

Right faith in the triple gem and firm belief in cause and effect are the foundations of learning Buddhism. Therefore, only by having right faith and dispelling all improper beliefs can Buddhism be universally applied in daily life.

Through Proper Understanding, Right View is Nurtured, and Eventually Faith and Wisdom Function as One

Genuine confidence depends on right view. In turn, right view comes from proper, thorough, and right understanding. Such right understanding in Buddhism comes from listening [to and learning the teachings]. Initially, disciples listened to the Buddha's teachings, and the disciples then passed down the teachings to others. It was only when the compilation of the teachings [after the Buddha's passing] took on the form of written records that learning the dharma from [reading] the scriptures became possible. For the sake of clarifying the meaning of the Buddha-dharma and ensuring that the meaning was correct, detailed systematic treatises were further established after long periods of debate among disciples. Additionally, to address the challenges from followers of other religions, there arose the need to protect the Buddha-dharma by elucidating the meaning of the dharma in-depth. However, as the elucidation [of the Buddha-dharma] developed, no stone was left unturned, and the treatises consequently became quite pedantic. In terms of an explanation of the dharma, many explications arose as a result of the split of the Buddhist monastic community into different schools.

⁴ This is referring to the use of bamboo sticks inscribed with numbers, which correspond to Chinese sayings. A person seeks an answer from an oracle like a deity, and the answer is revealed in the bamboo stick that they draw out. Answers are often cryptic, and the assistance of the fortune-teller is required in order to interpret the meaning.

Moreover, the process of the Buddha-dharma's transmission occurred over a long period during which there arose teachings possessing countless skillful means to cater to audiences of diverse spiritual capacities in differing times and regions. Regardless of whether they were the teachings transmitted from India or those interpreted by the ancient Chinese masters, all of them cover a vast array of topics and have a tendency toward elucidation based on doctrinal studies.⁵

The expansion and evolution of the Buddha-dharma was an inevitable and unavoidable occurrence. Nevertheless, the subjects became multifarious and the contents very complex. Accordingly, it is no mean feat for a beginner [who is starting to learn the dharma] to decide which *sūtra* best garners the essence of the Buddha-dharma so that the beginner can develop right faith on the basis of right understanding. Therefore, it is no wonder that some people who were more intelligent became inclined to the abstruse [theories] upon undertaking deep investigations into the dharma. As a result, the doctrinal studies turned into the activities among a small circle of Buddhists. Conversely, those who had less spiritual capacity believed in the Buddha but did not know to believe in the dharma (there were some who believed in the dharma, but their belief was only in the sense of believing in a certain *sūtra*'s powers, and they recited that *sūtra* to seek blessings and merits), and unavoidably they would become captivated by skillful means and turn to worldly benefits for this present life.

By relying on right view that accords with the Buddha-dharma, there will arise the attainment of confirmed confidence, which is the state where confidence and wisdom function as one. I feel that attaining confirmed confidence does not necessarily require limitless research and countless lectures on the dharma's meaning. [For example,] Cūḍapānṭhaka⁶ was not intelligent but still realized Arhathood. In addition, Venerable Huineng in the Tang dynasty was illiterate but had profound insights [into the dharma]. It is simply that in this age of the dharma's decline, good spiritual guides are hard to come by, so we must rely on the *sūtras* and treatises. Clear and concise demonstration of the Buddha-dharma's true meanings (the fundamental doctrine that is the core of all

⁵ "Doctrinal studies" is a translation of the Chinese 義學 (*yìxué*), which refers to study of the *sūtras* to discern the underlying meanings in the teachings. These forms of study tended to be more like the *abhidharma* studies and were therefore meticulous, detailed, complex, and not easy for the ordinary person to comprehend.

⁶ Also spelled *Śuddhipānṭhaka* or *Kṣudrapānṭhaka* in Sanskrit.

[the teachings in] the Buddha-dharma) is crucial for the sake of propagating the righteous dharma and bringing about right faith to the followers.

Nowadays, lectures and studies on the *sūtras* and treatises, as well as the more recent academic style of research [into the dharma], have their value, of course. However, these intellectual activities do not necessarily cause one to initiate right faith from their proper understanding and then further cause the Buddha-dharma to become deeply immersed in researchers' hearts such that they can universally apply Buddhism in their daily life. This is even more so for lecturers and researchers who lecture for the sake of lecturing or research for the sake of researching. These [types of] lecturers and researchers cannot generate right faith from their lectures and research, which is relatively meaningless from the aspect of practicing Buddhism. As for the doctrines, it is also worthwhile to attend to the issue of which ones are more feasible in terms of the application of the Buddha-dharma in our lives.

Practice: Benefiting Oneself and Others

Regarding practice [that is related to the feasible doctrines], it is the noble eightfold path in terms of the *Śrāvakayāna*. In the bodhisattva path, it consists of the six *pāramitās* and the four all-embracing virtues. Generally speaking, the practices that benefit oneself mainly focus on precepts [morality], concentration [meditation], and wisdom. As for the practices that benefit others, generosity, precepts, and tolerance are the primary factors.

Confidence: The Entryway to Buddhism

In Buddhism, practice is motivated by genuine confidence (which in turn comes from right view). It is said that aspiration depends on genuine confidence, and diligence depends on aspiration. This means that once genuine confidence is established, it will generate aspiration, and one will make the vows to practice diligently in accord with the dharma. The essence, both of taking refuge in the triple gem of the three-vehicle path and of making the bodhi vow of the bodhisattva path, refers to genuine confidence and aspiration. When there is aspiration (longing) and a goal is set (this is called

“making the vow”), one is able to generate diligence and strive to practice for the sake of realizing one’s ideals. Therefore, relying on right understanding to generate genuine confidence is the entryway to Buddhism for all Buddhist practitioners.

Wholesome Precepts: The Foundations for Learning Buddhism

During the process of practice, morality is the foundation of the noble path. Generally, Buddhists consider morality (like the law) as just [rules] indicating that one must not contravene this or should not do that. They do not realize that this is merely a part of morality, which is in the form of operational articles and is not the essence of the precepts.

So what is morality? The Sanskrit word *śīla* is translated as morality. [In the *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* it says,] “*Śīla* (innate wholesomeness in the Qin [dynasty] language): wholeheartedly following the good path without letting oneself be negligent [in wholesomeness], is referred to as *śīla*. Practicing the wholesome deeds, whether one has made the vow to uphold the precepts or not, is called *śīla*.”⁷ Morality refers to “innate wholesomeness” that has developed from “habitual tendency.” Precepts do not refer to general good behavior; rather, they are inspired by our parents, teachers, friends, or our own experience in this world. When our hearts are deeply touched and inspired, strength of innate wholesomeness (latently) develops. This is a strength that courageously advocates wholesomeness and opposes unwholesomeness such that when we meet with the conditions to commit unwholesome deeds, our inner mind (unknowingly) brings forth the strength to defy [temptations].

Innate wholesomeness is latent and continuously grows day and night. If we have a minor infraction, the virtue of morality remains. However, if small infractions are made often, then the strength of morality will diminish (referred to as “morality with little strength”). If the infraction is severe, [causing] the strength of wholesomeness to

⁷ *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, Fascicle 13, 「尸羅(秦言性善), 好行善道, 不自放逸, 是名尸羅。或受戒行善, 或不受戒行善, 皆名尸羅。」《大智度論》卷 13 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 0153, b9–10)

Editorial Note: The Qin dynasty here refers to Later Qin (384–417 CE), which was the kingdom where the translator of this treatise, Kumārajīva, undertook his translation.

dissolve completely, this is [considered] breaking morality. The virtue of innate wholesomeness is called *saṃvara* (also translated as protection), which is precisely what the Buddha-dharma refers to as “essence of morality.” This type of wholesome morality can still arise [in people] during times when there is no Buddha-dharma. It can also arise in people who do not know the Buddha-dharma during the times when the Buddha-dharma is existent. However, there is a difference. During the time when there is the Buddha-dharma, it provides practitioners with right view as guidance; therefore, the performance of ceasing unwholesomeness and carrying out wholesomeness becomes more righteous and stronger and may have less bias.

Relying on the virtue of innate wholesomeness, the actions of body, speech, and thought will all accord with the dharma as we go about our daily lives. On account of differences in lifestyle, societal relationships, and community norms, there are different types of precepts in Buddhism, such as for laypeople and for monastics in order to cater for these situations. Regardless [of which types of precepts are upheld], the essence of the virtues is the same. The virtues [of upholding precepts] are accomplished through the deeds that benefit oneself and others on the basis of the strength of innate wholesomeness. Innate wholesomeness may arise in those who have not taken up the precepts or who have only vowed to uphold the five precepts. In either case, it can be a foundation for the path toward liberation. If one lacks [innate wholesomeness], it is not definite that one will possess the wholesome roots of liberation even if one vows to uphold the monastic precepts or bodhisattva precepts strictly during the ceremony.⁸ Therefore, this innate wholesomeness that arises from deep within us is the [true] essence behind [the practice of] vowing to take the precepts and uphold the precepts.

Over the past thirty years in my country, there have been annual ceremonial events for taking the precepts. Although the precepts are conferred properly according to ceremonial rites, among those who have taken the precepts, only a few can dedicate themselves to routine practice. Hence, it is no surprise that [Buddhists are currently] unable to apply the Buddha-dharma universally in daily life.

⁸ This means that although they may have taken the vow to uphold the various precepts they may lack the continuous practice of upholding the precepts or may often violate precepts without proper repentance.

Relying on Confidence and Precepts to Further Cultivate Concentration and Wisdom

Genuine confidence refers to the accomplishment of indestructible confidence in the Buddha, dharma, and *saṃgha* and the accomplishment of innate wholesomeness longed for by all the noble ones. Accomplishing the four indestructible confidences, consisting of both [genuine] confidence and [wholesome] morality, ensures that one is certain to never regress and is destined to attain Buddhahood. If one then further progresses to cultivate concentration and wisdom, then in this very life, they may attain liberation.

Within Buddhism, genuine confidence is the entryway to the Buddha-dharma, and wholesome morality is the foundation for the practice. The more advanced stages of concentration and wisdom, and their realization, cannot be accomplished independently of confidence and morality. The *sūtras* say that by upholding the precepts, there is freedom from remorse; with freedom from remorse, there is happiness; with happiness, there is delight; with delight, there is tranquility; with tranquility, there is bliss; and with bliss, there is concentration. Relying on morality to cultivate concentration is a rational [way] to advance our practice, just as when sailing with the current, one can reach the destination easily. Cultivating concentration requires us first to abandon the five desires and unwholesome factors, which is exactly the meaning [of morality]. Some followers cultivate concentration for purposes such as achieving good health or gaining supernatural experiences. They do not abandon desires or cease unwholesome deeds but focus their attention on their breath or body. Even though they manage to maintain single focus of the mind, they would be extremely fortunate not to fall into deviant concentrations and become part of Mara's entourage.⁹ This is not the type of pure concentration (defiled or undefiled) that Buddhists [should] aim to develop. As for the realization of wisdom, Nāgārjuna said, "If one aspires to realize emptiness but has no virtues of faith and precepts as a foundation, their viewpoint on emptiness is erroneous." The actual realization of the emptiness of equality is definitely not what one lacking in confidence and precepts can accomplish. Although confidence and morality are commonly discussed by all Buddhists, their [practice] is less widespread

⁹ "Mara" refers to the Buddha's enemy who tried using various ways to distract the prince when he was still practicing to attain enlightenment. Figuratively, Mara represents the force of evil (the passions) that prevents sentient beings from attaining liberation.

than commonly presumed. This is why Buddhism is [currently] unable to be universally applied in daily life.

Since I became a monk, I have been occupied with exploring the texts of the Buddhist canon all day. Although I vow to research for the benefit of sentient beings and hope to garner the essence as an offering to the people of this world, I have only managed to extract bits and pieces in this vast ocean of the dharma, and what I have attained is limited. I must say I feel ashamed. I always feel that, essentially, the Buddha-dharma is simple and feasible. However, “those who are capable overshoot it while those who are incapable do not reach it.” This is why although Buddhism flourishes, it also becomes worse. Now I take this opportunity of celebrating the anniversary of this magazine to briefly outline my thoughts as [a source of] encouragement to all those who truly want to practice Buddhism.