



Dharma Seeds

Meditation Journal for
Prisoners

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Zen Venerable & Dharma Seeds

While attending the 5th Annual Oklahoma Buddhism conference I was privileged to meet Venerable Jian Hu. He is the Abbot of the Buddha Gate Monastery in Lafayette, California. I was speaking at the conference about Nichiren Buddhism and Prison Dharma work. The Venerable said positive things about prison dharma work and for some reason I was struck with his sincere approach to the Dharma.

The next day I spent about 7 hours with him and other dharma students. We all learned so much. Even more so I began to share more of the burden I had in getting qualified dharma instructors in prisons or even to write to them. He graciously accepted to begin to work on this and through his monastery and lineage reach out to those seeking dharma in prisons.

It has been 7 years since I have

paroled and my success is 100% associated by the dharma and practices I begun in prison. I know first hand how you can change, inside out, literally, while using their time in prison to learn new spiritual truths and disciplines. I am also excited to think now that more prisoners are going to be able soon to

have dharma instructions from a wonderful dedicated group of Chinese Mahayana Zen Buddhists. The Venerable even graciously allowed me to share some of his teachings within Dharma Seeds. I am truly thankful for this auspicious occurrence.



Venerable Jian Hu and Mark Maxey, at the new Buddha Mind Temple opening in the Summer of 2004 in Midwest City, OK.

Changes for Dharma Seeds

You will see with this issue some new changes in the format of Dharma Seeds. We now offer dharma lessons from formally trained monks. I am happy to see this change, as it will give you a chance to taste the Dharma and learn from the masters. I myself am learning and feel that monks can offer us better teachings than what I can. I wanted you to

get the best teachings. Dharma Seeds will also begin to publish dharma stories from prisoners. You can submit your own story, lesson or artwork for publication. I want to also encourage you to write in your questions you have about meditation or the dharma. We will publish the answers in upcoming issues. These changes are due to our

dedication in making all prisoners aware of true meditation and Dharma teachings so you can change your life. I know first hand how one can use the Dharma and be successful once you are paroled. I want to give back to others so you too can be successful. Enjoy the changes in Dharma Seeds and yourself. Peace be with you.

Inside this issue:

<i>Ven. Jian Hu and New Changes for Journal</i>	1
<i>How To Change Your Life-</i>	2-5
<i>Oklahoma Buddhist Conference</i>	5
Humility by Joseph R. Crowe FL prisoner	6
<i>Resources for Prisoners</i>	7
<i>Submission Guidelines</i>	8
<i>Peace in Troublesome Times</i>	8

Dharma Seeds

- Quarterly journal for meditators in prison
- On going Dharma lessons to change your life
- Questions and Answers from prisoners
- Dharma articles from readers of Dharma Seeds
- Meditation and Self Help tools
- Pictures and artwork by prisoners and Dharma Seeds, Mark Maxey

How To Change Your Life (used by permission from Buddha Gate Monastery) (Transcribed from discourse given in Meditation I class, Dec. 29, 2000)

Good evening cultivators! We are learning to observe the breath. That is the first step in meditation. We are learning to observe, observe things as they are.

Now this is what awakening is all about. The Buddha was a fully awakened person. Awakened or enlightenment means to see, to understand things as they really are. Understand everything: the world, the universe, your mind, people, and all other beings. Understand them and the self for what they are--not for what you think they are

Impermanence Is A Fact of Life

We are not called Buddhas, we are not enlightened because we do not see the reality of things. We do not see impermanence as a fact of life. Observe how impermanence is a fundamental element in life. Think about how everything changes throughout your life, how everything comes to pass. New things come and go. Impermanence is all around us.

Suffering is the first of the fundamental truths that the Buddha taught in the Four Noble Truths. This first truth, suffering, is closely associated with impermanence. "Oh, our loved ones have departed," we would lament. "Such sorrow, such pain. Why did this happen?" We put the blame on life's impermanence.

But if you take a closer look, impermanence by itself does not cause suffering. If a stranger died, you would probably not feel any pain. Instead you may think, "People die all the time. That's life. All people must die one day."

What is the difference? The difference is that when we come to know a person, we become attached to that person, and that is what creates the pain. When we care about someone, often we also simultaneously create an illusion, an illusion of permanence. We think that the person will stay the same, will always be there. We do not recognize, we ignore, or we choose to ignore the reality that all things change. That is the problem. Now this does not mean that we should not form close relationships nor that we should not care about others. What is important is to accept reality when impermanence hits. Do not delude ourselves or escape from facts. Delusion is what prevents us from becoming enlightened. We create a lot of delusions about people, about the world.

It is very important to recognize this. Whatever relationships that we encounter--with parents and children, husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, friends and classmates--do we not always have this inherent belief that "things will stay the way it is; we will always be good friends; I will always have this good job?" But this thinking goes against reality, we are not observing reality as it is. When we live in this delusion, we ignore things, we choose not to see things, we lie to ourselves. Then when something happens we are shocked by it. In truth, the world changes continuously. A lot of different conditions come into being. A lot of different factors come into play--things are always changing.

So impermanence is a fact of life. That in itself is not painful; it is not the source of our problems. Not recognizing impermanence, instead creating an illusion that things will stay the way they are for a long time--that is the source of suffering. The more we get attached to things, the less we can accept it when they come to pass, and the more pain we feel. To see life for what it is, to accept things as they occur, is an important lesson for us all. You need not believe in what I have just said. In his teachings, the Buddha always encouraged people to examine things for themselves.

When we live in illusion of permanence, when we cling to the past, then we will not be ready for the present. When things happen we are surprised, displeased, thinking it is unfair. And we wonder about the future. At some time or another, we have probably all asked questions like, "Why do these things happen? Why was I born? Why do these good/ bad things happen to me instead of others? Why are some people born so rich? Why are some people so poor?" There are reasons. They are not accidents. There are reasons for everything.

Can The Future Be Foretold?

Many Chinese people in the olden times, and even nowadays, are very interested in fortune telling. "What's my future?" They want to go find out, and so there are many fortunetellers around. Few of them even seem to be somewhat accurate. But nobody is a hundred percent accurate all the time. Now in the western world, in these modern times, how do we view this? Is it a superstition? Can future really be foretold? We shall soon understand.

In the Ming Dynasty there was a well-known man named Yuan, Liao Fan. When he was about five or six years old, he met a fortuneteller, who foretold his life. He said, "You will take a government examination when you are eighteen. You will get this grade and pass. You will then obtain a certain position in the government." He even knew how much salary Liao Fan would get. "But," he continued, "you will only go this far. You will not be able to get very high in the government. You will get married at this age. You will have no children. And then, you will die at the age of fifty-three."

This is a true story. As Liao Fan grew up, everything that was foretold came true. When he took his government examinations, he got exactly the same grades, position, and salary that the fortuneteller predicted. He was amazed. "So life is predestined," he thought to himself. "What's the point in making an effort then?" So he came to believe that life and the future were all predetermined. How else was it possible for someone to foretell your future? "Things will just turn out the way it is supposed to. What would be the point of trying?" He stopped striving and took an easy life. He started traveling and sightseeing all over China.



One day he came upon a mountain. In that mountain was a monastery where a renowned Chan (Zen) master lived. He went in and saw the Chan master sitting in meditation. So Liao Fan sat down in meditation also. They sat that way for three days and three nights without moving. The Chan master was quite surprised. "This is no ordinary person," he thought. As we all know, having just sat through a half-an-hour session, that this was no easy feat!

The Chan master asked Liao Fan, "What experiences have you had in your life? How can you sit there without raising a single thought? You are very calm."

Liao Fan told the master about the fortune-teller and his predictions, and then added, "I came to the realization that everything in life is predetermined. What is the point of doing anything? What is the point in raising any thought? I just take life as it comes. Things will run their own course."

Upon hearing this, the Chan master laughed at him. "And here I thought you were someone extraordinary. Actually, you are only an ordinary man. Quite ordinary."

Liao Fan was a bit upset. He was bright. At the age of eighteen, he passed his official exams, and received a fairly decent governmental post. Back in those days, this also was not an easy task! He did quite well for himself and was proud of the fact too.

He asked, "Why do you say that I am an ordinary person?"

"When you were six, someone predicted your life. It's been twenty years since, and what he predicted is still true. This means that you are common like the rest," the Chan master's replied. "Ordinary people's lives can be foretold while exceptional ones cannot be. For the very virtuous and very immoral people, their lives cannot be foretold."

Liao Fan became curious.

Weaving The Future Pattern

The Chan master explained, "Why is it that your whole life can be prophesied? As you react to things the same way, a pattern forms. You don't really learn, you don't really change yourself. When someone gets angry with you, you get angry in return. When someone praises you, you are flattered, and then your pride becomes inflated. In the past you were like this, now you are like this, in the future you would still be like this. So the pattern continues."

Whenever we think or do something, something called karma is created. Karma is action, and actions have effects on the universe, the cosmos; karma has an effect in Dharma realm. Whatever you do, the retribution will come back to affect you. This concept is actually very scientific. Newton discovered that, when you apply a force, a same and equal force from the opposite direction will return; for every action there is a reaction. This is just one of the special cases of karmic law. When we perform good deeds, good things will happen to you. When you perform bad deeds, negative things will come back to you. Anything that you do, performing an action or deed, you create karma. A corresponding outcome will thus be created. Its effect will show in due time.

Now there are people in this world who can tell the future, see the future "patterns." Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, great cultivators, people with samadhi (people who have attained deep concentration states), they can see that. And then we have the fortunetellers who may also predict that. He may not be a Buddha or a cultivator. He may not even know how to meditate. But yet he can tell something about the future. Why? Simply put, fortune telling is based on statistics, a set of rules devised by observing many people and averaging out a common pattern. There are signs that one can learn to observe. Some people can look at your face and tell something about you. It is a matter of acute observations and following some rules.

What we have done throughout our lives leaves imprints in the mind. Your gestures and physical characteristics become extensions of these imprints. The Buddha sees that the body and the mind are not separate entities, they are one of the same. Your face, your body reflects your mind. If you can learn to perceive this, you would have the ability to know more about a person. But nobody can be a hundred percent accurate.

Your future is the accumulation of all your actions done up to the present moment. Everything done from the past up to now weaves a future pattern. This is just causality. If we never improve or change ourselves and we react to situations in the same manner, then basically everything will run accordingly. For example, if I slapped you, I would be able to tell your future. You would probably get angry or slap me right back. That is predicting the future. I took a probable guess and predicted your future reaction.

Then why is it that the lives of virtuous people cannot be determined? They do not fall into the norm. Very virtuous people examine their own actions closely; they are constantly improving themselves, and so change their future constantly. Thus their future becomes difficult to determine. The same holds true for very immoral people. Their minds are constantly going on the wrong track. They always create evil karma and thereby alter their lives for the worse. In both these cases, the actions have fallen out of the norm, out of the range of predictability for that of an average person.

So the Chan master told Liao Fan, "Why do I say that you are ordinary? Because the predictions still hold true. You are of the average lot."

"Are you saying then that I can change my future, that it doesn't always have to be this way?" asked Liao Fan.

"Yes, certainly. And I will teach you."

Understanding Causality

Now we come to a very profound concept: the causal relationship of all things. It is a fundamental Buddhist realization. If you wish to obtain a certain result, you need to do certain things. We need to examine, to recognize the right causal relationship of situations. You need to find the right cause and conditions that will create the right results. That is science. In fact, that is exactly what science and scientists do. They try to find the right causal relationships of things in the world.

If you do not want awful things to happen in the future, you can try to change it. As we have said, the future is determined by everything previous to it. Why did the fortuneteller predict that Liao Fan would die at the age of fifty-three? He must have preformed some action, some karma, to get this result. How does one change this? How do we live a longer life? We need to understand the causal relationships between long lives and short lives. If we do a lot of killing, we take away the lives of other beings. As a karmic result, we will have poorer health, or live shorter lives. And if in a single lifetime we kill excessively, we will live shorter lives or be killed for many lifetimes to come. This is causality.

Once we have understood causal relationships, we must not forget another important element: acceptance. Everything that happens to us, good or bad, is due to things that we have done previously. When we get into an "accident", when we earn a good living, when someone dies, etc., if these things have already happened, then they are in the past. There is nothing else to do but to accept. We often say, "time can heal everything." Does time heal anything? No. What happens is that as time goes by, we gradually accept reality. Acceptance, that is what heals. So why not accept things now, as they happen?

However, this is not the same as believing in a predetermined future. The point stressed here is to learn how to let go now instead of ten years later, then we will not suffer as much. Sooner or later you will have to accept. Wise people perceive things as they are, accept events as they come. This is not being pessimistic. This is being realistic. We can still try to change the world and change ourselves, because things can still be changed before they happen, not after.

The Chan master continued, "If you want to change the future, if you want to live a longer life, then you need to understand what are the causes for a long life. You need to stop acts of killing, and even more importantly, protect and save lives. Do things that can save people and animals. For example, donate medicine. Save animals from being slaughtered. When you perform these acts, you change your future."

He then added, "Promise yourself to do a thousand good deeds. Perform a thousand virtuous actions to help others. Whenever you complete an act of goodness, mark it down in a book. Keep a track of these. Try to finish in three years."

And so he did. One, two, three years finally passed and Liao Fan finished. He felt very happy. His life was more meaningful. He decided to make a new vow, a new resolve. "I will do ten thousand more over this many years," he promised himself.

Gradually things began to change. The predictions were no longer accurate. He was not supposed to get any higher positions in the government but he got promoted. He was to have no children but he had two excellent sons. And then when he was fifty-three, he did not die. Liao Fan actually changed his future. When he was sixty-nine, he wrote a book about his realizations called, "The Four Lessons of Liao Fan." (ㄇㄞㄨㄛˋㄌㄧㄠˋㄈㄢˋ) It is still in circulation now and is even translated into English.

As we see, a large degree of the future is in our hands. I say to a large degree because there are still some things that are very difficult to alter. But our current actions can definitely change what is yet to come.

The Key to a New Future

The Buddha once said, "If you want to know what you have done in your past (including past lives), just look at what has happened in this life. If you want to know what will happen to your future, just look at what is being done in this life. "

There is no need to go to a fortuneteller. All we need to do is to look at this life's experiences. Has it been good? Has it been bad? Has it been mixed? If it has been mostly good and happy, then that means that in the past you have done many good deeds. You made others happy, you created good karma between you and other people. If most of your life has been unhappy and unfortunate, then that means that we have not planted good seeds previously. We created a lot of bad karma. Just by understanding this Principle of Causality, you can tell about your own past. We do not need a fortuneteller or go to get hypnotized. The details, who you were, what you did, are not all that important. Why? It is already in the past. What would be the point? Take a deep look at this life and you will have a good general idea of the past.

As for our future, "If you want to know what will happen to your future, just look at what is being done in this life." This is the key. There is an important difference between "what has happened" and "what is being done." For example, if somebody treats you badly, that is a result of karma from the past. This is something that you are experiencing now, something that "has happened." How you react to this situation though is "what is being done" and this will determine the events in the future. Do you understand? You cannot change what has already occurred. However, when you change your reactions, you change the future outcomes. If someone treats you badly that means that somewhere along the way, bad karma was created between the two of you. If you react to things in the same negative way and think, "He treated me badly, I will get him back, fair is fair," then you have created the same cycle over again. This is samsara. It like playing ping-pong, hitting back and forth. The same situation happens over and over again. A predictable pattern forms.

If we understand this, we should be determined to change our reactions. Instead we say, "He treats me badly, I will forgive and forget. I will be like the vast empty space and let go." Immediately the karma between the two of you changes for the better. Bad karma turns into good karma.

The future depends on what you have done, and what you do now. And what you do now comes from the mind and the thoughts that you have at this moment. That is why we need to meditate in order to become more mindful. Everything begins from the mind. Everything you do, everything you say. You need to be aware of the type of your thoughts that you are having. What are you thinking? How do you react to things? The change starts from there, the future changes from there.

Through awareness you can detect your thoughts, catch them before they turn into an action. It is like catching a thief before it commits a crime, and transforming the thief into a sage. Transform your thoughts into actions that will bring you happiness. Have thoughts of equality, of tolerance, of compassion. Then turn these thoughts into actions. Generosity and charity will bring you prosperity; giving comfort, solace and compassion will bring peace and blessings. Protecting life will give you good health and a long life. This is the Buddhist principle of causality. When you understand it, you take life into your control. Life then becomes very positive. You can always change things for the better, beginning at this very moment. Detect your thoughts, become aware. What are you thinking? Exam them closely. Catch yourself and ask, "am I falling back to my old ways, the old habitual ways of reacting? That is not being very mindful is it?" Become mindful, live a mindful life, that is cultivation.

5th Annual Oklahoma Buddhist Conference

Saturday, March 6, 2004 at the University of Oklahoma, the 5th Annual Oklahoma Buddhist conference was held. Over 110 dharma students attended ranging from age 5 to 65. I attended and honored to have presented two abstracts for discussion. One was on the history of Nichiren Buddhism and the other topic was a State of the Union of Prison Dharma. I was genuinely moved by the openness and way others opened up to the needs of prisoners regarding the dharma and need of a post-release facility for prisoners to parole to for further dharma training. I was able to share my own personal story of how I embraced the dharma through Centering Prayer and other meditative practices while I was at Folsom State Prison.

During the conference there were over 18 different abstracts (teachings) given by over 22 presenters. There were Theravadan, Mahayana and Japanese Buddhism schools represented. It was a great day of fellowship, vegetarian lunch, and learning on how to apply the dharma in our present lives.

I hope others will begin to reach out to prisoners by being a pen-pals or visiting so prisoners can learn more about the Dharma.



Humility—by Joseph R. Crowe, Okaloosa Correctional Institution, Crestview, FL

One of the biggest obstacles on the path to enlightenment is learning to be humble. Sure, you might actually act humble around others most of the time, but what about in your mind? How often have you imagined yourself to be a rock star, or a movie star, or some great Bodhisattva worshipped by millions? Those of us in prison are extremely guilty of this. It is how we sometimes pass the boring hours. You always hear guys talking about what they are going to do when they get out, how they plan on making all this money, or who they plan on finding some gorgeous lover and retire on a yacht. Is this being humble?

Most of us have mis-concepts about what enlightenment even is. We think that it is some grand, golden jewel-encrusted trophy that we obtain. It will allow us to rise above the mundane and achieve some higher state of living. Or special esoteric powers that will allow us to levitate (hopefully over the fence) or some other type of special power.

Most of us want to find some yogic exercise or mantra or meditation technique that we can practice for some time and then achieve instant enlightenment. But in reality it doesn't work like that. Zen master Seung Sahn of the Kwan-Um School of Zen likes to talk about mantra sometimes. He says that chanting any mantra is good. You can chant Om Namah Shivaya or Om Madi Padme Hum or Namu Myoho Renge Kyo. Any mantra is good, you can even chant coca-cola and it will help. The path, the mantra, the tradition you choose is only a tool to help you achieve enlightenment. Ultimately you have to work on yourself. You have to recognize when thoughts arise and how to let them go, or learn more about your neurosis or bad habits and how to let them go. Meditation and mantra chanting can help. Buddhism is all but discovering "self".

So, what is enlightenment? Many of us feel that it is something that is sought after, that maybe discovered through the Guru or mantra. Shakyamuni Buddha searched for enlightenment for 6 years. He practiced under a guru, he practiced yoga and mantras, he even did extreme ascetic disciplines that we would find impossible. But all of this was in vain. The Buddha realized this, he realized that a person starving himself half to death had no better a chance at attaining the supreme knowledge than a fat glutton had. So he therefore took nourishment, sat under the Bodhi tree and practiced meditation until he achieved enlightenment.

Do you know what he realized as he sat there looking at the morning star, gazing through his third eye at the endless universe, a fully liberated Buddha? He realized that what he had been searching for that whole time had been with him always.

You are already enlightened. You don't get enlightened from something. You don't get it from the guru, or from a mantra or from a meditation technique. Enlightenment is part of your natural make-up. It's not to say that your 3rd eye, i.e...enlightenment, your Buddha Nature, is shut. Your 3rd eye has never been open or shut. It gazes at the universe limitlessly or endlessly. Only our warped, selfish sense of our righteous self prevents us from noticing this. We have ignored our 3rd eye. IT works quite fine, only we are not looking through it.

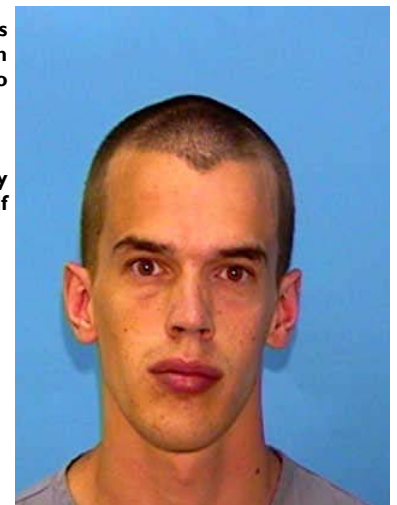
As we walk along the path, it is so important for us to be humble. Chogyam Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist and founder of the Shambala lineage, talks about a broken heart. It is a very sore and raw and therefore it is very perceptive and full of feelings. As we become humble, we begin to realize the suffering of others and our heart aches. But it is a good ache, for it means we are developing great compassion for others. IT does not mean we must be depressed and lonely. On the contrary, a truly humble person is a happy person. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says he is not lonely, and this is a statement from one who is a celibate monk.

This is the situation, we are inside the fence, and some of us will be there for a long time while others will be there but a short time. But even if we were to be released tomorrow, is there room for us in world for us to attain enlightenment if we have a giant inflated ego? After all in prison there is no privacy when it comes to showers, bathrooms or our cell. So it is vital we become humble.

Practice hard brothers, all that you learn becomes your daily life. The highest teaching is absolutely useless unless you learn to practice it in your every day life... humbly. The smaller our sense of self becomes, the larger the world will seem to us.

Blessed be, with love for all sentient beings I write this.

Joseph R. Crowe
Okaloosa Correctional Institution
Florida





Resources for Prisoners

Pen-Pals

Dharma Seeds
C/O Mark D. Maxey
1843 N. Gatewood
Oklahoma City, OK 73106

Prison Dharma Network
POB 4623
Boulder, CO 80302

Prison Programs

Buddhist Peace Fellowship
POB 4650
Berkeley, CA 94704

Gateless Gate
20 West University (Suite 301G)
Gainesville, FL 32601

Prison Dharma Network
POB 4623
Boulder, CO 80302

Buddhist Sutras & Texts/Books

Buddha Gate Monastery
Attn. Ven. Jian Hu
3254 Gloria Terrace
Lafayette, CA 94549

Buddhist Peace Fellowship
POB 4650
Berkeley, CA 94704

Other Prison Programs

Human Kindness Foundation
POB 61619
Durham, NC 27715

Lionheart Foundation
POB 194
Back Bay Boston, MA .02117

SYDA Yoga Prison Project
1107 Stanford Ave.
Oakland, CA 94608

Visions for Prisons
POB 1631
Costa Mesa, CA 92628

If you see or know of a resource missing from this page, please write me with the information so I can pass it along to others in the next quarterly journal.

Thanks and

Namaste



Meditation Journal for Prisoners

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Submissions Called For in Dharma Seeds

You can now submit articles, artwork or questions directly to Dharma Seeds for publication. If you submit a story, or dharma lesson, please include a short bio about yourself to be included. Artwork can be original pencil or pen drawings. If you have questions or suggestions please send those too, we will attempt to answer all questions in forthcoming journals. It is our goal to make this quarterly journal grow with new articles and art from the prisoners that read our journal. Here are the rules...

All works must be original

no submissions will be returned

one entry per year will be published

Editing of articles will be at editors discretion

Peace in Troublesome Times

While preparing this issue I found out that in California there was some Senate Hearings regarding a riot 2 years ago at Folsom State Prison. In researching this article on the Intranet I found out that one of the guards had committed suicide over the way the administration handled the riot. The guard was a Captain who had been a Lieutenant when I was at Folsom. I had worked as his clerk a few times when my Lieutenant was on vacation. While it is standard prison way to not like or agree with the "man" I found it hard not to be compassionate about this death. I mean, here is a man, who left behind a wife, 2 kids and really was troubled by the actions of the administration. He had tried to stop the riot earlier, but the

commanding person over him would not let him sound the alarm.

It is hard practicing the dharma in prison, and especially when we notice our compassion growing to include those who are guarding us.

Just remember it is important in our dharma practice to keep all the precepts and truths in our lives. We need to make these truths the core of our beliefs. While we may have compassion it may be hard, but everyone one of us has the Buddha Nature in us. But not all of us honor or respect this. But we should not hate or grudge another. This is just a thought to think upon.



Cassady and KiKi, my two cats Their calmness and contented view of the world, seemed to reflect the contents/message of this "Journal," even though I ignored them while preparing this issue."