



## Practicing with COVID-19

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How do we practice in a world grappling with COVID-19? As Dharma students, we have a constant choice when we meet each moment: with fear or compassion; with isolation or connection; with the loss of control or dancing with each moment's unfolding. Our practice is tested in profound ways in the urgency and unavoidable nature of this pandemic. In that test, we can discover the refuge of the Dharma.

Experiencing a pandemic is new for all of us. Each day we are confronted with new changes to our lives: the government's order to stay at home, the closing of schools and businesses, the daily new cases and deaths. Our weddings, graduations, trips, retreats, funerals, all are postponed or cancelled. Yet, the core issues that arise are universal human experiences. During our lives, each of us experiences fear, uncertainty, and loss of control. To quote a few lines from Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, *Kindness*:

*Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.*

At times, the fragility of our lives becomes undeniable. We are confronted by the reality that our loved ones and ourselves will at some point experience illness, old age, and death. Nothing that is conditioned is outside the law of impermanence.

Usually, these experiences are staggered throughout our lives and our communities. Normally, when my life falls apart, others around me are more stable. We can overlook or ignore these realities when our lives are going smoothly. There is a collective denial. A unique aspect of this pandemic is that we all are confronted with the reality of impermanence at the same time. Not just our immediate family and loved ones, not just our communities, not just our nation, but the entire world's population. The same fear, the same uncertainty, the same grief that we are experiencing is felt in China, in Italy, in Iran. We may have different intensities, different conditions of life, but we share the same common concern. As a human race, we are united in this experience.

We can choose to unite in fear or compassion. If we are not bringing our practice to bear, we become connected in our fear and panic. Observe the runs on toilet paper and hand sanitizer as the "madness of crowds" take over. As we see others rushing to stock up in fear, our own fear gets triggered and we find ourselves rushing in a panic and frenzy to get our own supplies. Gripped by this state, we see other

people as obstacles or even rivals to be overcome in our self-obsessed urgency. The fear of others as potential carriers of COVID-19 causes us to recoil from contact. To quote Washington's governor, Jay Inslee, "Assume everyone is infected and you are infected." People who are "other" can be dehumanized. Our actions of rudeness, of anger can seem to be justified. Our means are rationalized by our ends for self-survival.

This panic can take over if we are not able to establish a foothold in our practice. An essential shift is from our minds to our hearts. Our worry and fear can be magnified by our relationship to thought. If we forget the transient and unsubstantial nature of thought, we become convinced of the truth of our thoughts. One fearful thought generates two more, and soon we have a storm of anxiety. How much thinking is necessary to navigate this crisis? How much is added on as we try to compensate for the depth of uncertainty?

Three steps we might use as Dharma practitioners anytime the fragility and uncertainty of life asserts itself:

### **1. Stabilize and Ground Attention**

The conceptual realm and emotions have a powerful pull on our attention. First, we need to stabilize and ground our attention. Often the sensations of breath/body can provide this anchor. However, sometimes turning our attention to the breath and body amplifies our anxiety and worry. Luckily, any of the senses can offer our attention a safe harbor. Resting attention on sound, on sight, on taste, touch, smell can allow our attention to settle and ground. This creates a spaciousness that allows us to gently turn toward our difficulty.

### **2. Hold Oneself and Others with Compassion**

There is real fear, real suffering at this time. With the spaciousness of a stabilized and grounded attention, turn toward the heart of the suffering. See through the layers of worry, anxiety, of fear, to connect with the simple, essential truth. One teacher describes this as turning toward the most tender aspect. If supported and balanced by mindfulness, this turning toward should result in a settling, a sense of stillness, even while touching this tenderness. If this generates more fear, more unease, go back to step one, or try step three. In this quality of compassion, the turning toward is without agenda or preference. It has a depth of patience and acceptance. Compassion is willing just to be near the pain, the fear, to acknowledge its presence fully. Then ask the heart of the tenderness, "What is needed?" Let the answer emerge naturally from the field of stillness. If you can, act on what arises.

### **3. Open to Universal Compassion**

Shift from the personal and immediate concern you feel for yourself and your loved ones to a universal compassion. As you hear about the spread of COVID-19 and its impacts, touch that tender aspect of your own suffering. Now, reflect on how that suffering is shared by everyone in your community. Shift from my personal grief to the grief, shared by every being. Keep expanding that understanding to your state, the nation, the continent, the hemisphere, and finally, the globe. No matter what language we speak, what culture we express, we are united in this experience. Let that reality open your heart. Let your actions flow from that openness.

Recalling the end of Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, Kindness:

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.*

*"Kindness," from Words Under the Words: Selected Poems. Copyright © 1995 by Naomi Shihab Nye.*