

## A Buddhist Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic

*I'm okay, if I don't look a little closer  
I'm okay if I don't see beyond the shore  
The Indigo Girls, Perfect World*

Buddhist philosophy tells us nothing about virology, public health, or how to treat respiratory illness. But it may have something to teach us about what we can learn from a pandemic, how we might best contribute to the lives of others in the context of a pandemic, and how we might develop in insight and moral sensitivity by reflecting on the pandemic and on our place in the world in which it unfolds.

The first of the four noble truths, the one that constitutes the foundation of all Buddhist thought and practice is that of the ubiquity of suffering. Many people, when they first hear this, regard Buddhism as at best pessimistic, and at worse, a denial of the reality that the world is full of goodness and beauty. This is because we often think of suffering simply in terms of our own present pain or distress, as that suffering of which we are immediately aware. This is a narrow view of what it is to suffer, and reflection on the pandemic directs our attention to the deeper dimensions of the suffering that enframes our lives.

We suffer because others suffer. And we do so either because we *recognize* their suffering and are distressed by it or because we become aware that we *fail to recognize* and to be move by it—that we intentionally or unintentionally look the other way—and therefore suffer from being less than we would like to be. Attention to the massive suffering caused by the pandemic can inspire us to hold this insight in our hearts now and after the pandemic has passed.

We suffer as well because even the happiness we enjoy is impermanent. The health and prosperity we enjoy at one moment can be taken away from us at the next. Our lives themselves are impermanent, and can end prematurely. This impermanence is unavoidable, and is brought into sharp relief by the pandemic

And we suffer because we are not in control of our own lives and destinies; we cannot, as we imagine we might, “stand on our own two feet.” We live our lives subject to countless causes and conditions, and changes in those causes and conditions can transform or end our lives at any moment. Most of those are out of our control. The pandemic makes this lack of control evident.

All of these dimensions of suffering are present throughout each of our lives. Some of us are fortunate enough that this pervasive suffering is not salient. That good fortune is a blessing and a curse. We feel ourselves to be happy, but only at the cost of losing touch with the very nature of our existence and with those we think we hold dear. The pandemic forces us to confront that difficult reality. We would be wise to hold onto that insight after it passes.

Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the impermanence of all things as well as the interdependence of all things. Even though it may seem obvious on reflection that all things, including our lives, are impermanent, and that all phenomena in the universe are causally interdependent, it is easy to lose sight of those facts in everyday life, to live as though we will do so forever, to treat health and pleasure as though they will always be with us.

And once again, the pandemic calls our attention to these facts. The hope, health, and prosperity many of us took for granted a few weeks ago vanishes. Our own lives are unavoidably transformed by the fates of others. We cannot return to health or to happiness until the pandemic passes, not only in our own neighborhoods, but all over the world. Impermanence and interdependence are not mere truisms, but deep existential truths, truths we must hold in our hearts even once this passes.

To hold onto these insights is not to succumb to pessimism or to depression. It is to open our hearts to those around us, to recognize that all share in our suffering, to respond to others with friendship and care, no matter who they are, and to cultivate traits of character that enable us to reduce the suffering of others and of ourselves. The 9<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva wisely reminds us that although the world is covered with rocks and thorns, to protect ourselves we need not cover it all with leather; we can put on a pair of sandals. By transforming our own minds, attitudes and behavior, we can become part of the solution to the problem of suffering, rather than part of the problem.

But how to respond? How might we use this terrible opportunity to transform ourselves? One approach is to cultivate what Buddhist ethicists call the “six perfections.” These are traits of character or habits of mind that benefit ourselves and others, enabling us to become more effective moral agents, and to respond more rationally and with greater openness to those around us.

We begin with *generosity*. It is time to be of material, emotional, and social assistance to those around us. By helping family, neighbors, communities, and institutions that find themselves in need, we ameliorate the suffering around us, and reaffirm our membership in these networks that determine our own lives and those of others.

We can cultivate careful *attention* to the needs of others, to our own responses to those needs, and to our own affective states and intentions, states and intentions that may either contribute to or ease suffering. We can recall our better selves. By remembering who we are, who we aspire to become, and by developing an open awareness of the situation around us, we allow ourselves to become more responsive, and less reactive, agents of benefit, not of harm.

By cultivating *patience* we reduce our tendency to anger or to despair, and enable ourselves to work calmly, and to respond effectively to the needs around us. This both reduces our own suffering in these times and makes us more effective agents

for the benefit of others. And by developing the *resolution* that enables serious effort, we ensure that we do not lose hope or heart.

Buddhist ethicists remind us as well that taking time to *contemplate* is important. We need not have a disciplined meditation practice, but we each need time in the day to reflect, to gather our thoughts, to fix our resolve, and to remember who we are, and to what we are committed. This in turn allows us to develop the *wisdom* to be effective for ourselves and for others.

This development of generosity, attentiveness, patience, disciplined effort, calm, and wisdom enables personal growth while also helping us to address the pandemic. It enables us to become better friends to one another, to care for one another, to take the interests of others as our own, and to derive happiness from their happiness as well. And this enables us to work to transcend suffering, and to promote happiness in the world. A pandemic is a terrible thing, but if we are wise, we can use it make the world a better place.

*We get to be a ripple in the water*  
*We get to be a rock that's thrown*  
The Indigo Girls, *Perfect World*