

Dharmette: Meditation in the Time of COVID-19

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on March 25, 2020

I'm very aware of the challenges that many people have – in our society and around the globe. In Redwood City, a few people here and there go for walks or run. It's pretty quiet. It seems like a very nice time to be walking on the streets. It seems like things are peaceful. But there are plenty of people for whom it's not so peaceful. There are challenges of all kinds that come with being sheltered in place: not having work, or even having a place to live perhaps. There are challenges with being sick, being concerned about becoming sick, or being concerned about loved ones, or people in New York, Los Angeles, the Bay Area, Spain, Italy, Japan, and Thailand.

These are extraordinary times we're living in. For those of us who meditate, these are times that we can call upon meditation as a support. But the question that all of us can ask is, "What kind of support do we want meditation to provide us?" It's useful to become clear about what that support is. Is it simply a support to not be distressed, or to be a little bit calm and peaceful?

That's valuable. We need people who can be calm. But is it to be calm and removed, or is it to be calm and somehow present and supportive?

Is it a time for us to meditate so that we have greater compassion and care for others?

I'm in awe of doctors, nurses, and medical professionals and what they have to do now, what they're gearing up to do, or fully involved to do. Some of them have responsibilities at home with children and parents to take care of. And now they're caring for people who have the coronavirus, not knowing whether they will become sick, and where it all is going?

We share this experience of the pandemic with our society. We feel like we're in it with everyone else. So how can meditation support us and help us in how we share it? If we share it only with our fear, challenges or distress, then perhaps we're not really sharing it with everyone. If we're only aware of our own challenges and difficulties right now, maybe meditation can give us the space to understand that we're really sharing these difficulties with millions of people, hundreds of millions of people or billions of people. It's a shared human experience.

What does that do to us when we open up and see it as a shared experience, that what's happening to others is

in some ways happening to us? Even in the isolation of being sheltered in place, what if this is not a time to just be thinking about and taking care of oneself. How can we think wisely and usefully for others? How can we be informed in ways that make us a better person for the world around us? How can we empathize and care for people far away? How can we sympathize with the plight and challenges they're in?

This is a time for lots of love and compassion. If any of us have been cultivating love and compassion, this is the time for it. This is the time to tap into our capacity to sit and meditate, as a way of tapping into our capacity for care and compassion – our capacity to be a companion who holds the suffering of others and accompanies the world – just as others accompany us in our challenges in this time and place.

I think it's really important that meditation at this time in our society be understood to be something that supports and connects us to others. It has a role and place in how we as individuals meet the situation we find ourselves in, so that we don't close in or push out the world around us, or try to just hunker down and take care of me, myself and mine. If meditation is helping us to only do that, maybe we're not really living up to the full potential of what Buddhist meditation is about.

We want to find a way to meditate so that we have the capacity to breathe easily, openly, and kindly as we read the news, talk to friends and family members, and go through our own challenges – with food, family we're living with, our health... It goes on and on.

So we pause, like the whole globe is pausing, in order to reflect deeply. I'm really fond of the idea of the word 'contemplative.' People may have different associations with it. But for me, a contemplative is someone who is living their life from the depth of their heart. They're reflecting deeply. They're connected to something that's spiritual and sacred. They're connected to the depths of awareness, presence, and compassion. A contemplative is trying to live from a different set of values that come from being deeply connected to the inner life, and the outer life. What a time it is to be a contemplative! What a time it is to be a contemplative within the world, as part of the world!

What's been on my mind today is the many people who have challenges and are suffering. Some people say there is a tsunami coming in some places in the world. The number of people getting the coronavirus is going to increase dramatically in the next few weeks. We don't know what kinds of challenges our society will have.

I hope that meditation makes us someone who is better prepared for addressing how we are in relationship to all

this – that our meditation is relevant for what the world is going through, and that we become a contemplative in heart, body, and mind. I hope that, in some small way, we are not an island in the world, but rather a raft for people in need. I hope that somehow our calm, our care, and our support make a difference for the welfare and happiness of others. That is certainly my heartfelt wish at this time.

I hope that in whatever ways we've sat and meditated today, that any benefits these teachings might help provide for the welfare and happiness of everyone on this globe.

Just as this virus has touched almost everyone on this globe in one way or another, may it be that our care and love – our collected, shared humanity, concern, and support for each other be spread out so that we will remember this time of the COVID-19 virus as a time where everyone came together, supported each other, and helped everyone get through this.

May our meditation help that to be so. Thank you.