

N.6 • Winter 2020

EUROPEAN BUDDHIST

magazine



Hope

**What can we
learn from
this crisis?**

Contents

What can we
learn from
this crisis?
page 6

Impermanence
made manifest
page 12

What has been
revealed by
the covid-19
pandemic?
page 18

Buddhist
action
and inner
ecology in
a post covid
world
(part 1)
page 24

Buddhist
action and
inner ecology
in a post
covid world
(part 2)
page 30

Practitioners daily
thoughts in these
challenging times
page 34

Can
Buddhism
heal the
economy
and save
our planet?
page 38

Crisis, what crisis?
page 44

What Buddhism can
provide to people
beyond coping
strategies
page 50

Editorial

A monk asked Zen master Yun Men Wenyan (864 - 949 CE): "What are the teachings of a whole lifetime?" Yun Men said, "An appropriate response."

In the past months, I have read quite a few articles in the media which pointed out that pretty much everybody seems to have an opinion about the Covid pandemic, but not much is heard from religious communities on this subject, at least not publicly.

In days past, when there was a time of crisis, people used to turn to spiritual leaders for advice. They went to churches, temples, mosques and synagogues to get explanations and guidance, and they trusted in it. This has obviously changed, and I guess it is a sign of the decreased relevance of religions and spirituality in people's lives nowadays. But big questions need big answers, and we can't expect politicians, television or influencers on social media to provide them.

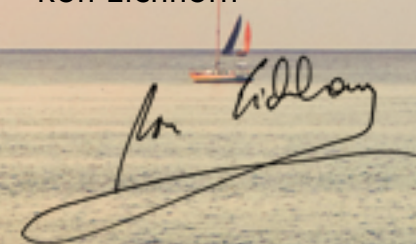
Buddhism is solving your problems, I always tell some of the new students who come to the temple in Berlin, of which I have the honor to be abbot. That's not because your problems will disappear. But because through the Dharma, you will realize the actual nature of your problems and as a result, you become free from attachment to them and will be able to experience unconditional bliss. The foundation of the Buddha's precious teachings is the liberation from suffering, and it really is a very hands-on method.

In this issue of our European Buddhist Magazine, we try to shed light on what this current situation is teaching us and what "an appropriate response" could be. As always, it is our privilege to be able to present you a splendid collection of distinguished writers from the various Buddhist traditions represented in our membership.

I do hope you will enjoy the reading.

My best regards in the Dharma,

Ron Eichhorn



Ron Eichhorn
European Buddhist Union
President

PS: Another time, Yun Men said: "If you walk, just walk. If you sit, just sit. But do not wobble."

ENJOY READING



HEALING TOGETHER

Covid's wound is deep and we still find ourselves in the front row, under attack that involves not only the health and economic aspects but also, above all, undermines sociality. Hope is made fragile by uncertainty, isolation, fear of encountering suffering. The disease that affects our society is underhand because it brings with it a radical transformation of the places of encounter, work, culture and relationships and does not give us a certain horizon on which to base a reconstruction. Yet, the wound must be healed, the healing must be imagined and desired. We must take care of this process of recomposition, of rapprochement. The place to put it into action, to create the conditions for rebirth is the community, our community. Thought of as the common home that favours, sustains and protects closeness, the relationship. Sharing a hope is a great engine of transformation. It is a magic and a form of practice. Trusting in this will, this deeply human instinct to build bonds, to value them, together with the choice to be on the side of what unites us, represents the concrete possibility to heal the wound and start again together. The impact of the coronavirus is so profound also on the way we perceive the world, which seems to us irreparably changed. This is precisely why it is urgent to return to reflect on the foundations on which a community is built. In recent months I have been struck by how some Italian theatre companies have chosen to get off the stage and enter the courtyards, especially in the suburbs and bring beauty where there was alienation, despair. In this hope, in this changed paradigm that has rediscovered the value of proximity, of gratuitousness, we can, we must rediscover the value of a strong emotional bond that can also create a different narration of reality. We must rediscover a look towards the other that does not stop at fear but has the daring to put friendship back at the centre as a sincere occasion for knowledge, confrontation, construction of an identity that is the beginning of a process of imagination of a new collective identity. Buddhist communities can read in this process of transformation the opportunity to design a citizenship, an idea of polis where proximity becomes the condition to create relational micro communities that become the bricks for the common home of our new present and open us to the hope of a new future.

Stefano Davide Bettera
European Buddhist Union
Vice President

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS CRISIS?

By Irma Rinne

When seeing a difficult situation as an opportunity to learn, it is like seeing a silver lining around a dark cloud. With an attitude of learning and openness, we can have a deeper insight into a problematic situation, and therefore, it is possible to have a new kind of understanding of what exactly is at stake.

Although there are many crises going on in the world at the moment, the covid-19 pandemic is perhaps the biggest and the most urgent. It overshadows many others, such as the climate change, refugee issues, wars, natural disasters, and the economic depression. It is understandable that this kind of world-wide crisis creates fear and anxiety. It is especially frightening when the threat is invisible, and the virus becomes infectious even before there are any visible symptoms.

For this article, I decided to follow the news written in newspapers from a fresh point of view. Do they reveal anything positive about this situation? Every morning I read Helsingin Sanomat, Finland's leading newspaper. I soon noticed that my tendency to read the newspaper has been quite superficial, without really paying attention to what had been written. Now, by reading selectively and going into the details, it has become quite clear how everything is intertwined. We can learn a lot by being aware of what is missing, as well. I am happy about this opportunity. Only now has it occurred to me how interesting it can be just to read newspapers. »

"When we collectively focus on problem solving, we are able to do amazing things."

Saturday 10th October: Danger of selfishness

In her essay on cultural pages, Eleonoora Riihinen began with a grim overview of the present:

We live in a world where the past does not control the present, and the future has become completely unpredictable. Crises, such as terrorism, cultural conflicts, economic crises, pandemics, natural disasters, and climate change, all these prevail.

She found advice in a book written by Christopher Lasch from the University of Rochester about 40 years ago, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). Of course, Lasch knew nothing about the current crises, but he saw some trends in the world that have come true: increasing of unpredictability, impoverishment of the poor, and insecurity. According to Lasch, these situations can also present the danger of one turning towards himself increasingly as well, in a very narcissistic way. Riihinen picked some guidelines from Lasch's book on how to improve the situation:

Reduce superficial news browsing, headlines and fuss from reading the social media. Go deeper into things, read background news stories, watch documentaries, read history, non-fiction, novels, and poems. Try to outline long arches. ...Do not just try to change yourself, change the circumstances – small and large. Do not just make your own life better, make the lives of others better too.

Tuesday, 6th October: Vaccine development

Janet Currie, professor of economics at Princeton, was interviewed via video call. She specializes in labour economics, especially poverty and anti-poverty policies and their implications for children's health. According to her, the coronavirus pandemic has underlined the importance of effective, public health and prevention – although this has not always been realized.

When we collectively focus on problem solving, we are able to do amazing things. When we collectively prioritize things, when we don't argue but agree, we cope better. Back last year, many researchers said it would be impossible to develop a vaccine in less than a year. But now the development work is well under way.

Sunday 4th October: A new perspective

Public transport suffers losses when the working population sits at home working remotely. Rob Mayo from New Zealand gave a lecture in a webinar in Helsinki.

There may be a new opportunity in a crisis. It is important to find a new perspective. If in the past, public transport has been viewed from above, for example from the perspective of economics or engineers, technically, now the perspective could be people-centered, not system-centered. The question is whether public transport is safe, whether it is healthy, and how important it is to people. You have to meet people and ask for feedback. What do passengers think about intervals, exchanges, awkward stairs, confusing signs? How to create a comfortable travel experience?

Wednesday 21st October: New way of traveling

We are adopting new ways of traveling, and this change may be permanent. Until a moment ago, we regularly travelled far, many times in search for a good life in luxury style, a life that is easy, effortless and enjoyable.

Soile Veijola, a professor in the field of tourism research at the Tampere University, asked if a good holiday life could be something else, more sustainable. Clean air, clean water and clean food? Time to be yourself? Responsible traveling could permanently benefit oneself, the community and the nature.

Sunday 18th October: The wisdom of emotions

In an interview on Sunday pages, Sara Heinämaa, professor of philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä, talked about how harmful it is to forget emotions in social issues. Love is most important, she said. Here are glimpses of her thoughts:

In recent years there has been a period of fears, first refugees, then covid-19 and the pandemic. Ultimately, behind the fear, there is awareness of the fragility and limitations of your own life. One must understand the wisdom of even negative emotions. Emotions bring information. They reveal what is worthless to us and what is valuable. Anger shows injustice. Emotions make us act.

When Sara Heinämaa speaks of love, she does not mean any passing fancy, but commitment, attachment and change.

One can also love one's work or art, a wide variety of things. Such committed concern must be respected, given value, status and public significance in society. It should not be abused, one should not leave too much of a burden. This can happen to caregivers, nurses, doctors, teachers etc. Emotions need to be understood both in oneself and in others, they must be interpreted and controlled. If love is forgotten in the community, one cannot make best out of oneself or the world. We do not learn to strive for the best, we will be content with the worthy. »



Daily exercises

Reading a newspaper with a new perspective can become a daily exercise. This pandemic also gives us good circumstances for developing renunciation and compassion, like Tulku Dakpa Rinpoche of Danakosha Ling Finland said. We have learnt to go for a retreat at home with a remote guiding via different communication technologies like Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet. The sense of community or nearness may remain weak, but one can adapt to the new situation.

We also have a good opportunity to practice awareness of our own feelings when, for example, using the mask. Usually it awakens various feelings of anxiety, panic or irritation. Tranquillity to perceive one's own emotional states without valuing or criticizing is a good exercise.

When we remember that our experience of the world is only a reflection, like a dream, it is easier to maintain calm even in the midst of worries. And at the same time, we have to do what we can to make things better in our daily lives, with compassion. When we follow the instructions and recommendations of the authorities, it benefits ourselves and the society. ✿

LOVE PEACE LAUGH

IMPERMANENCE MADE MANIFEST

By Paula de Wys

To a certain extent, I have learned something from the teachings of the Buddha. That 'extent', the amount that I have learned, is a credit to my teachers. The vast amount that I have not learned in any other way than as an intellectual and rather superficial understanding, is basically due to my own procrastination. I think: I will practice more later. Tomorrow. When I am older (I am now 72...). Looking at what there is still left to understand, realize and accomplish, it is obvious that my putting things off is the result of a kind of denial of one of the basic truths in both Buddhism and the empirical world: everything is changing all the time. Nothing is permanent – not the things we would like to stay the same nor the phenomena that we would prefer to change.

It was quite amazing how quickly the Covid-crisis turned everything we felt was normal upside down. Things that we took for granted were suddenly impossible or at least problematic. Going shopping, to school, to a meditation or attending meetings, visiting

or inviting others for something as simple as a cup of coffee, following teachings, going to a concert or to the movies, calling in a repairman, going to the doctor – suddenly we had to think, postpone, cancel and adjust almost everything in our lives, and it was not always easy. On an individual level the impact for most people was huge. For a Buddhist center in busy Amsterdam, it also meant major changes in everything we did.

Most of the changes were dictated by the government and were the result of a lockdown, so there was simply no choice. At Maitreya Institute Amsterdam, the center that I work with, we were used to a full schedule of teachings and meditations, with pujas, sutra recitations and other activities. From one day to the next everything stopped, and we scrambled to decide and then communicate to students and the rest of the world about how we planned to continue, both with the program and services we provide and also financially. Keeping the continuity of classes »

» and meditations was definitely important, but paying the rent was also high on the list of our concerns. How we managed this was not unique, but it was effective and opened opportunities we could not have imagined before the crisis.

For years we had discussed doing more on internet or through YouTube but had never really managed to put these ideas into practice. The expertise and equipment were not available and there was no real need to acquire them. Although many of us had used Zoom or other virtual meeting sites to attend meetings with people internationally, we had never considered holding teachings and meditations through such a medium. Suddenly this possibility became a necessity and we were able to continue the meditations and teachings without a break. That was a great relief on that score, since making the teachings of the Buddha accessible to people is our *raison d'être*: it is why we exist.

DONATIONS AND PAYING THE BILLS

Maitreya Institute has the status of a charitable organization and we do not charge for attending our activities. We do, however, request a donation for most things and indicate a suggested donation, with consideration for students and those with a minimum income. We had always requested that people who did not attend a class in person but wanted the audio recordings afterwards donate half of what was suggested for those physically present. When we had to do everything online, we debated how to work with this donation system and settled on just being open about the situation. We once again made it clear that people were free to donate whatever they wished but that - if they were in a position to do so - »

**“ Everything
is changing
all the time.
Nothing is
permanent ”**



» we would greatly appreciate it if the donation could be the full amount and not half because the rent, etc. remained the same as always. It was very moving to see how almost everyone continued to donate the 'old' amount, sometimes even more, and that we received several generous, spontaneous donations to help us in these difficult times!



SUMMER MAHAYANA-VIPASSANA RETREAT SUCCESS

Another unexpected benefit from this new way of presenting the teachings was that we were able to offer the meditations and classes to a much larger audience. Our resident teacher, the Dutch monk Ven. Losang Gendun, noticed a larger number of people attending his online evening meditations twice a week. Then his six-week summer 'virtual city retreat' (Mahayana-Vipassana, based on the Maha Satipatthana Sutta) attracted more than 60 participants, a number that would never have been reached if given at the center. How one participated was flexible, with more than thirty of us following the 7:00-8:00 a.m. meditation session and many more tuning in for the weekly Thursday evening teaching. A number of people did multiple sessions each day, others did not, and some also chose to follow the Tuesday night movement classes given by Annelies van der Heijden. Although given online, they are very useful if one has been sitting for hours, either in meditation or at the computer.

Perhaps some people joined the retreat because their individual stress levels were high and they felt a need for Buddhist teachings and meditation, hoping to find a way to become calmer and less agitated. Maybe some people wanted a distraction, or - in their isolation - to be part of a group, even if they only saw others on a screen. Certainly, some joined because they finally had the time to do so. But it became obvious that this summer retreat gave them much more than all of the above. The distraction and relief from stress turned out to be by-products. »

» I and others noticed that how we practiced seemed to change in ways we had not expected. It was summer, hot and bright. The city around us and our daily lives were much quieter. Everything seemed to work together to make the meditations and instructions bring about a deepening, an inner silence, that helped to make meditating or listening to teachings go deeper, touching one more profoundly than in a usual retreat situation.

This was a most unexpected advantage of the lockdown.

THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY

At the beginning of the crisis, one of our concerns was the potential loss of the sense of community. We consider the formation and cultivation of a Dharma community made up of the people who come to the center regularly a very important aspect of the center. The late Lama Thubten Yeshe called this 'family feeling' (in his wonderful inimitable English). Such a community is essential for the survival of a center in the long run as well as being important to the well-being of the students. Often, they have to function in the world at large and this sometimes seems at odds with working hard



on taming and understanding their minds and on following the Bodhisattva path. But what does community mean when our only contact is via a screen? Can a caring atmosphere and personal support be provided without regularly coming together in person? We have found that it can, although it is definitely second best. We saw that among the students, the sense of concern for one another was palpable. Of course, a lot depends on the efforts and sometimes guidance of the teacher.

Since the lock-down here in the Netherlands was looser than, for instance France or London, it was possible for some individual students to meet in one another's homes - socially distancing, of course - and to participate together in teachings or meditations. The center's WhatsApp group was constantly used to share quotations, articles, jokes and sometimes more personal things. There are even new members who have joined the WhatsApp group, including one young man whose handicap makes it a physical impossibility to join classes in person, but is now an active part of the group.

So, this expression of impermanence, having to go from only presenting meditations and teachings in person at the center to doing everything online, turned out to be not the disaster we had feared. It took work to change our registration and administration systems and then more effort went into communicating it all, and although we are still not completely streamlined, we have been fast-forwarded into the 21st century - and are the better for it. »

» OTHER FPMT CENTERS IN EUROPE

Other centers in the FPMT, the organization with which Maitreya Institute is affiliated, have had very similar experiences. Some, like Institut Vajra Yogini in the south of France, struggled and requested help in the form of financial donations and were surprised by the outpouring of support that reflected appreciation for their great kindness and generosity towards students over the years. This was not an isolated case, and centers losing money were often assisted by grateful students.

FPMT centers in Spain, Italy and the UK worked even more closely together than usual, launching online programs that reached people in their own countries as well as abroad. The German speaking centers in Austria, Germany and Switzerland joined forces and offered programs together, supporting each other with programs, funds and more.

H.H. DALAI LAMA AND KYABJE ZOPA RINPOCHE

Last, but certainly not least, for many people one of the greatest positive sides to the crisis is that teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the FPMT's Spiritual

Director, Lama Zopa Rinpoche - our two greatest sources of inspiration - have been made available to everyone in the world online. Personally, I find it a great relief to know that both are able to take a rest from traveling – although rest might not be the appropriate word. His Holiness, now 85 years of age, not only teaches but participates in conference from his residence in Dharamsala. To stay informed about His Holiness' teachings, check out www.dalailama.com.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche is at Kopan Monastery in Nepal, where he has been teaching ceaselessly, in English for the international audience and in Tibetan for the benefit of the hundreds of monks and nuns at Kopan. He has been doing a series of talks called 'Thought Transformation during the time of Covid-19' and, as usual, Lama Zopa Rinpoche pulls no punches. He does not teach to please the crowd, or to win you over or to charm you.

He's there to tell you about how important it is to tame your mind, practice patience and compassion and make offerings to the Three Jewels (the objects of refuge: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and how if you don't practice dharma you will create more suffering for yourself and others. »



» He also explains the importance of using suffering situations on the path and how unfavorable conditions became a beneficial support to our practice. The English language teachings have been made available online and can be accessed by anyone via the FPMT website (www.fpmt.org). Perhaps a good teaching to begin with is one that can be found on <https://fpmt.org/teachers/zopa/lama-zopa-rinpoche-news/> - it is the teaching given on October 12. Rinpoche has also given a lot of advice on prayers and practices that can be done to stop the spread of Covid-19, all of which is available on the FPMT website.

IN CONCLUSION

Needless to say, if I had a choice to have or not have the virus in the world, I would choose the latter. The suffering that has resulted from the pandemic is

enormous and will be felt by many individuals, sectors, countries and the world for a long time to come.

However, it has been and continues to be not only a disaster, but an opportunity. By shaking up and upturning our complacent lives at home and at our centers, we have had to learn resilience, and the importance of realizing the impermanence of all phenomena has once again been brought home.

Hopefully, we will not become complacent in the 'new normal' and will realize that all that we experience today will be different tomorrow. As I said at the beginning, the extent of my own understanding of this important point is limited by my lack of realization of impermanence. But although easier said than done, the truth of impermanence is being brought home daily. Let us hope that by developing a more profound understanding of its nature, all of us - every sentient being - will find benefit! ❀



What has been revealed by the covid-19 pandemic?

The truth is always present, but we are not, or do not always want to be, aware of it. The pandemic has made this fact more apparent in many aspects, and this is one of the positive aspects of it. The universal laws, which are Buddha's teachings, have become more tangible and highly topical due to the pandemic.

Like all phenomena, this crisis has a cause. Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim, Supreme Matriarch of the Yun Hwa Denomination and founder of the Lotus Buddhist Monastery in Hawaii, perceives human ignorance as one of the causes of the virus. How can we understand and classify this profound statement?

Not only humans have a consciousness, but so do all other living beings and, consequently, nature. This means that all our thoughts, words and actions are perceived, not only by other people and living beings, but also by nature.

Water, trees, mountains, and plants have a consciousness and we humans influence this consciousness, especially with our attitude, thoughts and actions.

“ We are part of nature, we are one with nature ”

Thus, ignorant thoughts, words and actions have a negative effect on living beings and nature. We therefore have an immeasurable responsibility for our living environment.

When we are together with others and have a negative mind, we cause them to feel uneasy. Not only does the consciousness of people take notice of this negative spirit, but this "discomfort" spreads to all sentient beings and nature. They notice our state of mind as well.

In these times, we direct our awareness more towards nature. Let us also become

aware of how much nature nourishes, cares for, and protects us. With a positive attitude in mind, we will continue to use nature's resources for ourselves, but with the necessary respect and appreciation. We, therefore, do not waste water and we buy food only to the extent necessary to nourish our bodies, so that it is not ultimately thrown away. This also means to keep animals with all due respect and appreciation so that they can have a happy life.

Our bodies are built from the elements of nature, so let's wake up from our dream and realize that we are a part of nature, and that we are one with nature.

The pandemic, the virus, is only a symptom of the crisis, just like the fever is a symptom of an infection. We can try to lower the fever with various remedies, but as long as the infection itself is not treated and cured, the fever returns.

The correct mental attitude of us as human beings is requested. If we follow the Buddha's teaching, we can create world peace in no time at all and eliminate the cause of this crisis. »



“ WITH THIS REORIENTATION OF THE MIND AND THOUGHTS IN A POSITIVE DIRECTION, WE STRENGTHEN OUR MENTAL IMMUNE SYSTEM AND CONSEQUENTLY ALSO OUR PHYSICAL IMMUNE SYSTEM. THIS MAKES IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR A VIRUS TO PENETRATE AND CAUSE TROUBLE. ”

» With one mind and one intention, we would deprive the pandemic of its livelihood and cause, for according to the law of the universe, every appearance is followed by a disappearance. The duration between appearance and disappearance depends on our state of mind.

So, what can we learn from this "infection"?

Social Buddhism, which was taught by Shakyamuni Buddha from the beginning, is holistic. As Buddhists, we not only feel

a great responsibility for the spiritual well-being of people, but are also deeply concerned about the physical health of all living beings. Without a healthy body, we find it difficult to concentrate on spiritual development. We are constantly concerned with physical complaints. Because of the threats of this virus to our bodies, physical health and especially the immune system have become a very high priority. We suddenly find ourselves asking questions like: Do we eat healthy food? Do we get enough exercise in the fresh air? Do we allow ourselves the relaxation and rest phases necessary for the regeneration of mind and body?

Whenever we are "attacked" by an infection, we become aware of the importance of our immune system. Unfortunately, in this pandemic, neither governments, nor experts, nor the media have made much mention of the immune system and the role it plays in this situation. Moreover, it appears that the mental aspect of our immune system was not and is not discussed at all.

We have been confronted with this virus for most of the year now. Many have been infected and many have also died from it. As a result, the media are continuously spreading the news about the virus' danger potential, the hospitalizations and deaths. In print, online or on TV, most headlines and stories are about the coronavirus. All other topics are pushed into the background. The contents of conversations with friends and acquaintances are similar. There is only one topic left: corona. »

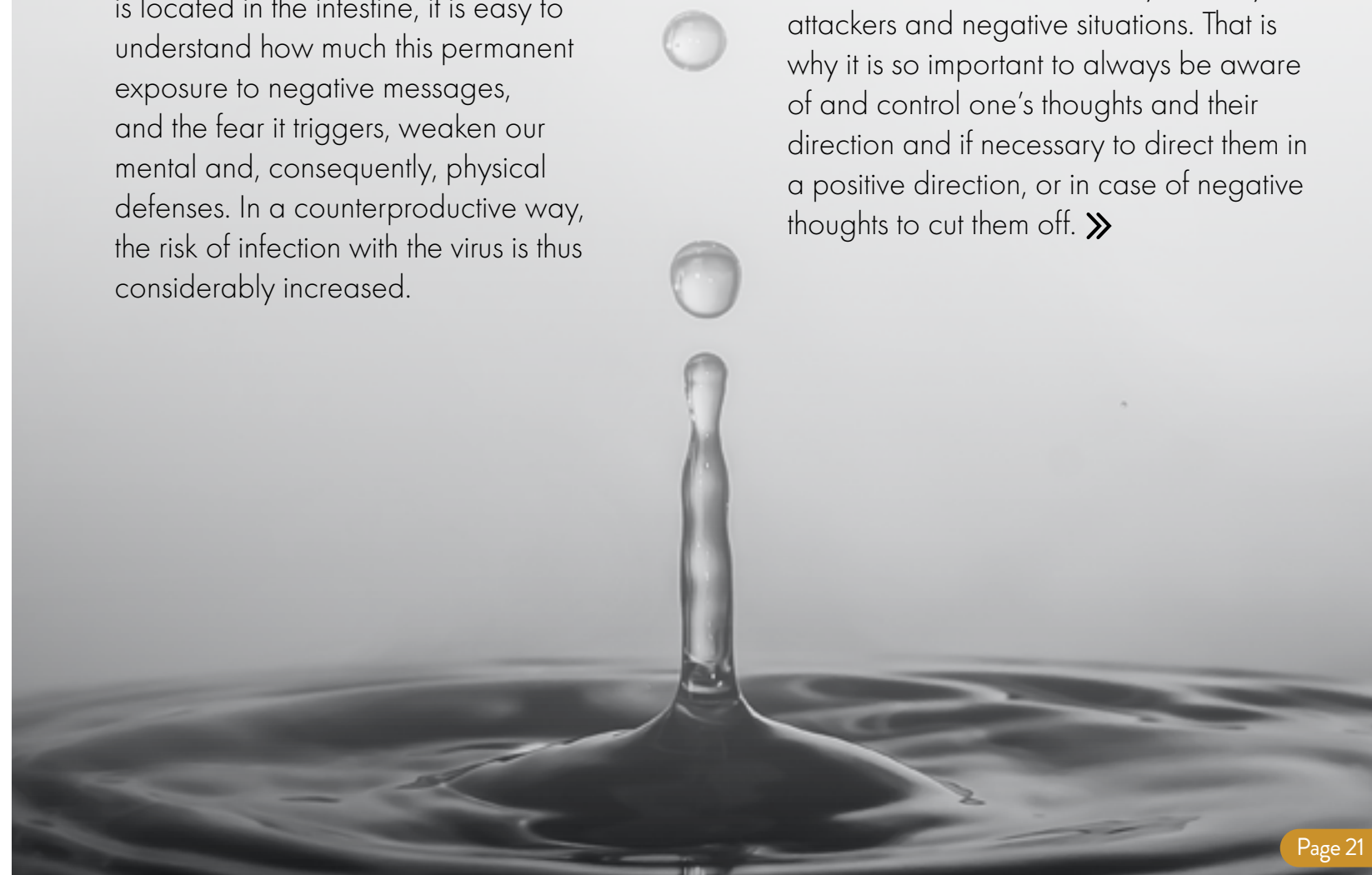
» In addition, the measures imposed to contain the spreading of the virus lead to economic collateral damage and add to the negative mood. Many are on short-time work and some have lost considerable income, their jobs or even their homes. This is quite a threatening situation for our psyche and our mental immune system. A large part of the population is exposed to this situation unprotected.

It is well known that fears and worries have serious effects on our well-being. They trigger stress in our body, which particularly strains our digestive system. Science calls it the intestinal-brain axis (see <https://link.springer.com/article>)

Since 70-80% of our immune system is located in the intestine, it is easy to understand how much this permanent exposure to negative messages, and the fear it triggers, weaken our mental and, consequently, physical defenses. In a counterproductive way, the risk of infection with the virus is thus considerably increased.

How can and could we protect ourselves against this? Vaccinations as well as nutrition and physical exercise are important for the immune system. But, what is most important is a strong immune system in the human mind, because everything is created by the mind. The mind is the boss!

"What should our mind become immune to?" you may ask. Against negativity! The more turbulences there are in this world and the more unsettling the times are, the more important it is to be able to rely on oneself and to help oneself. It is now all the more important to learn to deal with negative situations. When the mental immune system is weakened, one is at a great risk of being stressed, with far-reaching physical consequences. A weakened mind offers entry to many attackers and negative situations. That is why it is so important to always be aware of and control one's thoughts and their direction and if necessary to direct them in a positive direction, or in case of negative thoughts to cut them off. »





» A negative mind produces negative thoughts and actions. With a negative mind, we resonate to negative messages, just as people with a negative attitude feel comfortable in the company of others with a similar attitude. If we are able to direct our mind and thoughts in a positive way, we are less affected by negative headlines. With this reorientation of the mind and thoughts in a positive direction, we strengthen our mental immune system and, consequently, our physical immune system as well. This makes it more difficult for a virus to penetrate and cause trouble.

If we let fear and worries "infect" our mind, we are "contagious" for our family, our friends, acquaintances, and for all people with whom we are in contact, including all sentient beings and nature.

We can develop the most effective "vaccine" against these infections ourselves by practicing sincerely and obtaining a peaceful mind that strengthens our immune system and protects us from infections of any kind.

Rest and meditation are helpful methods on the way to inner peace and serenity. Let us notice the beauty of nature, the beauty of plants and flowers, the beauty and peace of mountains, forests and lakes, rivers and seas.

Let us use this time of restricted activity to make us aware of this connection with nature. In silence lies a power which enables us to find access to the "true self", to our intrinsic nature, which is called the Buddha nature. Calmness makes us less caught up in external influences and impairments, allowing us to lead fearless and harmonious lives.

Buddha's teachings and the meditation practice support and guide us, especially in times when the undulations on the surface of the vast sea seem to increasingly intensify. The Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are invaluable. ✿

**EVERY DAY
WE ARE BORN AGAIN.
WHAT WE DO TODAY
IS WHAT MATTERS MOST.**

Buddhist Action and inner ecology in a post covid world



Part one.

By Olivia Fuchs

This piece is based on a talk I gave at the EBU AGM in September 2020 in answer to the following provocation: The covid pandemic has meant that action on the climate emergency has lost its focus. What positive action both inner and outer, can Buddhists and sanghas (communities) now take?

To begin with I would like to state that I am no expert in climate action and that this is a very personal response as part of my journey of thirty three years' Buddhist practice with the Soka Gakkai International. I am a women's leader in South East London, a very diverse part of London and I work in the arts as an opera director. For a long time now, I have seen my Buddhist practice and work as social change making and five years ago I decided to follow my heart and study for a Masters in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation with an emphasis on religious peacebuilding. Since then peacebuilding, interfaith work and engagement with the climate crisis have

become a big part of my life and I am now a research fellow at the Centre for Applied Buddhism.

A year ago, it was suggested to me that I start an intra-Buddhist climate action network as part of Faith for the Climate's, an UK interfaith organization, capacity building programme for minority faiths (Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs). Out of this initiative the **Eco Dharma Network** was born with the aim to strengthen Buddhist climate action, to build on and amplify work already happening, and to encourage and support our capacity as Buddhists to take individual and collective action – to create community, a sangha of sanghas. »

» In response to the theme, although the climate emergency may have lost its focus at the beginning of the pandemic, I also believe that it is making the climate crisis more main-stream and helping people and governments to join up the dots. There is a growing awareness of the interrelated issues and causes of pandemics, climate crisis and ecological disaster, and there is a groundswell of popular opinion demanding governments build back better and invest in a green economy to create a fairer, greener and more sustainable world. I also understand that since the beginning of the year global commitments to taking climate action, both from governments and businesses have doubled.

As Christiana Figueres says, the pandemic has pushed the PAUSE button making us all stop and reflect, and she is convinced it has also given us the opportunity to push the RESET button. We can all ask ourselves personally and collectively:

'What is this situation teaching us? What can we learn and do differently?' Personally, having contracted Covid-19 in March, the experience has given me the opportunity to treasure life more deeply, to strengthen my purpose and resolve, and my understanding of why I am here on this beautiful planet earth right now, at this crucial time. The next ten years are critical and we need to change the trajectory of humankind.

In my opinion we have all the resources to do this:

1. Buddhist principles that we can offer to the wider discourse on the ecological and climate crisis.
2. Buddhist Practice or inner ecology: the impact of our inner transformation as reflected in outer action.
3. Actions we can take individually and collectively. »



» BUDDHIST PRINCIPLES

As Buddhists we have a lot to offer to the Western secular and interfaith discourse on the climate and ecological emergency, which is often underpinned by a Christian world view. The principle of **Interconnectedness**, or interbeing, and our interconnection with nature and all life, is beautifully illustrated by the metaphor of Indra's net, a web, which has at the intersection of each thread a precious jewel. When one thread is pulled all the jewels are activated and then in turn reflect all the other myriad jewels in a beautiful sparkling universe. Once we deeply understand this interconnection, we can transcend the perception of the duality of self and other, which gives us the illusion of separateness, often leading to isolation and excessive individuality. By extension understanding the nature of **non-duality** we can perceive the absolute connection of our own inner ecology, our personal field, within the context of the larger field or ecology. How we think and what we do matters.

We can also share our understanding of the **three poisons** as the causes of the ecological disaster we find ourselves in. They work on personal and collective levels leading not only to personal suffering but also to confusion on systemic and societal levels as can be seen in the world right now.

Most of us will be familiar with these poisons inherent in all of our lives.

Greed is a continual unfulfilled desire, wanting more and more and never being satisfied. On a structural level this leads to excessive consumerism and exploitation, as well as unjust systems where some suffer from hunger and poverty while others overconsume.

Anger/ill will is based on the idea of 'them' and 'us', it leads to hierarchical thinking, aggression, and violence. Structurally it is expressed as oppression, war and militarism.

Delusion is the opposite of awakening. It is to not understand that we and all life are worthy of deep respect, endowed as we are with infinite potential to manifest the Buddha's qualities of compassion, loving kindness, wisdom, courage and creativity. It is to not realise our interconnection with everyone and everything and it can also lead us to not believe in our own agency. »



» The third principle I would like to suggest we can offer is the concept of **karma** in its original meaning as 'action' - in thought, word and deed. Not only have the actions we have taken individually and collectively created our present karma, but more importantly the actions we take now are the causes we are making for the future, and therefore every action we take counts. Although we are seeing the effects of causes made in the past in the present climate and ecological crisis, we also have the power to change – to change our hearts and our future. Together we can co-create and re-imagine the future possibilities and outcomes. It may be too late to mitigate all the effects of climate change, but we can decide how we respond and adapt individually and collectively. It is never too late to change our behaviors and ways of living, how we interact with each other and the world, both individually and collectively.

This brings me to the subject of the importance and potential impact of our Buddhist practice.

BUDDHIST PRACTICE

Personally, I understand there to be two interrelated aspects of our practice: that of **inner transformation** and that of **outer action**. Both are of course completely interactive.

When I change, my environment changes, and the world as well.

When the world changes, I choose to respond, and I change.

My practice is not only for myself but for all living beings and for nature and the Earth. Over the last couple of years, I have had to work hard in my Buddhist practice to transform my inner delusion and my disbelief in my own agency - to transform the grief, anger and shame I feel at having been complicit in the climate disaster, and to find a new agency. One of the things that helps me is to strengthen my intent through the question 'what can I do to make the world a better place for myself and others today?'. I have understood that I cannot change everything at once, but I can take action in my own way and collaborate with others. By taking actions big and small in the hope that they benefit others and the world, I am no longer as overwhelmed by the extent of the crisis, but I start to feel hopeful. Since I have started practicing in this way all sorts of opportunities have arisen. The power of our intent can create change. »

» BUDDHIST ACTION or choosing the Bodhisattva or 'Ecosattva' path

So what can I, what can we do?

On a personal level I have begun by educating myself and learning more about climate change: reading, listening to webinars and my favourite podcast 'Outrage and Optimism', researching good news stories.

Reconnecting with nature through walks, gardening and rewilding is also hugely beneficial as it gives me a different perspective. I am sure we are all making life-style changes as best we can. Eating a plant-based diet, shopping locally and avoiding single-use plastic, buying only second hand clothes, using only renewable energy and less water; less driving and flying, instead biking, walking, and using public transport; ethical banking and investments. Once we have done these things, however, what else can we do?

1. David Loy, 2018, Eco Dharma: Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis

"LET'S TAKE ONE ACTION
THIS NEXT WEEK!"



We can have dialogue and Influence the people around us, our communities, families, friends, neighbours, sanghas. We can discuss, collaborate, work together, and be joyful and celebrate life right now. We can also share the good news stories, for example that China is leading the way in international climate action with a pledge to be net zero before 2060. We can use our voice in social and political activism by contacting our political representatives and asking them to back a green, fair and sustainable recovery plan, and we can join with others in protests and campaigns. As I have discovered, collaboration and joy are key. With others we can co-create the future, inspire each other and be inspired, no longer feeling alone. I believe that together we can have an impact. We never know when the tipping point towards a shift of consciousness and norms will happen, as it did for instance with the Berlin Wall coming down and the end of apartheid in South Africa...✿



BUDDHIST ACTION AND INNER ECOLOGY IN A POST COVID WORLD

Part two.

By Eric Vinson



WHAT CAN WE DO?

It is said, that because of the covid pandemic, action on the climate emergency has lost its momentum. What inner and outer positive action can Buddhists and Sanghas now take?

As far as I am concerned, I am actually not so sure that the covid pandemic really has meant that action on the climate emergency has lost its focus. In my opinion, it's very difficult to make such a global, general statement, because we have contradictory signals on the matter: for instance, China's pledge to be carbon neutral by 2060, or the wide coverage of climate issues in Le Monde, my favourite newspaper. Even if it is a very small observation post!

Was there a real, a strong focus on climate emergency before the covid pandemic? In the matter, what was the practical part, the real implication of each country, company, organization and human being? Green washing, communication, demagoguery, or strong preoccupation and effective efforts? And has something really changed since the outbreak? It is very early, very difficult to give a grounded answer, beyond our opinions, beliefs and expectations.

In addition, can't we say that the pandemic is a precursor, a sign and a part - probably the first of this major scale - of a global ecological crisis? In other words, we should not disconnect climate issues from other environmental problems (such as the loss of biodiversity): for me, it's all the same, everything is cross linked and interdependent, as a whole unique situation. Our problematic, unprecedented, global situation...

To take one example only: I would say that the covid pandemic will probably oblige people to adapt quickly to this new, uncertain situation. And those adaptations could be made - entirely or partially - in a greener way... Nothing is certain, of course, but it's possible. In a word, we are just now in a stage of indeterminacy...

A point of uncertainty where human individual and collective freedom could have an impact and make a difference. And I like to think that the worst-case scenario is never guaranteed, even if it is unfortunately the most likely. »

» In fact, I'm inclined to think that the covid pandemic, confinements and all the bad and good consequences are for many people (whose number we don't know...) the opportunity of a greater awareness; or at least, the beginning of it, of what is wrong in our post-modern way of life: individualism, materialism, meaninglessness, greed, and so on... Could this kind of shift in those people's mind be quick, significant and have real effects on our global situations? Nobody knows, it is far too early to adjudicate on it...

In our troubled times, what inner and outer positive action, can Buddhists and Sanghas now take?

These first considerations must have led you to understand that, for me, the most important features in our present situation are complexity, incertitude and unpredictability. And, as usual, complexity, incertitude and unpredictability give birth to human passions (individual as well

as collective ones) such as fear, rivalry, distress, diversion, desire for safety - to name but a few - and could generate conflicts, hatred and so on. Going straight to the point, I would say that all that I have just mentioned is Dukkha. With this pandemic, we are facing Samsara, and - as Buddhists - we are supposed to have tools, methods, inspirations to try to cope with it, even if it is never so easy, isn't it?

To be more accurate: in my opinion, our present civilization and ecological global crisis will not be solved without connecting work on oneself with work on society and culture(s) so as to bring personal transformation and collective transformation. This specific perspective could be named «inner ecology», as it is inseparable from global and environmental ecology. In this regard, spirituality and religions - Buddhism, among others - are irreplaceable resources. And our role is to understand, explain and use these traditions widely, so as to serve the common good. »

**"We must make
our best to be
good human
beings"**



What is to be done in concrete terms?

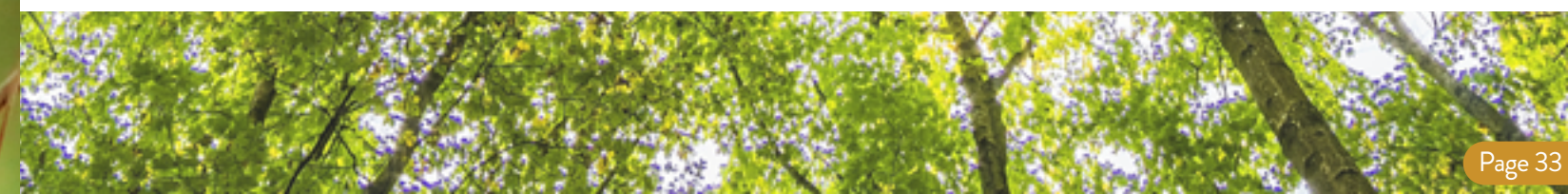
» First of all, we must make our best to be good human beings - as HH Dalai Lama keeps repeating - and, what is more, to try to be good, real Buddhists. We must practice, meditate, pray, keep our vows and make good wishes, use the tools our masters and instructors have given us. We must follow the ethical and spiritual path opened by Gautama Buddha and help other people and beings as much as we can. We must try to tame our own passions, fix our flaws and problems with a wide, strong, active bodhicitta. We must try to keep a cool head, due to reflexion, training, and meditation, when all about us are losing theirs, as Kipling said. And in order to do so, fortunately we can find inner resources in our spiritual methods and experiences; and then, share our feelings about it - our difficulties, fears, etc. - with our fellow buddhist companions. In order to be stronger and to pull together.

The most important thing? To avoid desperation... and do our best, in our daily practice and daily life, inspired by a true, sincere quest for universal goodwill and Enlightenment. A quest for personal, collective and global coherence, from our inner heart to the whole earth and sky. Yes, good, right motivation is most important:

to do our best is our own part; good or bad, the outcome does not belong to us, as mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita. And then, if mundane things go well, that is fine! But if they go wrong, it is not so bad either, as long as we keep strong spiritual practice and commitment. It is Samsara, isn't it? All is transient illusion. And we have been foretold...

More specifically, from an ecological point of view, we could try to improve our communities - buddhist groups - and make models out of them. We could represent, as individuals and as Sanghas, the change we wish to see emerge in the world. For instance, we could green the organization of our local communities, and begin to manage resilient structures to prevent a predictable collapse. We could build networks to support ecological change, around our temples, monasteries, centres and pagodas. Another path could lead us to begin or strengthen interfaith green commitment: to encourage other non-buddhist traditions to converge, in this ecological concern and ethics.

In a word, we could be active, ecologically involved citizens and consumers. We could be committed Buddhists! ✿





Practitioners daily thoughts in these challenging times

By Emilia Raunio

Looking back to the beginning of year 2020 things truly have changed. As a practitioner never before have I contemplated *Anicca*, impermanence, one of Buddha's core teachings, so vividly. Some ask when things will come back to how they were, but as we know past is not coming back. For once this crisis has touched us all in one way or another. At the same time global warming, social injustice, human and animal rights and welfare, just to mention few, should take just as big action as this pandemic.

As a Buddhist practitioner I see this year as a great opportunity to look deeper into our minds. What kind of thoughts it wakes up and how we communicate and live with these often difficult and even painful thoughts and feelings. Are we repeating harmful and unskillful patterns, or can we be in the present moment with clear mind and skillful thoughts and action? Lucky enough, many of us have placed greater emphasis on gaining mental clarity and self-help, in order to be ok with oneself and the people around us.

In my living room, I have a calligraphy painting, a beautiful memory from a retreat at Plum Village in France, decorated with the sentence "*Sans la boue pas de lotus*"

("No mud no lotus"). This year, the words by the Zen Buddhist master, peace activist and founder of the Plum Village Tradition, Thich Nhat Hanh, have opened up to me in a new way: "*Most people are afraid of suffering. But suffering is a kind of mud to help the lotus flower of happiness grow. There can be no lotus flower without the mud*".

Nowadays, we truly experience insecurity, both mental and physical pain as well as suffering in many ways. For me, to be truly present and not to chase away or fight, but to take care of the painful feelings, has truly been great way to live in these challenging times. Sitting in silence and contemplating the mud and the lotus has become a beautiful daily practice as well these days. Not the mud nor the lotus are either better or worse, they are inseparable and nurture each other. There is not one without the other. The beauty blooms when we let go of the struggle and accept and let things be as they are. This does not mean apathy, but quite the opposite. When we see clearly, we may change things if we can, but we can also let things be, if we cannot do anything about them. Letting go of the struggle and resting in the moment, as things are. The importance of meditation has truly shown its power. »

» One thing I started during the first weeks of lock down, was lists of things that boost my mood in difficult times.

Physician M.D Susan Biali Haas speaks and writes about stress reduction, burnout prevention, mental health and resilience.

In an article *Guilt-Free Ways to Boost Your Mood and Brain in Tough Times* (Psychology Today, Jun 23, 2020) she has collected a variety of guilt free mood-boosting strategies as follows:

- Going outside
- Reading a good book
- Playing an instrument
- Listening to a great podcast or audiobook while walking, doing chores or relaxing
- Enjoying your favorite music
- Sketching or painting
- Making a special meal
- Enjoying nature whenever you can find it
- Supporting local business by buying something you need from them
- Doing a workout that you enjoy, at home or outside. »



» As the constant stress of the pandemic swirls around us, our brains need positive input, Biali Haas says. By doing pleasurable, healthy things we can treat ourselves to a well-needed boost of positive neurotransmitters. But of course, if you are really struggling, it is recommended that you make use of any counseling support available to you, she adds. So, what would your list look like?

I'm happy to share my list with You and hope You will share your list too.

- Go to nature as often as possible
- Start Your day with mindful movement and meditation, perhaps setting an intention for the day
- Enjoy cooking and seasonal food, share recipe and food with others
- Start gardening with friends, grow plants and take care of them home
- Listen to your favorite Podcast (one of my favorite ones is Being well with Dr. Rick Hanson, also attending he's weekly zoom meditations online)
- Read a good book, sing, dance, write, sketch
- Talk to a friend and take care of friendships
- Do charity work
- Before going to sleep think 3 things you are thankful of
- Support local and small business
- Ask for help and offer your help and presence
- Smile and give your smile to people passing by
- Practice deep listening
- Be supportive and see what you may learn from challenges
- Contemplate impermanence in daily life, leaves falling from tree, seasons changing
- Plan and take time for rest, mindful breathing, meditation and silence.

Last words

All conditioned things are impermanent, strive with diligence, is said to be Lord Buddha's last words. Breath by breath and step by step we may come back to the present moment, all things are changing and impermanent. Let us strive with diligence here and now. Seeing the changing and passing nature of existence. We are all in this together. Let us strive with diligence. *

Can Buddhism heal the economy and save our planet?

We know we are at the edge of self-destruction: there is massive pollution that has now reached even our food and our bodies, there is a potentially irreversible warming up of the climate, it might be too late to stop the Sixth Extinction and our societies show the biggest gap between rich and poor in human history. Ironically, it took a pandemic to force us to slow down from this madness. But this also gives us an opportunity to make a fresh start. Whether we will succeed in doing things differently however, depends not only on UN Climate Conferences and good intentions but also on correct insights into why we ended up in this mess in the first place.

Although there are obviously multiple causes for the massive damage done to our societies and our planet, one of the main culprits is neoliberalism. Since the oil crisis of the 70s this ideology successfully presented itself as the only possible way of organising a society. A simple look at history shows this is absurd. Now we are in need of new ideas and a new vocabulary to think and act differently and Buddhism has the potential to contribute to this huge task ahead of us.

By Dr. Michael Daniel Vermeulen

Neoliberal Freedom

Neoliberalism refers to the economic theories of Friedrich (von) Hayek, Milton Friedman and the School of Chicago. Due to a law of 1919 the Austrian aristocratic families lost their title (and had to drop the 'von' in their name). It made Friedrich bitter about democracy and paranoid about government interference. His ideas were strongly affected by nostalgia for the privileges of the aristocracy before the Great War. Neoliberals firmly rejected the principles of distributive justice and progressive taxation, even though these resulted in three decades of prosperity after WWII with a fairly narrow gap between rich and poor. Their rejection however was not based on facts but on dogma: to them it was an attack on freedom. Only, freedom was redefined as the unconditional and

unlimited right of every individual to make as much profit as possible. This narrow and rather peculiar definition was a frontal attack to US president Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 Four Freedoms Speech and to the way freedom was defined in the international Human Rights declarations and treaties after the Second World War.

The neoliberal worldview considers the economy to be an independent realm with its own universal natural laws, free from political influence or moral considerations. This was an old aspiration within economic thinking: 150 years ago, pioneering Western economists were very impressed by Isaac Newton's success in the realm of physics. Many have since been looking for economic laws that were as imperative as Newton's

three laws of motion. But in reality neoliberalism turned out to be an ideology resembling more a sect than a science, especially in their unwillingness to comply with a core principle of science: falsification. This shows in their stubborn rejection of every possible alternative approach to the economy (TINA - There Is No Alternative - became an expression) which also allows them to refuse taking up responsibility for the disastrous consequences of their policies. But it is even more evident in their paranoia towards everyone who suggests a different approach to the economy, demonising them as Communists aiming to suffocate freedom and install a totalitarian government. »



» Buddhist Freedom

The Buddhist worldview is in many ways the opposite of neoliberalism. But does this imply that Buddhism has anything to teach us about a fair society or even the economy? Seeking inspiration in Buddhism may seem odd at first. Many people believe Buddhism is about individual salvation, not about fair taxes, social justice or ecological well being. But core concepts of Buddhist spirituality, such as interdependence and *an-atman* (not-Self, more specific: no Independent Self), make it clear that personal Awakening is not something that can be obtained separately from society, nor can it be indifferent to society or to the fate of other sentient beings and the environment. This prejudice is also historically unfair. Emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism in 264 BCE for example led to radical political changes: he ordered the building of hospitals (not only for humans but also for animals, which in the West only appeared in the late 18th century CE), created public parks and planted new

trees, made sure women had access to education and villages had access to drinking water.

Freedom refers in Buddhism to freedom from *dukkha* (dissatisfaction/dysphoria). While Buddhism identifies attachment to profit, consumption and material wealth as main sources of *dukkha* that enslave us, neoliberalism claims these to be the solutions that make us free and happy. Furthermore a consumerist economy even cultivates dissatisfaction so more products can get bought and produced. A Buddhist economy cultivates contentment and durability. It rejects needlessly and endlessly renewing products. *"For the modern economist, this is very difficult to understand. He is used to measuring the 'standard of living' by the amount of annual consumption, assuming all the time that a man who consumes more is 'better off' than a man who consumes less. A Buddhist economist would consider this approach excessively irrational: since consumption is merely a »*

» means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption" (Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, 1973).

These opposing views result from different perspectives on what it means to be human: to Buddhism we are inter-dependent sentient beings in search of happiness. Interdependence means everything we do has an impact on others and the environment (and vice versa). When we use interdependence as the core principle of our economy we can create an economy with human flourishing at its heart. An economy where we leave no one behind, where the dignity of all actors within the economy is imperative not just that of a lucky few.

To neoliberalism we are in-dependent consumers in competition for the same resources. Any social, moral or ecological limitations form a threat to this independence. With competition at its core, the economy becomes a giant lottery with a happy outcome for a small elite. Leaving people behind is not a side effect but its essence. The dignity of the actors within the economy is irrelevant, only their accumulated wealth and power.

To put it simply: to Buddhism the others are the goal, to neoliberalism they are the obstacle.



Gold Fever

The more fundamental question is: why do we keep following the neoliberal ideology despite its disastrous outcomes? During four decades of neoliberal economy a small elite of super wealthy got filthy wealthy, but meanwhile the average income of ordinary citizens remained more or less the same. What's more: years of austerity meant they had to work harder but got less in return: healthcare provisions were reduced and pensions delayed, not to mention the pollution and destruction of the ecosystems. Logic would dictate we stop and change, yet politics still swear by the neoliberal mantra: 'There Is No Alternative - go harder'.

When we zoom out, a neoliberal looks more like someone suffering from gold fever. Someone who's so obsessively, feverishly digging for gold that he ends up neglecting his relations, his environment and his future. Or like a junkie, in this case not addicted to drugs but to profit. Approaching everyone as competitors or potential obstacles also created a fragmented, disconnected society resulting in ever increasing levels of isolation and mental illnesses. The state of our economy and the state of our social interactions - symbolised by Wall Street and Facebook - all show symptoms of addictive rather than rational behaviour. Could it be that we stick to neoliberal axioms, not because they benefit us but because they turned us into addicts? »

» Three Addictions

The Buddha taught that our minds can't see clearly because they are subject to Three Fires. In later centuries these were renamed as the Three Unwholesome Roots (in Theravada) or the Three Poisons (in Mahayana), but the reference to fire and the context of the Vedic fire cult are essential to understand the full power of the allegory (Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, 1996). 2500 years ago, Vedic households in North India had three sacrificial fires at home. In order to maintain the cosmic and social order these fires should never be left to go out, and had to be fuelled permanently. The Sanskrit term *samskara* also refers to the ritual turning in circles around the sacrificial fires. All of this was daily reality to the Buddha's audience. But he gives the fires a radical new meaning and identifies them with three obstructive mental states: grasping/craving (the desire to possess everything we like, or we think will make us happy), aggression/hatred (the desire to push away or destroy everything we don't like, or we think might pose a threat to us) and prejudices/indifference (not understanding or wanting to understand the way things are).

When we are under the influence of the three fires, we behave like the man with gold fever: in the search for happiness we keep digging, we keep looking for more, we become restless and paranoid, afraid and irritated of others and the outside world. We disconnect and look for differences with others to justify our behaviour, such as owning more than others, or considering it a privilege to be a man, or to be straight or to be white... In Buddhist terminology, we create the mental concept of a Self (*atman*), in the illusion this Self is independent, fixed, in no need for others and not influenced by its environment. This delusion is fuelled by endlessly turning in circles around the three fires. If someone in Gautama's days would want to describe an addiction without having the vocabulary of modern medicine at hand, he probably would do it this way. We could therefore also call the three fires the three addictions, for just like drug addictions they are associated with feverish behaviour, delusional thoughts and isolated lives. And as it happens, neoliberalism is nurturing all of these. »

» Interdependent economy

If we look carefully, a paradigm shift happened. Where throughout history it was never disputed that the economy should serve human flourishing, within the neoliberal ideology material wealth became a goal on its own. Now we need to reconnect people with each other and with the environment. *Inter*-dependence implies that our personal healing is not *in*-dependent from the healing of our societies and ecosystems. In an interdependent economy we take the impact of our actions on other sentient beings and the ecosystems into account. Interdependence also means there is no economy possible without political choices. These choices should not only be rational, but must also be guided by values as *ahimsa* (non-violence towards other sentient beings but also to ecosystems and our planet), *metta* (unconditional friendliness) and *karuna* (compassionate action). In other words, as HH the Dalai Lama says: 'our intelligence needs to be guided by warm-heartedness', and Buddhism has 2500 years of experience in training warm-heartedness.

Where the three addictive fires create hostile, isolated and polluted environments, warm-heartedness creates supportive, connected and flourishing environments (also known as Pure Lands). To make *ahimsa*, *metta* and *karuna* prosper within our societies, we need to incorporate them in education and make them guiding principles for legislation. There is not much time left to cure humanity of its addictions, redirect our economy and politics, and save our one and only planet. We Buddhists have to contribute now at all levels to heal our economy from neoliberalism and transform our societies towards such open, friendly and compassionate environments. ✿

This article is based on a talk given by Dr Michael Daniel Vermeulen at the opening session of the 2018 UN Vesak Conference in Bangkok: 'Eudaimonistic Buddhism: Can Metta Transform and Redirect Our Societies and Save Our Environment?'

Crisis, what crisis?

By Prajnaketu

"Namo Buddhay – Jai Bhim!" marked the start of the 2020 International Buddhist Youth Convention at Bodh Gaya in February. A dozen or so of us intrepid Europeans joined a mostly Indian convention at the auspicious Seat of Awakening. We were there on the invitation of the growing Indian wing of the Triratna Buddhist Community. Following in the footsteps of the visionary Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, who converted to Buddhism in 1956, their youth movement hosts an international convention every few years. I was delighted to join in.

Bodh Gaya – where the Buddha is said to have become the Buddha in Bihar, northern India – is renowned as a meeting place for Buddhists all over the world. And, true to its reputation, Tibetans, Chinese, Burmese, Sri Lankans, Thais, Indians, and Western Buddhists of all persuasions were there to perform their devotions under the Bodhi Tree. Circumambulating the Maha Bodhi temple we shuffled our way into the densely packed central shrine as it thronged with the chanting of hundreds of different voices. We meditated closely alongside one another. We ate together in local restaurants. And we shook hands, hugged, and bowed to one another in camaraderie.

Coronavirus was a Chinese thing, we were told. It was all under control. We were free to continue with our planned pilgrimage after the convention. So, we carried on north to visit the other holy sites on our itinerary. The morning we were due to leave for Lumbini, I had diarrhoea. Given my previous trip to India, I was anticipating some unpleasantness at some point, and I resigned myself to hunkering down in the bus for the one hundred and sixty or so kilometres, first along slow Indian roads and then along the 'roads' in Nepal, until we reached Lumbini. It turned out not to be just a digestive issue. A cough joined the mix, then a fever, and eventually a complete loss of my taste and smell. I went to a doctor in Nepal. By now the coronavirus was coming more to the attention of health practitioners. Had I been to China in the last 21 days? No? Ok, well it probably wasn't coronavirus.

I soldiered on for the next week. Or rather, my hosts caringly conveyed me from one holy site to the next until I finally arrived at Delhi airport in a very shabby state indeed. I was concerned that airline might not even let me onto the plane. The final hurdle was at the security gate. 'Where from?' 'UK'. 'Have you heard of coronavirus?' 'Yes.'

I was waved through. »

» Relieved, I boarded a mostly empty plane on the way home – returning to the UK just before the Spring lockdown began here. I remained ill for another ten days. Although I can't say conclusively whether I succumbed to Sars-Cov-2, most of the symptoms checked out and it was pretty unpleasant, even for a relatively fit, relatively young, man like me. I nursed myself back to health slowly and then began to get my bearings on the situation we were all facing.

For a start, I was going to have totally re-think my work, co-ordinating the Triratna Young Buddhist Project. My Spring was due to be filled with events and retreats. They were all shelved. Then there was working out how to get our community running online events, so I produced how-to videos and ran workshops for those who were new to that kind of thing.

I was now working entirely from home – like many of us – which suited me. In previous years I've spent as much as half the year or more working away from home, so it was something of a blessing to get into a routine, catch up on my reading, and get myself back to full strength again. The weather in Oxford, where I live, was stunning. Seemingly, each new week brought more sunshine and unseasonal warmth. The flowers were blooming. Local wildlife – badgers, kingfishers, trout, deer – began to appear in the neighbourhood with a frequency not seen for generations. The sky was still and completely blue, without a streak of cloud. My partner and I made the most of our exercise quota, taking in walks along the river Thames, and even into the deserted city centre (pictured). And most of the people I spoke with, at least in »

» Oxford and elsewhere in the UK, seemed to be getting along ok.

Increasingly, I was becoming conscious that this was not universally the case. The news brought a relentless flow of fearful stories. People were losing their jobs or being furloughed indefinitely. Many were experiencing acute loneliness and mental anguish. And that's leaving aside the horrors of the intensive care units, which, by all accounts were overflowing with coronavirus patients. Receiving updates on the latest lockdowns and spikes turned into a kind of entertainment – it was enthralling, and, in the midst of an otherwise monotonous routine, offered a strange kind of escapism.

I found it troubling: the deep incongruence between my generally pleasant – if, by now, overfamiliar – surroundings and

what I was witnessing through the media. I'd been practising *mettā bhāvanā* for nearly twenty years and yet still, I found it hard to imaginatively connect with the evident suffering around me, albeit slightly beyond the periphery of my immediate experience. There were graphs and the macabre metrics accumulating the cases and deaths. But these were just numbers. Even having gone through a suspected case of coronavirus first hand, these numbers seemed far removed from the reality of my life. Somehow, I wasn't able to take them in.

Then a couple of members of the Triratna Buddhist Order fell sick and died of coronavirus. Although I didn't know them personally, this was closer to home. And the desolation in the centre of Oxford, as shops were closing, students were absent, and dilapidation began to set »



Oxford in lockdown

» in, underlined the fact that I was not isolated from the effects of the pandemic or the measures being taken to address it. Friends of mine were having difficulties living on their own. So I tried to draw upon this to join up the reality of the wider situation with the reality of my home life. There was a crisis going on, so I didn't just want to remain oblivious to it, easy though that may have been.

Around this time my meditation practice, always a reliable barometer of my overall spiritual health, started to sag. Although my life was fine, all things considered, I was beginning to feel rather fed up with it. I wanted the lockdown to be over. I realised I'd been putting my Dharma life on hold, one way or another. In fact, I'd been putting my work life on hold too. My general contentment with the lockdown was now in tension with a desire for it to all be over. I wanted to get back to my 'proper' work again; to open up our local Buddhist centre to in-person activities again; to go on retreat again. I could maintain a certain amount of superficial inspiration over Zoom but I noticed a palpable dip in the rest of my life.

A pattern was emerging. First, I was waiting until I got home. And then until I got better. Fair enough. But then the goalposts shifted until the end of lockdown – then, I would be able to resume my work and my life as I'd hoped. But even as the lockdown eased

things still weren't quite right, not without a vaccine. When we had a vaccine, though, things would all return to normal... I was postponing the stuff of my life until more propitious conditions arose – and then postponing it again! Prone as I might be to overlook trifling faults, I couldn't let this one pass.

I realised that this was about more than my own shortcomings. This pattern was playing out everywhere. "Everything will be ok once..." but then when the promise arrived, we just transferred the attitude to something else.

This is flawed for two reasons. First, perhaps most obviously, this means that vital time slips away. In anxious waiting, we miss the opportunities to act. I was inspired to see some cafes, which, even early on in the Spring lockdown, had moved to a takeaway service and transferred their seating to the pavement outside. These makeshift efforts – in the face of unpropitious conditions – in fact gave them the edge over their competitors who just decided to close up and sit it out. These innovators seemed to be saying "let's just do the best we can." They weren't wasting any time.

But second, and more fundamentally, things are never going to be ok. Vaccines may or may not work. We don't know yet. The economy may or may not return to pre-coronavirus health. And even if it does, there'll always be another crisis, »

» be it, climate change, terrorism, refugees, economic troughs, and, sooner or later, another pandemic. I'm not trying to be bleak – the fact is that there's always some kind of crisis going on, personally, nationally, or globally. There's always a plausible enough reason to hunker down and try to ride it out until a better time comes along. On reflection, I see this as cowardly. Especially for a Buddhist.

I suspect the Buddha had something like this in mind when he asked himself:

"Why, being myself subject to birth, do I seek what is also subject to birth? Why, being myself subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, do I seek what is also subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement?" (Ariyapariyesana Sutta).

In other words, why do I seek resolution in the very things that I know can't offer it? The conditions that we think would be most propitious always turn out to have the very same issues we're trying to avoid. Even if they didn't, we'd probably find something wrong with them. 'Too perfect.' And so, the issue probably isn't about the external conditions at all – crisis or not – it's what we make of them. We can be like the boarded-up cafes that hoped for better luck on the other side. Or we can do the best we can now, with whatever's going on around us. Perhaps it's trite to say that, but I think it points to something existential. Samsāra itself can be seen as the way of being which demands a resolution – for everything to be tidied up once and for all. And yet, because the resolution inevitably bears the seeds of the problem, this just keeps the whole unsatisfactory Wheel turning.

I'm still don't exactly think of our present time as a crisis. It's deeply unsatisfactory, sure. And different from the 'old-normal' on the face of it. But the deeper pattern of perpetually postponing life carries on in much the same way. If I've learned anything from this time, it's how easy it is to give up and wait for a better time. But if local cafes can rise to the challenge, why not me? *

"We can do the best we can now, with whatever's going on around us."

WHAT BUDDHISM CAN PROVIDE TO PEOPLE BEYOND COPING STRATEGIES

There are different levels on which we can approach this question – from an organizational point of view, being a Buddhist Sangha, having community life, and from an individual perspective of facing such a supposed extraordinary situation. One positive aspect of this crisis – unlike war for instance – is that most of us have the time to reflect and gain some understanding and insights even though in many cases the situation could be life-threatening.

Before I try to give a possible answer to the question, it is always good to understand the perspective and background. Different Buddhist schools may have different approaches as they have different emphases. Additionally, recommendations can be made from a monastic, yogi or lay perspective, which could make a significant difference as well. In my case, I was born 40 years ago and raised within the context of Diamond Way Buddhism, which is part of the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. It puts a clear emphasis on lay Buddhism rooted in the spiritual forefathers of the Karma Kagyu

lineage like Marpa, the famous Tibetan translator who combines the methods and view into daily life. If one chooses the latter, this is a challenge, as the outer conditions have a bigger impact when one has a family and a job. One is more dependent on conditions compared to being solitaire in a cave or in a monastery with austerity. So, we need practical advice on how to manage and how to learn from a crisis.

Coming from the organizational point of view, the world tour and all physical lectures and courses of our main teacher, Lama Ole Nydahl, were already cancelled in February, weeks before the official lockdown was announced. Instead, he has held more than 60 streaming lectures, twice every weekend with 2,900-3,200 students worldwide participating and listening. Especially in times of the strict lockdown, this gave orientation and support in holding the view and still having the possibility to access the precious Dharma teachings. Additionally, instead of physical meetings, online »

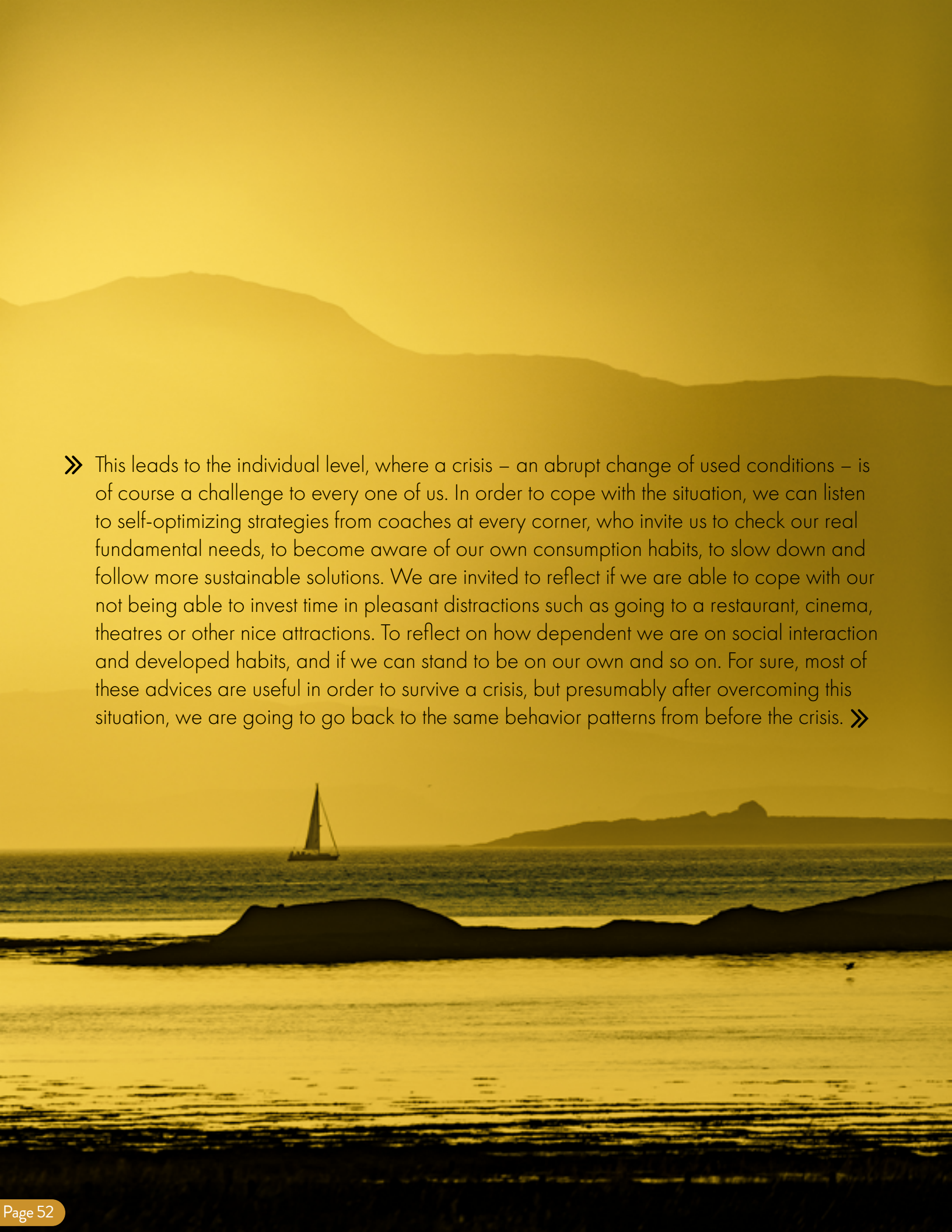
By Widukind Baier

» conferences and exchange with delegates from all over the world strengthened the bonds between students and friends. Like possibly any other spiritual community, we learned that the usage of digital tools is useful to get theoretical input to work with and to stay in touch with each other, this is especially true when one connects across national borders. At the same time, it became clear that subsequent to the crisis we will remain to be an “analog” Sangha, as the exchange of personal and common meditation is essential, and the direct exchange between teacher and student is important in order to receive a full transmission of the teachings.

Another challenge was and is that we have many live-in centers organized on a voluntary basis, which is a characteristic of Diamond Way Buddhism. Living now for about twenty years in different Buddhist centers, I have experienced this as an additional value, being a community having a close and familiar exchange and possible learning field as part of our way of practice and personal development. But all of a sudden, what used to be a benefit is now the challenge.

For instance, if one considers sharing one big kitchen with 14 people and being used to eating and meditating together on a regular basis. As every habit is difficult to change – even for Buddhists – we have had to learn and to handle the situation by splitting up into smaller groups and creating restrictions on personal contact within common rooms and so on.

One could assume that being a Buddhist makes the situation easy to accept and easy to deal with, as we are the supposed to be “experts” on watching inner processes without clinging too much to outer circumstances. But reality also reveals another picture – different views, opinions and implementations of what society and common sense expected us to do became virulent in the more than 150 Buddhist centers and groups in Germany. So far, no outbreak has happened in any of the centers – but just like in society, many things had to be organized and responsibilities assumed while also taking into account the strong wish for individual freedoms. »



» This leads to the individual level, where a crisis – an abrupt change of used conditions – is of course a challenge to every one of us. In order to cope with the situation, we can listen to self-optimizing strategies from coaches at every corner, who invite us to check our real fundamental needs, to become aware of our own consumption habits, to slow down and follow more sustainable solutions. We are invited to reflect if we are able to cope with our not being able to invest time in pleasant distractions such as going to a restaurant, cinema, theatres or other nice attractions. To reflect on how dependent we are on social interaction and developed habits, and if we can stand to be on our own and so on. For sure, most of these advices are useful in order to survive a crisis, but presumably after overcoming this situation, we are going to go back to the same behavior patterns from before the crisis. »

» What can Buddhism give people beyond coping strategies - what is the unique and timeless wisdom that Buddha presents us?

According to Thaye Dorje, H.H. the 17th Karmapa, the spiritual head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, the current viral pandemic is not the only one, there seem to be various kinds of pandemics, in both mental and physical terms. To my understanding, not only outer conditions and our body are in a constant change and thus impermanent, but the same is true for thoughts and feelings. In fact, we are already living in a continuous state of emergency – in times like these it just becomes even more evident. Only the mind – the clear space behind or in-between thoughts and feelings, the radiant awareness which is the basis of each and every perception – is lasting, timeless and unlimited. We only have to become aware of the natural true state of mind, independent, indestructible and full of joy, love and compassion – getting to know the richness and trust of having everything already within us.

Realizing these teachings, nothing can really frighten us, even if the body dies, which in the end it does anyway. I am not appealing here to be unaware or careless and not take the virus seriously on an outer level. It is important to understand the precious human body as a perfect means to achieve enlightenment and – while on the way – to benefit as many sentient beings as possible. Thus, fearless and unshakeable, we can face any crisis, whether mental or physical. »



» What does that mean now both for living in a crisis and our everyday life?

It is common wisdom that fear is never a good advisor, in this case it may be difficult to transfer, however – it only helps if we know in what we can ultimately trust: the all-pervading wisdom of mind itself. To begin with, we can acknowledge things we seemingly cannot change, we can only accept them and try to make the best of every situation. Here, we are just talking about changing the perspective a bit – it is about the view and motivation behind every action that makes the difference – this slight but very essential refocusing is the key to further development until enlightenment. It is not mandatory to be a yogi living in a cave in the mountains, it is about being a yogi in daily life, where step by step we try to take every single moment as a means for realizing our Buddha nature here and now.

As we all experience on a day to day basis, it is already difficult working on an outer level and change our behavior. Even more subtle are thoughts and emotions. Without it being noticed, we have developed small habits and rituals, which make daily life easier to handle as we do not have to think about them and can focus on other, more interesting things. Generally speaking, this is a smart behavior based on evolutionary survival strategies, but a disruptive moment like this – a perceived (outer) crisis – gives us the possibility to be confronted with and be aware of how subtle the “ego clinging” of mind can be.

Therefore, it is only important that we apply this basic wisdom Buddha gave us – which is to meditate, to getting to know our mind. It is not about maturity depending on life experience, it is about becoming aware of the basic functionality of mind. We are not talking about recharging batteries for times after the phenomenon of corona. It is about allowing basic and inherent qualities of mind to show. It is about stepping out of the vicious circle of making us dependent on our minds’ own products – thoughts and emotions – or on other people behaving nicely to us or rules that favor us. »



» Basically, we are not forced to think or feel in a certain way, but we are free to do so. As my teacher, Lama Ole Nydahl, repeatedly says, “Happiness is a decision”. If we have the luxury of having enough to eat and drink and a comfortable place to sleep, this crisis situation could be welcomed as the mind’s greatest gift to itself – time for meditation, time to getting to know the inherent qualities of mind with less distraction coming from the outer world. Like in a laboratory situation or a partial retreat, we can check our own mind and how it reacts to restrictions and new settings. This allows us to use the situation as a continuous field for learning.

Therefore, we could gratefully accept the situation, but at the same time keep an awareness for the suffering of sentient beings around us, showing active compassion and responsibility on all levels in the best possible way. Thus, we are not only surviving crises, but learning to live and grow for the benefit of all on the basis of inner freedom. ✿

About the authors



Irma Pushpa Rinne has lived in Helsinki all her life, since 1947. She studied and worked at the University of Helsinki, at the department of musicology, as a coordinator. She is a member of the Buddhist Dharmacenter since 1998 and the chairperson of the Buddhist Union of Finland since 2015.



Paula de Wys met Buddhism in Nepal in 1972 where she became a student of the late Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Since then she has mainly been working for the cause of Tibet and with (Tibetan) Buddhism, mostly in the Netherlands.



Franz Brenner/Shin Kyong Je Ja Nim, is a Head disciple of Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim, Supreme Matriarch of the Yun Hwa Denomination and founder of the Lotus Buddhist Monastery in Hawaii. Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim has supported, guided and taught him in all areas of life, for which he is immeasurably grateful. The considerations in his article are based on his understanding of the teachings of Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim.



Emilia Amalā Raunio is a Helsinki based yoga teacher and freelance writer. She's also council member of EBU, vice-chairman of Finnish Buddhist Union and board member of Bodhidharma association.



Dr. Michael Daniel Vermeulen is a Buddhist philosopher and medical doctor. He was the representative of the EBU to the European Union from 2011 to 2015. Since then he has been a speaker on several United Nations conferences on topics related to Human Rights, Queer Buddhism and Buddhist Environmentalism. He is one of the founders of the European Rainbow Sangha (for LGBT+ Buddhists, friends and allies) and of the Gay Buddhist Fellowship of London.



Olivia Fuchs lives in the UK and has practiced Buddhism for over 35 years. She is a professional Opera and theatre director. She holds an MA in Reconciliation & Peacebuilding and is the Chair of the Eco Dharma Network UK. She is presently working with the Faith for the Climate movement in the UK in order to bring multi faith voices to the COP 26 conference, which is taking place in Glasgow in 2021.



Eric Vinson, Ph.D. in political science, is a French researcher, teacher and journalist specialized in religions, spirituality and secularism. He is now managing Emouna, the French interfaith formation program for priests, imams, rabbis, lamas, secular civil servants, and NGO workers.



Widukind Baier lives in Germany, is Buddhist in 2nd Generation, himself father of two children and has practiced meditation for more than 25 years. He has graduated in political science with focus on international relations and human resources management. Today, he works as a consultant for an executive search firm both national and international.



Prajnaketu is a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order living in Oxford. Ordained in 2014, he is a co-founder of the Oxford Triratna Buddhist Centre and leads retreats across the UK and Europe. He has a background in mathematics teaching and is currently writing a book on the subject of compassion.



Stefano Davide Bettera is a writer and journalist. He published "La via occidentale alla meditazione" (Corriere della Sera - 2020), "Il Buddha era una persona concreta" (Rizzoli - 2019), "Karma Polis" (Franco Angeli - 2018), "Fai la cosa giusta" (Morellini - 2018), "Felice come un Buddha" (Morellini - 2017). He has been conducting research and study activities for years on the relationship between spirituality, philosophy and contemporary and ancient cultures. He is Vice President of the European Buddhist Union and on the board of the Italian Buddhist Union.



Ron Eichhorn is the president of the European Buddhist Union and a head disciple of the Supreme Matriarch Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim. He is abbot of the Berlin temple of the Yun Hwa Sangha and a professional film director. In his spare time, he likes to go sailing and plays the Ukulele.

Colophon

Final Editing:

Ron Eichhorn
Stefano Davide Bettera
Clara De Giorgi

Graphic Design:

Noemi Carmona Laan
from www.numydesigns.com

Photography:

Pexels
Prajnaketu

A Buddhist voice for Europe

The EBU is the umbrella association of national Buddhist unions and Buddhist organisations in Europe



Contact the EBU

www.europeanbuddhism.org
info@europeanbuddhism.org
network.europeanbuddhism.org

 [EuropeanBuddhistUnion](https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanBuddhistUnion)

The EBU was founded in 1975 in London and is a member of the International Buddhist Confederation, the European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB), the European Council of Religious Leaders and Religions for Peace.

In 2008 the EBU obtained official participatory status with the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations at the Council of Europe.

THE EBU
APPRECIATES
YOUR INTEREST
IN OUR
MAGAZINE

