

# "Never let a good crisis go to waste": Buddhist reflections on the Coronavirus pandemic



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One of the most subtle demons in spiritual practice is complacency. We can think of complacency as a “near enemy” to continuity. If any of us in positions of comfort or privilege have been coasting on the sense that everything is fine, and will continue to be fine — *for us, even if we know cognitively that it’s not fine for many others right now* — we can be grateful that that particular delusion has finally been punctured.

Disaster has arrived.

How well we live through it depends in part on how well we practice with it. Many of us *do* have the skills to not waste this crisis, but it will take our wholehearted engagement and skillful practice, all together — if not physically together.

Continuity, where our effort is gentle but persistent, steady but still flexible, is one of the most valued qualities in Buddhist meditation practice. Continuity is when we meditate a little bit every day no matter what, or when the habit of mindfulness is so established that we can’t help but be present with what’s happening moment to moment in our body, heart, and mind. Continuity is what builds *samādhi*, the meditative stability that is the most valuable kind of focus in the Buddhist system. Relaxed, steady, interested, engaged without being busy or frantic, it’s maybe the one quality that most determines how much we deepen in both meditation and insight.

Complacency feels *a little bit* like continuity, with its steady, unruffled quality. Except that complacency is the combination of steadiness and NON-mindfulness, which basically means delusion. In continuity, we understand that conditions are constantly changing, and we modulate our effort accordingly. Continuity is intimate with changing experience, and responsive, a contact improv dance with life, where we stay connected

in a dynamic often unstable situation. Complacency, on the other hand, is dangerous. It's when we think we know the dance so well that we don't have to pay much attention. We've gone on auto-pilot, often because of overwhelm or boredom, and very often rooted in privilege. Our habits have been unchallenged for so long that we've forgotten that conditions are fundamentally unreliable.

Conditions are fundamentally unreliable.

The Pāli phrase for that, from the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, is *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*, "All processes are impermanent." It's followed by its inevitable implication: *sabbe dhammā anattā*, "All phenomena are not-self."

The first part of practicing with the current dramatic moment, with public gatherings shutting down, and communities suddenly worried about how to supply people with basic survival needs, is to come out of denial and complacency. To shake off the idea that things are suddenly "not normal," and that something's wrong. Nothing is any more wrong than on any other day. People's lives have been dramatically disrupted constantly, for as long as we have a record of them. What's happening now is that the borders of first world delusion have been breached, which was always inevitable. We're just as vulnerable as anyone else to the realities of life on a crowded planet. But unfortunately, it's been easy to not notice or admit that.

*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*. "All processes are impermanent."

It's so important to remember, in moments like this, but also in moments like... *always*, that we're in a constantly changing dynamic system. And that what's happening is the natural unfolding of vast cycles of action and result, expansion and contraction, through the entire ecosystem. To think of a viral pandemic — like the microscopic partner we now find ourselves dancing with — only in human terms, as if its primary importance revolves around numbers of deaths, or amount of economy disrupted, *is to take phenomena as self*. To think that this is about us. But this is not about us, or at least it's not *only* about us.

We've known for decades that the comfort many of us live in is fundamentally unsustainable. This comfort is not just physical, in the way that we take for granted climate-controlled spaces, or abundant clean water, but also emotional and existential.

Those of us who reliably have this comfort have believed that it is a God-given right, or the result of our technological brilliance (and those amount to the same thing, and lead to the same racism and cultural egoism), and that it is ours to possess and enjoy. A comfort to enjoy so deeply that many days we don't even think about it. We've forgotten that actions always have results, or in Buddhist language, bear fruit. We ignore the fruits of our actions — melting ice, dying species, pandemics that span the globe rather than stopping at a natural boundary — because we've been able to keep them all at a convenient distance. This is the epitome of complacency.

Our perception of what's happening on this earth has been wrong for a long time. Now is a moment for gratitude that our misperception can finally be corrected. We are not separate from our ecosystem, and never have been. Many people and cultures know this very deeply, of course, especially indigenous cultures and others that retain some of their pre-colonial knowledge systems. But the colonial process, where aliens with a technologically crushing force made contact over vast distances of land or ocean, depends for its power on the erasure of the knowledge of interconnection. Conquest that ruthless is impossible otherwise.

The line about not wasting a good crisis is from Winston Churchill, talking about World War II, and how it took a thing as horrific as that war to create something as world-stabilizing as the United Nations. There's a whole genre of science fiction, from the Cold War thriller *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) to my generation's *Ender's Game* (1985) and *The Watchmen* (1987), based around the idea that only a big external threat, like an alien invasion, would make it possible for the nations of the earth to come out of the habit of war and conflict, out of self-centeredness and xenophobic nationalism, and into cooperation and mutuality.

A useful threat for that purpose has arrived, and it is a kind of alien invasion. A powerful, fast-moving, far-from-human life form has found our species to be the perfect vector for its worldwide expansion. (Way better than bats, who don't cross oceans very easily!) But the alien stories rarely go far enough. The standard plot line still depends on xenophobia — fear of the Other — as the motivation for human collaboration. Coming out of the delusion of self suggests a different pathway forward. But the different pathway requires thinking like an ecosystem, not like a species.

We know that human activity has thrown the ecosystem out of the equilibrium it enjoyed for millennia. And we can think of this new virus arriving in our consciousness and bodies the same way we think of any invasive species arriving in a new ecosystem: through our short-sightedness and hubris. One of the “invaders” in the San Francisco Bay Area where I live is the tiny whelk snail, or “Atlantic oyster drill.” Indigenous people here, the Coast and Bay Miwok, Ohlone, and Pomo, sustainably ate local “Olympia” oysters for 4000 years. But Gold Rush colonists in the 19th century harvested them to extinction, and in one short-sighted ecosystem mistake among many (see eucalyptus, Scotch broom, nutria, and Himalayan blackberry... and that’s just around here), brought Atlantic oysters across the continent on the new railroad to replace them. The Atlantic oysters died (the water here is too cold in the summer, which any local who lives near the ocean can tell you), but the snails got off the train, thanked us for the ride, and thrived.

Thanks to our miraculous rails, roads, ships, and planes, humans have touched every mile of the globe, and connected all those miles through the medium of our bodies, constantly moving around, moving further and faster than any animal ever did before. It’s only inevitable that our co-inhabitants of this earth would try to hitch a ride with us in whatever way they can. The important shift here is partly to let go of the idea that we’re the only intelligent and self-interested beings around — we’re clearly not. Aliens of all kinds are close by, acting in self-interest, and in relationship with us (and each other) all the time. But the bigger shift is to let go of thinking “us” and “it” or “them” at all. It is to start thinking like an ecosystem.

*Sabbe dhammā anattā*, “All phenomena are not-self.”

The difficult concept called “not-self” (*anattā*) is one of the most radical ideas in the Buddhist system. Many religions and philosophical systems have come up with the idea that we’re not the kind of beings we think we are, defined by our bodies, social identities, and personal narratives. But most other systems do something that’s comforting in relation to that rather disorienting proposition: they replace the consensus reality of the personal self with a more cosmic Self. This more “true” Self idea is that you are actually Divine consciousness, or an immortal soul saved by Grace, or never were separate from the Beloved, no matter how alone you felt. These are beautiful and useful ways to

conceptualize the vastness we can feel in our most ecstatic moments. But not-self is more radical: it doesn't replace the personal self with anything at all.

In not-self, we have a path to an extraordinary freedom of heart: nothing is about us. We're not the center of the universe, as any parent tells their teenager, but we're not even the center of our own life story! Not because we don't matter or have worth (of course we do — just as much as anything does), but because *there's no center*.

If we let go of the idea that we're the center, the Coronavirus is just as much the protagonist of this earthly moment as we are. Or even more accurately, when we see that there's no center at all: the virus is inseparable from us, where "us" means the earth as a living being, or the whole universe as a living phenomenon, singular.

If the first practice for this moment is to wake up from the delusion of normalcy, a second is to wake up from the delusion of separateness. As long as we keep thinking we're not part of the earth, or that we're supposed to "subdue it: and have dominion over" it (Genesis 1:27), we'll never stop making ecosystem mistakes, destroying our only home, our own body, the earth. And we'll never attain freedom of heart or peace of mind. How could we? We're self-harming.

Thinking like an ecosystem is not easy, and the ancient viruses of xenophobia and nationalism are harder to contain than a mutating bat germ. But if we're lucky, this pandemic becomes the "good crisis" that will bring us closer to being a more mature and enlightened earthly community. We must realize that we're all here together — all the human nations, all the animal nations, all the plant and fungal and spirit nations — and that there are no real borders on this earth.

Of course we care for our vulnerable elders, and all human lives are beautiful, and worth protecting, to a point. Wash your hands. But if we want to thrive as a world, a far bigger perspective is needed, and a change in how we live together that goes way beyond how we manage this breach in our comfortable bubble. May the bubble stay popped for a long time! Long enough for the insight of non-separation to become our new normal. We've accelerated movement and inter-species contact throughout our world. There's no way to do that and continue to pretend we can stay separate, or that we ever were.

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* ends with the alien emissary, Klaatu, stopping all electrical activity on the planet for a half hour lecture on nuclear disarmament, and a threat: "Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course and face obliteration. We shall be waiting for your answer."

The present course was, of course, pursued, far beyond what even the prophets of the nuclear age could imagine. And the results of our actions are upon us.

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