



Spirituality in a Time of Crisis: Responding to the Coronavirus from the Buddhist Tradition

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Coping with Crisis

How does your religious tradition help its followers make sense of the world during a major crisis?

One of the core principles of Buddhism is the teaching on cause and effect. According to Buddhism, events don't happen randomly, and there is not an omnipotent Supreme Being causing things to happen, but rather things and events are a result of causes and conditions, a dynamic interplay of countless causes and conditions coming together. It is possible to produce new causes and conditions for the results that we would like to have happen. In Buddhism, there is no concept of predestination or fate, things and events are seen as dynamic unfoldings that are constantly changing.

Therefore, in relation to this current pandemic, we see the causes and conditions that have brought this situation into existence, and affirm our agency to change the course of the pandemic by doing things like social distancing, "sheltering in place," etc. The Buddhist understanding of this crisis is not that it is random, or some kind of divine test or punishment, but that it is simply a result of factors that can be changed.

For further investigation of these principles, see:

- [The Four Noble Truths by Geshe Tashi Tsering](#)
- [Comfortable with Uncertainty by Pema Chodron](#)

What teachings does your tradition offer to help followers deal with these feelings?

In psychological terms, anxiety is a response to threat and uncertainty. One of the core teachings of Buddhism is the teaching of impermanence, that things are changing all the time. Even when we are not experiencing this reality as acutely as we are in the current crisis, we meditate on the reality of impermanence to become more and more familiar with this fundamental truth, so we are not taken by surprise when things change, as they inevitably will.

What practices does your faith teach for dealing with them?

In addition to the meditations we do to habituate ourselves to the reality of impermanence and change, and the inevitability of unwanted experiences, there are many meditation techniques for managing fear and anxiety. One of the techniques I find most helpful is a practice called R.A.I.N. This stands for Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Non-identification. In this practice, we bring awareness to what is happening, **recognizing** the emotion that we are feeling without trying to suppress it or distract from it. We then **allow** the emotion to be what it is, without trying to push it away. Then we **investigate** with kindness what might be underlying the emotion, perhaps a personal narrative we haven't let go of, or an exaggeration about what the future might bring, the intensity of the disturbing emotion might lessen. The last step is **non-identification** with the emotion, realizing that even when the emotion feels overwhelming, it is not who we are, and **nurturing** ourselves in this difficult time.

[Resources for the practice of R.A.I.N.](#)

Building and inspiring fellowship and community in a time of crisis

How does your religious tradition inspire people in a time of crisis to come together as one human family and realize how deeply interconnected we are despite our differences?



An awareness of interconnection and interdependence are fundamental aspects of Buddhist philosophy and practice. We often meditate on our interdependence, for example, thinking of all the people and factors that are involved in getting the food on our plates, the clothes we wear, all the things we use and enjoy. A teaching that is emphasized in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is the practice of “equalizing and exchanging self and others.” In this practice, we think about our common humanity, how all others are just like me, in wanting happiness and freedom from suffering. This leads us to take care of all members of our human family, realizing that our happiness and even our very survival are dependent on others.

How does your religious tradition move people in a time of crisis to look out for and take care of one another?

From this perspective of interdependence and connectedness, and a deepening of our compassion, we are moved to reach out and help others as much as we are able.

The following resources present compassion training from a Buddhist perspective:

- [A Fearless Heart by Thubten Jinpa, Ph.D.](#)
- [Compassion Cultivation Training, an eight-week secular course, sponsored by the Compassion Institute](#)
- [Responsibly Facing the Pandemic by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi](#)

Reflecting on gratitude and faith in a time of crisis

What does your religious tradition teach about the importance of gratitude as a foundation of our life even in times of crisis?

In Buddhism, we emphasize the role of mind in creating our suffering, and our happiness. We say that there are external situations over which we have no control, but it is really our minds that create the experiences of happiness and suffering for us. Therefore, if we are able to see even the difficulties with a positive attitude, and cultivate gratitude, it will change our subjective experience of even unwanted and painful experiences, and balance the feelings of overwhelm and despair which can so easily arise in moments of crisis like the one we’re going through now.

What lessons can we learn in a time of crisis that we might not learn otherwise?

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there is a genre of teachings called “lojong,” which is often translated as “thought transformation” or “mind training.” The principle of these teachings is that we can take any hardship we experience, and transform it into the spiritual path. In fact, we look at these experiences as precious opportunities to grow spiritually.

This is not to deny that the experience is hard and may be unwanted, it’s not a question of going into denial or trying to discount the experience. But instead of sinking into feelings of despair, anger, and self-pity, how can we see even the unwanted experiences as an opportunity for growth and transformation?

The following resources present an introduction to this approach:

- [Start Where You Are, The Places That Scare You, and When Things Fall Apart, all by Pema Chodron](#)