

COVID-19 Reflections

Additional essays can be found at:
<https://kwanumzen.org/primary-point/covid19>

Practicing during this pandemic has emphasized the fragility of the present moment and how we need to be there to help others. I have had a number of my former students who have either landed in the hospital because of COVID-19 or have had family members who have died because of this illness. The immense suffering COVID-19 has brought about has driven home for me the need to keep a clear mind and to know what my correct function is in this period of time. Also, this illness has highlighted our teachings on impermanence and how we only have here and now to make a difference. So, I hope everyone stays well and that we continue to practice for every sentient being who is enduring this present moment and beyond.

Joshua Lewis
The Three Jewels Zen Center
Binghamton, New York



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It seems these days that the future is one seething mass of indeterminable crises: whether they come from the present pandemic, or economic collapse proceeding from it, or mass extinction caused by climate change; to many it seems as if we are stuck, trapped on some out-of-control train speeding toward doom. A brief inquiry into the etymology of that word, crisis, can show us the brakes.

It is originally a Greek word. Hippocrates and Galen, early doctors, used it in a medical sense. The *krisis* was the point at which a disease would become fatal or not; it was the point at which a patient would be determined to live or to die. In this original sense, *krisis* means a moment of decision. It comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *krei-*, meaning to “sieve,” suggesting distinguishing, or discriminating. As such it is connected to the words *ascertain*, *certain*, and *discern*. The crisis is the moment we cut through our delusions, perceive reality just as it is, and act.

What can you do?

Aaron Ivsin



A New Friend

Day One

At the beginning of COVID-19, I sit for hours in my at-home seven-day retreat in front of my second-story window and greet a leaf—a lonely, rust colored, oak leaf on a bare branch of a bare tree. Through wind, rain, snow, sunshine we sit together, the leaf and I.

Day Seven

As the retreat comes to an end, while still seeing your rust color, I ask, “Do you hear, out of winter’s silence, the spring song of the chick-a-dee?”

Day Fifty-Five

When I see you this morning still there holding on to the bare branch on the bare tree, I feel a warm tug pulling on my heart.

I bow to you, my old friend.

Nancy Hathaway
Seven-day at-home retreat
COVID-19



Before the pandemic, I had been struggling with some physical issues and thought it might be advisable to learn to sit in a different posture (from kneeling to lotus). I began studying Yin Yoga in order to help me sit in a more sustainable manner. Once everybody began exercising social distancing measures, I had to make some changes. My current practice now involves a blend of brief meditation while kneeling, followed by an hour to an hour and a half of practicing Yin Yoga. While practicing yoga, I have been focusing on mindfulness and also compassion for our world. I have been holding those loved ones who have passed away, as well as their families, in my thoughts and close to my heart. I have also taken on an almost prayerful approach to my current worldview.



Illustrations: Willy Garver

As a father and a husband, my concern is often with my family during these times. My wife is a NICU nurse and I am very proud of the person that she is and the work that she does. I am very worried about her and *all* those who are put in harm's way on a regular basis. Each day, I try to reach out to at least one person and simply make their day just a little bit brighter. It helps me and I hope that it helps them as well. I find it very challenging to be helpful and "safe" at the same time, but I am trying . . .

"Only go straight . . ."

John M. Boye (Kwan Jok)
Chogye International Zen Center



I have a four-word entry:
 Effort is the attainment.

William A. Remas



Look inside and tell me dear.
 Are you cluttered?
 Or are you clear?

Jim Mizkewitsch (Jung Bul)
Australia



"Alive or dead?" I ask as I awake each day. And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought, with many recognitions dim and faint, and somewhat of a sad perplexity, while washing my hands, I hope that every person will have pure hands to receive reality. With deep bows to Chien Yuan, William Wordsworth, and Thich Nhat Hanh.

John Holland



"Why do you wear a mask?" Zen Master Dae Kwan asked me in a kong-an interview on April 29, 2020. How

my answer would have been so different a few months ago!

I live in Hong Kong, a city that is still traumatized from the 2003 SARS outbreak. As soon as we heard of the Wuhan novel coronavirus in January 2020, the locals immediately bought every mask they could, and masks became the norm in public. If you didn't wear a mask, others would avoid you like the plague. The foreigners living in Hong Kong—myself included—looked down on the locals because we were told by the World Health Organization and other Western medical experts (including the American Centers for Disease Control) that masks were useless. We were *so confident* that we were in the right because our best epidemiologists told us so.

A few months later, when COVID-19 broke out in Western countries, our Western experts changed their minds. Masks are indeed helpful for hampering the spread of the disease, especially from asymptomatic carriers. This was an incredibly humbling experience. I have learned not to trust my ego so much, even if it's based on "science," and that I should always follow the situation, especially when locals have acquired such wisdom from a previous epidemic. I hope we all continue to practice hard, put it all down, and find the answer to "Why do you wear a mask?" In that answer we will find the direction for our practice and our life.

Minh Tran



The new opportunity of online morning practice before telework intensifies my formal practice. It gives me a stronger, clearer and grateful start of the day. Therefore I wrote these poems as a present.

Online Practice

After night, morning comes.
 Chanting in the spare room with a muted voice,
 I meet you without moving.
 Who is host, who is guest?
 Very close by, the vibration of a bell,
 The pulse in a wire.
 Connection never falls out.

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Illustrations: Willy Garver

Online Companion

As leaves we sit under a tree.
An arm we cannot touch anymore.
Fingers and words spread in the air,
Pushed into the ground, we breathe at most
Together. Oxygen forms the chant,
Full and warm, a companion
Traveling with us, one, two
Pairs of eyes.
We bow
Unseen
Close by.

Leen Pil



Five in the morning the alarm goes off, into sweatpants and sweater, down the stairs, feed the cat and light the candles on the altar. The gradual building of the morning bell's ringing grows to its final hit. This slowed and tranquil chant flows clear into the brightening morning light and out into the world. Neither windows nor distance nor time can keep the sounds from permeating into the world and there is nothing unconnected. The morning sun's shadows crawl across the room, time is movement, and the silence becomes even more muted. The day flows by.

When the dimming light returns, the candles are lit again and are present for the thousand eyes, for the compassionate cries, and for the hell that is left behind. The chants deliver another day of life on this planet. The incense drifts up silently while darkness crawls across the floor, night settles over the quiet new world.

Harold Rail



Together Action: The Power of Sharing

One evening during an informal talk at the Providence Zen Center, a student said to Zen Master Seung Sahn: "Zen Master, you always teach about 'together action.' But suppose two people were hungry and had some food, but it wasn't enough for both of them. What should they do?"

ZMSS: "Divide the food."

Student: "No, they don't have enough to divide it and keep them both alive. Then what should they do?"

ZMSS: "Divide the food and together die."

This is a beautiful teaching. How does this dialogue inspire you? How can we apply this spirit of sharing to our current pandemic crisis? It is not just about food, but anything that we need to survive, such as masks, face shields, and other medical supplies and gear to treat patients with COVID-19. We can all do our part. If you are a boss, you can protect your staff's jobs but perhaps with less pay. If you are a developer or a landlord, you can help your tenants with lower rent. If you are the owner of a grocery store or supermarket, don't mark up prices, earn less and share more. If you have any resources that can help those in need, this is a good time to practice the power of sharing. Even if you have nothing to share, please share your smile and words of loving-kindness.

This is a time for us to wake up to the power of sharing. One day we will all die. But before we die, let us die gracefully with appreciation and gratitude. This is a way for us to reconnect with our true nature, which is filled with compassion and wisdom.

Zen Master Dae Kwan

May 2020



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A Bad Situation Is a Good Situation

Our York Zen group formed a year ago and had started to become a strong and committed sangha, but apart from Roger and myself, the group had no interaction with the wider Kwan Um School of Zen until the COVID-19 lockdown. We held our last in-person practice on March 17, and then we moved to Zoom meetings and Skype kong-an interviews. This situation has provided a great opportunity for people to explore the wealth of KUSZ resources online and meet other teachers and practitioners from other sanghas. The sangha is flourishing; generosity and gratitude abound.

In gratitude,

Lizzie Coombs JDPSN

May 21, 2020



Illustrations: Willy Garver



My practice feeds my work as a physician in many ways, before and after the outbreak of the coronavirus. A direct example comes from when I saw my first patient with COVID-19, layered in personal protective equipment, N95 tight on the face, uncertain of the risk as it was so early in our experience with the virus. Many of my colleagues find our masks suffocating and uncomfortable. Sometimes I do too. Sometimes I think of our practice, following the breath—*what I am . . . don't know*—and use that to be present in the moment, to address the need in front of me right now.

James Hudspeth



Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian government has imposed a movement control order in the country. A lot of our Zen students say, “Luckily, I practice Zen!” Zen Master Seung Sahn often reminded us that a bad situation is good situation. Our students really feel it this time.

Recently, I started giving teachings online. The topic was “Bodhidharma’s Teaching *Two Entrances and Four Practices*: How to Have Rest-Mind During This COVID-19 Situation.” Many students were able to better connect with KUSZ teachings. They understand how to use our karma to help all beings, and why we need to do hard practice. Furthermore, they are willing to try, try, try, try for ten thousand years.

Chuan Wen Sunim JDPS



Pandemic Musings

A few weeks ago Zen Master Jok Um was in the Zoom room with Ten Directions during our weekly practice. I heard him use the phrase “life force looking for opportunity.” No idea what the context was but it caught my ear and I wrote it down. As I kept looking at the words, streams of biology movies flooded my mind. Pea shoots growing toward the light, thousands of sperm frantically

surrounding one egg, a hawk dropping out of the sky to snatch up a mouse. The phrase seemed to capture perfectly the extent to which the energy of endless craving is wired into my nervous system. And the way that my mind is always on the move, looking around for something, anything.

Sometimes “looking for opportunity” for me goes no further than looking for chocolate, but more often than not, life force in me is in fact looking for certainty. Many times in the course of these pandemic days some dreadful scientific or political words will make me first frantically fearful and then grasping for certainty. Tell me how this will end. I am willing to embrace the idea of an awful future to overcome the anxiety of not knowing. Appreciating how deeply this craving for solid ground is wired into me has made it easier to say “oh, opportunistic life force, it’s you again” and look outside at the peonies instead.

Margaret McKenzie



Daily Drawing as a Practice

In mid-March when we got the order to shelter in place, I realized that my home would become a monastery of sorts. Soon our sangha, Open Meadow Zen, scheduled all our practice times on Zoom. I decided to offer the idea of a daily drawing, done on a small format every day for as long as the pandemic lasts. It’s a lot to ask, especially of people who don’t think of themselves as artists. Calling it a “perfection free zone” didn’t make it less intimidating. Talking about drawing before thinking only made matters more opaque. But several gave it a try, and a couple of them are sticking with it.

For me, doing a daily drawing has been a grounding. (Hey, I’m already grounded anyway.) So many days have already passed. So many drawings, yet each morning brings another surprise. Some of them are less than stellar, but I include every one of them. We sometimes share them in our Zoom meeting and email them to each other. It is inspiring how the arts are flourishing and connecting people everywhere.

Willy Garver

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